

Running Head: SHP FINAL PAPER

REPRESENTATION AND CONSTRUCTION OF DISABILITY IN CHILDREN'S PICTURE

BOOKS

by

Rachel Cobb

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Rachel Cobb

Greenville, NC

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Approved by:

Dr. Christy Howard and Dr. Jennifer Gallagher

Department of Literacy Studies, English Education, & History Education, College of Education,
and Department of Elementary Education and Middle Grades Education, College of Education,
respectively

Abstract

Picture books convey messages about society and how groups of people engage with one another and are often the first literary representations of societal functions that children see. Picture books can be used to promote positive views of individuals with disabilities when they are written with accuracy and sensitivity, but they can also unintentionally perpetuate harmful stereotypes and promote negative views of and interactions with people with disabilities if not written well. Therefore, it is important that educators are aware of what portrayals of characters with disabilities are appropriate for classroom use and what portrayals could harm students or cause them to think inaccurately about disability. Unfortunately, few critical studies have been conducted on disability-focused picture books (Koc, Koc, & Ozdemir, 2010), and those that have been conducted show that there are strikingly few positive yet realistic portrayals of individuals with disabilities in children's literature (Brenna, 2009). This study works toward a greater understanding of ability and disability in children's literature through a critical content analysis of four picture books using a Critical Disability Theory framework. The four books analyzed in this study were found to be appropriate for classroom use with few reservations.

Keywords: Bersani and Myers, CDT, characters with disabilities, children's literature, critical content analysis, Critical Disability Theory, critical theory, disability, Kleekamp and Zapata, picture books

Children's literature can affect the way children develop attitudes towards certain things, including disability (Koc, Koc, & Ozdemir, 2010), so it is important to teach with books that foster positive attitudes toward disability and encourage students to positively interact with one another, regardless of dis/ability. It is also important to work towards equal and fair representation of all groups of people in literature so readers are able to see their experiences reflected in literature and empathize with those who are different from them (Bishop, 1990). Unfortunately, previous research reveals individuals with disabilities are not equally and accurately represented in children's literature (Brenna, 2009).

Educators should note that disability is not fairly represented in children's literature and actively seek out picture books that include characters with disabilities, but should also analyze and critique these books before using them in the classroom, as "being exposed to misinformation about themselves or others" can cause children to internalize untrue and prejudice messages (Golos, Moses, & Wolbers, 2012, p. 240). The purpose of this study is to examine what qualifies the authors and illustrators for writing and illustrating about disabilities with accuracy and sensitivity, what challenges characters with disabilities face and how they overcome these challenges, and the nature of the relationships between characters with and without disabilities in four picture books. The goal is to gain a sounder understanding of how disability is constructed in picture books and become a better analyzer of picture books.

Literature Review

Bishop (1990) introduces the idea of being able to see oneself and others in her article "Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors." Mirrors are created when readers are able to see their own lives, identities, and experiences reflected in the literature they read; windows are created when readers are able to see a glimpse of others' lives and experiences; and sliding glass

doors are created when readers take windows a step further and empathize with others. “Reading is self-affirmation” (Bishop, 1990, p. 1), but underrepresenting and misrepresenting certain groups sends the message they are devalued; this is why plentiful and accurate mirrors and windows are so important in literature. Windows and mirrors are equally important to one another, as they help people understand and accept each other (Bishop, 1990). The unfortunate reality is that there are not enough disability-centered mirrors and windows. Books portraying the life of someone with a disability are scarce, and typically, characters with disabilities are not the protagonists when they are included in books (Brenna, 2009).

The Role of Educators

Several researchers and experts present the idea of teachers being intentional about creating inclusive classrooms. Connor (n.d.) recommends teachers refer to students with disabilities as students with learning differences, educate students without disabilities about disabilities, show students how to reject and turn around ableist notions, mainstream students with disabilities into general education classes, and mainstream Special Education majors with other education majors in college/university teacher education and preparation programs. Kleekamp and Zapata (2018) suggest that inclusion does not simply happen, that teachers must actively work to create safe spaces for children with disabilities, and that one way to accomplish this is to use literature to provide mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors. They also suggest providing this literature throughout the entire school year, not only during special times such as autism awareness months.

“Issues” Books

Though one of Connor’s (n.d.) recommendations is to actively and explicitly teach students without disabilities about disabilities, many others warn against this. While disability-

focused literature can be used for these purposes, several researchers and experts warn that there is an easily misunderstood difference between using literature to foster inclusivity and using literature for the sole purpose of teaching about disability. Brenna (2009) states that a book becomes an “issues” book when too much attention is given to a single character trait (i.e. having a disability), and the book is written to teach others about the specific disability shown in the book. Warning against the writing and usage of “issues” books, Brenna believes books about disability should be authentic, researched, and only written for the purpose of providing readers with windows and mirrors. Kleekamp and Zapata (2018) agree and conclude that disability-focused literature should be used to show students examples of characters with disabilities showing intersectionality and enacting agency, rather than to teach others about disabilities. “Intersectionality is an approach to literary analysis that invites students to consider how a range of identity factors, such as gender, race, nationality, class, sexuality, age, physical ability, corporeality, role, or setting, interact to shape a character,” (Kentoff, n.d., p. 66). Samman and Santos (2009) define agency as a person’s ability to make purposeful decisions.

Critically Examining Disability-Focused Literature

As of 2010, approximately 2.3 percent of all children ages five to fifteen in the United States had a physical or sensory impairment. Because this percentage is relatively high, it is important to examine how these children see themselves reflected in literature and how their peers see them portrayed; however, research reveals that there are not enough content analyses studying the portrayal of this population in picture books (Koc, Koc, & Ozdemir, 2010). Brenna (2009) suggests critically examining how disability is represented and constructed in books before bringing them into the classroom, as do Bersani and Myers (2008/2009), who emphasize that books addressing disability are being promoted without being critiqued or analyzed. They

make the following recommendations for critiquing and analyzing books that address disability to ensure they do not promote ableism: ensure the book does not ignore disabilities, identify any stereotypes the book promotes and perpetuates, ensure the characters with disabilities do not have to have special talents or compensate for their disability, ensure characters with disabilities are not always the beneficiaries of able-bodied and able-minded people, identify words and phrases in the book that could cause readers to associate disability with deficit, analyze examples of characters with disabilities living full lives and enacting agency, and ensure the author is qualified to write about disability. Bersani and Myers (2008/2009) also recommend looking at the copyright dates on books to ensure they are relevant and current. While the dates do not dictate the author's perspective on disability, older books are more likely to portray disability as something that needs to be cured because that has been the general mindset of society in the past.

