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Disrupting ableism: Strengths-based representations of disability in children's picture books

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Abstract

Children's literature is a powerful influence on the social construction of perceptions and narratives, and it is critically important that all children see themselves represented in the books in their classrooms. However, strength-based views of characters with a disability are rare in children's picture books, meaning that children with a disability may not see themselves reflected in the books on their classroom shelves. Even worse, books may reinforce limiting, ableist stereotypes and myths about people with disabilities and their lives. Representing characters with disabilities in strength-based ways in children's literature, where "the person's own abilities and strengths are explicitly considered [and] empowerment of the person has a high priority", could educate able-bodied students about disability, promote attitudes of acceptance and strengthen perceptions of self-worth among students with disabilities as well as their typically-developing peers. We conducted a qualitative content analysis of 34 exemplar picture books featuring a main character with a disability. Low occurrence disabilities such as visual impairment were more frequently represented than high incidence disabilities such as a specific learning disability, but the main characters in our highest rated books modelled self-awareness, agency and acceptance. These books disrupted ableist myths about disability and provided the reader with tools to push back against both implicit and explicit stereotyping, teasing and bullying. By incorporating children's picture books with strength-based representations of disability into research and teaching for primary classroom literacy instruction, we can reinforce valuable social emotional skills that foreground respect for the humanity and dignity of all students.

Keywords

Disciplines

Accessibility | Disability and Equity in Education | Early Childhood Education

Comments

DISRUPTING ABLEISM: STRENGTHS-BASED REPRESENTATIONS OF DISABILITY
IN CHILDREN'S PICTURE BOOKS

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Abstract: Children's literature is a powerful influence on the social construction of perceptions and narratives, and it is critically important that all children see themselves represented in the books in their classrooms. However, strengths-based views of characters with a disability are rare in children's picture books, meaning that children with a disability may not see themselves reflected in the books on their classroom shelves. Even worse, books may reinforce limiting, ableist stereotypes and myths about people with disabilities and their lives. Representing characters with disabilities in strengths-based ways in children's literature, where "the person's own abilities and strengths are explicitly considered [and] empowerment of the person has a high priority" could educate able-bodied students about disability, promote attitudes of acceptance, and strengthen perceptions of self-worth among students with disabilities as well as their typically-developing peers. We conducted a qualitative content analysis of 34 exemplar picture books featuring a main character with a disability. Low occurrence disabilities such as visual impairment were more frequently represented than high incidence disabilities such as specific learning disability, but the main characters in our highest rated books modeled self-awareness, agency, and acceptance. These books disrupted ableist myths about disability and provided readers with tools to push back against both implicit and explicit stereotyping, teasing, and bullying. By incorporating children's picture books with strengths-based representations of disability into research and teaching for primary classroom literacy instruction we can reinforce valuable social emotional skills that foreground respect for the humanity and dignity of all students.

Nearly two decades ago, Hehir (2002) described the "devaluation of disability" whereby society assumed it was "better for a child to walk than roll, speak than sign, read print than read Braille, spell independently than use a spell-check, and hang out with nondisabled kids as opposed to other disabled kids" (p. 3). These are the limiting notions that ableism (Butterfield, 2016; Campbell, 2009) places on people with disabilities. Ableism occurs when members of the dominant, typically-developing culture enact perceptions that "maintain biases and myths" (Myers & Bersani, 2008, np) resulting in inequitable treatment of people with disabilities. Historically, definitions of disability have always "existed at the intersection between the particular demands of a given impairment, society's interpretation of that impairment, and the larger … context of disability" (Braddock & Parish, 2002, p. 11). Thus, disability is a social construct (Davis, 2000) based largely on perceptions within a society and defined by the World Health Organization (WHO) as "the outcome of the interaction between a person with an impairment and the environmental and attitudinal barriers he/she may face" (WHO, 2001, np).

Literature and educational systems are powerful influences in the social construction of perceptions and narratives (Luke & Freebody 1997) and children's literature has emerged as a particularly compelling tool for forming narratives that push back on societal tropes. Representing characters with disabilities in strengths-based ways in children's literature could help remove attitudinal barriers by educating able-bodied students about disability, promoting attitudes of acceptance, and strengthening perceptions of self-worth among students with disabilities, as well as their typically-developing peers (Dyches, et al., 2006; Wopperer, 2011). Strengths-based views recognize people as causal agents in their own lives and focus first on "what each person is able to do and to be" (Shogren et al., 2017, p. 22). Such a focus removes thresholds for inclusion, emphasizing the capacities of all people in any environment. Negating deficit views, strengths-based approaches focus on opportunities to grow, develop, and thrive in personal development, interpersonal relations, social inclusion, and emotional and physical well-being; across contexts of home, community, school, social activities, and advocacy. Children's literature that foregrounds strengths-based views of disability has the power to promote social-emotional learning and positively impact attitudes about disability from an early age, but researchers have expressed concerns about the scarcity of children's literature that positively portrays characters with disability. This lack of representation in children's picture books may promote a lack of acceptance, further reinforcing ableist inequities (Adomat, 2014; Crisp et al., 2016; Pennell, et al., 2018).

