



The Representation of Differing Abilities in Children's Literature: A Local Analysis

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Abstract

One hundred popular children's books for ages 0-6 were selected from a local metropolitan library system with data from 10 library branches. These frequently checked out books were then analyzed for how disabilities were represented in the books. This study found that only a few books checked out of the library represent children with differing abilities. Out of one hundred books, only thirty-six books show differing abilities with all of them depicting visual impairment (e.g., glasses) and four depicting a mobility impairment (e.g., wheelchair) in addition to the visual impairment. Understanding that children's literature influences children's attitudes, it is vital to find opportunities to engage children in books depicting children with disabilities as children begin to develop their understanding and attitudes at a young age.

Introduction

Books can become a powerful tool to teach children meaningful and relevant information, for example, in depicting children with differing abilities in a story setting. Children, including children with disabilities, seek representation of themselves in stories and appreciate when they are able to relate to the characters (Leary, 2016). Many different fields utilize children's books to explain higher-level constructs and concepts. For example, race, gender, (Adukia et al., 2021) and empathy (Kucirkova, 2019) are often constructs and concepts discussed in children's books. Illustrations depict the race of characters as well as the clothing, hair and other images of gender present. The storyline and depiction of characters provide insight into these concepts in addition to how to treat or engage with the characters. Book characters representing children with disabilities can add to all children understanding the concept of children with disabilities.

Disability (differing abilities) is defined as a person who has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities according to the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA). Within the definition of disabilities, differentiating invisible and visible disabilities is important to clarify. Invisible disabilities are categorized as debilitating pain, fatigue, dizziness, weakness, cognitive impairment, learning differences and mental disorders. Hearing and visual impairments also reside within this category. A visible depiction of differing abilities might include the use of an assisted device such as a wheelchair, cane or walker. An individual may live with both a visible and invisible disability or differing abilities.

Books often become a child's first exposure to children and adults with disabilities. Importantly, the representation of differing abilities in children's literature can provide a myriad of positive impacts for children with and without disabilities. Books focusing on this topic show an association with positive effects on children's interpersonal relationships and social behaviors with these books providing examples and prompts for children to consider how they relate to

children with differing abilities as well as to reflect on individual differences (Kurtts & Gavigan, 2008).

Children who have the opportunity to engage in reading on differing abilities inclusive literature creates space for children to see themselves and others represented visually and textually (Golos & Moses, 2013), while also helping to foster positive peer relationships in children of varying degrees of ability (Stelle, 1999). This exposure also provides an opportunity for children to learn about social norms and behaviors as well as to personally participate in developing their own social-emotional skills (Price et al., 2016).

Regarding children with disabilities, inclusive literature introduces them to books about themselves and depictions of their daily lives (Ayala, 1999). This can lead to improvement in self-efficacy and their perceptions of self-worth and accomplishment. Alternatively, as children without disabilities read books focused on inclusivity, it works to help them develop a sense of acceptance, empathy, and to better understand their potential impact when interacting with differently-abled others. Resultantly, these children may be more open to discussions about disabilities and their own feelings on the matter, supporting them to accept individuals with differences (Kurtts & Gavigan, 2008).

Historically, children's literature often portrays those with disabilities stereotypically, thus emphasizing differences rather than identifying how those of differing abilities can relate to others (Ayala, 1999). Research studies show the characterization of those with disabilities to be inaccurate and wide ranging in severity (Ayala, 1999). For example, some books often entail a miracle cure such as in the book, *Giraffes Can't Dance*. The giraffe's knees were crooked and his legs were thin. The giraffe has difficulty dancing and was laughed at by others. In the end the giraffe is able to dance and the other characters exclaim that it is a miracle (Andreae, 2000). Additionally, individuals with disabilities were rarely the main character (Price et al., 2016). While some books include inclusivity, the most commonly represented disabilities remain limited to either visual or orthopedic impairments, without a single book in the study depicting an emotional disability (Ayala, 1999). Importantly, children's literature can provide the opportunity to raise children's awareness and engage them in conversations on differing abilities (Emmerson et al., 2014).

