

Disability Representation in Children's Books

Submitted by

Elizabeth Foster

Graphic Design

To

The Honors College

Oakland University

In partial fulfillment of the
requirement to graduate from

The Honors College

Mentor: Maria Smith Bohannon, Professor of Graphic Design

Department of Art & Art History: Graphic Design

Oakland University

(December 02, 2022)

Abstract

This project has explored storytelling through the works of a creative visual project. It is used and developed in order to answer the question of how one could write and create a children's book that accurately focuses on the topic of children with disabilities. This creative project explored several different areas that included visual elements such as world-building, character design, all with the support of storytelling. An important factor that was considered through the process of this project was avoiding harmful stereotypes that can be found in books on this topic. The hope for this project now that it is completed is that children will be able to see themselves accurately represented in a book designed specifically for them. The focus of the story in this project was creating an accurate tale of a child with disabilities that does not fall into harmful tropes and to properly educate other children while entertaining them. The most important goal was to have created a piece of literature that is both visually appealing as well as sensitive to the topics at hand in support of the intended audience.

Introduction/Background

The most recurring factor regarding research on children's literature and how disability representation plays a role is fairly consistent. The main focus is found to be on the educator's side. The research compiled at this point in time is in reference to give guidelines and guidance for teachers and professionals when it comes time to pick out accurate literature. It also references how to avoid works that, although have pieces of representation, display harmful stereotypes and aspects. Another factor that comes up is ~~just~~ how impressionable children are, especially very young ones. If the only form of stories about children with disabilities they are exposed to are negative or are filled with harmful stereotypes, it can have a negative factor on

their behavior in the real world (Pennell et al. 2017; Tondreau and Rabinowitz 2021).¹ Research also states that a great majority of books featuring any form of representation in the case of disabilities are simply featuring people who are “just different” (Rodriguez et al. 2018).² Although this message is great for children, it’s not giving them the most accurate form of education because they are not clear on how disabilities are much more than ‘being different,’. Not only is it important to share literature and media that can be used for educational purposes, but it is also important to highlight instances where a character’s disability is their sole purpose and only identity. Researchers find sharing literature that includes characters that are dealing with a disability is just as important as sharing literature with characters that are simply just living with a disability. By showing young children these examples of literature it offers a more humanizing look at what children experience in their day-to-day lives (Kleekamp and Zapata 2018).³

The current gap across the board is that the majority of the existing research focuses on already existing work. There seems to be a major focus on how to use existing works to educate children versus how to write a story in an accurate manner. Not only is this a consistent factor, but all of the research done is also catered to educators and educating them on how to pick work. The current research also recognizes that most literature featuring disabilities are rarely in relation to the main character. Disabled characters are often the side or background character, treating them as an afterthought and not giving them the spotlight they deserve. Through the use of this project and the research being compiled, it will be further explored and further evolve

¹ Ashley E. Pennell et al. “Respectful Representations of Disability in Picture Books” *The Reading Teacher* Volume 71, Issue 4 (August 2017) 411-419, doi: [10.1002/trtr.1632](https://doi.org/10.1002/trtr.1632)

Amy Tondreau “Analyzing Representations of Individuals with Disabilities in Picture Books” *The Reading Teacher*” Volume 75, Issue 1 (April 2021) 61-71, doi: [10.1002/trtr.2017](https://doi.org/10.1002/trtr.2017)

² Maria Samsel “The Impact of media representation of disabilities on teachers’ perceptions” *Support for learning* Volume 28, Issue 4 (December 2013) 138-145, doi: [10.1111/1467-9604.12036](https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9604.12036)

³ Monica C.Kleekamp “interrogating Depictions of Disability in Children’s Picturebooks” *The Reading Teacher* Volume 72, Issue 5 (September 2018) 589-59, doi: [10.1002/trtr.1766](https://doi.org/10.1002/trtr.1766)

into how a children's book about disabilities can most accurately be betrayed in the most authentic manner.

It is important to explore this topic because children deserve to see themselves represented in a way that is not only positive and accurate, but doing so without further amplifying hurtful stereotypes. My project's focus is the idea of how it can be possible to create a piece of children's literature without falling into harmful tropes at the same time as accurately portraying children with disabilities. A common problem that is constantly being found in the world of children's literature is mainly that existing works within this topic, fall into harmful stereotypes. Due to the existing problems, there is more emphasis on straying from harmful literature rather than exploring how to create new, more accurate work.

