



Representation & Construction of Disability in Children’s & Young Adult Literature

Overview

“Reading is self-affirmation” (Bishop, 1990, p. 1). Children need mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors when they read to see their experiences reflected, see others’ experiences represented, and empathize with others (Bishop, 1990). As future educators, it is important for us to provide and use inclusive literature in our classrooms to create inclusive, safe, welcoming learning environments for our students. Unfortunately, individuals with disabilities are underrepresented in children’s literature, and when they are represented, they are often not the protagonist and are often represented inaccurately (Brenna, 2009). In light of this information, the purpose of this study was to gain an understanding of how disability is currently being represented and constructed in children’s and young adult literature and learn how we, as future educators, can analyze the books we use in our classrooms to ensure we only use books that promote inclusive environments. To accomplish this goal, we completed a critical content analysis: Rachel analyzed four disability-focused picture books one might use in an elementary classroom and Hannah analyzed two disability-focused young adult novels one might use in a high school English classroom. One of the most important aspects of our analysis was agency, a person’s ability to make purposeful decisions (Samman & Santos, 2009). We found that all books in this study generally represent disability accurately and positively and would be appropriate for classroom use. This is our Signature Honors Project. Dr. Christy Howard and Dr. Jennifer Gallagher served as our faculty mentors.

Process

We conducted a critical content analysis of our six books. A critical content analysis differs from a regular content analysis in that a critical content analysis prioritizes a critical lens as a frame for the study, not just as part of interpreting findings or citing scholarship in a literature review (Short, 2016, p. 5). For this study, the critical disability theory acted as the critical lens. We began by reading articles by experts in the fields of education, disability studies, and literature, including examples of other critical content analyses, to familiarize ourselves with the topic of our study. We then chose our books, which were all approved by our two faculty mentors, and decided what research questions and themes to use to analyze the books. Then, we used Short’s (2016) methodology for critical content analyses, described in steps below:

- Initial reading - we read through the books once without coding to understand the content as well as note our initial feelings and “live in” the book; this is what Short (2016) calls an “efferent stance” (p. 8).
- Reading for coding - we read the books again, this time coding for our questions and themes. We used quotes in all books and illustrations in picture books as evidence for our findings, and we used color-coded sticky notes to flag this evidence in our books. This is the process known as “coding.” We then created charts that had columns for this evidence, the page numbers we gathered it from, and our comments and notes, to organize our evidence according to our questions and themes.
- Writing - after coding, we wrote our findings in our “Findings” sections of our individual final papers.

Research Questions and Themes

The research questions used to analyze the four picture books were:

- Who tells the story of individuals with disabilities? Do authors have disabilities, have family members or close friends with disabilities, or have they done extensive research and talked to people with disabilities before writing the books?
- What challenges do characters with disabilities face in children’s literature and how do they overcome these challenges?
- What types of relationships are shown between characters with disabilities and characters without disabilities?