Fairy tales are another example of stereotypically representing disabilities in children's literature. Previous research (Ayala, 1999; Beckett et al., 2010; & Hughes, 2006) the representation of differing abilities in children's fairy tales by depicting the differing ability with a character who has a difficult past and problematic present. In popular fairy tales such as *Beauty and the Beast* and *Rumpelstiltskin*, the characters represent differing ability in the form of suffering or a burden to those around them as well as to society.

Fairy tales also often depict the evil villain as a disabled character. An example of this is Captain Hook in *Peter Pan*. Captain Hook does not have a hand and uses a hook instead. In some versions of *Peter Pan* it is stated that Peter fed Captain Hook's hand to an alligator based off of a dare from the Lost Boys. Captain Hook cannot control that he lost his hand, but is treated as an evil and violent character (Solis, 2007). Characters with a different physical appearance apart from the norm often categorize as weak or inferior. In *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, the

dwarfs are weak, flawed, and ill. In one version of Snow White, the dwarfs are portrayed as lost souls that are sentenced to manual labor in the mines due to their differing abilities (Solis, 2007).

Additionally, a disabled character may become a source for humor (McGrail & Rieger, 2014). In some tales, characters without differing abilities laugh and mock the characters with disabilities (Hodkinson, 2017). Gashton laughs at the Beast in *Beauty and the Beast*. He also evokes fear in the townspeople by stating that the Beast will hunt their children at night. Lastly, the character with a differing ability may be portrayed as the super cripple, violent, sinister and evil. Examples of this would be Captain Hook or transformation of the evil queen into the elderly crippled woman in *Snow White*. This stereotype conveys a world view wherein characters with disabilities change themselves to become accepted and happy in their life (Harnett, 2000). Similar to this perception, Beckett et al., (2010) discuss the challenges of the happy ever after endings in children's books. This type of ending encourages children to believe that the differing abilities can be magically fixed or corrected. An example provided by Beckett et al., (2010) is *Adam and the Magic Marble*. Two of the boys have Tourette's Syndrome and one has cerebral palsy. When the boys find the magic marble, they are cured and the marble has fixed their ailments.

From the previous examples, one can see how children's literature can influence children's attitudes (Smith-D'Arezzo & Thomas, 2010). By providing age-appropriate abilities in safe ways, children gain positive interactions and acceptances. Books allow children to expand their knowledge and understanding beyond their own experiences. They are able to examine themselves as they learn to accept others who are different from them as well as may be difficult to understand (Taylor et al., 2020). Attitude development research finds that children as young as age four can identify pronounced physical disabilities such as cerebral palsy or hearing impairments (Diamond, 1993; Diamond & Hestenes, 1996; Dyson, 2005). As children grow older, they develop an awareness of less evident disabilities (intellectual disabilities and mental illness) (Price et al., 2016).

Beginning in the years from the 1990's to 2000's, children's literature demonstrates more positive and accurately representative characters with disabilities; these characters engage in typical activities, interact positively with peers, and portray themselves as doers, helpers, and persons with characteristics similar to those without disabilities (Price et al., 2016). When reviewing more current representative literature, physical, sensory and cognitive disabilities appear most commonly included, with less portrayal of learning disabilities (Prater et al., 2006). However, even today in libraries, utilized by teachers and families alike, it can be difficult to find quality inclusive literature on differing abilities (Price et al., 2016).

While improvements are being made in targeting more contemporary literature to portray varying levels of ability, this area continues to have room for growth; in addition, research has identified multiple considerations. For example, inclusive literature can serve to assist fully abled children in understanding and accepting those in their lives with differing levels of ability. Although, in order to do so, it is essential this representation is accurate and realistic. Toward this goal, it is important to highlight children with disabilities as believable people and avoid portraying them as props, only depicting associated behaviors (Ayala, 1999).