Similarly, Kleekamp and Zapata (2018) suggest using the following criteria to choose appropriate disability-focused books for classroom libraries: characters in the book who have disabilities reject typical portrayals of disability, books focus on a specific disability rather than the general concept of disability, characters are well developed, books include accounts from the point of view of the character(s) with disabilities, friendships exist between characters with and without disabilities for genuine reasons rather than as a favor to or out of pity for the characters with disabilities, and characters with disabilities have multi-sectional identities. I used these criteria, in addition to my research questions, to examine the four books for this study.

Theoretical Framework

This study draws on McGowan's (2014) work with Critical Disability Theory (CDT). Critical theory "addresses the need to develop a systematic way of thinking that includes incorporating historical circumstances in order to confront and address an unjust society"

(McGowan, 2014, p. 33). The five characteristics of critical theory, according to McGowan (2014), are a grounding in a specific political analysis, a concern with educating people in order to free them from oppression, a distinction between subject and object and researcher and focus of research, criticism and skepticism of our current society and a vision of a more fair and inclusive society, and lack of verification until these goals are met. These goals and characteristics of critical theory have been adapted to meet the societal needs of people with disability. Because CDT asserts that ableism is so normal that it is invisible, CDT's purpose is to challenge ableism, challenge its invisibility, and demand that differences in physical and mental ability be recognized rather than ignored. CDT works under the belief that equality for people with disabilities is their basic human right (McGowan, 2014).

CDT connects with the problem statement and purpose of this project and was used to guide the content analysis. The problem being addressed in this project is that disability is underrepresented in children's literature, and what few books do address disability sometimes promote ableism and are being used and promoted regardless because they are not being examined first. This reflects CDT because it suggests that disability is often ignored in literature, and in order to work through CDT, one must understand that the differences in physical and mental ability are often ignored. The purpose of this study is to examine the representation and construction of disability in children's literature, and one purpose of CDT is to challenge ableism. Many works of disability-focused children's literature, even modern ones, promote ableism, either intentionally or unintentionally.

Methods

The data for this study consisted of four children's picture books: *Emmanuel's Dream* by Laurie Ann Thompson (2015), *Just Ask* by Sonia Sotomayor (2019), *The Girl Who Thought in*

Pictures by Julia Finley Mosca (2017), and *Silent Star* by Bill Wise (2012). These books were chosen from a list of picture books and chapter books featuring characters with disabilities provided by librarians at my university. Each of these books features at least one protagonist with a disability and they have each been approved by my faculty mentors. Each book is described further in the table on the next page. I completed a content analysis on each book using the theoretical framework I described in the previous section, Critical Disability Theory (CDT); I used this same theoretical framework across all books I analyzed. Since CDT works to analyze and challenge ableism and the invisibility of ableism in society, I used this lens to analyze if and how the books I used for my content analysis promote or challenge ableism through the relationships between characters with and without disabilities and the challenges characters with disabilities face and how characters overcome these challenges.

To complete my content analysis, I used Short's (2016) process for using critical content analysis as a research methodology. I first read through the book one time without coding or making notes of any kind, but paying close attention to my initial impressions, reactions, and emotions from the book. This is what Short (2016) calls an efferent stance, meaning to first "live in" the experience of that text as a reader – to experience the whole before we analyze the parts. Our focus initially is not a critical reading, but a personal response" (p. 8). Once I personally responded to the book, I reread the book for the purpose of coding, focusing on each research question, which are described in the following subsections. I coded using color-coded sticky notes, one color for each research question and another color for a miscellaneous category, and pasting them throughout the books to help me remember where each piece of evidence came from. Then I created one document for each book, and each document contained one chart for each research question and one miscellaneous category. Each chart had one column for the quote

Title	Author	Date	Summary	Protagonist	Disability
<i>Silent Star</i>	Bill Wise	2012	Wise tells the biographical story of 1800's major leaguer with deafness William Hoy who overcomes communication barriers, unfair treatment from players on opposing teams, and constant put-downs from people in his hometown and opposing teams to become one of the best major league baseball players in United States history.	William Hoy	Deafness
<i>The Girl Who Thought in Pictures</i>	Julia Finley Mosca	2017	Through this biographical picture book written in rhyme, Mosca tells the story of animal scientist Temple Grandin, who was diagnosed with autism as a child. Temple faces many obstacles, including not knowing how to express anger and being expelled from school for poor behavior as a result, being told she would be unable to succeed, and having trouble making a place for herself in the male-dominated farm industry.	Temple Grandin	Autism
<i>Emmanuel's Dream</i>	Laurie Ann Thompson	2015	This book tells a true story. Emmanuel Oforu Yeboah was born in Ghana with only one leg and faced challenges because of it, including having to hop or be carried to school, not being able to balance a bicycle for a long time, being rejected by employers, and being abandoned by his father, all due to his disability. Emmanuel's mother also dies when he is a teenager, leaving him to care for his younger siblings by himself. He overcomes all these challenges and eventually rides his	Emmanuel Oforu Yeboah	Born with one leg

			bicycle all around Ghana to spread the message that disability does not mean inability.		
<i>Just Ask!</i>	Sonia Sotomayor	2019	This book is an own voices text written by a Justice of the United States Supreme Court who was diagnosed with diabetes as a child. The book showcases a total of 14 children with various disabilities and health challenges who each discuss their disability or health challenge, how it affects them, and what they do to overcome their challenges. The book ends with all the children working together to plant a garden and celebrating their uniqueness.	Multiple	Multiple

or piece of evidence from the text or illustrations, one column for the page number(s), and one column for my notes. I then examined what I coded to draw conclusions regarding my research questions and compare these to my theoretical framework; this is what I used to write up my findings.