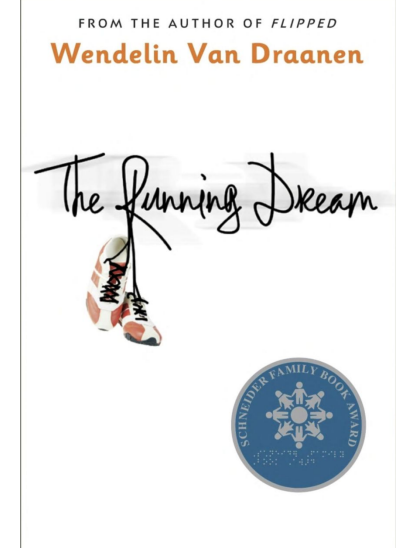
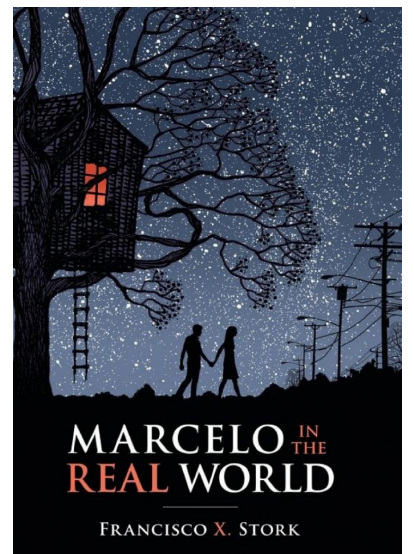
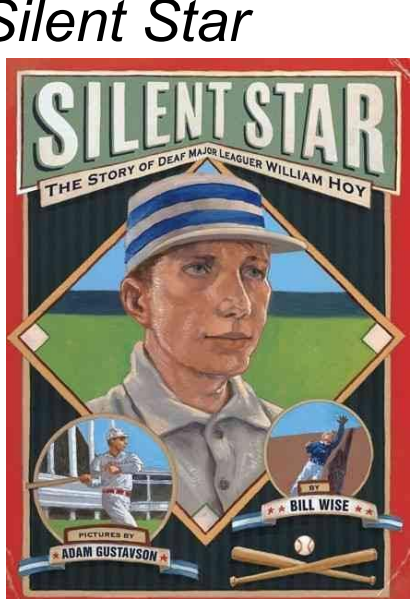
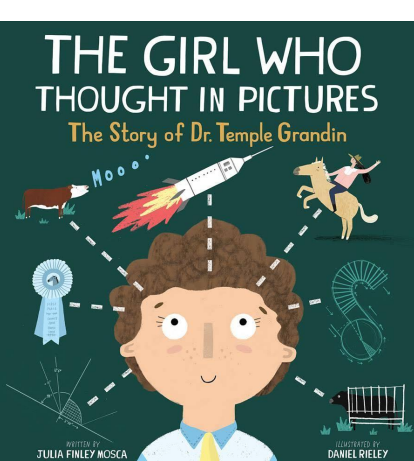
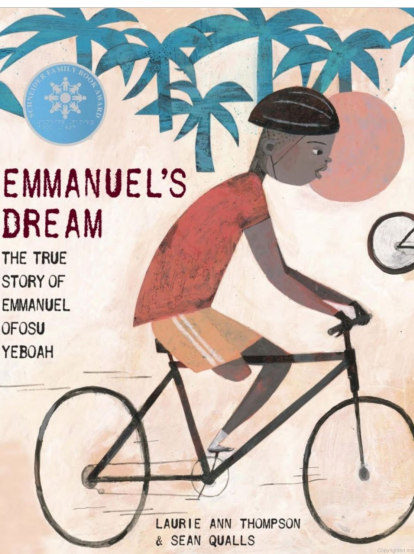

The research questions used to analyze the two young adult novels were:

- How are disabilities portrayed in young adult literature?
- What challenges do characters with disabilities face in young adult literature?
- How do the characters overcome these challenges?

