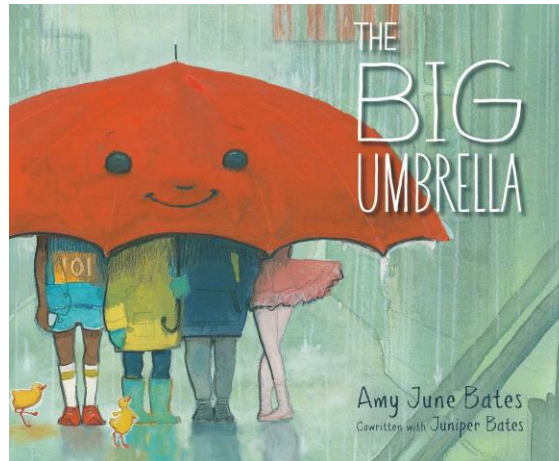


First Opinion: Sharing the Message of Inclusion with Young Readers

Bates, Amy June, and Juniper Bates. Illustrated by Amy June Bates. *The Big Umbrella*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1018. Print.

Jennifer Bumble



In *The Big Umbrella*, we visit a smiling umbrella as it heads out into the world on a cloudy, rainy day. Held by a child in rainboots and a yellow jacket, the umbrella welcomes a stream of inhabitants with diverse interests (e.g., ballerinas, skateboarders, and runners), peculiar appearances (e.g., giant feet and hairy frames) and any number of legs (both dogs and octopuses are welcome) who find themselves stuck out in the rain. The authors go to great lengths to highlight the wide range of individuals the umbrella might protect, even going so far as to include those wearing plaid (a pattern difficult for even the most fashionable among us to carry off). The umbrella continues to grow with each page, accepting enthusiastic visitors as well as those who worry there might not be enough room. Only on the final page, as the sun clears, do we see the visitor's faces as they enjoy a bustling park nestled under the big umbrella. A few words on each page guide the story alongside bright, expressive illustrations; making the book accessible to novice and experienced readers alike. Further, the book's minimal text creates space for questions and discoveries that might guide more abstract discussions on kindness, tolerance, and inclusion. I shared this book twice—first with a group of wiggly four- and five-year-olds and then, one-on-one with a reflective eight-year-old who was captivated from the moment she saw the smiling, red umbrella stretched across the cover. While some lessons spanned both age groups, other more

nuanced levels of understanding emerged as children explored their own experiences being “outside the umbrella.”

Smaller children will immediately identify the differences among characters and make connections to their own experiences as an outsider. As I read, the group of young preschoolers quickly found themselves reflected in the book as ballerinas and roller skaters. Excitement built as the umbrella grew, and the animals drew their attention—particularly the sad puppy who “was gonna get all wet.” Before turning each page, I asked if they thought the umbrella could grow any bigger. Initially skeptical, they were concerned the “umbrella couldn’t hold any more.” Over time, most children found the pattern in the story, declaring with wide smiles, “everyone can fit inside.” After finishing the book, we discussed times they felt like characters in the book. Emotions quickly surfaced as they recounted experiences: “being stuck in the rain” or “sitting alone at lunch.” We also listed different things that were like an umbrella including houses, cars, stores, and schools. Abstract concepts such as why it’s important for different people to live together seemed to stretch just beyond their awareness. However, they had a firm grasp on the foundations of the book. One child said she would explain this book to a friend as “a story about an umbrella that kept growing...so people wouldn’t be lonely.”

Older readers will explore deeper levels of meaning in the text and recognize the umbrella as a metaphor for how they might treat others. As this strong reader and I alternated roles as reader and listener, we found hidden details on each page—like the ballerina who changed positions each time the umbrella welcomed a new visitor. She wasn’t troubled by the repetitive storyline or sparse text; fully immersed in the beautiful watercolors that introduced each character so well. She squealed as we reached the last page, studying each character’s face as they ate ice cream, painted and rode bikes in a crowded park. Then, she spent considerable time flipping back and forth through the pages; determined to find the moment each character joined the umbrella by a tiny glimpse of their shoe, hat, or jacket. She talked at length about friends who were bullied who might also feel like they were “outside the umbrella.” She summed up the lesson of the book well, stating, “tall or short—everybody can be friends.” She gave the book “5 stars” and said she would recommend the book to “friends in my class who might not read a lot but get bullied sometimes.”

Amy June Bates and her daughter, Juniper, have truly created a story time gem. Well-designed for classroom read-alouds as well as more intimate settings, the book facilitates multiple layers of understanding guided by the experiences and perspectives of the readers. Although the overarching lesson of inclusion lurked just below the surface, many children grasped the concept when provided with discussion prompts and examples. The book would integrate well into thematic units on emotions,

acceptance or bullying. Further, the topic lends itself to a myriad of activities including identifying other objects or individuals who might personify the big umbrella, reflecting on times when students feel “out in the rain,” or identifying how students might “be an umbrella” to others. With such broad appeal and a universal message, this book is sure to be a crowd-pleaser at home or in the classroom.

About the Author

Jennifer Bumble is an assistant professor of special education at the University of Missouri-St. Louis. Her research, teaching and service focus on improving the postschool outcomes of young people with disabilities by developing strong partnerships across educators, service systems and communities that support meaningful inclusion for all. Prior to academia, she worked as a special educator in Texas and an EL educator in South Korea. She also served as an educational consultant with the Vanderbilt Kennedy Center; developing trainings, tools, and resources for special educators across Tennessee