During the 2017-18 school year, 9% of school-aged students in the United States ages 6-21 received special education services. Of these, nearly two-thirds received 80% or more of their education in the general education classroom (U. S Department of Education, 2020). Children's literature underrepresents this significant portion of the population (Dyches, et al., 2006; Hughes,

2012; Koss, 2015; Myers & Bersani, 2008; Pennell, et al., 2018) and this lack of representation tacitly reinforces ableist notions that any kind of physical or mental difference is unacceptable or bad (Koss, 2015). Given the growing number of students with disabilities educated in general education classrooms, and as a first step to providing teachers with tools to make more equitable and representative choices in the books they share with their students, we conducted a content analysis exploring the ways exemplar children's picture books whose main character has a disability represented strengths-based views. We also examined how these texts unpacked and disrupted ableist views both explicitly and implicitly.

A Note on Terms and Positionality

In preparation for this research we reviewed documents produced by advocacy organizations representing international views, including Disabled Peoples International (DPI) and the WHO; and organizations in the U. S., including the American Association of People with Disabilities (AAPD) and the U. S. Department of Education (U. S. DoE). We found multiple terms, including *impairment*, advocated by DPI (Mulcahy, 2005) and the WHO (2001; 2011) and *disability*. The World Report on Disability (WHO, 2011) uses both terms as descriptors, emphasizing the contribution of "academics, clinicians, and—importantly—persons with disabilities" (p. 5) in the creation of the International Classification of Functioning (ICF). The ICF classifies *impairment* as "problems with body function or alterations in body structure, [such as] paralysis or blindness" and defines disability as difficulties with any combination of impairments, activity limitations, and participation restrictions. The DPI adopted an abbreviated version of the ICF as its preferred definition "with the hope that we can have an improved definition when time on our World Council allows for a debate on this issue" (Mulcahy, 2005, np)

Because this content analysis focuses on picture books published in the U. S. for children who are 5 to 8 years old, and utilizes as its source a clearinghouse at Vanderbilt University in the U. S., we also reviewed documents from the AAPD and the U. S. DoE, including the most recent Congressional report on implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA; 2020). We found a multitude of terms used in the IDEA classification system for educational access in U.S. schools. Differences in orthopedic, speech/language, hearing, visual, and other health functioning are termed as impairments. Differences in development, learning, and intellectual functioning are termed as disabilities. Deaf/blindness is a stand-alone term in U.S. documents, while autism, attention difficulties, and emotional/behavioral differences are termed as disorders (e.g, autism spectrum disorders, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, and emotional/behavioral disorders).

Based on the guidelines of the WHO and multiple self-advocacy groups, we used the term *disability* in this research. We acknowledge that this is not the preferred term worldwide. We respect the emerging discussions of identity-first language among advocacy groups such as the Autistic Self Advocacy Network (ASAN; 2020). As able-bodied researchers who practice in the U. S., we chose to use person-first language, as this is the current practice within the public school system.

Our selection of terms and our analysis are impacted by our positionality. At the time of this research both authors were assistant professors at a research-intensive university, after having previously worked as teachers in U. S. schools. Emily had been a teacher and administrator in schools for children ages 5 to 18 (Kindergarten through 12th grade, or K-12) for 17 years prior to entering academia as a literacy professor. She began her teaching career working with students identified with special education needs in grades K-12, with the bulk of

her experience in self-contained Kindergarten, 1st, 2nd, and 3rd grade (K-3) classrooms serving

students ages 5-8, and inclusive 4th-5th grade classrooms serving students ages 9-11. She later

added a reading specialist endorsement and worked as a Reading Recovery teacher and literacy

specialist in grades K-3 before moving into administrative roles in special education. Angela had

been a special education teacher at elementary and high school levels for nine years prior to

entering academia. Her classroom teaching experiences included working with autistic students,

and students with specific learning disabilities (SLD), emotional/behavioral disorders (EBD),

and intellectual disabilities (ID). We recognize and acknowledge the ways these experiences

both limit and strengthen the framing and analysis described here.

Conceptual Framework

The social model of disability (Oliver, 1990) theorized that what makes someone

disabled is not their medical condition, but the limiting attitudes and structures imposed by

society. It is ableism that promotes limiting attitudes and structures. Ableism is "a network of

beliefs, processes and practices that procures a particular kind of self and body … projected as

the perfect … and therefore essential and fully human" and casts disability "as a diminished state

of being" (Campbell, 2009, p. 44). Derby (2016) argued that, while discrimination against

anyone is unacceptable, "championing and privileging ability is ubiquitous" and as a result,

ableism "operates below our cultural radar and remains socially acceptable" (p. 106). By

contrast, strengths-based representations of people with disability promote recognition of the

whole individual, with disability representing just one aspect of a life (Buntinx, 2014). Strengths-

based views are the counterweight to ableism. People with disabilities are not defined by one part

of their lives or their bodies. None of us are. In children's literature, strengths-based

representations of main characters with disabilities could help children form narratives that refute

ableist beliefs. To support this, teachers need high quality literature that scaffolds the unpacking and disruption of ableist views both explicitly and implicitly, so that these views can be critiqued and replaced with strengths-based narratives (Hughes, 2012).

