

# USING DIVERSE CHILDREN’S LITERATURE TO RAISE DISABILITY AWARENESS IN URBAN ELEMENTARY CLASSROOMS

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## Abstract

*The student population in urban elementary classrooms has become increasingly diverse over the past two decades. While teachers have responded to this diversity, in part, by incorporating diverse texts related to race, culture, and language, few teachers have incorporated texts related to people with disabilities. Consequently, children have few opportunities to learn about people with disabilities in the world. Unfortunately, this often leads to biases, discrimination, alienation, and other negative outcomes. In this article, I argue that urban elementary teachers should incorporate diverse children’s literature with main characters with disabilities as a means of raising disability awareness. Next, using a critical literacy framework, I provide an example of teaching about disabilities during a 4-day instructional unit. Finally, I conclude with recommendations for selecting books with characters with disabilities.*

Keywords: Diverse texts, disabilities, urban schools

## Introduction

The student demographics in urban classrooms in the United States continue to become increasingly diverse regarding race, culture, language, socioeconomic status, and ability (NCES, 2019). Scholars (e.g., Gay, 2023; Hammond, 2015; Ladson-Billings, 2021) have argued for teachers to incorporate diverse perspectives into the curriculum as a means of creating responsive, affirming, and inclusive learning environments for all students. Although significant progress has been made regarding diversifying the curriculum along the lines of cultural, racial, linguistic, and socioeconomic status, less progress has been made regarding incorporating diverse perspectives related to people living with disabilities into the curriculum that is taught in many urban elementary classrooms (Andrews, 2020). According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (2020), approximately 27% of U.S. adults have a disability. At the same time, roughly 16% of children in the U.S. have developmental disabilities. Although adults and children with disabilities make up a significant portion of the population in the United States, many urban elementary teachers are not incorporating children's literature with main characters who are classified as being disabled (Hansen et al., 2023). This lack of knowledge about people with disabilities often leads to negative outcomes for children with disabilities and children without disabilities alike (Bishop, 2012; Crisp, et al., 2016; Hughes, 2012; Koss, 2015). Given this lack of disability representation in the literature that is used and made available in many urban elementary classrooms today, the purposes of this article are threefold. First, I argue that urban elementary teachers should use diverse children's literature (that center the experiences of people with disabilities) to promote disability awareness and advocacy. I begin by briefly

discussing three reasons why it is important for urban elementary teachers to combat this issue in a forthright and explicit manner. Next, using a Critical Literacy framework (Freebody & Luke, 1990; Freire, 1970; Freire, & Slover, 1983; Janks, 2013), I discuss examples of how an urban elementary teacher might teach about disability in their classroom during a 4-day instructional unit on the topic of autism. Lastly, I discuss some considerations teachers should keep in mind when selecting diverse texts to facilitate these critical discussions.

### **Defining Disability, Disability Awareness, and Diverse Children's Literature**

It is important to note that people living with disabilities are not monolithic in nature (Andrews, 2020). A disability can be both visible and invisible in nature. That is, a disability can be a physical, mental, and or neurological condition that limits a person's activities, movements, thinking, or sense (Andrews, 2020). For the purposes of this article, when I use the term disability, I draw from the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (IDEA; P.L. 108-446,) typology of 13 categories of disability. These categories include: Autism, Deaf-Blindness, Deafness, Emotional Disturbance, Hearing Impairment, Intellectual Disability, Multiple Disabilities, Orthopedic Impairment, Specific Learning Disability, Speech Language Impairment, Traumatic Brain Injury, Visual Impairment, and other health impairments (e.g., asthma, attention deficit disorder or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, diabetes, epilepsy, a heart condition, hemophilia, lead poisoning, leukemia, nephritis, rheumatic fever, sickle cell anemia, and Tourette syndrome) (IDEA, 2004).

