

Chapter 7

Reading (Dis)ability in Young Adult Literature: Preparing Teacher Candidates for Understanding and Selecting Texts

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, a team of university educators describes how they explored and applied the lens of disability studies to young adult literature with pre-service teachers. The authors first provide a detailed overview of disabilities studies as a theoretical tool and then describe how they worked with teacher candidates to develop their understanding of criteria for evaluating nuanced representations of disabilities and determining their authenticity. Activities, discussion questions, and practical considerations are provided. They end with implications for teaching, including the benefits of such work for shaping how future teachers construct their notions of youth as well as how they select curriculum for their classrooms.

INTRODUCTION

Scholars have well-established the need for diverse books in school curriculum (NCTE, 2015). Drawing on the work of Bishop (1990), educators often note that literature can serve as both a window, providing a glimpse into another viewpoint or experience different from readers', as well as a mirror, allowing for representation of students' cultures, lives, and families. Both are key to cultivating understanding and empathy as well as for validating youth. With a particular focus on multicultural literature, Bishop (1990) warned, "When children cannot find themselves in the books they read, or when the images they see are distorted, negative, or laughable they learn a powerful lesson about how they are devalued in the society

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of which they are a part” (Bishop, 1990, p. ix). She also noted that if readers only see themselves, the consequence can be youth who become self-centered adults.

Less often discussed, however, is the “sliding glass door” in Bishop’s metaphor, which extends the notion of mirrors and invites readers to “walk through in imagination to become part of whatever world has been created or recreated by the author” (p. 1). Johnson et al. (2018) emphasized that an “emotional connection” is often involved for literature to be transformative in this way, and they avowed, “Books that serve as sliding glass doors invite readers to step through and into an experience that may change them. The change may not be visible to others and may not be immediate to the reader” (p. 572). Books, in this sense, are therefore powerful instruments, affording for a deeper understanding of humanity and enlightened sense of self as a member of society.

Glazier and Seo (2005), however, complicated the mirror aspect of Bishop’s metaphor for literature and purported that readings should also include having students in the dominant group reflect on their status and privilege. In their discussion of multicultural literature, they cautioned against presenting literature in ways that reinforce an ‘us’ versus ‘them’ binary, which could “reinforce notions of ‘culturelessness’ among white European American student populations” (p. 686). They noted that silences often exist in school curriculum which in turn result in the “silencing of certain individuals” (p. 688).

In recent years, however, educational professionals have observed that simply the *existence* of diverse texts that serve as mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors in schools is not enough. Teachers must take care to ensure that multicultural literature reflects groups in authentic, non-stereotypical, and affirming ways so as not to perpetuate misconceptions (Landt, 2006). In addition, reading must be accompanied by discussion and activities that prompt students to reflect and think critically (Landrum, 2001), both in terms of Bishop’s metaphor described as well as for how literature reflects and constructs society.

In this chapter, we apply Bishop’s metaphor specifically to working with pre-service teachers to read around the issue of (dis)ability.¹ Historically, “most representations of disability in classic literature are negative or restrictive, others are intended to elicit the audience’s sentimentality and pity” (Curwood, 2013, p. 17). And, although included as a category of diversity, disability is a part of multicultural literature that has been traditionally overlooked but has gained increasing attention in recent decades. We examined how texts that focus on disabilities can reflect students’ own experiences and can provide them glimpses into others’, building onto traditional notions of ‘windows and mirrors.’ We also, however, embraced the notion of critical mirrors, examining how such novels can catapult our understandings of ableism, and we explored literature as sliding glass doors, considering how reading about (dis)ability might be transformative.

We feel that working with teacher candidates around recognizing and deconstructing the portrayal of (dis)abilities in texts is crucial to their future teaching in myriad ways. Scholars have noted how books have the ability to influence readers’ beliefs and opinions about (dis)ability (Sayers, 2014; Solis 2004). Darragh (2015), recognizing the import of reading books with characters with (dis)abilities, wrote: “Often, in attempts to be polite, students will just ignore disability altogether, but in doing so they are dismissing the person as well. Students need to learn it is ok to ‘see’ a difference” (p. 141). At the same time, such books can allow readers to see commonalities as well, understanding “characters with disabilities as full and complex beings” (Adomat, 2014, para. 53). Working with teachers to read and openly discuss this topic can therefore help them better relate to the youth with whom they will work.

Central to undertaking any exploration of this literature with teacher candidates is understanding the criteria scholars have posited for evaluating depictions to discern harmful tropes and to recognize positive portrayals. For example, Landrum (2001) noted that events in narratives that represent (dis)abilities

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