The positive impact of access to inclusive and representative literature is valuable in a wide range of settings including public libraries, schools, child care centers, healthcare facilities, as well as at home. Studies highlight the importance of this evaluation and selection process of this area of literature (Price et al., 2016). In examining this literature, five evaluative criteria include lack of stereotypes, confronting the disability, accuracy of information, literary quality and not “using” disabled characters inappropriately (Ayala, 1999). In this way, characters with disabilities become valued, portrayed appropriately and genuinely embraced both narratively and through illustrations (Price et al., 2016).

The goal for this current qualitative analysis is to find the frequency of representation of differing abilities within children’s books most frequently checked out in a midwestern metropolitan city library.

Learning Theory

Social learning theory developed by Albert Bandura (Bandura, 1976) focuses on the aspects of observing, modeling and imitating behaviors. Using Bandura’s theory, children have the opportunity through literature to *observe* the depiction of disabilities and visualize the *modeling* of appropriate responses. Thus, children have the opportunity to *imitate* the understanding, acceptance, and treatment of individuals with disabilities portrayed in the literature. Individuals who surround the child may either reinforce or correct the child as they imitate what they observed in a children’s book. Therefore, it becomes critical children’s literature provides their young readers with inclusive, accurate and responsive content.

Research Questions

In reviewing children's books that were most frequently checked out in a midwestern metropolitan city for ages 0-6, the research questions were:

1. What was the frequency of representation of differing abilities within the books?
2. What types of differing abilities were depicted?
3. Were the disabilities visually depicted through pictures or textually through the storyline?

Method

A content analysis methodology evaluated the representation of differing abilities in children’s books. Content analysis requires a systematic analysis of communication (Mayring, 2004). In this study, children’s popular books were analyzed. The storyline, primary and secondary characters were analyzed both in the text and illustrations for the depiction of differing abilities using the ADA definitions.

Terminology

For the purpose of this investigation, disability (differing abilities) was defined using the examples of medical conditions listed from ADA such as deafness, blindness, diabetes, cancer,

epilepsy, intellectual disabilities, partial or completely missing limbs, mobility impairments, autism, cerebral palsy, HIV infection, multiple sclerosis, muscular dystrophy, major depressive disorder, bipolar disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder and schizophrenia (American with Disability Act, 1990). Operational definitions were derived from sources such as the Center for Disease Control, Mayo Clinic, U.S. National Library of Medicine and the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual-5th Edition.

Selection of Books

Books were selected through collaboration with a local, metropolitan library system with data from 10 library branches. The library system provided the most frequently checked out books from January 2019-December 2019 listed in order by frequency of selection. The inclusion criteria for the books were books that were targeted at the 0-6-year-old population and classified by the library as readers, picture books, or board books. Books were excluded if they contained more than one story (e.g., 5-Minute Marvel Spider-Man Stories).

Coding

Two graduate students provided the primary coding (one student, a graduate student in speech-language pathology and the other, a child and family development candidate). Provided with a list of qualities with associated operational definitions, the two coders used a binary + and – system to identify whether or not the construct was present. Students noted special features for the authors to revisit. By including this option, the coders were able to note potential differing abilities that were not originally provided by the authors. The coders first began rating 20 books to assess for reliability between coders; they achieved 85% agreement when assessing if differing abilities were present within the book. Then, the differing items were discussed to increase understanding of the concept and gain consensus. Intercoder agreement of 75-90% is considered an appropriate level of agreement (Bajpai et al., 2015). Therefore, when raters reached this level of agreement, the full sample was analyzed.

Intercoder reliability was assessed by comparing the results of 100% of the full sample. The percentage of agreement was calculated between the two coders. If a disagreement occurred between the two raters, the book was rated a second time for consensus. Overall agreement was 96%.

Results

The first 100 books that met the inclusion criteria were selected for analysis. Of the 100 books, 36 books depicted a difference in ability (Table 1). Sixteen of the books showing differing abilities were by the same author (Mo Willems). The differing ability was not in the storyline, but only in a visual representation of secondary characters. In all 32 of the books, vision (i.e., glasses or an eye patch) was the only observation of difference with four additional books depicting a mobility impairment such as a missing limb and a cane in addition to a visual impairment. In the book *The Day You Begin* the text hints at some type of differing ability “there will be times when the climbing bars are too high, the run is too fast and far, the game isn’t one

you can ever really play.” (Woodson, 2018, p. 13). While this text alludes to a differing ability, there was no representation in the illustrations of the book.

