
DISABILITY REPRESENTED IN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

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Abstract

Children search for representations of themselves in the literature they read. However, disabilities are not always portrayed accurately or positively in children's literature. Disabilities should be included in children's literature because children will be exposed to disabilities in their lifetime, whether personally, at home, or at school. Moreover, it is imperative that children read works where disabilities are positively portrayed. Therefore, this paper describes five children's books and explains how they positively portray disabilities and some of the authors' personal experiences with disabilities. These books include *Moses Goes to a Concert* by Isaac Millman, *Why Does Izzy Cover Her Ears? Dealing with Sensory Overload* by Jennifer Veenendall, *The Seeing Stick* by Jane Yolen, *Red: A Crayon's Story* by Michael Hill, and *We'll Paint the Octopus Red* by Stephanie Stuve-Bodeen. These books bring advocacy and awareness to disabilities in a positive, child-friendly way. They do not portray disabilities as something that needs to be fixed, but rather bring appreciation to the lives the characters live.

Keywords

disability, awareness, advocacy, children's literature, representation, lifestyle

Introduction

Children love being read stories, sometimes the same stories over and over again. Whether it is obvious or not, children also look for representation of themselves in those stories and enjoy the stories even more when they can relate to the characters (Leary, 2016). However, the way children and adults with disabilities are represented in literature is misleading, if they are even represented at all. Liz Crow, an activist specializing in disability in literature, says, "Over a lifetime, you can expect at least one in ten of the children in a school year to be disabled, so that's roughly three per class. And a much larger number of the remaining children will have close involvement with a disabled person through family, friends, partners, their own children, colleagues, and so on. Clearly, it makes no sense at all to continue misinforming children about disability" (Crow, 1990).

Too often, disabilities are portrayed as something about the person that should be fixed or that the person should be angry about (Golos & Moses, 2013). Disabilities are also commonly portrayed as being solely inspirational. Alayna Leary, who identifies as a disabled writer, expresses her frustration with the publishing industry: "Even when what the disabled person is doing is normal for non-disabled people—learning to drive, going to Prom, running a company, publishing a book—it's celebrated as inspirational because a disabled person did it" (Leary, 2016). How does it affect children with disabilities when they see themselves portrayed in this way? Rather than portraying people with disabilities as solely inspirational to abled readers or as something to be fixed, authors should use disabilities in books as a way to bring advocacy, awareness, and appreciation to

the disability being portrayed (Crow, 1990). The following children's books do just that in fun, exciting, and colorful ways.

Moses Goes to a Concert – Isaac Millman

Moses and his classmates are excited to go on a field trip to a concert in town. Moses' teacher Mr. Samuels has two big surprises waiting for them when they reach the concert. First, he brings balloons for all his students so they can enjoy the concert! Because Moses, his classmates, and Mr. Samuels are deaf, the balloons help them to feel the music through vibrations. When the concert begins, the students notice two things about the percussionist. Her instruments are in front of the orchestra not behind as a percussionist normally would be. Plus, she is not wearing shoes! The reason is she is also deaf and feels the music through the vibrations in the floor, helping her to know when to play her instruments. The students' second surprise is getting to play all the percussionist's instruments after the concert. She tells them that they can become anything they want to be when they grow up! Moses realizes he can become a doctor, an actor, a lawyer, or a teacher. Moses decides he wants to become a percussionist.

Moses Goes to a Concert accurately portrays Moses, his classmates, and his teacher as members of the d/Deaf community. A hearing person may think it would be pointless for a deaf person to attend a concert, but *Moses Goes to a Concert* details how a deaf person can enjoy a concert. *Moses Goes to a Concert* gives specific examples of the tools Moses and his classmates use to enjoy music, such as using balloons to feel the vibrations of the orchestra and Moses going barefoot at home to feel his drum. These tools are used by real life members of the d/Deaf community and would be relatable to deaf children reading *Moses Goes to a Concert*. This book encourages the use of sign language throughout and includes accurate, colorful illustrations of how to sign the text. The book also exemplifies more subtle attributes of d/Deaf culture, such as the students waving to show their applause. The most admirable trait of *Moses Goes to a Concert* is the depiction of Moses and his friends as happy children who have typical lifestyles. The book does not focus on their disability as a problem to be fixed, as Mr. Samuels teaches them ways to thrive and enjoy activities in unique ways.

