


Chapter 11

Silent Voices, Invisible Minds:

A Comparative Study of Flowers for Algernon and Out of My Mind

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ABSTRACT

This study offers a comparative analysis of Daniel Keyes' Flowers for Algernon and Sharon M. Draper's Out of My Mind in the context of education, inclusion, and ethics. Both novels reveal how prejudice and exclusion render the potential of individuals with disabilities invisible. Charlie, despite gaining intelligence, remains isolated, while Melody, with high cognitive ability, struggles against the "incompetent" label. Using inclusive education, labeling theory, and critical pedagogy as frameworks, the analysis shows how these works expose the limitations of normative schooling and highlight the urgent need for equity, empathy, and systemic transformation in educational practices.

INTRODUCTION

Although education systems are defined as fundamental structures that support individual development, offer equal opportunities, and increase social participation, in practice, it cannot be said that every individual is equally represented in the education process. Especially when it comes to individuals with disabilities, educational processes can often be exclusionary, restrictive, and based on normative patterns (Ferguson, 2008; Slee, 2011). According to a recent UNICEF report from 2021,

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there are an estimated 240 million children with disabilities worldwide. The report further highlights that children with disabilities are disadvantaged on the majority of child well-being metrics when compared to their non-disabled peers (UNICEF, 2021). These disparities underline the fact that ensuring the right to education involves more than providing physical access; it also requires creating learning environments where students' voices are heard, their potential is recognized, and they are accepted without marginalization (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). Yet, when such recognition and acceptance are absent, educational systems often respond by categorizing learners through deficit-oriented labels. As Figueroa (1994) points out, when we do not react in the same way to the structures and limitations imposed on us in institutionalized learning, the system categorizes us as 'exceptional learners' or 'at-risk learners.' Understanding individuals' experiences of exclusion is critically important for making education policies and teacher training more inclusive.

The recognition of the right to education as a universal human right began with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948; in subsequent periods, a significant impetus was given to the concept of inclusive education through international and national regulations such as the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975, the United Nations International Year of Disabled Persons in 1981, and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities adopted in 2006 (Artiles et al., 2011). With the Salamanca Statement, education began to include the concepts of social justice and equality (UNESCO, 1994). According to this declaration, education should have a structure that focuses on students' individual differences and the needs arising from these differences. These developments have reinforced the philosophy that individuals with disabilities must be ensured full participation in society and have emphasized that education is the fundamental tool for this participation. Nevertheless, a striking gap remains between these commitments and classroom realities. Despite the international consensus on inclusion, students with disabilities continue to face exclusionary practices in educational settings (Reeves et al., 2022). When students exhibit different developmental patterns or communication styles that do not conform to common norms, they are often labeled with terms like "difficult learner," "unable to learn," or "maladjusted" (Goffman, 1963, 1990). This situation not only undermines academic achievement but also damages the student's self-esteem, sense of belonging, and long-term learning relationship (Freire, 1996).

Taking the above-mentioned ideas into consideration, this study examines Daniel Keyes' *Flowers for Algernon* (1966) and Sharon M. Draper's *Out of My Mind* (2010) novels to discuss how the relationship between disability and education becomes visible through individual narratives. The main reason these two works are noteworthy is that despite their high learning motivation, individuals with disabilities are systematically excluded in those books, their potential often remains unseen, and they experience loneliness even in environments considered inclusive.

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