Diverse Literature and Classroom Response

Critically responsive classrooms are charged with providing literature that represents multiple forms of diversity. Literature representing many marginalized groups is increasingly available, and has been instrumental in raising awareness of diversity and equity needs along lines of racial, cultural, gender, sexuality, and socioeconomic difference. However, disability remains an under-recognized area of diversity in the research literature on critically responsive approaches to difference (Annamma, et al., 2013; Brenna, 2008; Campbell, 2009; Derby, 2016). Children's literature that is sensitive, respectful, diverse, and inclusive can promote acceptance and more realistic views of difference based in race, culture, sexuality, and gender. It has the potential to do the same for differences in ability by recognizing the strengths and contributions of people with disabilities through equitable representation (Brenna, 2008).

Use of diverse literature in K-12 classrooms has been framed by Bishop's (1990) metaphor of books as mirrors, windows, or sliding glass doors. Books that are windows offer different views of the world and illustrate people, places, and things that readers have experienced before or that are new. Books that are sliding glass doors allow readers to become immersed in the world created by the book. When books serve as mirrors for individual experiences, "[l]iterature transforms human experience and reflects it back to us, and in that reflection we can see our own lives and experiences as part of the larger human experience." (Bishop, 1990, p. 9).

By providing texts that serve as metaphorical mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors, teachers can help all students see, understand, and value themselves and others. However, books that mirror the experiences and lives of children with disability are not yet fully available in school or public libraries (Pennell et al., 2018). Inclusion of these books in classroom libraries is therefore essential if we are to counter the limiting notions that ableist views promote. Books that mirror society as it is, with people of all abilities represented, are of value both for children with a disability, because they can see their own lives and experiences reflected, and also for children without a disability. Such books, when well written, allow children to step through the sliding glass door and value the experiences of people for whom disability is just one aspect of life.

Disability in Children's Literature

Hughes (2017) identified two models frequently present in disability representations: the charitable model and the medical model. Both take an ableist approach, with disability represented as a problem, and the person portrayed as a passive recipient of charity or treatment. Both models are detrimental to peer acceptance and independence, and a scarcity of books with strengths-based portrayals of characters with disability may also contribute to lack of reading success among students with a disability (Hughes, 2012). Because the inclusion of students with disability in general education classrooms is increasing (U.S. Department of Education, 2020), their participation should be reflected in classroom books, and reflections should represent strengths-based views if we are to counteract limiting, ableist views.

When students with disabilities are portrayed from a strengths-based approach, children's literature can promote social-emotional learning and positively impact student and adult attitudes about disability. First, literature can initiate conversations about disability in the classroom (Iaquinta & Hipsky, 2006) and using children's books to meet educational goals closely aligns

with the purposes of children's literature: to entertain, to help children understand the world they live in and cope with problems they face, to introduce new places, ideas, or situations, and to portray characters with whom readers can relate to better understand themselves (Wopperer (2011). With support and instruction, children can generalize these beliefs beyond the pages of the book (Hughes, 2012; Rankin, 2018).

Second, children's literature containing strengths-based portrayals of disability can also shape attitudes of teachers, parents, and caregivers (Golos & Moses, 2011; Koss, 2015; Matthew & Clow, 2007), so books used in the classroom should be of high-quality (Norton & Norton, 2002). There are no flawless criteria to identify high-quality literature, but any content analysis of picture books focused on representation of disability should consider literary elements and illustrations as well as critique the strengths-based or ableist views. In picture books, illustrations contribute just as heavily as words to meaning-making (Sipe, 1998) and as a result the visuals in picture books representing characters with a disability should work synergistically with the narrative to present the social model through strengths-based representations (Hughes, 2012).

Method

To explore the ways exemplar children's picture books featuring main characters with a disability represented strengths-based views, and how they unpacked and disrupted ableist views explicitly and implicitly, we conducted a qualitative content analysis (Hoffmann et al., 2011; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). We selected children's picture books from the Innovative Resources for Instructional Success (IRIS) Center, housed at Vanderbilt's Peabody College and supported by the U.S. Department of Education. The IRIS Center (2020) mission includes "improving education outcomes for all children, especially those with disabilities birth through age twenty-one, through the use of effective evidence-based practices and interventions." One IRIS resource

is a curated booklist, with titles selected by a renowned researcher in special education with

expertise in developmental differences, as well as, special and general education topics. The IRIS

Center's mission, along with the expertise brought to the curated booklist selections means that

representations in picture books chosen from the IRIS booklist could set a rigorous standard for

how all children's books could disrupt ableist views.

Content Analysis

Hoffmann and colleagues (2011) described qualitative content analysis as a way of

"making inferences from texts and making sense of these interpretations in a context surrounding

the text" (p. 30). The context and conceptual framing for our analysis was the social model of

disability (Oliver, 1990). Recent content analyses of children's picture books that include

characters with disabilities have been related to disability broadly (Emmerson, et al., 2014) have

considered the intersections of race, gender, and disability (Koss, 2015) or have been focused on

specific disabilities (Azano, et al., 2017; Golos & Moses, 2011). Because we were interested in

strengths-based representations and how these could help teachers and young children analyze

and disrupt ableist views, we selected picture books written for children ages 5 to 8 from the

IRIS curated booklist. We included books published from 2014-2018 that represented the broad

range of disabilities seen in U. S. public schools. This produced an initial sample of 34 books.