In short, disability awareness as used in this article is defined as the process and practice of acknowledging, understanding, accepting, and appreciating a person's experiences related to living with a particular category of disability (Kemp, 2023). Developing disability awareness is important because it helps people develop an understanding of how disabilities affect people's lives. Moreover, developing disability awareness can help dismantle stereotypes and empower individuals with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions need to combat injustices toward people with disabilities (Kemp, 2023; Lindsay & Edwards, 2013). In a systematic literature review of 1031 articles, Lindsay and Edwards (2013) identify five types of disability awareness efforts, initiatives, interventions, and or programs commonly found in schools. These are referred to as: (1) social contact, (2) simulation, (3) curriculum, (4) multimedia curriculum and (5) multiple components. For the purposes of this article, I draw from their notion of promoting disability awareness through a specific form of curriculum integration and or transformation.

For clarification purposes, when I use the term diverse children's literature in this article I draw from Galda, Sipe, Liang and Cullina's (2013) definition of multicultural literature. These scholars define multicultural literature as literature that includes and highlights the narratives, experiences, voices, frames of reference, and vantage points of historically underrepresented groups in society. Similarly, Bishop (1990) points out that multicultural children's literature is written with the express intent of providing "mirrors, windows, and sliding doors" for children. Concerning the notion of mirrors, Bishop points out that multicultural children's literature can and should be used to affirm the diverse identities, perspectives, language patterns, and experiences that diverse student populations bring to the classroom. Next, regarding the concept of windows, multicultural children's literature can and should be used with children from non-

minoritized backgrounds to provide insight into the lived experiences of people who do not share the same cultural identities, language systems, and frames of reference. Finally, regarding the concept of sliding doors, Bishop further points out that multicultural children's literature can and should be used with children across different cultural backgrounds to provide readers with access into social and cultural experiences and worlds they normally would not have access to experiencing or visiting. Furthermore, the focus on diverse children's literature in this article involves children's and young adult literature that center the experiences of people with disabilities.

It is important to note that it is not enough for urban elementary teachers to merely incorporate diverse children's literature in the classrooms that contain characters with disabilities. Instead, Prince and Hayden (2023) point out that it is vitally important for these diverse texts to have and portray protagonists with disabilities in positive and affirming manners for these texts to make a transformative impact in the lives of children. The protagonist is the main character in fictional works or the most prominent figure in a true-life text (McCabe et al., 2011). Accordingly, Table 1 provides examples of diverse picture books, with protagonists with disabilities, that might be used to raise disability awareness and advocacy in urban elementary classrooms.

**Table 1:**  
*Examples of Diverse Children's Literature with Main Characters with Disabilities*

| Year | Title of the Book  | Author               | Disability Emphasis                   |
|------|--|----------------------|---------------------------------------|
| 2021 | A Bird Will Soar   | Alison Green Myers   | Autism                                |
| 2019 | Charlie and Frog: The Boney Hand                               | Karen Kane           | Deaf                                  |
| 2019 | Helen Keller: The World at Her Fingertips                      | Sarah Albee          | Blindness                             |
| 2012 | A Dog Called Homeless  | Sarah Lean           | Emotional/Behavior Disorder           |
| 2016 | Baxter Turns Down His Buzz: A Story for Little Kids About ADHD | James M. Foley       | Neurodiversity (ADHD)                 |
| 2019 | A Slip of a Girl   | Patricia Reilly Giff | Intellectual/Developmental Disability |
| 2021 | A Walk in the Words  | Hudson Talbott       | Learning Disability                   |
| 2020 | Fast Friends   | Heather M. O'Connor  | Multiple Disabilities                 |

|      |                      |                        |                              |
|------|----------------------|------------------------|------------------------------|
| 2016 | A Whole New Ballgame | Phil Bildner           | Physical Impairment          |
| 2012 | Out of My Mind       | Sharon Draper          | Speech/Impairment Disability |
| 2013 | Brain Ride           | Angela Welch<br>Prusia | Traumatic Brain Injury       |
| 2016 | As Brave As You      | Jayson Reynolds        | Visual Impairments           |

