Mindful Portrayals:
Using Fiction to Create Awareness, Understanding, and Support for People with Autism and Developmental Disabilities

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ABSTRACT

Considering the arts model as a tool for promoting awareness, understanding, and support for people with autism and developmental disabilities, this paper discusses stories as a measure of societal thinking as well as a vehicle for societal change. The author’s dual perspectives are shared as a researcher of books for children and young adults, as well as a writer of books for young people. Data from an ongoing qualitative study related to award winning North American picture books for young people offer understandings of current patterns and trends regarding
portrayals of characters who are differently abled, and this article has compelling implications for teaching, learning and further research.

My interest in portraying characters with developmental disabilities, as well as my current academic research platform related to an exploration of characters in contemporary children’s literature, was inspired by the children with whom I worked in regular and special education classrooms over a span of twenty years. My students’ gifts and challenges did not typically appear in our classroom texts, prompting my reflections on the young heroes we encounter every day and the need for these heroes, and their peers, to see a range of lived lives reflected in society’s artefacts.

Galda’s (1998) metaphor of books as mirrors and windows, illuminating how reading allows us to see ourselves and others through the revealing yet comfortable distance of text, is a compelling lens through which to examine books portraying characters with disabilities. If the landscape of school and community reading material is to offer children and young adults authentic pictures of self and other, a variety of content and form in quality literature is needed. Our classroom and public library collections must go beyond what have emerged as ‘popular’ aspects of difference—most notably, gender, social class, and ethnicity. Disability is the single category of difference that can present at any time during a person’s life, eclipsing other differences with its very prevalence, yet it continues to be relatively uncommon in terms of fictional character traits.
Research on classic fiction involving characters with disabilities has uncovered previous patterns including the trend that characters with disabilities are either 'cured' or 'killed' during the course of a story (Keith, 2001), a tendency that suggests authors have not been able to envision a happy future for someone with a disability. My previous research on contemporary children's novels (Brenna, 2011; Brenna, 2010a; Brenna, 2010b; Brenna, 2009; Brenna, 2008) illuminates new trends, including the lack of travel opportunities for characters with disabilities and the absence of minority sexual orientations and particular cultural backgrounds in characters who are ‘differently abled.’

A recent study of award-winning North American picture books (Emmerson, Fu, Lendsay, & Brenna, 2013) foregrounds texts available to North American readers at a time when schools and communities are working towards social justice through a healthy respect for human differences in self and other. In addition to supporting school curriculum through suggestions for diverse classroom resources, a focus on messages about disability conveyed through children’s books provides an intriguing avenue for further research. A key question underpinning the current discussion is: what do contemporary North American picture books tell readers about disability?

**North American Children’s Picture Books: Patterns and Trends**

First of all, numbers of North American picture books published since 1995, portraying characters with disabilities, are comparatively small. This matches a statement by Jaeger and Bowman (2005) who say, “Disability is ordinary. Yet disability is rarely considered as a societal
issue in a thoughtful and humane manner” (p. ix). If the landscape of picture books for children is to offer authentic selections as windows and mirrors, it is going to take some creative problem solving on the part of educators and parents, as well as some new work from writers. The following section provides a discussion of preliminary findings from a current study by Emmerson, Fu, Lendsay, and Brenna (2013) related to particular award categories for award-winning books published since 1995.

**Canadian Governor General’s Award for Children’s Illustration**

Only two of the 18 Canadian Governor General’s Award winners in the category for illustration contained representations of characters with disabilities, and none of the disabilities included involve autism or developmental disabilities. The first, Paul Yee’s (1996) *Ghost Train*, depicts a physical disability in the central character. The second, Cybele Young’s (2011) *Ten Birds*, offers an abstract view of physical disability in a vision of how seemingly flightless birds manage to use various innovative strategies to cross a river, with perhaps the most ingenious bird of all simply walking over the bridge. A third award winner, Kyo Maclear’s (2012) *Virginia Wolf*, may depict a character with childhood depression, however the interpretation of this diagnosis remains relatively ambiguous within the context of the story.

**Canadian Governor General’s Award for Children’s Text**

A single picture book award winner from the 18 winning titles has appeared in the category for text, and that is Rachna Gilmore’s (1999) title *A Screaming Kind of Day*—providing a striking portrait of a little girl whose hearing impairment is simply one aspect of her characterization rather than the employment of disability as a plot device.
American Caldecott Medal

A scan of the 17 American picture book winners of the prestigious Caldecott medal for children’s illustration has turned up even fewer examples of characters who are differently abled. Only one book published since 1995 has depicted a character with a disability, and it is P.O. Zelinsky’s (1997) Rapunzel, a version of the fairy tale that includes a prince who is temporarily blind.