The following subsections describe the research questions I used to focus my content analysis and how I formulated answers to these questions for each book.

Who tells the story of individuals with disabilities? Do authors have disabilities, have family members or close friends with disabilities, or have they done extensive research and talked to people with disabilities before writing the books?

Bersani and Myers (2008/2009) pose the question, “Is there something in the author’s and illustrator’s backgrounds that recommends them to writing about the disability experience accurately and with sensitivity?” when discussing ways to analyze children’s literature for

ableism. Although some books written about disability by able-bodied and able-minded authors can portray disability with accuracy and sensitivity, if these are the only authors writing about disability, the books perpetuate a single story of disability. It is important for books about disability to be authentic in order to promote more than one story, so I reviewed the biographies of the authors and illustrators when they were provided in the jacket or on the back cover of the books. When biographies were not provided, I researched the authors and illustrators to determine what qualifies them for writing and illustrating about disabilities with accuracy and sensitivity.

What challenges do characters with disabilities face in children's literature and how do they overcome these challenges?

Brenna (2009) states that because the goal when writing about marginalized groups, such as those with disabilities, should always be authenticity and reality, books about disability should not hide the fact that having a disability causes one to face unique challenges that one would not ordinarily face. I used Bersani and Myers's (2008/2009) methods again here, to analyze the challenges characters with disabilities face and how they overcome these challenges by determining if the book ignores disability and challenges altogether, looking for instances where the character with a disability can only overcome his/her challenges with the help of an able-bodied and able-minded person, and identifying examples of characters with disabilities enacting agency and living full lives. Essentially, I considered how authors positively created characters with disabilities who faced realistic challenges and worked through these challenges by their own strength.

What types of relationships are shown between characters with disabilities and characters without disabilities?

In their content analysis on the relationship between characters with and without disabilities in picture books, Koc, Koc, and Ozdemir (2010) sorted these relationships into eleven small categories under the three broad categories of positive, neutral, and negative. They claim it is important to analyze the relationships between characters with and without disabilities in picture books because “the messages in children’s literature can make a significant contribution in the early development of attitudes of children” (p. 145). If children’s literature can have such an effect on how children think about, interact with, and treat their peers with disability, it is important to ensure the books educators use in their classrooms show positive relationships between characters with and without disabilities, or at least negative relationships that become better overtime. I used Koc, Koc, and Ozdemir’s (2010) eleven categories to examine the relationships between characters with and without disabilities.

Findings

To guide my content analysis, I used the research questions explained above, so this section discusses author credibility, challenges characters with disabilities face and how they enact agency to overcome those challenges, and relationships between characters with and without disabilities. Generally, all authors have at least minimal credibility for writing about disabilities, even if they only researched the subject of the book (three out of four of the books were biographical). Each book demonstrated realistic challenges for characters with disabilities and realistic ways of overcoming them, as well as positive relationships between characters. I also gathered some data about intersectionality and issues books; these extra findings will be examined in the discussion section as they relate more to the literature review than to my research questions.

Author Credibility

For the purpose of this study, author credibility was determined based on the author's personal experiences with disability and/or the author's research into the specific disability or disabilities they write about. In coding the four books, I found that only one of them is an own voices text, meaning the author shares an identity with a protagonist (Ford, 2019). The authors of the three books that are not own voices texts conducted research before writing the books, and all three of these books are biographical. Only one author of the biographical books did not consult the subject of the book, but this subject is a historical figure who has been deceased since 1961.

Silent Star by **Bill Wise**. Wise did extensive research before writing this book, but it was more on the protagonist William's life than on deafness or disability in general. Similarly, the illustrator conducted extensive research, but the focus was on baseball rules, uniforms, and stadiums during William's time, the late nineteenth century (Wise, 2012). While this is a biography, so the bulk of the necessary research would be on William and baseball during his time, the author and illustrator could have done further research on deafness and disability in athletes to ensure they were a credible source for writing about disabilities; in exploring the author's and illustrator's websites, I found no such information.

The Girl Who Thought in Pictures by **Julia Finley Mosca**. On the Acknowledgements and Bibliography page at the back of the book, there is a statement that reads, "The publisher, author, and illustrator are immensely grateful to Dr. Temple Grandin for contributing personal photos, speaking at length with the author, and providing helpful commentary throughout the creation of this book" (Mosca, 2017, p. i). Although some secondary sources were used, seven out of ten sources listed under the bibliography were either written by Temple herself or were videos of her speaking or being interviewed (Mosca, 2017). The author even used a direct quote from Temple in the book: on page 11, the text reads, "She was 'DIFFERENT, NOT LESS,' they

all finally agreed” (Mosca, 2017). According to the more in-depth biographical author’s note in the back of the book, “Different, not less” is the phrase Temple coined to describe herself (Mosca, 2017). External research does not show that the author and illustrator have disabilities or have family/friends with disabilities, but they are still credible sources of information for this book because they talked with Temple herself to get most of their information.

***Emmanuel’s Dream* by Laurie Ann Thompson.** There is no information in the inside flap of the book, cover of the book, dedication page, or copyright page that suggests the author and illustrator are credible sources of information about disabilities (Thompson, 2015). However, the author’s website contains a link to Emmanuel’s activist website, suggesting the author did explore his story there, which is information from Emmanuel himself, to get information for her book (Thompson, 2020).

***Just Ask!* by Sonia Sotomayor.** This is an own voices text (Ford, 2019). According to the dedication page, the author has a close relationship with a person who has ALS and was inspired by this person to write this book (Sotomayor, 2019). Part of a letter to readers from the author in the front of the book reads, “I was born on June 25, 1954, and in 1961, when I was seven years old, I was diagnosed with juvenile diabetes. To take care of myself, I had to do things other kids did not. Sometimes I felt different. When kids saw me giving myself a needle shot of insulin, my medicine, I knew they were curious about what I was doing. But they never asked me, my parents, or my teachers about it. I also often felt they thought I was doing something wrong” (Sotomayor, 2019, p. ii). This letter shows the author is a reliable source for writing about how children with disabilities and health challenges often feel excluded and like they are constantly being stared at because she felt this way as a child and has had to cope with this since she was seven years old. On the acknowledgements page in the back of the book, the

author states, “Some children in my life may see their names in this book. Yes, it is you who provided a model for my story...” (Sotomayor, 2019, p. iii). The author based her characters on children in her own life with disabilities and health challenges, showing that in addition to relating to her characters on a personal level, she had outside sources of information about disabilities and health challenges.

