

Inclusivity Throughout Literacy

Verbal communication is the first form of communication introduced to people at as young as 12 months old; it's the very foundation of literacy. For many, learning to speak comes naturally, for me, however, this was not the case. Growing up, speaking simple sentences was one of my greatest challenges. While other children my age were quickly developing verbal communication skills and uttering complete sentences with ease, I was trying to speak but my words would become lodged in my throat and no sound would escape. My parents and teachers quickly noticed this pattern and I was diagnosed with a stutter.

To learn to speak “properly”, I spent hours each week in a speech therapy office struggling to grasp the communication skills that my peers had. I felt as though because I could not speak the same way everyone around me could, the value of what I had to say was lessened; I feared I would never be able to share my passions and ideas with others.

I saw myself in the students of “Nobody Means More to Me than You and the Future Life of Willie Jordan” by June Jordan, when they laughed after hearing their own literacy, Black English, being used in literature and assumed that the author was uneducated, because I too had never seen someone who spoke like me represented in an academic setting. The story prompted a deep analysis on how literacy shapes the human experience and how people whose main form of literacy is “standard” often take it for granted.

The students wrote to various news outlets to seek justice for Reggie Jordan’s racially motivated murder, choosing to write in Black English to be authentic to themselves. Despite the importance of what they had to say, “Newsday rejected the piece. The Village Voice could not find room in their ‘Letters’ section to print the individual messages from the students to the police. None of the TV news reporters picked up the story.” (Jordan 305). Although their attempts to seek justice for Reggie were unsuccessful, their commitment to their culture’s literacy demonstrated a newfound acceptance of their language and culture. I was able to reflect on my own relationship with language and realized that I should not be ashamed of my voice.

Growing up, I avoided my stutter. I used writing as an outlet to share my voice without the pressure of speaking and learned how to use digital design to create visual representatives of my ideas. After years of speech therapy and observing communication around me, I have overcome my stutter and learned to speak fluently, however, my challenges are what drove me to cross linguistic boundaries and explore different mediums of literature resulting in the diverse and direct communication skills that I have today. The students in Jordan's class taught me that being literate does not mean adapting to societal expectations; literacy is about synthesizing different voices to empower others and make space for communication across a more diverse population.