

Selecting Children's Books About People with Disabilities

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Introduction

In the best of all possible worlds, no one would have a disability. But people do have disabilities and young children can be shocked the first time they see a person with a disability. Even children with disabilities can be frightened when they encounter a person with a different disability than their own. Furthermore, they can feel very much alone if they do not know other people with the same disability. Reading and listening to books is one way that children can learn to become comfortable around people with disabilities. Librarians can perform a real service to all children by including quality books about people with disabilities in their juvenile collections.

Certainly, children's collections in libraries need to reflect the diversity in their communities. And, in fact, during the 1990s, more children's books were published that showed a diverse group of characters, and librarians began to include these books in their collections. But while acceptance of cultural diversity has become widespread, it has not included disabilities. In discussing a diversity quiz that she developed to help professionals analyze their openness to culturally diverse literature and to literature that shows people with disabilities or illnesses, Joan K. Blaska (2003, 12) states, "Usually, early childhood professionals do well in the first column asking about diversity of culture but do poorly in the second column which addresses individuals with disabilities or illness."

Literary Background

"The appearance of disabled characters in children's fiction has its roots in mythic, biblical, classical, and contemporary literary forms" (Baskin and Harris 1977, 18). In many cases, the character with a disability acts as a

symbol rather than a full-blooded person, e.g., the blind person who “sees” or the mad person who “enlightens.” Disabled characters have served as scapegoats, as well as catalysts for change in characters who are not disabled. They have also provided comic relief in the manner of the cartoon character Mr. Magoo. The disabilities themselves play a number of different roles in literature. For example, a disability can be a sign of favor or a punishment. It can serve as an outward reflection of inner traits, being either a sign of goodness or indication of wickedness. In other scenarios, disabilities can be romanticized so that characters either achieve heroic heights or are the beneficiaries of miraculous recoveries (Baskin and Harris 1977). Traditionally, children with disabilities are portrayed in literature as either the “brave little soul” or the “poor little thing,” neither of which is a very accurate or appealing description. In older literature most main characters with disabilities are Caucasian males. The most common disabilities portrayed are either orthopedic or visual impairments (Ayala 1999).

Social Background

Around the end of the nineteenth century, it became popular to send disabled people to institutions or special schools located away from populated areas so that many people without disabilities never saw people with disabilities. For people without disabilities, their only experience of disabilities came through well-meaning books like *Heidi*, *The Secret Garden*, and *A Christmas Carol*. However, things began to change after World War I as the need arose for rehabilitation and vocational training for disabled veterans. Among the advocacy groups that began in the 1920s was the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC). Formed in 1922, the CEC lobbied for special education classes for children with disabilities and for standards relating to special education teachers. Still active today, the “CEC advocates for appropriate governmental policies, sets professional standards, provides continual professional development, advocates for newly and historically underserved individuals with exceptionalities, and helps professionals obtain conditions and resources necessary for effective professional practice” (Council for Exceptional Children 2006).

The enactment of federal laws that insured educational opportunities in public schools for children with disabilities was another factor that brought children with disabilities into the public eye. Although all states had enacted public education by 1918, many states frequently excluded

children with disabilities. Although several federal laws provided grants for special education programs during the late 1960s, the situation really changed with the passage of two laws in the 1970s. Public Law 93-112, The Rehabilitation Act of 1973, gave “qualified people with disabilities basic civil rights protection in programs and activities that receive federal financial assistance” (Horne 1996). Public Law 94-142, The Education for All Handicapped Children Act, was enacted in 1975 and guaranteed all disabled children a “free and appropriate public education” by law (Friedberg, Mullins, and Sukiennik 1985). This law also supported mainstreaming these children into regular classrooms as opposed to segregated classrooms. Amendments in 1983 and 1986 expanded the law to include funding for preschool programs as well as infant and toddler early intervention programs. It was expanded with a name change to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1990.

With the formation of advocacy groups and the enactment of the laws that allowed mainstreaming of children with disabilities into regular classrooms, there has been an increased interest in children’s books about disabilities. Since literature tends to reflect the values of society, more books are being published with characters who are disabled. Media coverage of disabilities and illnesses also serves as an inspiration to children’s authors to include characters with those disabilities in their stories. According to a study undertaken by Emiliano C. Ayala (1999) that analyzed books published between 1974 and 1996, “The results indicated a rise in the overall number of books being published and a greater diversity of disabilities being portrayed in recent publications. However, few books contained ethnically diverse characters, few were in languages other than English, and all placed little or no emphasis on specific cultural practices. Considering the cultural and linguistic diversity of our public schools, the limited number of children’s books representing multiethnic characters with disabilities reflects a tremendous imbalance in this literature base” (Ayala 1999, 103).