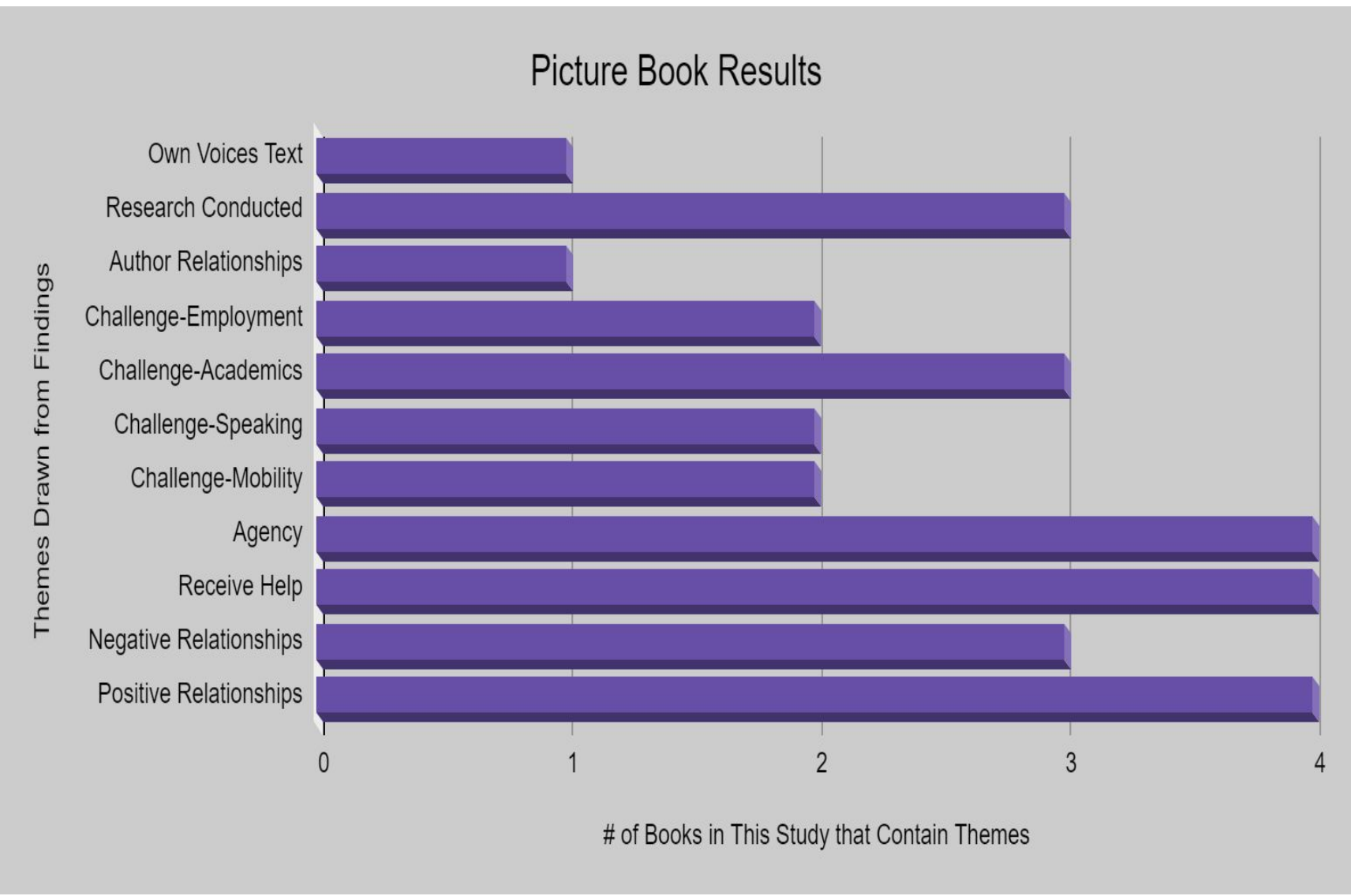
The themes analyzed in the two young adult novels were:

- How the main character shows agency and independence
- How the main character advocates and cares for others
- How the main character views themselves and their disability
- How other characters view the main character and their disability

