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 include 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 (Breene, 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” (Summar & Sambanis, 2005). 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 Horizons Project. Dr. Christy Howard and Dr. Jennifer Gallagher served as our faculty mentors.

Process

We conducted a critical content analysis of 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 field 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 analysis, 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 “affective stance” (p. 10).
- **Reading for coding**: we read the books again, this time coding for our questions and themes. We used quotes in all illustrations and explanations of 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 and 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.

Picture Books and Young Adult Novels Analyzed

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Young Adult Novels</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Protagonist</th>
<th>Disability</th>
<th>Plot Summary</th>
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| *The Running Dream* | 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 tells her story along her journey, which helps others 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.
| *Emmanuel’s Dream* | Laura Ann Thompson | 2015 | Emmanuel Ofosu Yeboah | Amputated leg | Emmanuel was born in Ghana with only one leg and faced numerous obstacles to becoming one of the best Major League Baseball players in United States history. This is a biographical book. | Emmanuel overcomes obstacles to become one of the best Major League Baseball players in United States history.
| *The Girl Who Thought in Pictures* | Julia Finlay 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 brilliant 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. | Temple Grandin was diagnosed with autism as a child and faced many challenges on her way to becoming a brilliant animal scientist.

Picture Books | Title | Author | Year | Protagonist | Disability | Plot Summary |
|----------------|-------|--------|------|------------|------------|--------------|
| *Silent Star* | BB Wise | 2012 | William Hoy | Deafness | After losing his hearing at the age of three, William Hoy (born 1882) overcomes countless obstacles to become one of the best Major League Baseball players in United States history. This is a biographical book. | After losing his hearing at the age of three, William Hoy overcomes obstacles to become one of the best Major League Baseball players in United States history.
| *The Running Dream* | Draanen, W. V. | 2012 | Jessica Carlisle | Amputated leg | After losing her leg in a bus accident, Jessica Carlisle must learn to walk and run again with a prosthetic leg. She tells her story along her journey, which helps others 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. | She tells her story along her journey, which helps others 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.

Results/Findings

To the left, the graph titled “Picture Book Results” show 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. The burning question she pulled from her findings section is the number of books represented and those themes. General themes and findings are summarized in the table below:

- **Only one out of the four books was an own voices text, meaning the author shared 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.**

Significance & Implications

On a personal level, conducting this study is important to us as 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 Sim’s 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, their self-esteem suffers. This is why it is important to read about characters with disabilities.

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Just Ask!: Be Different, Be Brave, Be You


Reading is Fundamental


The Running Dream


The Running Dream

In both books, the protagonists were treated with empathy and negative way. Negatively came from strangers who did not know them, and positively came from those who stood with them, not beyond their disabilities.

- The Running Dream has more powerlessness existing among the main character because she is not the main character in her own story. While the protagonist is meant to be the main character, she identifies with the protagonist.

- The Running Dream has more powerlessness existing among the main character than the main character in her own story. While the protagonist is meant to be the main character, she identifies with the protagonist.

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