The coders also evaluated if the representation of differing ability was depicted on a primary or secondary character. There was more variability in this measurement with 14 of the differing abilities occurred in primary, 18 in secondary, and the remaining four were inconclusive based on split responses or no response. The no responses were due to books without storylines or equal character involvement.

The raters were also asked to comment on if they felt the depiction was negative, neutral, or positive. All ratings were neutral or positive. However, the raters did not reach consensus on each book title. In 30 of the books, both raters indicated neutral. The raters agreed only one book was a positive representation which was for the representation of a visual impairment in the book *The Good Egg* by Jory John and Pete Oswald; the other five books split responses between neutral and positive.

Discussion

The current findings demonstrate there are few children’s books checked out that depict differing abilities. However, children’s literature can become a child’s first exposure to individuals with developmental disabilities (Taylor et al., 2020).

Similar to previous research, the books examined in this study found differing abilities represented as characters in a supporting role (Aho & Alter, 2018). All of the books in this study that included differing abilities were of secondary characters and not in the storyline. For children with differing abilities, it is vital they feel represented in books they read, not just as secondary characters but as main characters as well. For children without differing abilities, it is important for them to observe children with differing abilities in order to develop empathy and understanding (Leary, 2016).

Thus, there is a need to find ways to encourage readers to seek and check out books on topics of differing abilities. Understandably, for young children, it can become overwhelming to know what book to check out when there are so many choices. Thus, this research indicates the need for libraries to display particular books, such as books on topics of differing abilities, in order to draw children’s interest. In addition, highlighting books in a newsletter or bulletin board each month also encourages readers to check out books on various topics such as disabilities.

In addition, it is important for teachers to have a diverse library for their students to engage in reading. It would be helpful to have a class read aloud with books that depict differing abilities as well as discuss with the students after reading. The same is also true for parents. Children should be exposed to differing abilities in children’s literature in a variety of contexts. It is also not only about reading the books, but also having open and meaningful discussion with the child where they feel they can ask questions and receive answers without judgment.

Implications for Research/Practice/Policy

There are many reasons why it is important to include the representation of differing abilities in children's literature. Research describes how attitudes regarding differing abilities become formed in the early childhood years (Favazza & Odom, 1997). Bibliotherapy, or the use of books in a therapeutic way, can be a critical asset to early childhood practitioners in order to develop a greater understanding of the world (Kurtts & Gavigan, 2008).

On the surface level, representation can lead to positive experiences with literacy and therefore, potentially increasing the desire to read. On a deeper level, the representation of self is important in developing positive self-esteem. Books capitalize on the interaction of both personal and behavioral factors of the social learning theory (Bandura as cited in Staddon, 1984). Through diverse and representative books, children may learn about differing abilities, how to discuss differing abilities, and how to show empathy to individuals of all abilities.

Over the years there has been an increase in inclusive children's literature. For example, *Every Child is Different* by Luna James, *Different - A Great Thing to Be* by Heather Avis, and *Just Ask!* by Sonia Sotomayor to name a few. There is a need to encourage reading and access to inclusive children's literature. Libraries in communities, schools and the classroom should have an array of books that are inclusive in terms of abilities, race, family structure, religion and many other areas. In addition, inclusive literature should be highlighted for children to read whether by the adult (i.e. parent, teacher, etc.) to read inclusive books aloud, feature the books on a bulletin board, newsletter or another avenue. Inclusive children's literature is present, however it is not being checked out from the library. It is a must and need that children have to have access to the literature and be able to read it. Along the same lines children will gain a greater understanding and knowledge if there is a discussion following the reading of the books. Children need to feel safe to discuss and ask questions regarding the story without judgment.