Why Does Izzy Cover Her Ears? Dealing with Sensory Overload – Jennifer Veenendall

First grade has proven to be much different for Izzy than her kindergarten teacher said it would be. It is too loud, too bright, and too colorful. When her friend talks too loudly, it hurts her ears and sometimes she cries. When a friend brushes up against her, it pops her "space bubble" and she accidentally physically lashes out. The lights are too bright and hurt her eyes, and her teacher's colorful decorations make it too hard to focus on her schoolwork. She does not know what to do, but luckily her occupational therapist and her parents know exactly what to do. Now, Izzy has her own ear plugs to help when sounds get too loud. Her teacher takes down the colorful, distracting decorations, and puts away the unorganized school supplies into storage bins. Turning off the bright fluorescent lights and using the daylight instead helps all of Izzy's classmates focus better, too. Sometimes, if none of those interventions work, she gets to go into the sensory room where she can make herself into an "Izzy taco," play steamroller with her occupational therapist, or use other coping mechanisms to help herself calm down. With these helpful interventions, Izzy decides that first grade is not so bad after all.

Why Does Izzy Cover Her Ears? details how confusing school can feel for a child who has a sensory processing disorder. First, it focuses on the obstacles Izzy faces that other children do not face, such as sensory overload from bright lights and loud noises. The book describes the ways these obstacles affect Izzy, and how she reacts to them. It also explains the situation from Izzy's point of view, not her teacher's or a friend's. Additionally, *Why Does Izzy Cover Her Ears?* focuses on the interventions she is able to use and the coping skills she learns to help herself when she feels

overwhelmed. It expresses the relief Izzy feels when she learns she is not a “mean kid,” but that her body reacts to things in different ways than other children. This book could be a helpful tool for teachers, parents, and other students to understand a sensory processing disorder, helping the adults working with children like Izzy recognize a sensory processing disorder and take steps to support those children. This book could also help a teacher or parents realize that frequent misbehaviors often have an underlying cause. Classmates of a child like Izzy could better understand his or her reactions and the appropriate interventions after reading this book. A child with a sensory processing disorder may find the book helpful with explaining how or what he or she is feeling in certain situations along with providing a character with whom he or she can relate. Through the work, children also see that it is okay to work with a therapist and use coping mechanisms to help them succeed in school. Most important, through a girl main character, the work brings attention to sensory processing disorders and autism that are often overlooked or dismissed as emotions or hormones in young girls (Ratto et al., 2018).

Jennifer Veenendall is an occupational therapist with a master’s degree in human development who works with students like Izzy. She works with students of all learning abilities but has a specific passion for students with sensory processing disorders. *Why Does Izzy Cover Her Ears? Dealing with Sensory Overload* won the Foreword Book of the Year award in 2009 and was an International Book Award finalist in 2010 (AAPC Publishing, 2020).

***The Seeing Stick* – Jane Yolen**

Long ago in Peking, China, lived an emperor with only one daughter, Hwei Min. Hwei Min has everything she could wish for, but she is sad. Hwei Min cannot see, for she was born blind. Her father decides that he will do anything he can to help Hwei Min see. He offers a hefty reward to anyone who can complete this task. Many physicians and magicians try to help Hwei Min, but none of them succeed. Hwei Min starts to lose hope when an old man comes to the palace. He wants to show Hwei Min his “seeing stick,” in which he has carved many beautiful pictures. As the old man describes the stick to Hwei Min, she becomes excited and exclaims she wished to see the beautiful carvings on the stick. The old man explains that she can see using the stick, but her father dismisses the old man with uncertainty. However, the old man takes Hwei Min’s hand and shows her how to trace the carvings with her fingers. She becomes excited, and starts tracing the guards’ faces, the old man’s face, and her father’s face. She realizes she can imagine the carvings as she traces them with her fingers. She does not need her eyes to see, but her fingers and her imagination. She teaches other blind children that it is possible to “see” without truly seeing. She is forever grateful to the blind, old man who helped her see.

The Seeing Stick begins with Hwei Min feeling sad that she cannot see and shows her father trying to help fix her disability. However, as the book progresses it describes Hwei Min’s emotional transformation as she becomes comfortable “seeing” with her fingertips. *The Seeing Stick* sends the message that Hwei Min did not need to be “fixed.” However, she just needed the correct help and tools to allow her to embrace her disability. She even helps other blind children learn to use their fingers to see with the information the old, blind man shared with her. The beautiful illustrations begin in black, white, and grey until the appearance of the unnamed old man and his seeing stick. As the old man tells stories and Hwei Min learns to see with her fingertips, the illustrations gradually gain color. Jane Yolen’s *The Seeing Stick* was ardently accepted by the literary community. It won the Christopher Medal, was on the New York Public Library’s list of 100 Best Books of the Year in 1977, and was the International Reading Association’s Classroom Choice Book in 1978. It was first published in 1977 but was re-released in 2009 (Yolen, 2019).

***Red: A Crayon's Story* – Michael Hall**

Red tries very hard to fulfill the title on his label which is, well, red. His teachers ask him to draw a strawberry or join a group to draw a stoplight. They pair him with yellow to draw an orange. But no matter how hard Red tries, he always draws blue fruit and a blue light, and joins yellow to make a green orange. No matter how hard Red tries, he only colors blue. His teachers try to help him by sharpening him, loosening his label, and making him practice more. His family is disappointed that he cannot color red, but they try not to show it. Some teachers decide Red is just lazy, think he is not very bright, or say he will catch on eventually. One day, Berry approaches Red and asks if he will make a big, blue ocean for her boat. He realizes how easy it was, and he starts drawing all things blue! His teachers and his family realize he is great at drawing blue, and Red excels in school from then on.