### **Discussing Disabilities with Urban Elementary Students**

Researchers (e.g., Kerbel, 2023; Kingsbury, 2022; Tondreau & Rabinowitz, 2021) identify several important reasons why teachers should use diverse children's literature to discuss disabilities with elementary students. First, using diverse children's literature can provide spaces where children with disabilities can see themselves represented, reflected, and affirmed in the classroom (Kingsbury, 2022). Inasmuch as children from diverse racial, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds need to see themselves portrayed in the books they are reading, children with disabilities need to read and interact with diverse books with main characters with disabilities on a regular basis as well (Tondreau & Rabinowitz, 2021). Ultimately, this ongoing exposure and interaction with books that center the experiences of people with disabilities is likely to increase the overall levels of self-esteem, self-worth, and self-confidence among students who are living with disabilities (Kingsbury, 2022). For example, a first-grade teacher who reads and discusses *Next Door* (Kerbel, 2023) and other books that foreground the experiences of people with hearing disabilities consistently is likely to create spaces in the classroom where deaf children feel celebrated, affirmed, and included.

In addition to providing spaces in the classroom where children with disabilities feel affirmed and included, using diverse children's literature (with main characters who have disabilities) can work to disrupt and dismantle implicit biases toward people with disabilities (Hayden, & Prince, 2020; Kingsbury, 2022). Unfortunately, it is not uncommon for children to often hold implicit biases toward people with disabilities (Kingsbury, 2022). Frequently, this bias is due to a lack of consistent exposure and interaction with people who are living with disabilities among children (Artman-Meeker, et al., 2016; Hayden, & Prince, 2020; Triandis et al., 1984). At other times, this bias is often a result of being exposed to stereotypical images and information about people with disabilities from various socializing agents in a child's life such as: television, images, peer interactions, and family interactions (Tondreau & Rabinowitz, 2021). Insofar as the media and these other socializing agents have the potential to engender and cultivate negative biases toward people with disabilities in children, Banks and Banks (2020) argue that these same socializing agents have the potential to disrupt and dismantle stereotypical biases and negative information children may be holding toward/about people with disabilities. Therefore, incorporating diverse children's literature (with main characters with disabilities) can provide opportunities for urban elementary teachers to disrupt and destroy any misconceptions,

misunderstandings, and biases children may be holding toward/about people living with disabilities (Ostrosky, et al., 2015; Pennell et al., 2018; Tondreau & Rabinowitz, 2021).

Using diverse children's literature (with main characters with disabilities) can work to promote healthy relationships and interactions between children who are living with disabilities and children who are not living with disabilities (Adomat, 2014; Artman-Meeker et al., 2016; Parsons, 2013). For example, Adomat (2014) found that the interactions and attitudes of children without disabilities changed in a positive manner after participating in ongoing language arts activities with content related to a wide range of disabilities such as autism, physical disabilities, learning disabilities, and developmental disabilities. In short, this study involved 52 second and third graders who participated in a series of interactive read alouds, literature discussion activities, literature center activities, drama activities, and writing activities that centered the topic of disabilities. Not only did the researcher observe notable changes in attitudes among the children without disabilities toward the children with disabilities, many of the children without disabilities became motivated to take social action toward making the world a more equitable, humane, and just place for people living with disabilities. Furthermore, what this study suggests is that using diverse children's literature has the potential to produce positive outcomes for both children living with disabilities and children who are not living with disabilities.

### **Using a Critical Literacy Approach**

For the purposes of this article, I draw from and apply Freebody and Luke's (1990) definition of critical literacy as an ideological and practical approach to literacy that embodies four dimensions: disrupting the commonplace, considering multiple viewpoints, focusing on the sociopolitical, and taking action to promote social justice. In short, the primary goal of critical literacy is to use literacy skills and processes to identify the ways in which various forms of power and oppression exist and work to marginalize and dehumanize specific groups of people within the policies, practices, and systems that are enacted in various facets of society (Freebody & Luke, 1990). A secondary goal of critical literacy is to then develop and implement social action to resist and combat these oppressive and dehumanizing policies, practices, and systems in schools and within the broader society. In the sections that follow, I describe how a hypothetical fourth grade teacher named Ms. Jackson might use diverse children's literature and apply these four dimensions of critical literacy while teaching a 4-day instructional unit on autism. Table 2 provides an overview and summary of the critical literacy activities that are included in this instructional unit. Furthermore, it is important to note here that this instructional unit can be used as a model for planning and teaching children about the experiences of people with disabilities. Wherever feasible, teachers should strive to incorporate lessons and literature related to the experiences of people with disabilities across the curriculum and beyond a singular instructional unit.