With our initial sample identified, we proceeded with directed content analysis methods.

Hsieh and Shannon (2005) described a goal of directed content analysis as extending a

conceptual or theoretical framework, and this fit our aim of exploring strengths-based

representations and how they could counteract ableism. Prior research can provide structure for

directed content analysis by "identifying key concepts or variables as initial coding categories"

(Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1281) and for our initial coding we used a rubric developed to

evaluate books and movies featuring adolescent characters with disability (Menchetti, et al., 2011) and revised by Crawford (2016) for children's literature. After this initial review we selected six high-scoring books for deeper analysis to explore the ways these books depicted strengths-based representations and supported unpacking of ableist views. We identified items on the rubric that described specific features of a strengths-based representation or that contradicted ableist views, and we used these items to conduct a deeper analysis of these six exemplars, offering descriptive evidence (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) of the social model and how it can be represented in strengths-based ways that counteract ableism in children's picture books. Each phase of the content analysis is described in detail below.

Initial Rubric Review

Crawford's rubric (2016) focused on seven literary features: physical appearance of the book, characterization, literary style, plot, setting, theme, and point of view, with a total of 43 items that could be scored as Yes, No, Unsure/Mixed, or N/A. We first used the rubric to train and align our analysis using three texts from Crawford's (2016) review. Based on results from this initial coding, we established a collaborative coding procedure for the 34 books in order to maximize our shared expertise and insure interrater reliability. Twenty-three literary-focused items on the rubric were coded by Emily, and 20 items focused on representations of disability were coded by Angela. If either coded an item as "Unsure/Mixed" we discussed this item to reach consensus.

After this initial review we rank-ordered all books by total rubric score received out of the possible 43. Scores for the 34 books ranged from 11 to 41 with an average score of 30.2. Forty-seven percent of the books (*n* = 16), earned a score of 35 or more, with the top scoring book, *My Three Best Friends and Me, Zulay* (Best, 2015) earning 41. Because all books were

selected from an exemplar source, all 16 top scoring books received a rating of "Yes" on the item, "The story promotes the social model of disability: disability is viewed as a product of societal limitations rather than a biological problem that should be corrected through medical intervention."

Exemplar Selection for Descriptive Evidence

Once we ordered books in this way, we analyzed how disabilities in top scoring books aligned with representations of those disabilities in the U. S. school-aged population of students receiving special education services (Table 1). Because all the included books were published in the U.S., we used disability terms and prevalence data from the U. S. DoE including the differentiation between high incidence and low incidence disabilities. The two most frequent disabilities represented in the total sample of 34 books were autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and orthopedic impairments (OI) with seven books each. Other frequently represented disability categories included characters with multiple disabilities (MD) in five books, and characters with visual impairments (VI) in four books. The disability categories least represented at one book each were those whose main character experienced deaf/blindness, EBD, or SLD.

<Insert Table 1 here>

Boyle and Scanlon (2018) identified six high incidence disabilities that occur most frequently among students who receive special education services, including SLD, speech-language impairments (SLI), ASD, other health impairment (OHI; which includes attention deficit hyperactivity disorder [ADHD]), mild forms of ID, and EBD. Based on current data, these six categories occur for 93% of students who receive special education services (U.S. Department of Education, 2020). The representation of characters with disabilities in the books we analyzed was not reflective of the school-aged population that is the target audience for these

books. For example, during the 2017-18 school year, students with SLD represented the largest percentage of students who received special education services at 38.2% (U.S. Department of Education, 2020), yet only one book in this exemplar sample featured a main character with SLD. By contrast, characters with ASD and OI were each depicted in seven of the 34 books, or 20.6%, but students receiving special education services for ASD represent only 10.1% of the school-aged population and students with OI represent less than one percent.

Many of the books in our sample featured main characters with low incidence disabilities. This unequal focus in picture books we analyzed means that a majority of children who experience a disability may not encounter books that mirror their early life experiences (Bishop, 1990). However, we recognize that more visible impairments may be the first experiences able-bodied children have with disability, and thus may provide the first opportunity to engage with strengths-based narratives. With this in mind, we chose six top-scoring books for focused analysis, including three books representing high incidence disabilities: SLD, ADHD, and ASD; and three representing low incidence disabilities: visual impairment (VI), hearing impairment (HI), and multiple disabilities (MD) (Table 2).

<Insert Table 2 here>

We analyzed representations of characters in these six books using rubric items that specifically described the strengths-based view of disability as our lens (Table 3). Since illustrations and words combine to transmit meaning (Hughes, 2012) especially in children's picture books (Sipe, 1998) we also considered items focused on illustrations, narrative appeal, effectiveness, and flow.

<Insert Table 3 here>

Results

In strengths-based representations the main character is the causal agent in their own life.

(Shogren et al., 2017). In a picture book this agency may be enacted by a character who is

confident, accepts their disability, and makes their own decisions. The character is well-

developed and is not represented as someone to be pitied, in need of charity, or in need of

changing through medical intervention (Hughes, 2017). Like most compelling characters in

children's literature the character changes and grows throughout the story, and settings of the

book such as school, work, and recreation depict the character being included and having similar

life experiences as able-bodied peers. We analyzed each of the six exemplar books for these

items as descriptive evidence of strengths-based representations. We also noted additional

themes that revealed and disrupted ableist views either explicitly or implicitly.

