University of Mary Washington

# Eagle Scholar

Fall 2020

# Representations of Disability in Literature and Elementary Education

Rebecca Young

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholar.umw.edu/student_research

 Part of the English Language and Literature Commons

Rebecca Young

Dr. Chris Foss

ENGL 491

November 9, 2020

Representations of Disability in Literature and Elementary Education

Literature is one of the oldest and most widely recognized forms of creative media in many societies throughout the world. Additionally, significant research supports the notion that exposure to literature can influence readers' personal developments and their understandings of experiences that differ from their own. This point is crucial in discussions of diversity and inclusion, particularly in the field of elementary education. Children begin to develop understandings of themselves and others from an incredibly young age—as early as preschool and younger. By purposefully sharing diverse and inclusive literature with children during these formative years, educators can help them develop ideals which are positively inclusive of others and which support positive self-understandings.

In the field of disability studies, this concept is crucial. For centuries, the broad community of people with disabilities has been treated as inferior to those perceived as abled; they have been viewed as "less than fully human and therefore…not fully eligible for the opportunities which are available to other people as a matter of right" (Jason Dart, qtd. in Karten 2-3). Further, they have often faced discrimination and segregation in social situations, including the American education system. In many cases, this has also had lasting negative impacts on the academic and developmental opportunities students with disabilities have had access to.

However, over the last several decades, the Disability Rights movement has advocated for societal shifts away from these historically discriminatory practices and exclusionary belief systems. Literature is one tool that can help bring about this change, as it has the power to increase awareness, understanding, and appreciation of this diverse community. When literature, like other forms of media, includes positive and diverse portrayals of people with disabilities, readers who share similar experiences with their own disabilities can see themselves represented and empowered. Simultaneously, readers without disabilities can develop understanding and appreciation of experiences and communities they otherwise may not have access to or build relationships with. These individual developments can then influence readers' day-to-day lives and ideologies for the better. With time, these small-scale ideological shifts toward inclusivity can further spread throughout society. Thus, these literary representations can enrich all readers and have lasting positive implications for broad societal change.

To understand the ways disability is represented in literature, it is first necessary to understand the ways disability is perceived and represented beyond literature. As many disability studies scholars have addressed, there are two dominant societal perspectives of disability: the medical model and the social model. The medical model, as explained by Gail Ellis, presents disability pathologically, as something that must be "cured" or "fixed," and "its focus is on impairments, medical interventions and possible cures" (71). This model also typically discusses disability through a deficit lens, focusing on what a person with a disability "cannot" do, rather than focusing on their strengths and capabilities. In contrast, the social model primarily presents disabilities as a result of the environment in which someone resides; it "shows how individuals are disabled by barriers erected in society, not by their impairment or difference" (Ellis 62). When viewed through this model, an "impairment" only becomes a "disability" when someone's

environment or society is not accommodating for them. For example, a mobility impairment may not be a disability in a navigable area free of stairs. For most disability studies scholars, the best model may be a hybrid of these approaches. While the medical model is often criticized for being ableist and restrictive, an entirely social approach is also criticized for minimizing the real challenges and experiences of people with disabilities, and for minimizing the potential for individuals to consider disability an aspect of their identity. Each of these approaches must be considered when evaluating literary representations of disability, as they influence the creation and reception of that literature.

These broad and often unconscious societal views about disability also influence literary representation and interpretation. Literature, as with anything else, cannot be produced in a cultural vacuum. An author's understandings of disability will inevitably influence their portrayals of the disability community, just as a reader's understandings will influence their interpretations of the book. So, authors who ascribe to the medical model of disability will likely represent their disabled characters through this model as well; this is applicable regardless of whether the author may be conscious of their own perceptions or biases. As a result, it is important for readers to be aware of these biases and how to identify them while reading. Additionally, it is crucial to purposefully seek out authors who have personal experiences with disability, as they will be the most reliable sources for their own stories. When readers are aware of these societal views and portrayals of disability, they can be prepared to recognize and analyze their literary representations as well.

