

**Freaks on Exhibit: A Critical Review Essay of
Levison and St. Onge, *Disability
Awareness in the Classroom***

Dona Avery
Arizona State University

Levison, Lorie, and St. Onge, Isabelle. *Disability Awareness in the Classroom: A Resource Tool for Teachers and Students*. Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas, Publisher, 1999, 200 pages (plus 35 photo-cards), \$38.95 softcover.

I looked forward to this book. The title had all the right elements and the authors had both personal and academic credibility in disability experience. Sadly, however, the book turns out to be little more than a modern package of "cabinet cards" - those sepia-toned post-cards that carnival hawkers used to distribute in the 1800s to promote the "freaks" at touring sideshow exhibits.

The co-authors - Ms. Levison, whose authority seems to reside in the wheelchair she uses due to a car crash thirty years ago, and her counterpart, Ms. St. Onge, who boasts twelve years' teaching experience in Special Education - probably had the best of intentions. There are many schoolteachers who would like to have a guidebook to use when introducing disability awareness in their classrooms. Could it have been the *publisher* (responding to fetishistic impulses of the marketplace?), then, who turned a great idea into this Scrapbook of Spectacle? In any case, *Disability Awareness in the Classroom* emerges as something so tasteless, in the way of promoting a welcoming environment for disabled students, that it recuperates the centuries old fascination with freakdom. Like the hawkers who descended on a medieval village to announce the imminent arrival of a two headed goat, Siamese twins, or the Hottentot Venus, this guide to disability seems to shout: Come one, come all! See the amazing examples of Nature's mistakes! Be amazed! Be awestruck! Beware! These strange creatures are primitive and pathetic and unpredictable!

Such rhetoric, of the (side)show-and-tell genre of instruction, is frank exploitation and colonization of the differently embodied Other, no matter how glossy the photographs or empathetic the descriptive text. And this text, mind you, uses a vocabulary more common to very young children than to the older teens depicted in the photographs. What the authors have in mind, apparently, is this: a circle of primary grade students gathered at the feet of a wise and respected schoolmarm, eagerly learning about the differences they may notice about a new classmate who will arrive next week. The teacher will explain "kids like this," using information that is scripted in both the book and on the 35 *flashcards* that are included with this book. Disability, thus, can be taught in the same way as multiplication tables. Each child in class can even *hold* a card and stare at the disabled teen depicted on it and, then, *trade* cards with another child - it is not quite like trading the coveted Pokemon cards, but kids will be as mesmerized as when studying mutant frog specimens in a biology class.

Each flashcard features a black and white photo of a disabled teen. Here is Nando, struggling to write the word Wednesday as he sits at a table all by himself (Flashcard #5.3). Then, there is Felicia, fully grown, but giggling like a baby as her therapist balances her on a big, rolled, upholstered pillow (#7.5). Here is Maurice in his pajamas, lying twisted and grimacing, strapped to a neo-Medieval torture board made of plastic, while a nearby therapist prepares for him what looks to be a noose, from some wires and tubing (#3.4). Here is Nathan: see the therapist help him to a normalized upright position so he can "dance" as other teens do (#4.2). And here is Raymond, his feet strapped to the footrests of his wheelchair, which is surrounded by chrome and pulleys and attached to a hoist. Two therapists try to raise his heavy body onto a cot for his arm and leg exercises (#1.3). The teacher will

simultaneously tell the children, reading from the back of the flashcard, that Raymond has a progressive disease. Still reading, she will say: "If Raymond is gradually losing all his [physical] abilities, do you think it's a blessing that he's also losing his mental awareness?"

Clearly, the messages delivered by these cards and photos, and by the teachers who use them in class, are perpetuating several stereotypes rather than helping to demystify disability or to "prepare" children for the arrival of a new student who happens to be disabled. In fact, *Disability Awareness in the Classroom* may actually crystallize the myth-understandings, as well as increase the frequency of staring that an incoming disabled student will be made to endure. If the authors' aim in writing this book was to remove the fear or curiosity that students might have about differently embodied others who may join the class, they have failed.

A far better text for teachers, students, and disabled persons in society is the work of British authors Richard Rieser and Micheline Mason, *Disability Equality in the Classroom: A Human Rights Issue* (1992). Rieser and Mason personally know disability; but more importantly, they are in touch with their (nondisabled) readers' fears and anxieties. I would suggest that Levinson and St. Onge, however, might begin with an assessment of their own biased and anachronistic thinking which is embedded in some of the insipid questions printed on the flashcards - questions that teachers will ask of their students: "Why doesn't everyone need physical therapy? How do most young people stay healthy?" (#2.4); or "How can Menard be such a happy person if he has a disability?" (#2.3). We may as well get the students thinking about the sad life of JoJo, the Dog-Faced Boy, and about how they can prevent that "tragedy" from happening to them.

