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Disabilities Represented in American Children’s Books Today: Case Studies and Lessons to Learn to Promote Library Outreach Services for Children with Special Needs

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Abstract:

How are disabilities represented in children’s books today? What lessons can librarians, educators and community members learn from these experiences and perspectives in the collections and publications? This paper reviews and presents a selection of recent children’s books from the Arne Nixon Center for the Study of Children’s Literature at Fresno State as case studies to identify and explore ways to create inclusive environments in libraries for children with special needs. Children’s literatures provide an array of rich perspectives and resources that can be useful for readers including librarians who may not be familiar with physical, emotional, learning and mental disabilities, and the barriers that exist in society. These books also critique and challenge the stereotypes and stigmas surrounding such disabilities, and offer ways to rethink and reframe how to foster interactions and inclusivity. The paper compliments the study by presenting lessons and best practices from a children’s services librarian to promote and advocate for library outreach services to children with disabilities, and to encourage dialogue with parents, library colleagues and administrators and the community at large to bring awareness of these challenges faced by children with special needs today.

Introduction

Children's books have often been viewed as helpful resources to teach literacy and empower imaginations to young readers; the symbols, images, words, and stories can have profound

effects on children. By showing various perspectives in children's books, readers may learn to develop compassion, empathy, sympathy and understanding of other people's struggles and challenges in society today. This paper explores the collections from Fresno State's Arne Nixon Center for the Study of Children's Literature collections that focuses on children with disabilities and their representations. The paper presents two main themes: intersectionality, and self development and inclusivity, and provides practical advice from a children's services librarian who do provide support for children with disabilities for the community.

The Arne Nixon Center for the Study of Children's Literature is "a department of the Henry Madden Library at California State University, Fresno (Fresno State), the Center is one of North America's leading resources for the study of children's and young adult literature. The growing collection of 60,000 books, periodicals, manuscripts, original art, and papers of authors and illustrators, has an international and multicultural emphasis. Its materials are available to anyone for use in the Center's reading area. The Center welcomes anyone interested in literature for young people. All materials are available for examination. While children under adult supervision are welcomed as individuals, the collection is intended for use by adults. The Center serves students, faculty, scholars, authors, illustrators, translators, collectors, critics, readers, and fans from a variety of disciplines, including English, education, library science, art, storytelling, history, sociology, women's studies, multicultural studies, and American studies." (Arne Nixon Center's website, 2018).

Representation of disabilities in children's books have evolved over time. According to Agnew and Patridge (2001), "During the Victorian era mental disability was rarely shown in children's literature, while physical disability was frequently portrayed as a form of necessary suffering, or as a way of proving a character's essential goodness. Sometimes a temporary period of disability was used as a way of developing a child's character; in 19th-century novels the child usually became a better person as a result of his/her suffering." By the end of the 20th century, representations of disability in children's books were more focused on the "reactions" of a disabled reader (Agnew & Patridge, 2001). The works portrayed the lives and experiences of children with disability.

To understand how these collections can be processed into new areas of support for libraries today, the paper analyzes selected works to provide greater reflection on disability representations in American children's books. The Arne Nixon collection offers rich resources and studies into children's literature in all areas. This paper covers three books for each theme: intersectionality, and self-development and inclusivity to illustrate the richness and purposefulness of representing children with disabilities in children's books today.

Theme One: Intersectionality

One important theme running in these American children's books is intersectionality. What is intersectionality? According to Dhillon and Lyon (2014), "Our experiences of the social world are shaped by our ethnicity, race, social class, gender identity, sexual orientation, and numerous other facets of social stratification. Some social locations afford privilege (e.g., being white) while others are oppressive (e.g., being poor). These various aspects of social inequality do not operate independently of each other; they interact to create interrelated systems of oppression and domination. The concept of intersectionality refers to how these various aspects of social location 'intersect' to mutually constitute individuals' lived experiences. The term itself was introduced by Kimberle Crenshaw in 1989, although intersectional understandings of the social world precede her work." Intersectionality is an

important theme to explore the multilayer of experiences and identities of children with disabilities: race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and socioeconomics are all status identifiers to consider and to explore how children's books portray these multi-marginalized identities and experiences.