These perceptions of disability are perpetuated in literature through several aspects of the books; character roles, descriptions of disability, and illustrations are some of the most prominent. The traditional roles of disabled characters are relatively limited, and they are

typically viewed as less important to the plot than those of non-disabled characters. For instance, studies have found that characters in children's books who were portrayed with disabilities were consistently more likely to be seen in supporting roles rather than main roles, and rarely narrate their own stories even as protagonists (Aho and Alter; Leininger et al.; Price et al.; Prater). This trend reinforces the negative societal view that people with disabilities are inherently inferior and less important than non-disabled people. Additionally, it reinforces notions of "ability" as the accepted norm, othering people who deviate from that standard. Similarly, many characters with disabilities are shown as incapable of solving their own problems or the main conflicts in stories (Artman-Meeker et al.; Prater et al.; Price et al.). More often, characters with disabilities must be helped by a non-disabled character, or they have such minor roles in the book that they never assist in solving the story's conflict. This also reinforces perspectives of disability as limiting people's potential, showing the disability community as incapable as well. This further emphasizes and validates historical tropes that people with disabilities should be seen as pitiable, helpless, or even burdensome. All of these representations are detrimental to the disability community. In contrast, stories whose main characters have disabilities and are presented as heroic, rather than helpless, can show more realistic and positive perspectives of disability. Books that feature characters with disabilities in these ways dismantle those negative societal ideals and further empower the disability community.

In addition to character roles, the explicit descriptions of disabilities can have a strong influence on character reception and the overall representation of disability in children's books. Some of the traditional and potentially harmful descriptions of disability focus only on a deficit lens of portrayal. In these cases, characters with disabilities are almost entirely framed by what they "cannot" do as a result of their disability. For example, many representations of autistic

characters describe them as struggling to make friends or communicate (Black and Tsumoto;

Engel and Sheppard). This entirely deficit-focused approach reinforces negative societal

connotations around disability and is harmful for the disability community as well. Instead, texts

can describe disability in more positive ways, by focusing readers' attention on aspects of

disability that are strengths. Other descriptions of disability that can reinforce harmful ableist

ideologies include framing disability as a punishment for the character, a burden for their family,

or an inspirational lesson for non-disabled characters. Again, these explicit portrayals of

disability through literary characters perpetuate negative perceptions of the real disability

community, and they should be avoided in literature unless they can be further contextualized.

  The illustrations in picturebooks or graphic novels can add new layers to the texts as well,

for better or worse. In many cases, illustrations can enhance the overall reading experience and

enrich positive portrayals of disability. For example, the graphic novel *El Deafo* utilizes

illustrations to visually represent some aspects of Deafness and hearing impairments. The author

and illustrator, who herself identifies as Deaf, incorporated illustrative techniques to mimic the

confusion, disorientation, and isolation she experiences in some of her everyday interactions,

integrating those feelings into the experience of reading. As a result, "this literary/artistic form

discourages disengagement, sentimentality, and sensationalism" (Kersten 285). Additionally,

illustrated texts are generally more accessible texts than unillustrated ones; early readers,

English-Language Learners, and readers with disabilities all typically benefit from the addition

of illustrations. In these ways, illustrations can powerfully enrich understandings of characters

with disabilities. However, they can also perpetuate negative understandings of disability,

intentionally or unintentionally. For example, illustrations are sometimes the only part of a book

to address aspects of diversity such as race or gender; if they only portray disabled characters as

white and male, for example, those texts erase the intersectional diversity that is part of the disability community. Additionally, some picturebooks may reinforce segregational ideologies of disability by emphasizing otherness in disabled characters; for example, this can be seen when illustrators show these characters as purposefully different beyond a physical disability or isolate them in the imagery. Whether positive or negative, the illustrations in these books have the power to reinforce or challenge readers' perceptions of disability, so these aspects of the texts should be evaluated alongside the literature itself.

As alluded to in discussing illustrative representations of disability, texts portraying characters with disabilities also often lack other aspects of diversity as well. Since the 1990s, several studies have found that representations of characters with disabilities are overwhelmingly white, depict heteronormative families and relationships, and come from Eurocentric or Western cultural backgrounds (Artman-Meeker et al.; Dyches et al.; Matthew and Clow; Kleekamp and Zapata). This practice is harmful, as it ignores the intersectional diversity within the disability community. Additionally, many disabilities are underrepresented as well. For example, mobility impairments that require wheelchair accommodations are proportionally overrepresented, while other disabilities, such as vision impairments, are represented significantly less often; similarly, many portrayals of disability strictly follow prescribed diagnostic criteria for those disabilities and never represent them as complex or individualized experiences (Aho and Alter; Black and Tsumoto). In these cases, the representation of one disability is not inherently problematic; however, it can become problematic if it reinforces tendencies to oversimplify the disability community or erase the experiences of some disabled people.