Levinson and St. Onge acknowledge that "fear is one of the most prevalent feelings behind society's attitude toward disability" (p. 26). Their analysis is, perhaps, psychologically sound: "We are afraid of being in that situation ourselves, [for it] looks like too much suffering, pain and isolation" (p. 26). Why, then, is there such a focus in this text on the rigorous demands of physical therapy and on the social alienation that most disabled students experience? The authors' opinion is that, by "learning how to act toward someone, speak with someone, and look at someone who has a disability," students will learn "compassion" which is the "only effective cure for discomfort" that the viewer feels (p. 27). "Compassion," they say, is "honoring the life and experience of others, *even while feeling their pain and loss*" (p. 29, emphasis added).

This is the rhetoric of tragedy; it is indicative of a medical or pathological stance toward disability and that stance is antithetical to the "enablement and protection of rights" (p. 29) that the authors claim to be seeking with their "compassionate" approach. Yet, ironically, the authors narrate some instances where teachers "communicated to [their] class[es] only a sense of horror and pity" for disabled children; and they remark that "a teacher's casual, even well-meaning remarks can impress children with the wrong message" (pp. 30-31).

Well, yes, Levinson and St. Onge, children are impressionable. And, if the teacher takes seriously the points you list in "A Few Things to Remember" (pp. 31-32) (e.g., "It's natural to feel sorry for someone who has a severe impairment" or "It's natural to be attracted to beauty and repelled by deformity"), I am afraid that students will not only adopt from their teachers/role models a dull mindset characterized by elitism and prejudice, but that terms such as "impairment" and "deformity" and "disability" will be forever impressed on schoolchildren as indexical of all things scary, sad, and sublime, and things to be *avoided* at all costs.

In short, I find the rhetoric in *Disability Awareness in the Classroom* to be distressingly injurious to young minds largely because of the context in which this "freak wisdom" will be deployed. As for the photography in this book (and its flashcard replicas), I strongly endorse the message that Rosemarie Garland Thomson recently delivered at the 1999 conference of the Modern Language Association (MLA): "Photographs construct the object they

represent, shaping it through the conventions of presentation and through cultural ideas and expectations about such pictures" (Thomson, 1999). Thomson would situate the photography in *Disability Awareness in the Classroom* among the "cabinet cards" or souvenir photos of the "freaks" exhibited at Nineteenth Century carnivals and circus performances. Levinson and St. Onge have created anew the genre that Thomson (1999) terms "wondrous for its display of disabled people as wonders and curiosities, presenting them as...sensationalized objects of awe."

For examples of this modern text's co-optation of "carny" colonialism through wonder, let us revisit the trading card game that might go on in classrooms that use Levinson and St. Onge's flashcards of freaks. Here is Felicia. She is gripping a pencil awkwardly and concentrating on writing so hard that drool streams from her mouth. "She is very aware" (the teacher will read aloud) "that the drooling bothers people and causes them to stare at her. . . . Luckily, she has good friends in her special ed classes. . . ." (#7.2). (Should not a book published for educators at the end of the Twentieth Century place the stress on a dialectic of integration rather than its obverse?) Now comes Raymond. See how his solitary profile takes on a certain eeriness as he stumbles through a near deserted school hallway (#7.4). And here is a whole group of "Them," engaged in a sewing project (#6.5).

This book, in short, highlights all the things about disability that are most anxiety provoking for nondisabled students: the painful therapy, the isolation, the loss of bodily control, the social segregation, the "dumbed down" lesson plans for "retards" where rehabilitation rather than intellectualization is the key focus.

It is all about Special Ed, not about disability awareness. It fetishizes the freaks and infantilizes the incompetents and then rationalizes society's treatment of this Other. In one photo, "They" are wearing bibs as they eat lunch together (#6.1). From the back of the flashcard the teacher will read aloud the assuring "fact" that "These" students "prefer to eat in the [special ed] classroom [instead of the cafeteria] because they're uncomfortable eating in front of others. . . . Felicia can chew but mostly her mouth is open and you can see all of the food in it. We all know this is *not a polite* way to eat. . . . [S]he would rather stay in the privacy of the classroom with *friends who truly understand and accept her disability*" (#6.1, emphasis added).

Is not the purpose of this text to train nondisabled students in compassion and a *true understanding* of disabilities? No matter, the authors seem to shrug, segregation does no harm. After all, "These" people do not know how inassimilable "They" are. Here is a grinning Menard, who "faces life with a brave spirit" and who has "one of the most *joyful smiles* you'll ever see" (#2.1, emphasis added).