In *Featherless/Desplumado* by Herrera and Cuevas Jr. (2004), it is a story about a young child named Tomasito who is diagnosed with spina bonafida, which makes him unable to walk, and need to rely on his wheelchair. This children's book portrays Tomasito's emotional and physical struggles deeply by showing what he cannot do, how he feels that he doesn't fit in, and how he perceives himself compared to the other able-bodied children who are playing soccer. Throughout this book, it is also written in English and in Spanish. One way to bring attention to the Spanish-speaking community is to show how children with spina bonafida must cope with his surroundings. Tomasito's experiences reflect closely to those children who are bilingual and physically challenged; these bilingual children may transcend from one culture to another but they may also feel unsettled due to their physical conditions. Spina bonafida has become more statistically common in the Latino community, and this book is a step in introducing the condition through Tomasito's eyes and experiences. There is definitely a stronger need and demand for bilingual or foreign language children's books regarding these disabilities.

In *Granny Torrelli Makes Soup* by Creech (2003), a different kind of narrative takes place: Rosie's grandmother shares her experiences and challenges to Rosie when they are preparing food; Rosie, a young girl, has a falling out from her friend who is visually impaired. She learns from her grandmother from her stories on how to see things differently and learn to reconcile with her feelings and anger towards her friend. This story covers two identities that are not focused on one person at all. However, this book illuminates the commonalities that children with special needs may share with those who do not have special needs: an interest in food, friendships and stories. The book focuses on how to create equitable relationships, trusts, and friendships between those who are able-bodied and those who are not. Helping another person with special needs without their consent may generate more problems later on for the helper. This book takes a special lens from a child who does not have special needs but wishes to help her friend. However, it reminds readers that friendships are based on mutual trust and understanding.

A Fish in a Tree by Hunt (2017) sets up a different perspective from a young girl named Ally who is dyslexic. The intersectional identities of a young girl with learning difficulties are portrayed in this book for readers in the 6th grade. Ally is creative, imaginative, very bright, but she has a very difficult time reading. Throughout the book, Ally believes that she is not smart, and attempts to hide from her problems through denial; her new teacher Mr. Daniels recognizes Ally's challenge and he helps Ally succeed. The story draws on Ally's understanding of dyslexia, and readers may learn more about this reading disorder through her actions, friendships and dialogue. This book is recommended to understand how to become more empathetic to children like Ally who struggle with dyslexia. In addition, it provides context of other developmental challenges beyond the physical and visual ones. The learning disorders and difficulties are often overlooked since they are often "invisible," and children with these special needs may feel ashamed to speak up like Ally. However, by introducing these challenges, it may help create more understanding of the perspective from a young woman with disabilities.

Theme Two: Self Development and Inclusivity

Both themes may overlap, however, it has become clearer which book may provide more attention to the specific theme. The second important theme is self development and inclusivity. This also includes self-awareness since it relates to one's development and cognitive awareness of who they are and their surroundings. These books offer an opportunity to see how societies and communities can find ways to create more inclusive environments for children and people with special needs; these books also demonstrate how the protagonists have developed over time and become more confident in recognizing their special needs.

Not So Different: What You Really Want to Ask about Having a Disability (2017) by Burcaw is an eye-opening book that covers the experience of Shane Burcaw with spinal muscular atrophy where his muscles do not grow properly. Burcaw stays in a wheelchair while his body hasn't grown bigger but has become smaller. In this short photo book, Burcaw meets with different people, share his experiences and perspectives including his physical, emotional and psychological challenges. Burcaw isn't afraid to talk about his issue openly. He wants others to know about it; and he often relies on his friends and family to help him. For those libraries who would like to introduce these conditions, it is worth considering speaking to members of those communities to see if they would like to share their experiences with children in a public program. As Burcaw has done, he has actively engaged with different groups, and his book has affirmed his commitment to show what a person with a disability will experience. This book has shown Burcaw's self-development and awareness of himself and those around him; it also teaches empathy and compassion through his dialogue with many able-bodied people.

