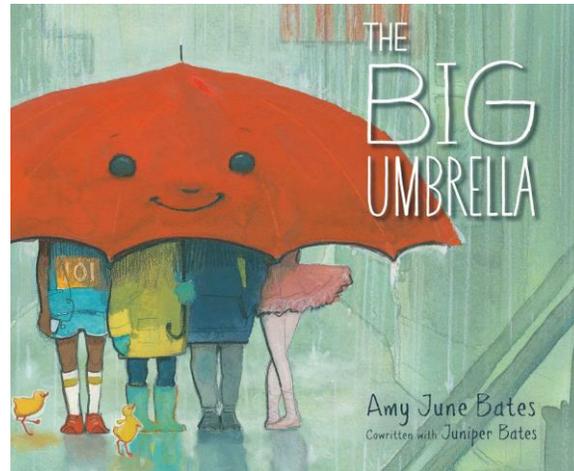## Second Reaction: Unpacking *The Big Umbrella*: Moving Toward Full Inclusion

Bates, Amy June and Juniper Bates. *The Big Umbrella*. Illustrated by Amy June Bates. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018. Print.

Christopher R.J. Worth and Juliet Salih-Worth

The Big Umbrella is a valid attempt to help children begin to actively think about and participate in conversations about the meaning of inclusion. The book lends itself to young readers through its use of bright, colorful illustrations and simplified sentence structure. It also attempts to make concrete the concept of inclusion by having myriad types fit under the umbrella: hairy, plaid, etc. As a team, we read the book to a total of sixty-six children, ranging in age from two to eleven years old. A large percentage of our readers were readers of color. These readings happened in formal Montessori classroom settings and community gatherings.

We began the reading by asking the readers what the word inclusion means. Through this pre-reading conversation, we found that five-to-eleven-year-olds were able to give a clear definition. Additionally, they have an understanding of what it feels like to not be included. The book helped them understand that their definition was accurate, but it did not seem to broaden their understanding. As a follow-up activity, we asked some of them to draw pictures of who would go under their umbrella. We found that, that remained very narrow: my mom, my dad, my

dog. We feel that if the author had extrapolated more identities all the way through the text, then the umbrella activity would not have just included their closest family.

This feedback suggested that they got the main idea of the story, but could not transfer the theme to larger ideas. They enjoyed it, but there was a disconnect, and as a result, a quick conversation was necessary in order to draw them out. An interesting thing we noticed about the conversation is that it was mostly dominated by the Caucasian readers in the room. Readers of color did participate, but it seemed as though White students were the first to offer ideas, commentary and observations about the book.

For readers between the ages of two and four, the book was too long. These readers do not have prior knowledge of the vocabulary of inclusion, and as a result they became quickly bored with the text, were unable to focus and they missed the point.

The book carries a strong message, important for young readers to understand. However, while it provides a baseline for a conversation-starter about inclusion in a broad sense, we feel that it largely missed the mark. Even though we saw our first pair of brown legs under the umbrella fairly early in the story, it is hard to connect to brown legs alone. Our readers skipped right over that because there was no face to connect to. We had to point it out. As facilitators, the lack of faces in the beginning and middle of the story made us feel as though there was an attempt to say, "it doesn't matter what your struggle is; you fit under here. While this might seem like a positive thing, what it did for us is it kept our readers thinking very surface-level. Not revealing faces under the umbrella promotes a color blindness and a struggle blindness. In order to deepen the conversation, we had to offer a multitude of scaffolding and inquiry questions to get anything other than surface-level from all of the ages represented in our groups.

Additionally, Bates' comingling of humans with animals caused our readers misdirection because, as an example, instead of discussing what it is like to be a person of color or a person with a disability in a situation where those groups would like to be included, we found ourselves distracted by the hairy creature or the oversized duck legs, or pausing the reading to answer questions about the hairy thing or the big object. This was a lost opportunity for us. If the umbrella began collecting diversely from the beginning, i.e. an identifiable Muslim woman, a

person with a disability, or a transgender person, all easily identifiable, we as facilitators, could have dug in more deeply with our readers, and had an authentic conversation about diversity, inclusion, and equity.

As we are taught in education circles, the presentation of the concept of inclusion must be consistent in order to effectively resonate with a child. If animals are going to be used to present this idea, then animals should be central to the story. If humans are going to be employed to carry the concept forward, then humans should be central to the story. If it is key to the story to comingle them, then the animals should be personified. The way the author employs animals was distracting to our readers.

In conclusion, we would not recommend this book. It is not a realistic portrayal of true inclusion. Although a good attempt, it waits too long to put a face to the nuanced meaning of inclusion.

About the Authors

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