I guess the authors' goal was a grand one: to desensitize school children through visuals so that, when the actual disabled student arrived in class, there would be fewer shocked responses and less staring. The new kid would feel more welcome, more ordinary. But when have souvenir photographs ever served to satiate or dilute the desire to gaze upon the exotic or the wondrous? The purpose of freak-show cabinet cards, after all, was to tempt and to tantalize, to lure the audience into the sideshow tent to see the atrocity for themselves. Fortunes were spent on promotional "front men" and their photographs to raise anticipation to a profitable pitch. By the same token, *pornographic* images serve to *escalate* desire to gaze at the "real thing." Porn does little to empower, or increase respect for, *actual, live* women. Can we expect that giving students a pictorial preview of disability will cause them to welcome, or to demonstrate respect, when the *actual, live* "freak" appears?

I do not think so.

The authors, quite honestly, do attempt to present disabled people outside the connotative cage of horror that cinema has created with movies such as *Frankenstein* and *Edward Scissorhands*. Remember Menard's "joyful smile" (#2.1)? Felicia, too, "laughs hard and loud at jokes, and is fun to be with" (#7.4). On the other hand, students will become

wary of a new pupil who has disabilities if they hear that "there are times when [Felicia] gets very angry, stomping out of the room" (#7.4); or that Nathan "sometimes slams his bedroom door. . . . He has even pulled posters off the wall" (#4.5). Nondisabled students are being spoon fed pejorative poison when they learn that, while Nando's condition of Down syndrome causes him to be "affectionate and loving much of the time, [he] can also be very stubborn. . . . He acts like a little child. . . . He is not capable enough to be given a lot of freedom" (#5.1).

The new kid in school endures enough shyness and anxiety without having to confront "regular" kids who have been taught that disability makes a person antisocial and unpredictable. Nondisabled people want their "crips" to be congenial and cooperative - just like the Mattel doll "Share A Smile Becky" (perhaps named for Rebecca, of *Sunnybrook Farm*?). The introduction of this doll, situated as a companion to the ever popular Barbie, was controversial, at first. Many fans believed that since Becky was in a wheelchair, progress toward cultural diversity was being made in pop culture: A contingency of disabled persons, however, pointed out that Becky's wheelchair did not fit into Barbie's Dream House so she was as socially isolated as ever. Furthermore, Becky's wheelchair had no brakes, so she had to be "watched," like Nando, who is "not capable enough to be given a lot of freedom" (#5.1) More to the point, though, is the idea that Share A Smile Becky was *expected* to smile and never to get angry or frustrated. Then, too, with the inclusion of two "share my friendship" necklaces in the Becky package, little girls were given the heavy handed, moralizing message that they had to be *nice* to disabled people (on the street, that is, because wheelchairs would not fit in their houses either). And, finally, while there was Pilot Barbie and Fashion Model Barbie and Lawyer Barbie, little Becky appeared to be jobless or without a socially redeeming identity other than possessing a "joyful smile.

Thanks to the ADA, perhaps, Mattel recently introduced a modern descendant of the Becky line: School Photographer Becky is now not only "employed," but she has changed into a pair of denim jeans (quite a fashion leap from the cotton capris she first wore) and has traded in her cutesy pink and purple wheelchair for a sleek, red chariot. This mover-and-shaker-type of gal has purpose, now, and is a hip and worthy contributor to society. She wears a 35mm camera around her neck and carries a backpack (she is a "regular" student in "regular" classes) and she proudly hugs the school yearbook under her arm. ready to get it filled with friends' admiring autographs.

It does cause one to wonder: If Mattel - a doll manufacturer - believes that Becky can share social space with the popular Barbie, is it too much to expect the factories of education to clear a space (mentally, physically) so that a real life Becky might be introduced in a classroom with less pomp and perversion than that proposed by the authors of *Disability Awareness in the Classroom*?

Life would be good if Becky had a Kyle, as Barbie has a Ken. Then we would be sure of the disabled gal's personhood. We cannot take that idea too far, though, lest Levinson and St. Onge start writing Sexual Awareness in the Therapy Gym. Imagine the flashcards in that book!

References

Rieser, Richard and Micheline Mason. *Disability Equality in the Classroom: A Human Rights Issue*. London: Inner London Education Authority, n.d. [Revised ed.: London: Disability Equality in Education, 1992].

Thomson, Rosemarie Garland. *Seeing the Disabled: Visual Representations of Disabled People in Popular Culture*. Paper presented at the 1999 Conference of the Modern Language Association, Chicago, 28 December.