Challenges and Agency

Brenna (2009) speaks to the importance of authors showing characters with disabilities facing realistic challenges, rather than sugarcoating the difficulties a person with a disability may face, and when examining the challenges portrayed in these four books, I found that most of the characters overcame their challenges by enacting agency of their accord. Agency is a person’s ability make purposeful decisions (Samman & Santos, 2009). Two of the four books I analyzed included characters with disabilities who had trouble finding employment due to having a disability, while another featured a character who had school-related challenges, not directly caused by her disability, but because people at her school did not understand her disability.

***Silent Star* by Bill Wise.** On pages six through eight, William faces and overcomes his first challenge: meningitis left him deaf when he was three years old, and because he could not hear speech, he never learned to speak. He overcame this challenge first by reading and writing to communicate with others. Later, “William learned to use American Sign Language and to read lips” (Wise, 2012, p. 9). Here, William enacts agency by taking it upon himself to figure out a different way to communicate other than speaking so he can make himself understood. The illustration on page 15 and the text on page 16 show William enacting agency to communicate with others once again. At this point in the story, a coach for a professional baseball team approaches William to offer him a position on the team, but William cannot hear him. William

enacts agency by using sign language, knowing there was a good chance the coach may not understand sign language, for the specific purpose of showing the coach that he was deaf and needed to use an alternate form of communication. The illustration shows William using sign language to advocate for himself by demonstrating this to the coach (Wise, 2012).

On page eleven, William faces the challenge of not being able to find a job because “not many jobs were open to deaf people” (Wise, 2012, p. 11). He overcomes this challenge by finding a job with the local shoemaker, the trade he learned at the Ohio School for the Deaf, and eventually saving up enough money to purchase the shop and run it as his own business. The illustration on page 12 shows William working diligently making and repairing shoes (Wise, 2012). In this way, William enacts agency by working hard to become financially stable and create a good life for himself despite the fact that most employers were not willing to hire deaf individuals.

Once William works his way into the minor leagues, he faces a new challenge: opposing players taking advantage of him due to his deafness. “Because he could not hear the home plate umpire shouting balls and strikes when he was at bat, Hoy had to turn around to look at the [umpire] after each pitch. The umpire would repeat the call, and as Hoy read the [umpire’s] lips, opposing pitchers often quick pitched Hoy, throwing the next ball before he was ready to bat. As a result, Hoy’s hitting suffered, and he struggled at the plate” (Wise, 2012, p. 18). William overcomes this challenge by devising a plan that would allow him to know the umpire’s call by looking down the left field line at the third base coach, who would wave one arm to indicate the umpire called a ball and the other arm to indicate the umpire had called a strike; as a result, William’s performance at bat increased dramatically (Wise, 2012).

***The Girl Who Thought in Pictures* by Julia Finley Mosca.** Temple's challenges in school mainly stemmed from other people's misunderstanding and mistreatment of her. Page thirteen describes Temple's school experience as "hard" because of the way her classmates taunted her and chased her around the school yard. When she eventually reacted to this bullying by throwing a book at another child, she was expelled from school and faced with the challenge of figuring out what to do next to achieve academic success. Initially, she overcomes these challenges by attending an alternative school where she meets a teacher who is much more supportive and understanding. Later in the book, she overcomes her school-related difficulties when she earns an undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral degree (Mosca, 2017).

On page twenty-four, the author describes Temple's challenges throughout her educational endeavors by writing, "She took on the world, but at times, she had fears. Because some things were SCARY, like people she'd meet who'd ignore her ideas and, well, wouldn't be sweet" (Mosca, 2017, p. 24). Temple's challenge here is simply facing fear because of the way others ignore her and treat her as less-than. She overcomes this challenge by never giving up, pushing past what people said about her, continuing to learn and grow in her passions, and eventually earning three degrees (Mosca, 2017). Temple enacts agency by pursuing her dreams and continuing to move forward in school as a means of reaching her goal of building better farms even though most people didn't believe in her ability to succeed and despite the fact that she was kicked out of school when she was younger.

***Emmanuel's Dream* by Laurie Ann Thompson.** The first challenge readers see Emmanuel face is difficulty riding a bike due to having only one leg, which clearly made it hard for him to balance. "Over and over again, Emmanuel fell - hard - but finally...he rode!" (Thompson, 2015, p. 11 &12). As seen by the use of the phrase "over and over again,"

Emmanuel overcomes this challenge by continuing to get back on the bike even when he falls, until he is eventually successful (Thompson, 2015). When Emmanuel decides to bicycle across his country, he faces the challenge of not having the necessary means - a bicycle - or assistance to achieve his dream: “At first no one would help. They thought his plan, to bicycle around Ghana, was impossible. Then Emmanuel wrote to the Challenge Athletes Foundation, all the way in San Diego, California” (Thompson, 2015, p. 21). Emmanuel enacts agency to overcome this challenge by writing to an organization who could help him reach his goal - which they did, by sending him a bicycle, helmet, shorts, and shoes - and thereby advocating for himself once again.

On pages fifteen and sixteen, Emmanuel faces the challenge of not being able to get a job at first because no one wanted to hire a person with a disability. He overcomes this obstacle by staying determined to find a real job rather than begging on the streets like he was told by many people to do, until he was finally offered a job in a restaurant. Pages 15 and 16 state, “But no one would hire him. Shopkeepers and restaurant owners told him to go out and beg like other disabled people did. Emmanuel refused. Finally, a food stand owner offered him a job...” He also picked up a second job - shoe shining - to earn extra money (Thompson, 2015). In this way, Emmanuel enacts agency by advocating for himself and demonstrating his ability to work until he was able to find two jobs.