Children are often easily impressionable and when educating them on sensitive topics it is better to be done on a level accessible to them. This is where creating new picture books comes into introduction here. Through the use of the principles of graphic design, storytelling can be used in combination with illustrative designs specifically catered to young audiences. Picture books are an important part of children's development and although within the world of design words are not the focal point, with the support of illustrations they both can come together to tell a story.

Process

First, in order to investigate how to tell a story at the level of young children it's important to understand your audience. I must create a story at their level of understanding while also still being educational at the same time. Picture books are a pivotal part of learning skills for

young children, this is why this creative project will focus and rely heavily on the illustrations and the text will be a secondary factor since the images can create a narrative as well.

Next, in order to diverge from the harmful depictions of disabilities in already existing literature, I will need to do a visual audit of the current collections of books with disabled characters. It is documented that in most instances of disability in children's books as well as picture books, the disabled character is often an older, elderly person. It is important to educate children and make them aware that people of any age can have a disability and not just somebody who is older. By going forward with this project it is important to have a character with a disability as the main character as well as have them be of a younger age. This is important because it makes the character feel more relatable and informs younger audiences that people with disabilities can be of any age.

By the end of the research phase of this project, it comes time to introduce my skills as a graphic designer. With the end goal being to produce an illustrative children's book, I will be using a variety of techniques and programs. Black and white sketches are the starting point in addition to creating storyboards to plan each page. This works by combining storylines and visual elements to create a cohesive story. I will be creating illustrations in the program Procreate as well as editing page layouts in Adobe Photoshop as well as Adobe InDesign. Using the program Procreate, I will experiment with different illustration styles and techniques before settling on the direction I want to take my project in. Color, space, and value are all important graphic design elements that will be implemented throughout the entire design portion. After my illustrations are completed, I will add the text and make sure they fit and don't take away from the existing illustrations. The final step in this entire process will be packaging the file and sending it out using Blurb's services to be printed in a hard-bound book.

Artist Statement

This project was a personal passion project of mine. As somebody who has a disability I know how much it means to have accurate and positive representation in the media. My goal was to create an illustrated children's book featuring a main character with a disability and that is exactly what I was able to create. I feel I was able to fully utilize my skills as a graphic designer and illustrator to create fully fleshed out illustrations that convey my desired message. My hope is going forward that I will be able to officially publish this book and contribute to the already existing literature featuring children with disabilities.

Much Appreciation to

This project would not be possible without the close work of my faculty mentor Professor Maria Smith Bohannon who I spent the semester working with one on one. I also want to thank Professor Courtney Jentzen who assisted me with feedback with my illustrations.

References

Hidalgo Rodríguez, M^a Carmen, Sara Blancas Alvarez, Diego Navarro Mateu, and C. Alonso Valdivieso. "Picture Book as a Tool for Encouraging Inclusive Values among Children: Picture Book Typologies and Teaching Activities Using These Publications." *The International Journal of Visual Design* 12, no. 2 (June 14, 2018): 17–34.
<https://doi.org/10.18848/2325-1581/cgp/v12i02/17-34>

Kleekamp, Monica C., and Angie Zapata. "Interrogating Depictions of Disability in Children's Picturebooks." *The Reading Teacher* 72, no. 5 (September 28, 2018): 589–97.

<https://doi.org/10.1002/trtr.1766>

Matthew, Nicole, and Susan Clow. "Putting Disabled Children in the Picture: Promoting Inclusive Children's Books and Media." *International Journal of Early Childhood* 39, no.

2 (September 2007): 65–78. <https://doi.org/10.1007/bf03178225>

Pennell, Ashley E., Barbara Wollak, and David A. Koppenhaver. "Respectful Representations of Disability in Picture Books." *The Reading Teacher* 71, no. 4 (2017): 411–19.

<https://doi.org/10.1002/trtr.1632>

Sableski, Mary-Kate, and Jackie Marshall Arnold. "Seeking Diversity in Children's Literature Utilized in Elementary Classrooms." In *Handbook of Research on Teaching Diverse Youth Literature to Pre-Service Professionals*. edited by Hartsfield, Danielle E., 87–102.

Hershey, PA: IGI Global, 2021. <https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-7998-7375-4.ch005>

Samsel, Maria, and Prithvi Perepa. "The Impact of Media Representation of Disabilities on Teachers' Perceptions." *Support for Learning* 28, no. 4 (December 6, 2013): 138–45.

<https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9604.12036>

Tondreau, Amy, and Laurie Rabinowitz. "Analyzing Representations of Individuals with Disabilities in Picture Books." *The Reading Teacher* 75, no. 1 (April 27, 2021): 61–71.

<https://doi.org/10.1002/trtr.2017>

Pages Of Project



