



TOPIC: Special Needs or Special Gifts - Can We Tell and Does it Matter?

Using the book (or video), *Westlandia*, illustrated by Maine artist Kevin Hawkes, help your students explore the related concepts:

- Everyone has strengths and challenges
- Is it really important that we know whether someone has a disability?
- Shouldn't we treat all people with dignity, respect, and kindness?

GRADE: 4

TIME: 30 minutes

OBJECTIVES:

After this activity, students will understand:

- That it is often difficult to know if a person has a disability
- About the sometimes "hidden" disability of autism and how people with autism have characteristics that can overlap with giftedness and exceptional talents
- That it is possible to have both a disability and exceptional talents

MATERIALS NEEDED:

- None if using an interactive whiteboard
- If not using an interactive whiteboard:
 - Book: [Weslandia](#) by Paul Fleischman
 - Flipchart paper or regular whiteboard

ADDITIONAL MATERIALS PROVIDED:

- For section H (below), optional page showing Cromwell Center hidden disabilities photos from previous classroom program to serve as a reminder to students. This pdf can be printed or shown on an interactive whiteboard.

ACTIVITY:

A. Have students individually write answers to:

- What makes you different from most of your friends?
- What makes you the same as most of your friends?
- What is a strength or talent that you have that most other children don't have?

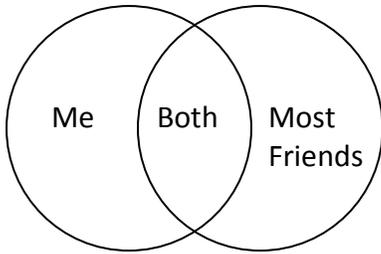
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Students can write this as an essay or single sentences. If they have studied Venn diagrams, it can also be completed as a diagram showing *same* and *different*. (Label circles Me, Most of My Friends, and Both).



B. Divide into groups of approximately four students each. Make sure groups are diverse and are not formed by preferred peer group. Ask students to share their answers with one another.

C. Introduce the book *Weslandia*. (Students may be interested to know that the illustrator, Kevin Hawkes, lives in Gorham, Maine.) Read the book aloud or watch this video using the IWB: <http://vimeo.com/70079450> (Video is 7:41 minutes long.)

D. Using an interactive whiteboard, regular whiteboard, or flipchart, create this chart:

HOW WAS WESLEY:

THE SAME AS OTHERS?	DIFFERENT FROM OTHERS?

Students can take turns coming up and writing words or phrases to create two lists.

E. Ask, “Does anyone think Wesley has a disability?” Get some answers and ask why. What type of disability?

F. Ask students, “What if I told you that Wesley has high-functioning autism? Would you be surprised? Why or why not?” Some review of autism may be needed if it has been a while since the Cromwell Center visited. Students may point out that Wesley was sensitive to clothing textures and foods, he didn’t play with other kids, didn’t have the same interests as others, etc.

G. Ask students, “What if I told you that Wesley was gifted? Would you be surprised? Why or why not?” (i.e., he created his own language, he invented things, etc.)

H. Point out that it is often hard to tell whether a person has a disability or not. Remind student of the Cromwell Center classroom program activity in which they looked at pictures of famous people and tried to determine whether the person had a disability or not. (See optional accompanying photo page to jog students’ memories.) “It was really hard to tell just by looking at someone, right? This is similar with Wesley.”

I. Point out that we don’t know whether Wesley has autism or not. Ask, “Would it be important to know whether he has autism if you decided to play/hang out with Wesley? Does it matter? Did kids still find him fun to be around?” Remind students that anyone with a disability in one area of their life still has many other talents.

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Optional Follow-up activity:

Students can do mock interviews with one roleplaying Wesley and one a journalist. Journalist can ask questions like:

- How did it feel to have no friends? Did it bother you?
- Why did people think you were weird?
- Why do you think kids started playing with you more?
- How did it feel when kids started playing with you more?

If desired, students can record videos of the interview.

After the interview, tell the class:

- At the beginning of the book, Wesley's parents wanted Wesley to change to be more like other children. They were worried that he "sticks out like a nose." Do you think acting more like "typical children" is expected by parents and teachers? Why?
- In this book, all the children changed to be more like Wesley. They adopted his ideas. Is that realistic? Can you imagine that happening at your school?

AN IMPORTANT NOTE FROM THE CROMWELL CENTER

Dear Teacher or Guidance Counselor:

Your brief feedback on this or on any of our other lesson plans is very important. It will enable us to share results with our grant funders and help obtain future funding, and any suggestions for improvements will help us fine tune the activities to best meet your needs.

To provide this valuable feedback, please go to the form on the bottom of this page on our website: <http://cromwellcenter.org/teacher-resources/>.

Or, if you prefer, you can e-mail your comments to sgreenwood@cromwellcenter.org.

Thank you!