Specific Learning Disability

How I Learn: A Kid's Guide to Learning Disability (Miles & Patterson, 2015) is written

in first person and features an unnamed white male character as narrator who appears to be in

upper elementary or early middle school. His classmates and school personnel include females

and people of color: those who present as African-American/Black and Asian/Asian-American.

The Narrator is self-aware: he knows that he and some of his classmates learn in different ways

and find some things difficult, but that is "OK". The statement "That's OK" is used repeatedly,

paired with agentive, strengths-based statements. The rhetorical style is informational and the

narrator invites readers into dialogue by asking them to think of things they are good at and

things that are hard, conjecturing that if they are reading this book, they must learn in different

ways too. Thus, the audience for this book is overtly limited to children who have difficulty

learning.

The Narrator focuses first on strengths, depicting and describing things readers may be good at: making friends, playing sports or games, drawing. He then provides brief descriptions of specific learning difficulties, including writing, math, and decoding and comprehension for reading. The book depicts teachers and parents modifying their approach by using relevant examples (e.g. using mathematics while cooking; implementing inquiry-based, hands-on science) and smaller group instruction including discussion to remove barriers inherent in the curricula and school system. The Narrator models agency by describing the many things he and his friends can do to advocate for their learning success when modifications are not immediately apparent. Success in learning is therefore depicted as a tandem endeavor: with student personal agency noted as important and modifications to the learning environment and presentation of curricula depicted. Notably, this book addresses specific misconceptions or myths, stating that SLD is not a matter of not trying hard enough or working hard enough.

Most scenes in this book are set in an apparent special education resource room with seven or fewer students and in a one-on-one tutoring setting. The Narrator and two classmates are also depicted in their homes, reading, writing, and completing math activities with caregivers. The settings are somewhat limited because characters are never included in what looks like a general education classroom. The Narrator is never depicted with more than a small number of peers or immediate family members, and this misrepresents the educational settings students with SLD encounter, since most spend a large part of their school day in general education classrooms (U.S. Department of Education, 2020).

The next two books feature animals as main characters: a rabbit named Baxter and a zebra named Zane. While this choice of characters may permit authors to sidestep representing diverse cultural and racial backgrounds, use of an anthropomorphized animal as a main character

can allow children some emotional distance, contributing to greater critical reflection "when the story message is very powerful, personal, and painful" (Burke & Copenhaver, 2004, p. 213). Reading any of the books we analyze here with a caring adult, as in a classroom read-aloud setting, can provide opportunities to address and discuss children's varied interpretations of the ways characters with a disability are represented.

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder

Baxter Turns Down His Buzz: A Story for Little Kids About ADHD (Foley, 2016) features a rabbit as main character. Baxter interacts with a variety of animal characters, both his age and adult, in recreational settings. Baxter is fast, both in thoughts and actions. Sometimes his peers pull back emotionally from his impulsiveness, and sometimes his quick actions unintentionally hurt his peers, as when Baxter wins a foot race but physically runs over other racers in the process. When Uncle Barnaby finds him sitting alone one day, Baxter confides his sadness and confusion: the other animals do not like him and he does not know why. Uncle Barnaby points out ways Baxter has unintentionally hurt others, then guides him on a series of relaxation and mindfulness activities to calm both his body and mind.

This book focuses on Baxter's behavior, rather than the unconditional acceptance that friends and adults can give. However, it frames Baxter's impulsiveness as sometimes being the cause of pain to others, unintentional but real. At the end of the book, Baxter runs another foot race after using the mindfulness and relaxation techniques. He wins, but without running down the other racers, and his peers respond with smiles. Baxter has grown and changed, and he is able to use what he has learned to increase his self-control and change his environment.

Autism Spectrum Disorder

In *All My Stripes: A Story for Children with Autism* (Rudolph & Royer, 2015) Zane the zebra comes home from school in tears. He tells his mother about the difficult and confusing parts of his day, including tactile and auditory sensitivities that results in his classmates making fun of him, difficulty with eye contact, and interpreting abstract language in concrete ways. While Zane is part of the same-aged peer group in all classroom, hallway, and outdoor scenes, he feels singled out for his differences, even when his teacher supports the individualized activity choices he makes during the day. Zane feels like all anyone can see is his autism. In response, his mother lists all his positive qualities, reassuring him that autism is just one part of who he is. The book ends with Zane feeling good about all the parts of his personality that make him uniquely himself.

Both Baxter and Zane represent younger characters learning to appreciate their strengths and negotiate their way through educational and societal systems that are not immediately responsive to their needs. Like Baxter, Zane needs the help of a caring adult to bring perspective to events of the day. Zane is sad at the beginning of the book, but he is not a character to be pitied. He is self-aware and knows he perceives the world differently. He also knows why certain stimuli bother him, such as a loud fire alarm or the feel of paint on his hooves. With his mother's help, Zane puts his unique qualities in perspective, as just one part of who he is (ASAN, 2020). Although Zane's peers do not understand his responses, his teacher supports his different interpretation of a science assignment, and the overall message of the book is one of self-knowledge and acceptance of difference, even though it may take time.