Despite these unfortunate trends in representation, some studies have found that literary portrayals of disability in children's books have begun to show increased diversity in more

recently published texts. For example, books published throughout the early 2000s showed a positive trend toward increased diversity in representations of characters with disabilities in comparison to previously published books (Dyches et al.). Additionally, some studies have shown the historical gap in representation between male and female characters with disabilities in children's books has begun to narrow, which is another positive trend of diverse representation (Dyches et al.; Black and Tsumoto; Leininger et al.). These recent trends toward more diverse literary portrayals of disability are optimistic, but there is still a significant amount of progress to be made with future publications and children's books.

The portrayals of disability in children's literature are crucial because they have sweeping impacts on the people who read and engage with these books. One of the most popular analogies in the field of multicultural literacy education is that of books as mirrors, windows, and doors. As Pennell et al. explain:

> As mirrors, books can provide students with reflections of their own thoughts, feelings, and experiences…as windows, children's books [allow readers to] view the realities of new worlds…[and] books can be seen as doors transporting the reader both into and out of everyday conditions. (412-413)

In other words, books can (and should) reflect one's own experience, show others' experiences, and let readers step into another world of experience. To be effective, this analysis should be applicable for students of any background, including those with disabilities. So, for example, there should be books that "mirror" the lived experiences of people in the disability community; those same books should also act as "windows" and "doors" for students who may not share that background or identity themselves. This allows the literature to enrich the understandings of non-

disabled students, and simultaneously validates the lived experiences of students with disabilities as well. These concepts also have implications for the lives of these readers that can last long after the initial reading experience has taken place.

For some children (and adults) with disabilities, reading books that include representations of their experiences can be a form of bibliotherapy. Bibliotherapy, as Leininger et al. define it, is a therapeutic experience of reading that "helps students understand themselves, realize that they are not alone, and see hope in their situation" (23). By reading books that portray characters who experience similar circumstances to them, some members of the disability community can build stronger concepts of self-understanding and recognize that they are not alone in their experiences. This can validate their thoughts and feelings and help them process any negative experiences they may have gone through; this can be especially beneficial for children who have cognitive or emotional disabilities. The process of bibliotherapy is associated with some potential risks, however; as with any form of literature, books representing disabilities can be used to reinforce negative understandings as well as positive. In some cases, using books that perpetuate negative ideals can be unintentionally harmful for students who would otherwise benefit from bibliotherapy. Again, this emphasizes the importance of using texts purposefully to promote inclusion and diversity.

Reading books that include diverse and positive representations of the disability community can also have implications on peer perceptions of students with disabilities. Several studies have found that children's attitudes toward peers with disabilities can be influenced— both positively and negatively—by what representations of disability they see in books, as well as in other forms of media. For instance, de Boer et al. analyzed several studies and found that a majority of non-disabled students generally hold neutral attitudes toward disability, but that

reading books including positive portrayals of disability can shift their attitudes toward positivity. Another study from 2019 found that students were significantly influenced both positively and negatively by representations of disability in cartoon characters, showing that these impacts exist beyond literature as well (Engel and Sheppard). Cumulatively, the profound research that has been done on this topic demonstrates how influential media representations of characters with disabilities can be for children's own understandings of disability. For students who may not have any personal experience with this community, such media portrayals could be their only source of knowledge about disabilities. When those sources reinforce positive and diverse understandings of disability, either explicitly or implicitly, children's perceptions of disability are likely to be influenced positively; the same is true for negative understandings. Additionally, Wilkins et al. found that children engaged in discussions about disability were often influenced by their teacher's attitude as well; for many students, attempts to provide the "expected" or "right" responses dominated discussion. Thus, the presentation of a given text is perhaps as important as the messages that text proliferates on its own. In regard to education, this emphasizes the need for teachers to both incorporate books that promote diversity and inclusivity and for them to be aware of what understandings their own words and actions reinforce. If classroom literacy and discussions encourage positive ideologies toward disability, non-disabled students will be more likely to develop positive perceptions of disability that can be translated to their treatment of peers with disabilities. This can begin to cultivate more widespread appreciation of and advocacy for the disability community.