Just Ask! by **Sonia Sotomayor**. Sonia, who has diabetes, faces the challenge of her body not naturally producing insulin the way it should, and she overcomes this by giving herself regular insulin shots to keep her body healthy. She states that, “Even though this can sometimes hurt, I gather all of my courage to do it...” (Sotomayor, 2019, p. 3). This shows agency because even though pricking her finger and giving herself a shot can be painful, Sonia does it anyway, taking it upon herself to keep healthy. Because he has asthma, Rafael faces challenges when he

has trouble breathing, which he overcomes by using an inhaler when necessary and taking quiet time to catch his breath (Sotomayor, 2019). Madison and Arturo face the challenge of not being able to see due to blindness, but they “strengthen [their] other senses and notice lots of details others may miss” to overcome this challenge (Sotomayor, 2019, p. 9).

On page seventeen, one character says, “My name is Anh and I speak with a stutter, so I sometimes repeat a word or get stuck when I try to say it” (Sotomayor, 2019, p. 17). This describes Anh’s challenges when speaking, but the book never describes how Anh overcomes or works through this challenge. However, page 17 introduces Anh as a good listener, so it does not hone in on what she struggles with, but rather balances it with her strengths (Sotomayor, 2019). The character Manuel describes his challenges with attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder by saying: “I can get frustrated when I really feel the need to move around even though I’m supposed to sit still. When my teachers and friends are patient with me if I forget something or get distracted, I can get myself back on track” (Sotomayor, 2019, p. 21). Manuel’s challenges are frustration when he is made to sit still even though his body feels the urge to move around and getting distracted easily, and his teachers and friends help him work through this challenge by being patient with him while he gets his focus back.

Many of the illustrations throughout the book show the characters enacting agency by doing or using the things they describe in the text that help them overcome challenges related to their disability or health challenge. On page 4, Sonia is shown giving herself an insulin shot, which she describes on the opposite page as something she needs to do to keep herself healthy. On page 6, Rafael is shown painting. On the opposite page, he tells readers that he needs to take quiet time to slow down and catch his breath due to having asthma, so it can be inferred that painting is one way he does this. This is an example of agency because Rafael chooses to engage

in this activity to help himself breathe better. The images across pages 23 and 24 show Nolan enacting agency by refusing a nut he is being offered because he is allergic to nuts and he has to speak up for himself to make sure he avoids nuts and stays healthy (Sotomayor, 2019).

Relationships Between Individuals with and without Disabilities

Koc, Koc, and Ozdemir (2010) discuss the importance of analyzing relationships between characters with and without disabilities and organize them into eleven categories that are expanded on further in the discussion section. I found that two of the four books emphasize important relationships between the individual with a disability and that person's mother. Three out of the four books emphasize relationships between individuals with disabilities and their peers that are positive and uplifting, but in two of these books, the individuals with disabilities are not accepted and befriended until they prove their worth to those without disabilities.

***Silent Star* by Bill Wise.** The book shows that toward the beginning of his life, William did not have a positive relationship with his peers. The illustration on page 7 shows a group of boys who appear to be William's age huddling with each other to make fun of William, who stands lonely to the side of them with a dejected look on his face. When he first began school, children teased or feared him because he was deaf and did not speak, and some adults looked down on him or ignored him (Wise, 2012). He is treated as though he does not exist, and many people seem to have pity on him. Although the relationship between William and his peers changes when he begins attending the Ohio School for the Deaf (Wise, 2012), this newfound positive relationship with his peers is not a relationship between characters with and without disabilities because all other students at the Ohio School for the Deaf also had hearing impairment. Not until William begins playing professional baseball does the book show a positive relationship between him and peers without disability (Wise, 2012).

The text that describes how opposing teams often took advantage of William by quick pitching him when he had to turn around to read the umpire's lips (Wise, 2012) shows a negative relationship between William and other players in the league because not only did they take advantage of him, but they clearly had low expectations of him because they did everything in their power to ensure he was not successful. Later in the book, William develops mutually positive relationships with his teammates, coaches, and fans. First, when William joins his first major league team, his teammates quickly give him a nickname to show their affection and let William know he is an equal on the team. The nickname was Dummy; the author does make a point to mention that in William's day, "dumb" was the appropriate word used to label people who did not speak, so the nickname Dummy was acceptable, but that today the language used to describe disabilities has changed to the point that it is not acceptable to label a mute person "dumb" anymore.

Second, when William devises the plan that would prevent him from having to turn around to read the umpire's lips after each call, his coach proves to be supportive in that he is willing to make hand motions to signal William so he would have a lesser chance of getting quick pitched (Wise, 2012). This is an example of others making modifications to support an individual with disabilities, rather than the individual with disabilities having to make an adjustment to his life, but William is still his own "hero" in this because it was his plan to help himself be successful.

Third, when William makes it to a major league team and proves himself a talented, reliable player, he grows into an appreciative, respectful relationship with his fans. This is shown on page four when the author describes the fans' reaction to William making a great play: "They threw confetti up in the air and wildly waved their arms and hats and handkerchiefs. The fans

made such a visual commotion because William Hoy was deaf” (Wise, 2012, p. 4). The fans were willing to adapt the way they show their appreciation so William would know they were proud of him and enjoyed watching him make a great play; this speaks to the positive nature of the relationship between William and his fans because other people are making adjustments, not the person with the disability.

***The Girl Who Thought in Pictures* by Julia Finley Mosca.** The most important relationships between Temple and the other characters depicted in this book are with her mother and her teachers. When people first start to notice that Temple’s brain does not function quite the same way that other people’s brains function, they respond to this discovery by saying, “Her brain’s not quite right. You must send her away” (Mosca, 2017, p. 9). Temple’s mother responds by telling them that they should be ashamed of the way they propose to handle Temple’s different-ness and expresses determination to figure out how to help Temple. The illustration on the opposite page shows Temple appearing frightened at a doctor’s office and her mother putting a protective arm around her (Mosca, 2017). This text and illustration show a loving relationship between Temple and her mother in which her mother is protective and believes that she and Temple will figure out how to help Temple be successful. This loving relationship is reflected in the real Temple Grandin’s letter to readers in the back of the book when she writes, “As a child, I was really glad that my mother always encouraged my ability in art” (Mosca, 2017, p. 32). This further establishes the positive, supportive nature of Temple’s relationship with her mother.