Selection

The selection of books about disabilities is of course determined by the intended audience of your library's collection—whether the intended audience is made up of children with disabilities, children without disabilities, or a combination of the two. There are three significant considerations to keep in mind when thinking about selecting books about disabilities for children. First, young children enjoy seeing books that have

characters that look and act like themselves. Second, they begin to recognize differences in people and at a very young age can “develop fear or discomfort around unfamiliar attributes such as glasses, facial hair, skin color, and disabilities” (Blaska 2003), which can lead to the development of stereotypes. A child with a disability needs to see books with characters that have his/her disability portrayed in a positive way. While books can be used to affirm a child’s identity, those same books can also be used to introduce other children to the differences in people. Books can serve as a means to talk about differences in people, which can lead children to a better understanding and acceptance of these differences. A third consideration to keep in mind when selecting books for children with visual, mental, hearing, or multiple handicaps is that these children often cannot read text as a result of their primary handicap (Reidarson 1991). Braille books or books with both Braille and standard type, and illustrations with sign language or tactile illustrations should, therefore, be considered for inclusion in the collection.

There are three types of books about disabilities for children: fiction, nonfiction, and quasi-fiction. Fiction, of course, involves stories that are made up. Nonfiction literature is made up of biographies, autobiographies, informative books, and concept books. Friedberg, Mullins, and Sukiennik emphasize the particular relevance of nonfiction about people with disabilities, because “nonfiction tells us about people who actually lived or still live, and thus mirrors reality with a sharpness, a poignance, and an authenticity that are not necessarily better than the quality of fiction, but are undeniably different” (1985, 5). Librarians should remember that biographies for children can contain elements of fiction in the form of made up conversations and incidents, which highlight the subject’s personality. Quasi-fiction is a term that applies to books that contain elements of both fiction and nonfiction. “Such works are primarily extended instructional messages delivered through the medium of a story. Most often they embody generous amounts of specific cognitive information, but recent titles seem more interested in promoting attitudinal changes than in presenting facts or explanations” (Baskin and Harris 1977, 59). Is one of these three types of book better than the other two? No, there are good books in all three categories.

When selecting books for children, the librarian must look for quality in the story and illustrations. Many stories written for children concerning disabilities are didactic in nature. There certainly is a place for instruction

in juvenile books dealing with disabilities, but according to Baskin and Harris (1984, 32), “Although most of the works intended for a juvenile audience are well-intentioned, in too many the message overwhelms the narrative... In general, the more earnest their endeavors and extravagant their claims, the less palatable is their product.” Since the message is all important in these books, they also tend to suffer from weak characterization.

In order to avoid reinforcing stereotypes, characters in the books chosen should have well-rounded personalities and should be children that the reader would like to know better. They should be included in the action of the story rather than being tertiary characters that watch others act. They should also have opportunities to participate in leadership roles. Disabled characters should not be portrayed stereotypically, nor should they be used only as catalysts for change in characters without disabilities. Tina Taylor Dyches, Mary Anne Prater, and Sharon F. Cramer (2001) examined books published in 1997 and 1998, and found, even in these relatively recent publications, that characters with mental retardation or autism were used primarily as catalysts for change in characters without a disability.

Because illustrations can make or break a children’s book, the quality of illustration is especially important. Good illustrations serve as an educational tool by “...allow[ing] readers to stare unreprieved at people and objects, a behavior generally unacceptable in real life” (Baskin and Harris 1984, 44). Yet it can be very difficult to portray children with disabilities such as autism or ADHD where there is not an obvious physical impairment. Questions that can help assess the quality of illustrations include:

- Do the illustrations add to the text by providing information, revealing character, interpreting action, and reflecting mood and attitude (Baskin and Harris 1977)?
- Do they show people with impairments as well-rounded characters?
- Do the illustrations accurately reflect the impairment as described in the story?

Authors and illustrators can choose to illustrate their books in different ways. Illustrations can be used to create closeness to the characters’ situations or distance from them. Photographs can be a very useful tool in nonfiction books for creating an immediate connection between the reader

and the characters in the story. Since the characters in the book are real people, they can remind the reader of family, friends, neighbors, or classmates. In order to be successful, drawings have to accurately reflect the descriptions in the story. Drawings can create a certain amount of distance, which can be useful when a situation might be too painful for young readers or listeners. Animal characters should be used judiciously since they can create so much distance that children may not be able to relate to the characters with disabilities at all.

When selecting books about children with disabilities, librarians must keep some other things in mind as well. Authors of recent books should be aware of current thinking about disabilities. In the past, it was common to label children according to their disabilities: the blind girl, the deaf boy, or the mentally retarded child. These labels acted to dehumanize the characters by identifying them solely by their disability. Therefore, authors should use language that designates the person first (e.g. the boy who is blind) and avoid terms that are now considered offensive. Newer books are generally more sensitive to language considerations. Copyright dates can serve as a clue to the use of language as well as a means to ensure that newly acquired books contain up-to-date information. In selecting books, librarians should note any bias on the part of the author. It is also important to make sure that authors do not simplify information for young children to the point that they distort it, and that they use words and terms appropriate to the age group. Librarians should also be aware that some picture books are written for an older audience and are not suitable for the traditional picture book audience. According to Marilyn Ward (2002, xiii), "An important recent development in picture books is that more and more books are geared to children in middle grades and to young adults." Finally, although humor can be an especially effective tool in children's books, it should not be used at the expense of the disabled character.