A useful resource is the Diverse and Inclusive Growth Checklist for Inclusive High-Quality Children's Media available through KIDMAP. The checklist examines the following areas: "Content: Story, Information, and Activity, Art, Audio, Audience, Purpose, Functionality & Navigation, Instruction, Guides, and Support Materials for Grown-Ups, and Creative Team" (Haines, n.d). While not all of the categories might fit for children's literature it is a start and could be adapted to fit the evaluation of children's literature. In addition, there are guidelines and suggestions for ensuring appropriate and accurate cultural representation in books (Harris, & Owen Van Horne, 2021). These guidelines could also be used as a starting point in developing guidelines for the representation of differing abilities in children's literature.

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Table 1. Rater Ratings

| Title | Author | Disability Representation | Character Role | Positive, Negative, or Neutral |
|--|---------------|---|-----------------------|---------------------------------------|
| A big guy took my ball! | Willems | Visual Impairment | Primary | Neutral |
| That is not a good idea! | Willems | Visual Impairment | Secondary | Neutral |
| Listen to my trumpet! | Willems | Visual Impairment | Primary | Neutral |
| I'm a frog! | Willems | Visual Impairment | Primary | Neutral |
| The pigeon has to go to school! | Willems | Visual Impairment | Secondary | Neutral |
| Waiting is not easy! | Willems | Visual Impairment | Primary | Neutral |
| Should I share my ice cream? | Willems | Visual Impairment | Secondary | Neutral |
| Hello hello | Wenzel | Visual Impairment | Primary | Neutral |
| Happy pig day! | Willems | Visual Impairment | Secondary | Neutral |
| A good day for A hat | Fuller | Visual Impairment | Secondary | Neutral |
| The day the crayons quit | Daywalt | Visual Impairment | Secondary | Positive/Neutral |
| Lion lessons | Agee | Visual Impairment | Inconclusive | Positive |
| The good egg | John | Visual Impairment | Secondary | Positive/Neutral |
| Hooray for hat | Won | Visual Impairment | Primary | Neutral |
| Elephants cannot dance! | Willems | Visual Impairment | Inconclusive | Neutral |
| Rex wrecks it! | Clanton | Visual Impairment | Secondary | Neutral |
| Mustache baby | Heos | Visual Impairment | Primary | Positive/Neutral |
| Dad's first day | Wohnoutka | Visual Impairment | Primary | Neutral |
| The thank you book | Willems | Visual Impairment | Primary | Neutral |
| We are in a book | Willems | Visual Impairment | Primary | Positive/Neutral |
| My new friend is so fun! | Willems | Visual Impairment | Secondary | Neutral |
| Another | Robinson | Visual Impairment Mobility Impairment (wheelchair) | Secondary | Neutral |
| Because | Willems | Visual Impairment | Inconclusive | Neutral |
| Brown bear, brown bear, what do you see? | Martin | Visual Impairment | | |

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|-----------------------------------|------------|--|--------------|------------------|
| Llama llama loves to read | Dewdney | Visual Impairment | Secondary | Neutral |
| Family is a superpower | Dahl | Visual Impairment | Secondary | Positive/Neutral |
| I am human: A book of empathy | Verde | Mobility Impairment (prosthetic) | Inconclusive | Neutral |
| I broke my trunk! | Willems | Visual Impairment | Primary | Neutral |
| There's a giraffe in my soup | Burach | Visual Impairment | Primary | Neutral |
| The Berenstain bears take off | Berenstain | Visual impairment | Secondary | Neutral |
| Dragon was terrible | DiPucchio | Visual Impairment | Secondary | Neutral |
| Eric Carle's book of many things. | Carle | Visual Impairment | Secondary | Neutral |
| There is a bird on your head! | Willems | Visual Impairment | Primary | Neutral |
| We don't eat our classmates | Higgins | Visual Impairment | Secondary | Neutral |
| Knuffle bunny: A cautionary tale | Willems | Visual Impairment, Mobility impairment (cane user) | Secondary | Neutral |
| How do dinosaurs learn to read? | Yolen | Visual Impairment | Secondary | Neutral |