Similar to the way Temple’s mother always supported and believed in her, Temple’s teachers always worked patiently with her to help her be successful. On page eleven, Temple’s “special teachers” help her finally talk (she was nonverbal for the first several years of her life) and agree that she was “different, not less” (Mosca, 2017, p. 11). Later in the book, Temple

attends a special school where she meets a teacher who tells her, “You’ll never fall short when you find what you’re good at, like science - you’ll SOAR!” (Mosca, 2017, p. 19). This text shows an encouraging relationship between Temple and her teacher, who believed in her and helped her discover her passions and how to cultivate them.

Another relationship depicted on pages 13 and 14 is the negative, demeaning relationship between Temple and her classmates. Page 13 describes how her classmates teased her and chased her around the schoolyard, and the illustration across both pages show children pointing and throwing a ball of paper at a frightened Temple. The illustration also clearly shows that Temple is an outsider among her classmates because she is sitting far away from the other children, reading a book by herself, while they point and throw things at her (Mosca, 2017). Also included in the illustration written in chalk are the words “LOOK AT HER!” (Mosca, 2017, p. 13), adding to the idea that Temple is a figure of fun among her peers.

***Emmanuel’s Dream* by Laurie Ann Thompson.** Throughout the entire book, Emmanuel’s mother believed in him and pushed him to be successful but did not coddle him just because he had a disability. His mother demonstrated the positive, supportive nature of their relationship by giving him a name that means “God is with us” (Thompson, 2015, p. 3). Naming him with a purpose shows that she believed he had a purpose and was no accident. This relationship was also shown when his mother tells Emmanuel that he could have anything he wanted, as long as he got it for himself (Thompson, 2015), demonstrating not only her faith in him but also her expectation for him to work for what he needs and wants despite his only having one leg. Emmanuel’s mother also carried him to school every day until he got too heavy for her to carry, even though “most kids with disabilities couldn’t go to school” (Thompson, 2015, p. 7), demonstrating her determination for him to earn an education, whatever the cost. (Note:

Emmanuel still went to school after his mother stopped being able to carry him; he hopped on one leg two miles both ways each day). Even on her deathbed, Emmanuel's mother still expected and inspired greatness in him and put responsibility on him by telling him to take care of his siblings, to be respectful, to never give up, and to never beg, showing that she still believed in him and expected him to work hard like everyone else (Thompson, 2015). Overall, Emmanuel had a positive relationship with his mother in which she supported him and did everything she could to help him succeed.

Emmanuel's relationship with his peers shifts throughout the book: at first, they reject him and refuse to play with him, but once he purchases a brand new soccer ball and demonstrates his ability to play soccer by using crutches to run around the field, they begin to respect him and become his friends. Page 9 states, "At first, nobody would play with him. So Emmanuel saved his money and bought something none of his classmates had: a brand-new soccer ball. Of course he would share it...if he could play, too. Lunging and spinning on crutches his grandmother had found for him and kicking the ball with his good left foot, Emmanuel earned their respect." One of his friends, Godwin, even pushes him on a bicycle until he can learn to use his working leg to balance (Thompson, 2015), showing a supportive relationship. The illustration on page 12 shows Godwin cheering Emmanuel on in the background while Emmanuel victoriously rides his bicycle. The illustrations on page twenty-four further establish this supportive relationship between Emmanuel and his friends because it shows them cheering for Emmanuel as they ride in a taxi alongside him as he bicycles around Ghana (Thompson, 2015).

Emmanuel creates a platform for himself by bicycling around Ghana with a shirt labelled "THE POZO," which means "the disabled person" (Thompson, 2015, p. 25). He uses this platform to establish a relationship with the general public. "Able-bodied adults ran or rode

along with him. People with disabilities left their homes and came outside, some for the very first time. The young man once thought of as cursed was becoming a national hero” (Thompson, 2015, p. 27). Emmanuel is also shown speaking to reporters and the general public in the illustration across pages 27 and 28. This relationship between Emmanuel and the public is reciprocal because Emmanuel took it upon himself to inspire others with his bicycle journey and the public responded by running and riding with him and coming out of their houses to learn from him and show their support. The illustration across pages 29 and 30 support the development of this relationship by showing the people cheering Emmanuel on and riding alongside him.

***Just Ask!* by Sonia Sotomayor.** In this book, most relationships between characters are shown in the illustrations rather than the text. The illustrations across pages 5 and 6 show Sonia and another unnamed character admiring Rafael’s artwork, showing a supportive relationship built on admiration and appreciation (Sotomayor, 2019). The illustration across pages 15 and 16 shows both characters with autism, Jordan and Tiana, coexisting well and playing together even though Tiana is nonverbal and Jordan loves to talk (Sotomayor, 2019), suggesting balanced friendship. The illustration on page 21 shows Jordan, who has autism, and Julia, who has Tourette’s syndrome, smiling while helping each other plant a tree, showing a reciprocally helpful relationship between them (Sotomayor, 2019). The illustration on page 28 shows all characters in the books working and celebrating together, showing a mutually supportive and positive relationship between all of them (Sotomayor, 2019). Manuel tells readers, “When my teachers and friends are patient with me if I forget something or get distracted, I can get myself back on track” (Sotomayor, 2019, p. 21). This sentence suggests that Manuel has teachers and

friends in his life who are patient with him and allow him to get back on track when he becomes distracted or forgetful, showing a positive, supportive relationship.

Discussion

Overall, I found the books analyzed in this study to be generally realistic, positive, and worthy of use in a classroom, according to the criteria set forth by the scholars discussed in my literature review, and I found that the data I collected from each book reflects my theoretical framework, Critical Disability Theory (CDT).

Connections to Literature

Each book meets the majority of Kleeckamp and Zapata's (2018) suggested criteria for choosing appropriate disability-focused books for classroom libraries: characters in the book who have disabilities reject typical portrayals of disability, books focus on a specific disability rather than the general concept of disability, characters are well developed, books include accounts from the point of view of character(s) with disabilities, friendships exist between characters with and without disabilities for genuine reasons rather than as a favor to or out of pity for the characters with disabilities, and characters with disabilities have multi-sectional identities. Each book also contains different types of relationships described in Koc, Koc, and Ozdemir's (2010) categories for relationships between characters with and without disabilities. One book could be seen as an issues book (Brenna, 2009), depending on how it would be presented to students in the classroom.