Tools

Librarians rely on book reviews as a primary selection tool; however, there can be problems with this tool. Many reviews are short and focus mainly on plot, which is not the most important element in selecting a book about disabilities for children. Another problem is that many reviews of books including disabilities are not critical, either because the reviewers do not have the necessary knowledge to analyze these books or they feel that "any book about a person with special needs serves an important social

goal, and therefore critical analysis is bypassed” (Baskin and Harris 1977, 63). Baskin and Harris also note that many reviews either focus on literary merits to the exclusion of the transmission of accurate information or conversely focus on information accuracy to the exclusion of literary merits (1977).

In order for librarians to make better selections in this area, they should look for reviews in publications that allow reviewers adequate space to analyze books critically. The National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities (NICHCY) has made the following recommendations that could prove useful:

- Contact a national, state, or local level disability organization that specializes in the disability and ask what children's books they might recommend;
- Check the holdings of other libraries and local bookstores;
- Visit the web sites of publishers that specialize in books about disabilities to see what materials they have that might meet the needs of your library (Kupper 2001).

Web sites that contain lists of appropriate children's books on disabilities can also be used as selection tools. Web sites that have bibliographies of children's books about disabilities include:

- American Library Association. "Select Bibliography of Children's Books about the Disability Experience." Most books were published between 2000 and 2004.
<http://www.ala.org/ala/awardsbucket/schneideraward/bibliography.htm>
- ERIC Clearinghouse on Disabilities and Gifted Education. "Children's Books about Disabilities." <http://ericec.org/fact/kidbooks.html>
- National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities. "Children's Literature & Disability." Most books were published during the 1990s. This bibliography also lists book publishers and their contact information. <http://www.nichcy.org/pubs/bibliog/bib5txt.htm>
- Council for Exceptional Children's Division on Developmental Disabilities and Special Needs Project. "Dolly Gray Award for Children's Literature in Developmental Disabilities." Awards given during every even year.

http://www.ddcec.org/secondarypages/dollygray/Dolly_Gray_Award.html.

Other sources that can be used as selection tools are bibliographies that have been published as books or journal articles. The International Board on Books for Young People (IBBY) established a Documentation Centre of Books for Disabled Young People in 1985. The Centre, which has a large international collection of books catering to children and young people with language disabilities and reading difficulties, regularly publishes lists of best books for young people with disabilities. Two of their current lists are *Outstanding Books for Young People with Disabilities 2005* and *Best of Books for Young People with Disabilities Jubilee Selection 2002*. A number of bibliographies, such as those in R. R. Bowker's "Serving Special Needs Series," were published in the early 1990s. They would be more useful now in assessing collection strengths and weaknesses rather than in collection development.

In 2003 the American Library Association established the Schneider Family Book Awards to honor authors and illustrators of books for young adults and children that portray individuals living with a physical, mental, or emotional disability. These books should always be considered for inclusion in collections about disabilities. Each year an award is given in three categories: birth through grade school (age 0–10), middle school (age 11–13), and teens (age 13–18). Criteria for the Schneider Family Book Awards include:

"Must portray the disability as part of a full life, not as something to be pitied or overcome and written for children and adolescents to understand and appreciate the theme. ... Committee members will consider interpretation of the special needs theme or concept, presentation of information including accuracy, clarity, and organization, development of a plot, delineation of characters, delineation of setting, and appropriateness of style. ... For a picture book entry the committee will make its decision primarily on the quality of the illustration, but other components of the book will be considered. The committee will consider excellence of presentation for a child and or adolescent audience. In identifying a distinguished picture book for children, committee members will consider excellence of execution in the artistic technique employed; excellence of pictorial interpretation of a special needs story, theme, or concept; appropriateness of style of illustration to the story, theme or concept; of delineation of plot, theme,

characters, setting mood or information through the pictures. ...The format and typeface must be appropriate, clear and free of typographical errors.”

While selection is what librarians usually think of when they talk about collection development, they also need to think about weeding. In a librarian’s life, it can be difficult to find the time to weed a collection. Although it is usually easy to discard books that are in poor physical shape, it is more time consuming (and less appealing) to go through the collection and weed out books that have outlived their usefulness. Books should be discarded if they contain information that is out-of-date. They should also be considered for discarding when their authors or illustrators show biases or when they portray people with disabilities in ways that are no longer acceptable.

Conclusion

Due to monetary limitations, the libraries where we work might not be able to develop large juvenile collections, but the children served by our libraries deserve the best collections that we can give them. Those collections need to reflect the interests and needs of our communities. Books about children with disabilities can help children with disabilities feel less alone, and can help children without disabilities become more accepting of their peers with disabilities, both now and in their adult lives. We need to use all the tools at our disposal and to be creative in selecting the best literature available on disabilities so that our youngest patrons have access to these special books.

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