These three books feature characters who are self-aware, accepting their disability and focusing on their strengths. They are depicted as able to take agency, advocating for the teaching techniques that help them learn, negotiating for acceptance of their different learning needs, and

implementing personal responses to control their environment. While the setting of concern for

Zane is school, Baxter learns how to manage his energetic responses in a community setting, and

the Narrator in *How I Learn* (Miles & Patterson, 2015) describes coping strategies for both

school and home. All three characters are supported by caring family members, growing and

changing as a result of the plot. The Narrator in *How I Learn* represents a slightly older student

who knows multiple strategies for maximizing strengths and presents a more balanced

perspective on school and learning than Zane, who comes home in tears. If these books were to

be read in sequence, from Zane, to Baxter, to the Narrator, they could provide a strengths-based

view of how to negotiate school, community, and home settings, with the support of family and

teachers.

Given the high incidence of students with SLD in the school-aged population, it is

troublesome that only one book in the sample featured a character with SLD. Students with

ADHD were similarly under-represented. Characters with low incidence disabilities were more

broadly represented in the 34 books we reviewed. Three exemplars representing lower incidence

disabilities are analyzed next.

Blind/Visual Impairment

Of the 34 books we reviewed, *My Three Best Friends and Me, Zulay* (Best, 2015) most

naturally revealed the main character's disability through plot evolution. The book opens with

Zulay, an African-American/Black elementary child meeting her best friends at the school

entrance. These "four best friends who help themselves" (p. 4) present as African-

American/Black, Asian/Asian-American, and white girls who link arms to skip into school.

Readers follow them through the hallway and into their classroom, where there are 22 desks.

Zulay prepares for the day on page eight, opening her desk to reveal a folded-up probing cane

among the papers, pencils, and chocolate kisses. This long white cane will be used later in the day, but in the meantime she completes math, writing, and reading activities along with her classmates. Going over the daily schedule, her teacher announces that several children will leave at different times for help with learning tasks but Zulay is the only student she lists by name, and Zulay does not like this attention.

During math instruction Zulay uses manipulatives to explore geometric shapes and, like her classmates, uses base ten blocks to learn place value. She uses her Brailler to write and allows her friend Chyng to type out her own name on the Brailler. Zulay describes how she learned to read with her hands. It was hard at first, but she mastered it, and her orientation and mobility specialist Ms. Turner assures her that using the probing cane will happen in the same way.

Zulay has resisted using her probing cane on previous days, but she tries to be patient. Learning to use it will increase her independence, helping her find her way easily in spaces outside of her well-known classroom. Ms. Turner and Zulay practice outside the school, but unlike the Brailler, Zulay is not eager to share this experience with her friends, and puts the probing cane back into her desk as soon as possible. Just as she did not like being singled out by her teacher, she does not like the attention the cane attracts.

When field day events are announced, Zulay wants to run the footrace, and the only person who cheers this choice is Ms. Turner. It provides a natural opportunity to practice using the probing cane to get to and from the track, and after several days Zulay is able to do this on her own. When field day arrives, she links arms with Ms. Turner and runs the race, cheered on by her friends. Readers of this book might wonder why Ms. Turner did not practice this race with

Zulay and one of her friends instead, and this author choice might provide a springboard for discussions of inclusion and belonging.

Zulay's story surfaces the challenges of being noticed as different. Using the probing cane will reveal her blindness to the world, including people she does not know, and this makes Zulay uncomfortable. Her story uncovers this theme, but does not resolve it. The next two books do.

Orthopedic Impairment

Unlike Zulay, Shane in *Not So Different: What You Really Want to Ask About Having a Disability* (Burcaw, 2017) invites questions about his visible orthopedic impairment. His self-authored nonfiction book pushes back on some of the limitations of nonfiction, using photographs throughout to depict assistive technology Shane uses and assistance he receives for daily living, while foregrounding him as an active member of his community and family. Talking bubbles, varied fonts, and the occasional Tyrannosaurus Rex soften the nonfiction rhetorical structure, and although some researchers and advocates worry that reliance on photographs in books about disability foregrounds the medical model (Myers & Bersani, 2008; Hughes, 2012) these photographs showcase Shane's independence. Shane describes the assistive devices and support provided by his family in ways that empower rather than limit him.

Shane begins by describing spinal muscular atrophy, a rare condition that causes overall muscle weakness. On the following pages Shane asks and answers common questions, taking on eating, drinking, dressing, using the bathroom, mobility, play, antics with his brother, and being made fun of. A double-page spread shows Shane in his motorized wheelchair, which "costs more than a brand new car" (p. 19), with all component parts labeled including backflip preventers, snack compartment, and rocket boosters. Shane's family is featured, and endnotes describe his

advocacy work as a blogger, public speaker, and fundraiser for his nonprofit organization

Laughing at My Nightmare (Burcaw, 2020).

One of the questions Shane answers is "Do people ever make fun of you?" (p. 26), and he

responds directly to the potential for being taunted that was raised in Zulay's story. In the

photograph accompanying this question one young woman whispers behind her hand while

another points at Shane. He is depicted looking away from the two women, but with a flushed

face. Shane acknowledges that this hurts his feelings while observing that "when you meet

someone who looks different from you, it's always best to treat them with kindness and respect"

(p. 26-27).