Picture Books and Young Adult Novels Analyzed

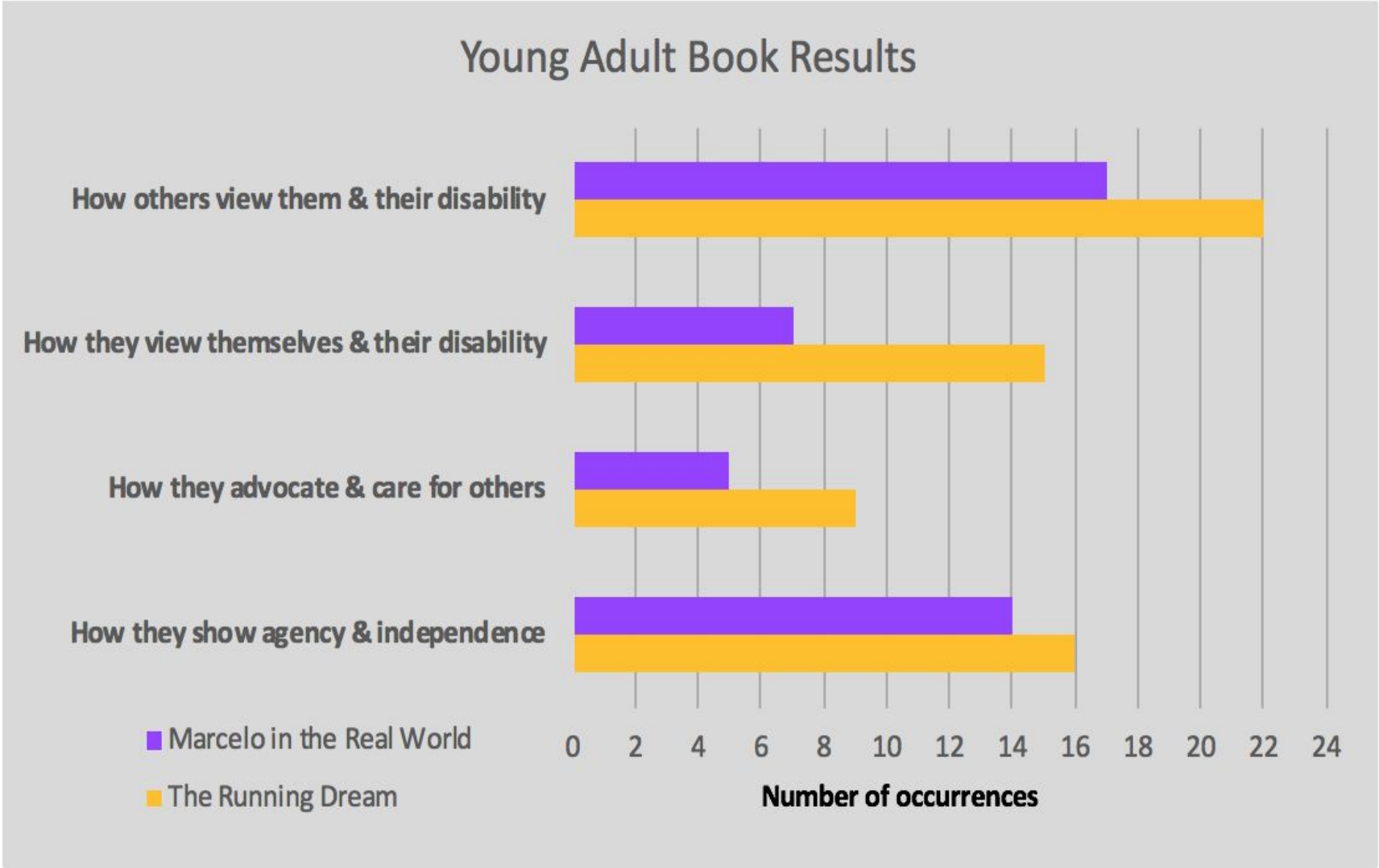
Young Adult Novels					
Title	Author	Year	Protagonist	Disability	Plot Summary
<i>The Running Dream</i> 	Wendelin Van Draanen	2012	Jessica Carlisle	Amputated leg	After talented runner Jessica Carlisle loses her leg in a bus accident, she must learn to walk and run again with a prosthetic leg. She befriends Rosa, a classmate with cerebral palsy, along her journey, which helps her see how blessed she is to be able to walk and run again and causes her to want Rosa to see what it is like to cross a finish line.
<i>Marcelo in the Real World</i> 	Francisco X. Stork	2009	Marcelo Sandoval	Developmental disorder (most similar to Asperger's Syndrome)	Marcelo sees the world differently than other people, but his father, refusing to recognize this difference, forces him to spend the summer working in the mailroom at his law firm. Through this experience, Marcelo learns about the real world and the injustice of the justice system from his coworkers and fights to make the justice system right.
Picture Books					
Title	Author	Year	Protagonist	Disability	Plot Summary
<i>Silent Star</i> 	Bill Wise	2012	William Hoy	Deafness	After losing his hearing at the age of three, William Hoy (born 1862) overcomes countless obstacles to become one of the best Major League Baseball players in United States history. This is a biographical book.
<i>The Girl Who Thought in Pictures</i> 	Julia Finley Mosca	2017	Temple Grandin	Autism	Temple Grandin was diagnosed with autism as a child and as a result faced many challenges on her way to becoming the famous animal scientist she is today. She also struggled with being a woman in the male-dominated farming industry. This book is biographical and written in rhyme.
<i>Emmanuel's Dream</i> 	Laurie Ann Thompson	2015	Emmanuel Ofose Yeboah	Amputated Leg	Emmanuel was born in Ghana with only one leg and faced challenges as a result, as well as the the challenge of losing his mother and having to care for his younger siblings. He overcomes these challenges and eventually rides his bicycle all around Ghana to spread the message that disability does not mean inability. This is a biographical book.
<i>Just Ask!</i> 	Sonia Sotomayor	2019	Multiple	Multiple	This book is an own voices text written by a Justice of the United States Supreme Court who was diagnosed with diabetes as a child. The book showcases 14 children with various disabilities and health challenges who each discuss their disability or health challenge, how it affects them, and what they do to overcome their challenges.