**Table 2:**  
*Instructional Unit on Autism*

| <b>Unit Topic: Autism</b>      |  |  |   |  |
|--------------------------------|--|--|---|--|
| <b>Grade Level: 4th</b>        |  |  |   |  |
|                                | <b>Day 1</b>                               | <b>Day 2</b>   | <b>Day 3</b>  | <b>Day 4</b>   |
| Dimension of Critical Literacy | Disrupting Commonplace                     | Incorporating Multiple Perspectives  | Focusing on the Sociopolitical  | Taking Social Action   |
| Text(s) involved               | We Move Together (Fritsch & McGuire, 2021) | Curated text sets related to autism  | I See Things Differently: A First Look at Autism (Thomas, 2014)<br><br>My Brother Charlie (Pete & Pete, 2010)<br><br>Looking After Louis (Ely, 2004)<br><br>A Boy Called Bat (Arnold, 2018) | A Manual for Marco (Abdullah, 2015)  |
| Pre-Reading Activities         | Complete and discuss K-W-L Chart           | Scan the book and identify, define, and discuss any important vocabulary words | Students will complete a web graphic organizer after brainstorming and discussing some of the barriers and/or challenges that   | Using a Venn Diagram graphic organizer, brainstorm, and document ways to take social action on behalf of people with autism in their |

|                           |  |   |   |   |
|---------------------------|--|---|---|---|
|                           |  |   | people with autism might experience as they engage in daily life activities   | school and local communities  |
| During Reading Activities | Facilitate critical dialogue   | Reflect on and document their learning in a Reader's Response journal | Students will look for and document connections (Text to Self, Text to Text, and Text to World) as they read independently                                      | Read the book and discuss ways people who do not have autism might support and advocate for people with autism          |
| Post-Reading Activities   | Students will generate and document critical questions using a graphic organizer | Present their findings/learning as a group presentation               | Students are encouraged to find two other people in the class who read different books during this period and to share their connections with these individuals | Students will work in pairs or small groups and select one of the advocacy activities to complete from the Venn Diagram |

As mentioned previously, the first dimension of critical literacy involves disrupting the commonplace (Freebody & Luke, 1990). This dimension of critical literacy involves engaging students in learning opportunities that disrupt common and often problematic ways of seeing, knowing, and understanding a particular issue or group of people in society (Freebody & Luke, 1990). To activate prior knowledge on the topic and help students make connections to what they will learn in these subsequent lessons, Ms. Jackson might begin by dividing her students into pairs and having them complete a K-W-L chart related to the topic of autism. The goal of this pre-reading activity is to identify what students might currently know or understand about autism and the ways in which this knowledge base is problematic. Next, Ms. Jackson might read aloud *We Move Together* (Fritsch & McGuire, 2021) and facilitate an interactive discussion to build additional knowledge related to the topic of autism. During this dialogical process, Ms. Jackson might pose critical questions to encourage her students to problematize (Freire, 2000) their traditional understanding(s) of the topic. Finally, after reading the text, Ms. Jackson might ask

students to work in pairs and use a graphic organizer to generate at least three new questions related to issues of power, oppression, and autism.