While asking intrusive questions can be an act of ableism, and Shane acknowledges the

tendency of people to stare on the very first page of the book, his narrative welcomes questions.

Perhaps his openness is a way to take agency and construct his own narrative for how he

negotiates the world. Because we (the authors) are both able-bodied, we accepted Shane's

interpretations and enactment of his life, including his disability. Overall, the use of real

photographs and the frank acknowledgement of questions young people ages 5 to 8 are most

likely to ask confronts ableism head on. Using this book in K-3 classrooms could open

opportunities for teaching social-emotional skills, including appropriate ways to discuss abilities.

When you keep the humanity of the person in mind, respect comes to the forefront. Shane's

openness continues on his blog, where he makes transparent his life as an adult with an

orthopedic impairment, including very adult experiences.

Deaf/Hearing Impairment

In *The William Hoy Story* (Churnin, 2016), William's deafness is revealed on the second

page as his mother engages him in conversation using both signs and speech, and William uses

lip-reading and paper/pencil to respond. This true story takes place in the late 1800s as William begins his career in baseball. Excluded from his school baseball team, William eventually joins a community baseball team and goes on to play for numerous professional teams. Like Shane's story, this retelling of William's baseball career takes on the topic of being taunted and adds being taken advantage of due to a disability. The owner of the first professional team William tried out for attempted to pay him less than the other players. Players on his own team hide behind their gloves so he cannot read their lips, and the opposing team, umpire, and fans laugh when William cannot hear the umpire's calls and does not realize that he has struck out.

This embarrassment is the turning point in the narrative. William develops hand signs and signals, some borrowed from American Sign Language, and convinces umpires to use these signs in addition to speech to make their calls. This turns out to be an advantage for his teammates, who use the signs to discuss plays without the other team knowing, and because this story takes place before the presence of giant screens and loudspeakers in stadiums it was also an advantage for the fans, enabling them to follow the game more closely. William was one of several people to introduce signs into the game of baseball, and one of the first to develop their use with umpires before they became regulation for games.

William Hoy played baseball professionally from 1888-1902. During this time period it was common for people who were deaf and mute to be referred to as "dumb" and William was nicknamed "Dummy" Hoy during his career. Endnotes describe William as embracing this nickname, viewing it as emblematic of his pride in his deafness. This nickname was historically acceptable for his time but is unacceptable today, and reading this book to students would open necessary discussions about the changing language and mores for ways we talk about disability.

In terms of illustrations, there are times when the picture does not match the storyline. The narrative clearly states that William needed to read lips to facilitate his ability to communicate with others, but there are multiple illustrations in which William is shown communicating with men whose mustaches completely cover their lips. Illustrations also depict only white characters, indicative of the segregated baseball settings of the early 1900's.

All three of these books open avenues for agentive conversations about disability, and for honesty about the way disability is often perceived and responded to by able-bodied people. Even as a kindergartner, Zulay recognizes that using her probing cane will expose her to potentially unkind scrutiny, and fear of this is almost enough to counteract the appeal of independence. As the youngest of these main characters, her story does not depict her confronting and resolving unkind scrutiny, as Shane and William do.

Both Shane and William embrace who they are, recognizing their disability as one part of their identity. Both pursue careers in the public sphere, as a speaker and advocate in Shane's case and a baseball player in William's, and this exposes them to the public gaze on a much larger scale than depicted in Zulay's story. Both Shane's and William's stories depict specific instances when their visible disabilities attract notice in unkind ways. The story of William being laughed at by a stadium full of people is the most overtly hurtful, but photographs in Shane's story that depict whispering and pointing confront subtle, but very hurtful, forms of ableism.

Discussion

Who is Represented

Students with specific learning disability (SLD) represent the largest group of students receiving special education services in U. S. schools, but they were the least represented in our sample, with only one book depicting a main character with SLD. This means that many students

may not see this aspect of their lives depicted in the children's picture books in their classrooms.

Conversely, students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) represent 10.1% of school-aged

students receiving special education services, but were the most frequently represented in our

sample at seven books. Main characters with orthopedic impairments were also represented in

seven books, even though OI occurs for only 0.6% of school-aged children receiving special

education services. Clearly there is room for more equitable representation in children's picture

books for students with high incidence disabilities.

In terms of race and ethnicity, half of the main characters in the books analyzed here

were white: the Narrator in *How I Learn*, Shane, and William. Baxter and Zane are

anthropomorphized animals, and Zulay is African American/Black. Supporting characters in two

of the six books represent diverse groups, but all supporting characters in Shane's and William's

stories are white, and all characters in Baxter's and Zane's stories are animals. In the U. S.,

students of color are identified for special education services at disproportionately higher rates

than white students (U. S. Department of Education, 2020), but those misaligned proportions

were not represented in the books we reviewed for this study. This preponderance of white

characters reproduces trends noted for representation in children's literature (School Library

Journal, 2019).

