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Diversity in Children's Lit
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19 December 2016

Invisible Disabilities

“Here's what I think: the only reason I'm not ordinary is that
no one else sees me that way”
-R.J. Palacio, *Wonder*

An essential and often challenging goal in education is to create an environment in which individual differences are appreciated, and where *all* children are valued. Diversity in the classroom is becoming a major issue in education; furthermore, the criterion for diverse literature is rapidly transforming with modern methods of critique, such as social media. Diverse characters in children's literature have been used for several years to introduce children to a variety of cultures and ethnicities. It is predicted that 70% of children in American schools by the year 2026 will be non-White or Hispanic, which is crucial to keep in mind in regards to diversity in race, culture, and language; however, while this type of diversity continues to be the main focus, more than 10% of the school population in the United States is currently identified as having a disability that significantly affects the child's ability to perform in the classroom (Hallahan and Kauffman, 1997, p. 12). So, where are all the people with disabilities in children's literature? As more and more students with special needs are integrated into regular classrooms, there needs to be a stronger focus on literature about disabilities that can be utilized as a powerful tool to combat stereotypes and promote positive attitudes toward people with disabilities. Because the disabled—mentally and physically—are considered a minority population, publishers, writers, and illustrators often fail to include them in their work; furthermore, if a person with disabilities is depicted, they are often inaccurately represented with equity in

mind. Books given to children in classrooms should be quality literature; additionally, books are an important way in which children learn about themselves, other and the world around them. Children's literature has the power to promote awareness of individual differences, "acceptance of self and others, and information that counteracts ignorance and stereotypes about mental and physical disabilities" (Gilmore, 2016, p. 218). In order for this to work, however, we need to start seeing more books with accurate representations of disabled youth on the shelves.

A major challenge for creating a successful inclusive classroom is creating an atmosphere in which difference and diversity are accepted and appreciated. Children are aware of individual differences from a very early age; more so, they recognize ways in which other children are alike or different from themselves. However, these differences are usually superficial and limited to physical features. Because of this, young children often conceptualize disability as being radically different and often respond negatively to others who appear so (Diamond, Hestenes, Carpenter & Innes, 1997). As children mature, however, they begin to realize that "superficial differences may obscure inner similarities, and they develop a better capacity for evaluation and comparison" (Gilmore, 2016, p. 219). As their sense of self emerges throughout childhood, children grow in the ability to understand and reflect on differences and similarities in people; however, it is important to remember that their perceptions of themselves and the world around them are heavily influenced by others. Parents, peers, teachers, and even media have such a substantial impact on a child's development and growth, personality, and character. As an educator, there is little you can do to manage what is being taught to students at home or by parents; yet, given that children spend a huge majority of their childhood in the classroom, there is a

lot you can do to give them the opportunity to see unique and diverse perspectives. One of the simplest, fun, and most effective ways to do this is through literature.

“Books provide windows by which children can look outside of their own experiences and live vicariously through others “ (Prater, Dyches, 2008). Books can be mirrors too, enabling children to reflect on themselves and their own experiences. As we have learned in class, good children’s books meet other important criteria as well: they must be developmentally appropriate, they need to deliver their message through well-chosen words and thoughtful illustrations, their stories have to be relatable for children, as well as engaging and entertaining for the child readers along with the adults choosing the books (Gilmore, 2016, p. 221). Today, we have seen an overwhelming increase in the amount of diversity in children’s literature, but unfortunately, it is still not enough. With criticism through social media and budding awareness of different groups of people and cultures, the literary community must adapt and most importantly keep creating, so that all types of people are accurately depicted in children’s books.

A 2010 study collected and reviewed fifty-nine children’s books that portray characters with disabilities to determine their quality and relevancy to educational standards today. The results found a significant increase in the overall number of books being published with the portrayal of disabilities; yet, few books contained other diverse qualities, such as non-White ethnicities and languages other than English. “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” (Smith-D’Arezzo, 2003, p. 1). As this study shows, the children’s literary community still has a long way to go in effectively creating a completely

inclusive mode of communication; however, it is almost 2017 and we are seeing a noteworthy growth in awareness for inclusivity in the classroom, which is outstanding. For example, I read *Wonder* by R. J. Palacio, which breaches a previously unheard of children's literature topic: facial abnormality. Palacio shows how the protagonist's physical barrier changes his school experience in a realistic and imaginative way, but also depicts real perspectives of his peers as well. Books like this are so important to have and to continue to create because they open a door to uncharted and necessary territory.

Books have the potential to challenge negative images and prejudices that children inevitably encounter, ultimately leading them to be more aware, understanding, and accepting of difference, diversity and disability. Education is a continual source of development and change; furthermore, as we continue to discover how important it is to include all types of people, particularly those with disabilities, we will continue to create meaningful methods of teaching. As an educator, you have the power and the privilege to choose books that can spark a meaningful change in youth and that is the most wonderful honor of all (Andrews, 1998, p. 420).

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