The second dimension of critical literacy involves helping students examine the topic of autism from multiple viewpoints (Freebody & Luke, 1990). In keeping with this dimension, Ms. Jackson might divide her students into four or five literature circle groups. Each group is given a different text set (Lupo et al, 2018) and asked to read, discuss, and document what they learned about the topic of autism from these texts. In short, a text set is a collection of fiction and nonfiction books, speeches, poems, videos, web resources, news articles, podcasts, and images that center on a specific topic or theme (Lupo et al, 2018). Furthermore, each group will be asked to present their learning with the rest of the class in a format they deem most appropriate.

The third dimension of critical literacy involves focusing on the sociopolitical (Freebody & Luke, 1990). In keeping with this dimension, Ms. Jackson might strive to help students make connections between the content in the books they are reading and the larger policies, practices, and systems that contribute to marginalization for people with autism. Ms. Jackson might provide students with an opportunity to choose between four different picture books on the topic of autism to read independently. Students might then be encouraged to make and document the personal connections they make as they read their specific book. Ms. Jackson might provide a graphic organizer to guide students in making text to self, text to text, and text to world connections while they are reading. After a period of 30 minutes or so, Ms. Jackson might provide an opportunity for students to share their connections with students who read different books.

The fourth dimension of critical literacy involves taking social action (Freebody & Luke, 1990). In keeping with this dimension, Ms. Jackson might read *A Manual for Marco* (Abdullah, 2015) and discuss the importance of taking social action toward making the world a more just and human place for people with autism. While reading the book, Ms. Jackson might identify and discuss ways that people without autism might support and advocate for people with autism. After reading the book, Miss Jackson might encourage students to work in pairs or small groups to complete an autism advocacy project such as: writing a letter to a media outlet concerning autism rights; designing and implementing an autism awareness campaign at school; creating a podcast episode pertaining to autism awareness; organizing and participating in a local march related to autism; raising money to donate to autism research, etc. Ultimately, the goal of this final dimension of critical literacy is for students to move beyond the classroom and use what they have learned to make the world a more equitable, just, and humanizing place for both people with and without disabilities.

## Conclusion

In short, student demographics in urban elementary classrooms are projected to continue to become even more diverse as we journey through the next two decades (NCES, 2020). This calls for urban elementary teachers to incorporate diverse and inclusive literature in their classrooms that reflect people with disabilities as a means of affirming all children and preparing students to live in a diverse and democratic society. Unfortunately, all books with main characters with disabilities are not equal in terms of themes, illustrations, and overall literary



quality (Welch, 2016). As such, urban elementary teachers should be mindful of three important considerations as they make book selections. First, teachers should prioritize using books that are written by people with disabilities over books that are not written by people with disabilities (Welch, 2016). Interestingly, many of the children's books (with main characters with disabilities) in publication are not written by authors with disabilities (Welch, 2016). Consequently, many of the nuanced experiences of people with disabilities are often missing from these texts. To provide a richer and more particularized understanding of the experiences of people with disabilities, it is important for teachers to prioritize texts that are written by authors with disabilities.

Notably, most of the main characters in books about people with disabilities are White (Paciga & Koss, 2022; Welch, 2016). Hence, urban elementary teachers should prioritize books (with main characters with disabilities) that also share the experiences of people of color. Demographic data remind us that urban classrooms are composed of large numbers of students from non-White racial backgrounds (NCES, 2020). Thus, it is necessary for teachers to incorporate books that share the experiences of people of color (with disabilities) whenever possible as a means of affirming and reflecting the multiple facets of students' identities.

Lastly, a significant number of children's books with disability characters communicate deficit-oriented narratives and messages that people with disabilities are broken and need to be helped or fixed by people without disabilities (Baglieri & Lalvani, 2020). As a result, readers often develop the perception that people with disabilities should be pitied by others in the world. To avoid communicating such messages, teachers should scrutinize the books they decide to incorporate prior to using them. Teachers should look for and prioritize diverse texts that share non-deficit counternarratives about people with disabilities to avoid communicating and exacerbating these stereotypical and ableist notions to children (Curwood, 2013; Kleepkamp & Zapata, 2019). Ultimately, using children's books with deficit, demeaning, and degrading messages and content will work to further marginalize and dehumanize people with disabilities in schools and society.

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