In addition to influencing non-disabled peers' attitudes toward students with disabilities, media representations of disability have been found to impact educators' perceptions as well. An educator's personal understandings of disability are directly related to their pedagogical

practices. For example, there is "a correlation between teachers' feelings of pity towards a student with a learning disability and the expectation of their failure" (Samsel and Perepa 138). Additionally, as with non-disabled students, data has shown that media portrayals of disability influence teachers' expectations for and treatment of students with disabilities (Samsel and Perepa; Hollenbeck; Harris). This data has serious implications for educators and for the disability community. As established previously, ideologies reinforced by teachers can have a significant influence on student perceptions of disability, making this a crucial field of study. Additionally, an increasing percentage of students with disabilities are spending some or all of their daily class time in inclusive, general education settings. For many of these students, while they may be accompanied by a certified special educator, their general classroom teachers have not been formally trained to work with students who have diverse learning needs or disabilities. Thus, these teachers' perceptions of disabilities could seriously impact the educational experiences of students with disabilities. In many pedagogical contexts, regardless of students' disabilities, teacher expectations and attitudes have been proven to affect student success both academically and socially. For students with disabilities, a lack of positive representation of disability in literature and other media could be detrimentally damaging to their education solely based on teacher perceptions of disability.

In light of this data, it is apparent that an increase in positive portrayals of disability in children's literature, particularly within the context of elementary education, would lead directly to benefits for children with disabilities. Oftentimes, especially at this younger level, teachers have a great deal of control over the books they include in their lessons and classroom libraries. Because of this, they have significant control over the diversity represented in their class texts. With purposeful intention, then, educators can improve the literary representations of the

disability community that their students are being exposed to regularly within the classroom. To do this, they can actively seek out books that were written and illustrated by members of the disability community, as well as those from credible sources of quality literature. For example, the Dolly Gray award for children's literature is a mark of quality literature representing characters with cognitive disabilities; by seeking out books from resources such as this, educators can begin to incorporate positive portrayals of disability into their classroom literature.

Despite the agency teachers often have in selecting their classroom literature, they are limited by what resources are currently available for them to use. Additionally, even some highly-accredited books can occasionally perpetuate negative understandings of disability; for example, some Dolly Gray award-winning books have been found to lack positive portrayals of their disabled characters and reinforce negative stereotypes (Artman-Meeker et al.; Dyches et al.). Thus, it is important for teachers to know how to evaluate books on their own for quality representations of disability. In doing so, they should analyze the texts for aspects of disability representation this essay has already highlighted, including tropes and stereotypes; whose perspective the story is told from; whether characters with disabilities are involved in the action or problem-solving of the story; how diverse the characters are, including and beyond disability identity; and what underlying messages about disability exist, if any. All of these aspects of the books should be considered alongside the overall literary quality of the work, including aspects such as plot and suggested reading level. When a teacher finds that a text includes some problematic features or encourages exclusionary ideologies, that book does not necessarily need to be avoided; instead, they can discuss those issues during class activities. Addressing negative portrayals of disability can encourage students to critically examine the ideologies they encounter, leading to deeper levels of understanding.

In addition to evaluating books for positive and inclusive representations of disability, some books that may not explicitly seem related to disability issues can still be read and taught through a lens of disability. For example, Ellis explains how *Winnie the Witch*, a book that never mentions disability, can be used to teach students about the social model of disability and the impacts of societal barriers on people affected by them. Activities such as this allow teachers to use their own texts to teach the broad concepts related to inclusivity and diversity. Similarly, themed literacy units can be used to spur discussions around disability-specific topics, or they can simply connect disability-inclusive texts within conversations of broader issues. These units incorporate a variety of texts from a diverse range of genres, reading levels, and contents, connected by one overarching theme. For example, Tracy et al. describe one unit designed around the theme of courage, explaining "the learning that occurred…was not because of the text sets themselves but rather how [the teacher] used them…to accomplish her broader vision" (535). Whether during a long-term unit or a single lesson, these models can be followed to foster discussion and engagement within the classroom around ideas relating to disability. These practices can allow teachers to positively influence the attitudes of their non-disabled students toward disability in addition to validating and empowering their students with disabilities.

Finally, perhaps a teacher's most important duty in this matter is, simply, to teach. Regularly and casually incorporating literature that includes characters with disabilities is a key way to improve the diversity of a classroom and should be practiced as much as possible for the benefit of all students; however, explicit discussion and instruction is also necessary. To support the development of long-term ideological shifts toward inclusivity, these texts must be shared alongside critical conversation. The ultimate goal is to spread appreciation and advocacy for this diverse community. However, the first step in this movement is to spread awareness. For

individuals who may not have any personal experiences with disability, learning positive

approaches and unlearning negative approaches to disability representation may need to begin

with explicit conversation about these issues. By encouraging students to think further than the

stories they read within books, educators can also emphasize how these literary concepts have

direct connections to the real world. In doing so, they can prepare those students to move into the

real world themselves, and to make it a better and more inclusive place for all.