In El Deafo by Cece Bell (2004), a graphic novel memoir, follows the life of Bell's life at a young age when she had to deal with hearing loss and used a hearing aid. The character suffered from hearing loss at the age of four and felt isolated from her friends. Her phonic ear became a source of support that gave her super powers yet it also gave her new challenges where she started to hear things that she shouldn't have been hearing. Bell's character grows in the memoir to understand that being different, her deafness, should not be something to be ashamed of. Her deafness is also considered a gift where she can "turn off from the sound of the world and enjoy peace." This book provides a great example of how the author reflects on her childhood experiences, behaviors, responses and growths with her hearing disability. It provides an opportunity for readers to see how the differences can be reflected positively. Bell's book is a testament to self-development, and recognizes the importance of inclusive environments for people to have friends. Libraries can strive to provide safe and welcoming spaces for all children with special needs; they need to rethink how their services and books need to portray the various experiences of those who have these conditions and disabilities.

So B. It by Sarah Weeks (2005) is a young adult (YA) book that covers the story of 12 year old Heidi who lives with her mentally disabled mother. In the story, Heidi doesn't know anything about herself or who her father is; she also doesn't know about her mother's past. In the book, Heidi ventures off to find out who she is and uncovers the truth of her family history; the story follows her point of view and shows how Heidi has grown and developed in her experiences. This book may give young readers an opportunity to understand what it is like to care for family members with special needs; by following Heidi's life, readers will see that Heidi has grown tremendously throughout the book. It is apparent that Heidi cannot become that child but must "grow up" fast to find out more about herself; the self-

development and self-awareness features are highly illustrated in the story. Libraries need to think about the spaces and environments for children who are living with parents with disabilities too. In general, these books provide a variety of perspectives relating to disability, special needs and conditions. There are many books to explore to understand how children with special needs or parents of special needs may develop over time.

Librarian Lynn T. Nguyen Perspective

Here in LA County, we are striving to providing library services to meet the needs of our community members from all walks of life everyday. With over 87 la county library location and 3.4 million people, there are moments where we will run into challenges and with that, we face these challenges head on and do our best to provide these services to our patrons.

Most recently, I attended a training to learn how to provide engaging storytime programs to children 0-12 years, who are on the spectrum or have some type of disability. I was no longer just reading a storytime about concepts, letter recognition, or animal sounds to a group of toddlers. I was learning how to change my tone of voice and language used to community with this special needs group.

Through the communities that I have served as a children's librarian, I have met a few patrons as young as 4 years old with various types of disabilities ranging from behavior to physical. Some are on the spectrum with disabilities such as aspergers or in some instances, cerebral palsy. When I conduct outreach in public schools, I will visit a few special education classrooms to provide a storytime program and share information about our library's resources. I'm constantly kept on my toes because each student learns differently and require much patience and creativity at each storytime program. I have noticed in these classrooms, I'm not necessarily reading a picture word for word, but instead, highlighting the photos or characters on each page. I am bringing the book much closer to each individual so they are able to see and identify the pictures. When I sing, I choose songs that are familiar and easy to break down.

Whether the storytime program is held in the library or held in a classroom, I aim to provide a program that is sensory friendly and serves those with all abilities. These are the list of my favorite storytime and picture books to use at my All Abilities Storytime Programs:

Brown Bear Brown Bear, What Do You See? by Bill Martin Jr. & Eric Carle
I Love You Nose! I Love You Toes! by Linda Davick
The Very Busy Spider by Eric Carle
My Heart is Like a Zoo by Michael Hall

Serving this special group holds a place near and dear to my heart because my younger sister is an Autism Behavioral Specialist for young children and my four year old nephew is autistic. Learning about disabilities through my own family has help me understand autism on a broader perspective. There is a huge disconnect and we need to break the stigma that those with disabilities are absolutely normal and welcome.

Conclusion

Children's books can provide useful perspectives and opportunities to engage with librarians, educators, community members and children with all special needs; these books need to be acquired, discussed, shared and read by everyone providing such services for children with these needs and families that are supporting children with these needs too; this paper offers a brief sample of American children's books that can be considered to be useful tools to engage with communities on such special needs including physical, mental, learning and emotional disabilities.

From intersectionality to inclusivity, children's books can provide important snapshots in understanding complex identities and struggles from their perspectives, and how to create welcoming environment for them to feel included. Along with these books that portray real and emotional experiences of children with disabilities, librarians can actively promote these books in their programs to discussions to combat the stigma, misunderstanding and misperceptions of all disabilities.

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