Characters reject typical portrayals of disability. Kleeckamp and Zapata (2018) state, "...much of the existing research has suggested that many inclusive-seeming texts often benevolently perpetuate deficit narratives of characters worth pitying by positioning characters with disabled bodies as mascots or characters with disabled minds as class pets. It is not

uncommon to encounter characters with disabilities who appear to lack agency or are victimized by other, ‘able’ characters” (p. 2). This is what they mean by typical portrayals of disability, and each book analyzed in this study shows characters rejecting such portrayals. William in *Silent Star* (Wise, 2012) and Emmanuel in *Emmanuel’s Dream* (Thompson, 2015) reject this typical portrayal of disabled bodies by ignoring those who make their physical impairments an object of fun and by enacting agency to prove that though their physical impairment causes additional challenges, they do not affect their talent or drive to be successful, and that they are not victims.

Temple in *The Girl Who Thought in Pictures* rejects the typical portrayal of a character with a disabled mind. Even though her classmates tease her and chase her when she first begins her school career, she is not portrayed as the class pet because she is not coddled by her classmates and eventually rises to success, through enacting agency on her own, despite the way they treated her (Mosca, 2017).

Each character in *Just Ask!* rejects the typical portrayals of characters with disabled bodies and minds because none of them are portrayed as class mascots or pets, but rather as equal individuals who bring unique strengths to the rest of the group, and each character enacts agency to overcome the challenges s/he faces (Sotomayor, 2019).

Focusing on a specific disability. All but one of the books meets the criteria of focusing on a specific disability rather than the general concept of disability (Kleekamp & Zapata, 2018). *Just Ask!* includes many different disabilities and health challenges, including diabetes, deafness, blindness, autism, dyslexia, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, allergies, and others (Sotomayor, 2019). Focusing on one disability makes a book less of an issues book and therefore more appropriate for classroom use (Kleekamp & Zapata, 2018), but *Just Ask!* would still be appropriate for classroom use. Because it includes common disabilities as well as common health

challenges (Sotomayor, 2019), the book addresses the idea of each child being unique and bringing their own strengths to their community more so than it addresses the idea of disability.

Well-developed characters who have intersectional identities. Each book contains characters who are well-developed and have intersectional identities, two of Kleekamp and Zapata's (2018) recommendations for choosing disability-focused books for classroom use. As mentioned in the literature review, Kentoff (n.d.) mentions a person's role as an aspect of a person's identity to be considered when examining books for intersectionality, and this is seen in *Silent Star* because William is presented as a professional athlete who happens to have deafness rather than as a deaf person who happens to be a professional athlete (Wise, 2012). In *Emmanuel's Dream*, Emmanuel is portrayed not only as a boy with a disability but also the caregiver of his family after his mother's death (Thompson, 2015). These two identities, his disability and his role of caregiver, work together to develop his character as a determined, responsible individual who works hard to overcome numerous obstacles. Similarly, each time a character in *Just Ask!* is seen having an intersectional identity, their disability or health challenge is intersected with their role. Examples are as follows: Bianca, who has dyslexia, and Rafael, who has asthma, are portrayed as excellent artists; Anh, who speaks with a stutter, is portrayed as being a good listener for her friends who like to talk (Sotomayor, 2019).

The Girl Who Thought in Pictures focuses more on Temple's academic life and professional achievements than on her having autism. It also presents other challenges Temple faced, aside from those associated with her having autism, particularly the challenges she faced being a woman working in the male-dominated farming industry (Mosca, 2017). This intersects her identity as a person with autism with her identity as a woman.

Accounts from the point of view of the character with disability. Only one book, *Just Ask!*, contains accounts from the points of view of characters with disabilities (Kleekamp & Zapata, 2018). Each character speaks from a first-person point of view when discussing his or her disability, strengths, challenges, ways of overcoming challenges, personality, hobbies, and talents (Sotomayor, 2019). None of the other books analyzed in this study give accounts from the point of view of the character with disability, but they would still be appropriate for use in a classroom because, being biographical, each was written after the author conducted extensive research on the individual being written about, so they still portray disability accurately and draw heavily on the individual's own life and experience.

Genuine friendships. All but one book analyzed in this study meets another critical aspect of Kleekamp and Zapata's (2018) criteria for disability-focused children's books – friendships exist between characters with and without disabilities for genuine reasons, rather than as a favor to or out of pity for characters with disabilities. William in *Silent Star* makes friends with his teammates as soon as he joins a major league team due to his talent and friendliness (Wise, 2012). In *Emmanuel's Dream*, Emmanuel is friends with other boys from his school who work to help him succeed and support him in his bicycling journey, but they were friends with him before he accomplished this (Thompson, 2015). In *Just Ask!*, the illustrations show several friendships between the children in the book by showing them laughing, celebrating, having fun, and working together. Though the book focuses only on disabilities and health challenges, these friendships still count as friendships between characters with and without disabilities because some characters have health challenges that are not considered disabilities (Sotomayor, 2019).

The only book that does not feature friendships between characters with and without disabilities is *The Girl Who Thought in Pictures*. While Temple does have positive relationships

with her mother and teacher, she does not have any friends throughout the book (Mosca, 2017). Despite the lack of friendships in this book, it would still be appropriate for classroom use, as long as there were other disability-focused books in the classroom that portrayed genuine friendships between characters with and without disabilities, because it shows Temple succeeding regardless of how other people treated her.