Red: A Crayon's Story may seem like an odd choice for a book about a disability, as this book identifies the general concept of self-acceptance and does not seem to focus on a specific disability. However, while observing in a first-grade classroom, a fellow educator had a specific experience with *Red* being used to help the classmates of a child with a disability understand why that child might act or do things differently than they do. The teacher in this classroom read the book to the students while the student was in his SPED classes. She used the story of Red to explain to her young students that everyone has their strengths and talents despite the labels that may have been placed on them. The students took turns naming the strengths of their classmate, and my fellow educator describes this experience as “one of the most formative experiences to date I have had while in a classroom.” This book is especially important for teachers, as it details the impact that a teacher’s words can have on a student. Red just wanted to color red so he could make his teachers and family happy but became more discouraged by the labels his teachers and family placed on him like lazy, not bright, and broken. This book reminds us that affirmations should outweigh criticisms in the classroom, and that criticisms should be constructive.

Michael Hall began writing *Red: A Crayon's Story* by thinking of what puns could be related to a crayon whose label differed from his true color. The puns he came up with sounded familiar: “He’s not sharp enough; He’s not bright enough; He needs to press harder.” Hall realized he had heard many of these things about himself when he was a child. Michael Hall is dyslexic, and he wrote *Red: A Crayon's Story* as a reflection of his own story. Adults who meant well often made things worse for Hall out of their determination to help him excel in school in the wrong ways. Hall says, “I believe that most of the damage we do to each other is the result of ignorance rather than cruelty.” He also hopes “readers of all ages enjoy the antics of Red’s well-meaning friends and family, who simply cannot see beyond his official label. I hope the book will provoke classroom discussions about issues like judging people based on outside appearances...and I hope Red will inspire reflection about the subtle ways children become mislabeled, judging children based on their successes rather than their failures, and the unmitigated joy of finding one’s place in the world” (2015).

***We'll Paint the Octopus Red* – Stephanie Stuve-Bodeen**

Emma’s parents have exciting news. She is going to be a big sister! Emma is not sure what to think about the idea, but she and her father start brainstorming about all the fun things she can do with the baby once it is born. With her new sibling, Emma wants to feed her grandpa’s cows, paint an octopus, fly on a plane to see Aunt Wendy, and go on an African safari! Once they are done brainstorming, she is overjoyed to have a baby brother or sister. One morning, her father wakes her up to tell her the news! She has a new baby brother. However, her brother, Isaac, is born with Down syndrome. Emma is worried that Isaac would not be able to do all the fun things she had been dreaming about. As she talks with her parents, Emma realizes that Isaac will be able to do anything

Emma has dreamed about, just with some extra help and a lot of love. When she finally meets Isaac, she tells him about all the things she plans to do with him. She tells him that she will patiently help him learn to paint the octopus, and they will paint the octopus red.

We'll Paint the Octopus Red addresses several different emotions children can feel when they find out they are going to be a big brother or sister. First, *We'll Paint the Octopus Red* focuses on the mix of emotions Emma feels when she finds out she is going to have a baby sibling. She feels jealous at first because she does not want to share her parents with the new baby. Then she feels excited because of all the fun things she will get to do as the baby gets older! Next, the book focuses on the uncertainty Emma feels when her father tells her the baby has Down syndrome. She is worried that Isaac will be unable to do all the things she planned for them to do. Next, she feels relief when she finds out Isaac will be able to do all those things, but he might need some extra time or help. Finally, Emma feels love for her little brother when she finally gets to meet him. The message of this book is important, as it displays children with Down syndrome the same as other children. Through the book we understand that they might need extra help, but they are able to live life to the fullest, just as children without Down syndrome can.

Conclusion

These books describe accurately portrayed, specific disabilities while showing them from different perspectives. Most importantly, *Moses Goes to a Concert* and *Why Does Izzy Cover Her Ears?* are both told from the perspective of the children with the disabilities. *Red*, *The Seeing Stick*, and *We'll Paint the Octopus Red* are told from an outsider's perspective, but the perspective is not one of pity but of newfound understanding. These books describe the children with disabilities as real-life children who lead normal lifestyles and feel a variety of emotions about their situations, both of which can be relatable to the children reading these books. Children with disabilities must also see themselves represented in the books they read, just as it is important for children without disabilities to be exposed to those books and gain empathy and understanding (Leary, 2016). As these books illustrate, disabilities literature should inspire advocacy, awareness, and appreciation for the rich lifestyles the disabled characters live.

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