Works Cited

Aho, Tanja, and Alter, Grit. "Just Like Me, Just Like You." *Journal of Literary & Cultural*

    *Disability Studies*, vol. 12, no. 3, 2018, pp. 303–319.

Artman-Meeker, Kathleen, et al. "By the Book: Using Literature to Discuss Disability with

    Children and Teens." *TEACHING Exceptional Children*, vol. 48, no. 3, 2016, pp. 151–

    158.

Black, Rhonda S and Tsumoto, Courtney A. "Portrayal of Adolescents with Autism Spectrum

    Disorder in Young Adult Literature." *Exceptionality Education International*, vol. 28, no.

    1, 2018, pp. 45–68.

de Boer, Anke, et al. "Students' Attitudes towards Peers with Disabilities: A Review of the

    Literature." *International Journal of Disability, Development, and Education*, vol. 59, no.

    4, 2012, pp. 379–392.

Dyches, Tina Taylor, et al. "Juvenile Literature and the Portrayal of Developmental

    Disabilities." *Education and Training in Developmental Disabilities*, vol. 44, no. 3, 2009,

    pp. 304–317.

Ellis, Gail. "Social Model Thinking about Disability through Picturebooks." Children's

    Literature in English Language Education, vol. 7, no. 2, 2019, pp. 61–78.

Engel, Carla Simone, and Sheppard, Elizabeth. "Can Cartoons Which Depict Autistic Characters

    Improve Attitudes Towards Autistic Peers?" *Journal of Autism and Developmental*

    *Disorders*, 2019, pp. 98-116.

Harris, Kathleen I. "The Unexpected Journey Shared by Families: Using Literature to Support and Understand Families Raising a Child with Disabilities." *Early Childhood Education Journal*, vol. 43, no. 6, 2015, pp. 473–484.

Hollenbeck, Amy R. Feiker. "Beyond Talking About Books: Implications of the Reading Comprehension Instruction and Pedagogical Beliefs of a Special Educator Perceived as Effective." *Learning Disability Quarterly*, vol. 36, no. 2, 2013, pp. 112–126.

Karten, Toby J. *Embracing Disabilities in the Classroom: Strategies to Maximize Students' Assets*. Corwin Press, 2008.

Kleekamp, Monica C, and Zapata, Angie. "Interrogating Depictions of Disability in Children's Picturebooks." *The Reading Teacher*, vol. 72, no. 5, 2019, pp. 589–597.

Leininger, Melissa, et al. "Books Portraying Characters with Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder." *Teaching Exceptional Children*, vol. 42, no. 4, 2010, p. 22.

Matthew, Nicole, and Susan Clow. "Putting Disabled Children in the Picture: Promoting Inclusive Children's Books and Media." International Journal of Early Childhood, vol. 39, no. 2, 2007, pp. 65–78.

Pennell, Ashley E, et al. "Respectful Representations of Disability in Picture Books." *The Reading Teacher*, vol. 71, no. 4, 2018, pp. 411–419.

Prater, Mary Anne. "Using Juvenile Literature with Portrayals of Disabilities in Your Classroom." *Intervention in School and Clinic*, vol. 35, no. 3, 2000, pp. 167–176.

Prater, Mary Anne, et al. "Teaching Students About Learning Disabilities Through Children's Literature." *Intervention in School and Clinic*, vol. 42, no. 1, 2006, pp. 14–24.

Price, Charis Lauren, et al. "Exploring Representations of Characters with Disabilities in Library

      Books." *Early Childhood Education Journal*, vol. 44, no. 6, 2016, pp. 563–572.

Samsel, Maria, and Perepa, Prithvi. "The Impact of Media Representation of Disabilities on

      Teachers' Perceptions." *Support for Learning*, vol. 28, no. 4, 2013, pp. 138–145.

Tracy, Kelly N., et al. "Courageous Voices: Using Text Sets to Inspire Change." *Journal of

      Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, vol. 60, no. 5, 2017, pp. 527–536.

Wilkins, Julia, et al. "Exploring Elementary Students' Perceptions of Disabilities Using

      Children's Literature." *British Journal of Special Education*, vol. 43, no. 3, 2016, pp.

      233–249.