Types of relationships. Koc, Koc, and Ozdemir (2010) noted eleven types of relationships between characters with and without disabilities and placed these types of relationships into three categories: positive, neutral, and negative. The three biographical books analyzed in this study portrayed both positive and negative relationships, while the one fiction book portrayed only positive relationships; no books portrayed neutral relationships. The types of positive relationships shown in the books are: “the successful one and proud others,” “the helper, adviser, and the appreciated friends,” “an equal body,” and “the supportive and worried parent of a child with impairment” (Koc, Koc, and Ozdemir, 2010, p. 149). The types of negative relationships shown in the books are: “the lonely or unhappy child and the ignoring, teasing one” and “the rejected person and the distrustful, very cautious one” (Koc, Koc, and Ozdemir, 2010, p. 149). Though some books portrayed negative relationships, they would still be appropriate for classroom use because it is important that disability-focused books are realistic, and it would be unrealistic to show that people with disabilities are never teased or ignored. These negative relationships could be used to show young students how their peers with disability, and even those without, feel when they are teased or treated as an outcast.

Issues books. Brenna (2009) warns against the use of issues books, books that are written specifically for the purpose of teaching about disability and that focus the majority of attention on the disability rather than other parts of the characters’ identities or the story itself, and

Kleekamp and Zapata (2018) further this warning by claiming disability-focused literature should not be used to teach about disability, but rather to provide mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors (Bishop, 1990). *Just Ask!* could be considered an issues book because all but two pages of the book discuss a character's disability or health challenge for the purpose of explaining the disability or health challenge (Sotomayor, 2019). Despite this, it would still be appropriate for use in a classroom as long as the teacher presented it as a book about how each person is unique and brings their own strengths to the community rather than as a book meant to teach the students about disabilities.

Connections to Theoretical Framework

My findings strongly connect to my theoretical framework for this study, Critical Disability Theory (CDT). CDT asserts that ableism is so normal it is invisible, so its purpose is to challenge ableism, challenge its invisibility, and demand that differences in physical and mental ability be recognized rather than ignored (McGowan, 2014). Each book analyzed in this study demands that differences in physical and mental ability are recognized rather than ignored simply because each book focuses on a protagonist or multiple protagonists with a disability.

Each of the three biographical books, *Silent Star* (Wise, 2012), *The Girl Who Thought in Pictures* (Mosca, 2017), and *Emmanuel's Dream* (Thompson, 2015), challenges ableism and challenges its invisibility. Each of these three books challenges ableism by showing the character with disability rising to success and using his or her disability either as a strength or as a platform for spreading positive messages about disability. Each of these three books challenges the invisibility of ableism by showing how people in the protagonists' lives, including their peers, classmates, doctors, employers, teammates, and sometimes even their own family, treat them

with prejudice, take advantage of them, and have low expectations of them, rather than ignoring the fact that individuals with disabilities are sometimes treated this way.

Just Ask! (Sotomayor, 2019) challenges ableism a bit differently than the three biographical books. Because this book focuses specifically on how individuals with disabilities and other health challenges are unique, bring unique strengths to the community, face unique challenges, and overcome these challenges in unique ways, the book challenges ableism simply by showing that even though a person with disability faces more challenges than a person without a disability would face, they can still overcome challenges by their own strengths and bring their strengths to the community to help others. This book does not challenge the invisibility of ableism; nowhere in the book is any character with a disability treated as an outsider, nor do any characters with disabilities convey feelings about being treated with prejudice or being discriminated against.

Recommendations

I would recommend each book analyzed in this study for classroom use. Although not every book meets all the criteria outlined by the scholars whose work was discussed in the literature review and used to guide the content analysis, each book meets the majority of this criteria and would be useful in creating mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors (Bishop, 1990) specific to disability.

***Silent Star* by Bill Wise.** I would recommend this book for classroom use because it does not hide the fact that people with deafness face communication barriers and are sometimes taken advantage of, but it also shows how people with deafness can overcome these challenges and do so of their own accord rather than having to rely on others to overcome their challenges for them. Because this book is also about a world-class famous athlete, it could inspire children who are or

who want to be athletes to support their teammates regardless of ability and show children with disabilities who want to be athletes their dream is possible.

***The Girl Who Thought in Pictures* by Julia Finley Mosca.** I would recommend this book for classroom use because in addition to discussing the challenges and discrimination a person with autism can face, it addresses the challenges Temple faced being a woman working in an industry dominated by men, so it could be used to address both ableism and sexism in the classroom. It can also inspire children with disabilities who have an interest in science to pursue their dreams and show them that earning the necessary degrees and getting the necessary field experience to become a world-famous scientist is possible.

***Emmanuel's Dream* by Laurie Ann Thompson.** I would recommend this book for classroom use because, similar to *Silent Star*, it can inspire children with disabilities who are interested in athletics to pursue their interests. Because Emmanuel's friends support him by helping him learn to ride a bike and then following him in a cab while he bicycled all the way around Ghana, it can be used to inspire children without disabilities to be supportive of their peers with disabilities. Also, because Emmanuel uses his cycling journey as a platform to spread positive messages about disability and change the way people view disability, it can inspire students with disabilities to speak up for themselves and show their peers that disability does not mean inability.

***Just Ask!* by Sonia Sotomayor.** I would recommend this book for classroom use because, even though it could be seen as an issues book if used for the purpose of teaching about disability, if used for the purpose of promoting diversity and the idea that people with different abilities and challenges bring their own special attributes to the community, it can foster a sense of appreciation for uniqueness in the classroom.

Conclusion

“Reading is self-affirmation” (Bishop, 1990, p. 1). Mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors are important tools for creating an inclusive classroom (Bishop, 1990), but it is imperative that educators critically analyze disability-focused books before using them in their classrooms to ensure they portray disability accurately and with sensitivity. The books analyzed in this study, *Silent Star* by Bill Wise (2012), *The Girl Who Thought in Pictures* by Julia Finley Mosca (2017), *Emmanuel’s Dream* by Laurie Ann Thompson (2015), and *Just Ask!* by Sonia Sotomayor (2019), are appropriate tools for fostering inclusiveness in a classroom because they show individuals with disabilities facing realistic challenges, overcoming challenges by enacting agency, and developing positive relationships with peers, family members, teammates, and teachers. These books should not be used to *teach* about disability, but rather to provide mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors to create an inclusive environment for students with disabilities and normalize the fact that people have differences in abilities. The process used to analyze these books for appropriateness for classroom use can and should be used by educators to preview all disability-focused books before including them in classrooms.

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