Results/Findings



To the left, the graph titled “Picture Book Results” shows 11 categories of findings from the picture books Rachel analyzed. These are not the findings by which she organized her “Findings” section of her paper, but are themes she pulled from her findings section. The numbers represent how many books represented those themes. General themes and findings are summarized in the points below:

- Only one out of the four books was an own voices text, meaning the author shares an identity with the protagonist (Ford, 2019). This same author was the only one who had relationships with individuals with disabilities.
- The most common challenge represented among the books was challenge with academics.
- Each book shows characters with disabilities enacting agency and accepting others’ help to overcome challenges.
- More positive than negative relationships were portrayed.



To the left, the graph titled “Young Adult Book Results” shows each of the four themes analyzed in the two young adult books. After the initial read, these are the themes Hannah chose to analyze in both of her books. The numbers represent how many times each theme was found within each book. General themes and findings are summarized in the points below:

- In both books, the protagonists were treated in positive and negative ways. Negativity came from strangers who did not know them, and positivity came from those who took the time to know them beyond their disabilities.
- *The Running Dream* has more passages explicitly stating how the main character views herself, since the story was the progression of her life post-amputee surgery. In *Marcelo in the Real World*, Marcelo was already aware of his difference from the beginning.
- In both books, the protagonists use their situation to advocate for other who had been treated unjustly.
- *The Running Dream* has more examples of agency and independence because the main character’s disability is physical. However, in both books, the protagonists gain more independence as the story progresses.

Significance & Implications

On a personal level, conducting this study is important to us as a future educators. Teachers need to include more diverse literature in their classrooms, and this will soon become our responsibility. On a professional level, many studies have already been conducted about diversity in children’s and young adult literature, but most of those focus on racial diversity. There have not been very many studies devoted solely to disability, which makes this study even more important. According to Rudine Sims Bishop’s concept of mirrors, students need diverse literature in order to see themselves represented. When children cannot find characters that are similar to them, or when those characters are treated or portrayed in a negative way, students take this personally and realize how society views people like them (Bishop, 2015). Bishop also states that having books serve as windows also important. If students “only see reflections of themselves, they will grow up with an exaggerated sense of their own importance in the world—a dangerous ethnocentrism” (Bishop, 2015, p. 1). Having books act as both mirrors and windows help students recognize and appreciate their similarities and differences, and it is the job of educators to find books for their classroom that can accomplish this.

This critical content analysis is an important development for the educational community. There have been many studies about diverse literature in terms of racial diversity, but only a few studies focus on disability. From this research, we can recommend to other teachers two young adult books that portray characters with disabilities, as well as four picture books. We can also share Myers and Bersani’s (2008/2009) strategies for analyzing books. We intend to share the results of this study, including the principles of Critical Disability Theory, to other education majors at East Carolina University and in our professional learning community. We hope that from this study, other educators will realize the significance of incorporating inclusive literature into their classrooms and will join the movement of increasing diverse books in classrooms across the country.

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