Unpacking Ableist Views

The six exemplar books provided descriptive evidence of the social model of disability

with strengths-based representations. All six main characters modeled agency, self-acceptance,

and self-awareness, with narratives that addressed specific misconceptions or myths. As younger

characters Baxter, Zane, and Zulay received specific guidance and techniques for self-advocacy

and negotiating school and community from adults. Older characters such as the Narrator in *How*

I Learn (Miles & Patterson, 2015), Shane, and William modeled how to advocate and negotiate the world as an older student or adult with a disability. Although the stories of Zulay, Shane, and William featured main characters with lower incidence disabilities, and were not representative of the U. S. school-aged population of students receiving special education services, these books raised and disrupted prevalent aspects of ableism that were not present in the books featuring characters with higher incidence disabilities.

These six books also explicitly tackled ableist views. The Narrator confronts the myth that learning disability is just a matter of not trying hard enough. Baxter and Zane learn self-control and self-acceptance, then take action to counteract feelings of being left out and change their environments. While the disabilities portrayed by these three characters are high-occurrence, they are not readily visible, and the stories of Zulay, Shane, and William surface some challenging aspects of life with a visible disability. As a young child, Zulay's concern about being noticed as a blind person almost outweighs the appeal of independent mobility. Shane chooses to confront questions about his disability directly, including how to respond to stares and pointing from able-bodied people. He provides pictures and descriptions of assistive technology and support he receives from others for daily life, but this story is his own and Shane is an active citizen of the world. William's story depicts self-advocacy in the work world as well, providing a vivid depiction of being taunted by a large group of people. He responds by developing ways for able-bodied umpires to communicate with him, and in so doing, increases interaction in baseball games by able-bodied fans who can now "read" the umpire's calls even from a distance. These three characters are unable to avoid the restrictive and unkind ableist actions that people with disabilities may encounter, but all three present strengths-based counter-stories and demonstrate agentive responses to living a life that includes disability.

Teaching for Change

As we move toward a more inclusive and equitable society, many questions need to be asked and answered about how able-bodied people respond to disability. Children's picture books that feature strengths-based representations of main characters with a disability are one way to tackle limiting ableist notions about disability. The Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators (2020) affirmed the power of words, stories, and images for taking on such a task, noting that "they define who we are for ourselves and for others" (np). Using the exemplar texts described here during classroom read-alouds could introduce strengths-based views to young children in a highly effective way, through natural opportunities for dialogue that read-alouds provide. All six books we analyzed would open opportunities for discussion of agency and growth mindset (Dweck, 2016), personal challenges that all children face.

More generally, William's story could raise conversations about how language evolves, not only for how we talk about groups of people but for how we describe and negotiate many life experiences. Dictionaries regularly add new words and sometimes add new uses for old words. At the time of this publication, the Oxford English Dictionary had just added COVID-19, a new version of "coronavirus" which was added in 2008 (https://public.oed.com/updates/) and the Merriam Webster Dictionary had added "self-isolate", a recombination of two existing words (https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/new-words-in-the-dictionary). Language is a living thing, and discussions of such elements of language, in general and in particular, can be supportive of reading decoding and comprehension skills (Bear, et al., 2020).

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Limitations and Future Research

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The potential impact of this content analysis would be incomplete without acknowledging that books alone are not enough: teachers are the critical intermediary. Young

children use conversation and discussion about themes and ideas in picture books as integrative tools for making sense of multiple sources of information (Schickedanz & Collins, 2012) building their knowledge of both the world and the world of books. The teacher is essential to this meaning making process (Ruddell & Unrau, 2004), since the subjective experience of a text can lead children in many directions (Sipe, 2000). This analysis of exemplar picture books featuring characters with a disability is the first step in a line of research, to be continued with use of exemplary texts in classroom read-aloud settings.

Research on children's literature in this century has often been conducted from a critical perspective, and while both of us have experience teaching students with disabilities, neither self-identify as having a disability. Therefore, we acknowledge Trousdale's (1990) concern of critical analyses from someone outside the culture. In future research, priority should be given to texts that are authored by individuals with disabilities. Similarly, critical disability theorists have argued that racism and ableism operate jointly, intensifying the impact of systemic oppression (Hall, 2019). Future research on ableism in children's literature should consider the intersectional analysis of ableism and other forms of oppression including racism, sexism, and class difference.

Future research should also consider children's picture books from a broader range of cultures and countries of origin. The books reviewed here represent the U.S. perspective, specifically that of characters who present as being born in the U.S. This limitation excludes the diverse views of newcomers to the U.S., many of whom journey from Global South countries such as Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East (dhs.gov, 2018). Inclusion of books from these cultures would more accurately represent the diversity in the U.S. and other western nations.

Conclusion

While increasing numbers of students with disabilities are being educated in general education settings, teachers cannot assume that these students are represented in the picture books they read. Critically responsive literacy classrooms should reflect students with varied backgrounds and abilities, and providing all students with literature where they see themselves represented has positive impacts across academic achievement areas, helping to build worldviews that ultimately enrich us all (Bishop, 1990, 2012; Diamond & Moore, 1995; Quiroa, 2017; Smolkin & Young, 2011). The strengths-based representations we found in the six books analyzed here would allow K-3 audiences to surface and confront myths and misconceptions of ableism in powerful ways. All six of these main characters are causal agents in their own lives, not people in need of medical or charitable assistance. By confronting implicit and explicit ableist views across high occurrence and low occurrence disabilities, these six books represent descriptive evidence of the power of strengths-based representations in children's picture books.

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