Schneider Family Book Award

Since 2004, a separate awards category has been utilized by the American Library Association in addition to the Caldecott award, and this new award—the Schneider Family Book Award—uses portrayal of disability as part of the award criteria. When Dr. Katherine Schneider was nine years old, she began borrowing books in Braille and longed to find more books about children who were blind or had other disabilities. Dr. Schneider and her family have since set up this award to encourage authors and illustrators to produce books that will express disability as an authentic part of the human experience. To date, the Schneider Awards have been given to eight titles, and included in this list are three picture books portraying characters who are blind or visually impaired, three picture books depicting characters who are deaf, and two picture books presenting characters with orthopedic disabilities. Again, none of the award winners include characters with autism or developmental disabilities.

Dolly Gray Literature Award

The Dolly Gray Literature Award was established in 2000 by members of the Division on Autism and Developmental Disabilities (DADD) of the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC)
working with the Special Needs Project—a distributor of books related to disability issues. This award has served a very real need—to recognize, through a book award, authors, illustrators, and publishers of high-quality fictional and biographical children’s, intermediate, and young adult books that authentically portray individuals with developmental disabilities. A list of winners can be found at: http://daddcec.org/Awards/DollyGrayAwards.aspx. This list includes the two picture books that tied for the award in 2012: Rebecca Elliot’s Just Because, and Holly Robinson Peet & Ryan Elizabeth Peete’s My Brother Charlie, illustrated by Shane W. Evans. Also in 2012, Kathryn Erskine’s (2010) novel Mockingbird tied with Waiting for No One, one of my own published novels (Brenna, 2010c); both these two books deal with female protagonists who have Asperger’s Syndrome.

Other Picture Books

Widening the search outside of the specific awards mentioned, one Canadian title appears that presents a character with Down’s Syndrome: Nan Gregory’s (1995) How Smudge Came. This picture book narrates the story of a young woman living in a group home who is prevented from having a puppy. How the hospice where Cindy works eventually adopts the dog is a satisfying ending to a heartbreaking tale that emphasizes a society where decisions are made for and about people without thorough consultation. Not only is this book unique in its treatment of Cindy and her gifts—it uses the picture book format to present a story geared for older children and adults, with a protagonist who is clearly not a child. Ron Lightburn’s evocative illustrations carry messages beyond Gregory’s words, and it is through his depiction of Cindy, not in the text itself, that her Down’s Syndrome is evoked.
Another Canadian picture book worth noting is Sheree Fitch’s *Pocket Rocks* (2004), illustrated by Helen Flook. While autism isn’t mentioned, the character of young Ian suggests traits of people with Asperger’s Syndrome, including naivety, fine-motor difficulties, meltdowns, sensitivity to smells, a unique perspective on things, an unusual and perhaps obsessive interest in collecting rocks, supported stress breaks, and the need for assistance at school. The book is an uplifting tale about the power of stories, and emphasizes without didacticism the positive application of strategies for self-management.

A local search of two major Canadian bookstores has offered the following information. Out of the collection of 252 Canadian picture books sampled in one store on August 7, 2012, only one portrayed characters other than ‘typical’ and, in the case of Epp’s (2007) *Hope and the Dragon*, the storyline revolved around a boy who uses his imagination to help himself deal with a chronic illness. A survey of the second bookstore produced no results in terms of picture books presenting a character with a disability.

While there has been considerable research on gender and multicultural diversity with regard to classroom texts (Finazzo, 1997; Galda, 1998; Gilbert, 1997, 2001; Rueda, 1998), little treatment has been given to the characterization of ability (Keith, 2001), although there are select discussions of the treatment of particular disabilities within contemporary fiction (Dyches & Prater, 2000; Dyches, Prater, & Cramer, 2001; Greenwell, 2004; Kalke-Klita, 2005; Mills, 2002; Pajka-West, 2007). Picture book illustrations are illuminated as a particular lens for studying the inclusion of characters with disabilities in children’s material (Matthew & Clow, 2007) and
another avenue for study involves how books about characters with disabilities may be evaluated and used with children (Dyches & Prater, 2000; Landrum, 2001; Smith-D’Arezzo, 2003).

**Picture Books in a Wider Context of Fiction for Children**

Dyches and Prater’s (2005) content analysis of thirty-four children’s fiction books published between 1999 and 2003 identified that the sample depicted characters with developmental disabilities as having either autism spectrum disorder or intellectual disability, within a rich and dynamic profile. Although significant of a positive trend in characterization compared with their 2001 study, because of the dynamic nature of newer portrayals, these researchers do suggest aspects worth consideration including the fact that the majority of characters presented were male. Another recent study examining graphic novels indicated that within the graphic novel form, people with disabilities are represented, however these portrayals most frequently fit a negative and stereotypical image (Irwin & Moeler, 2010).

A previous study related to novels for children and young adults (Brenna, 2010a) provides some interesting comparisons to the results of the current North American picture book study. Of the fifty Canadian novels in the Brenna study sample, there were characters represented with autism, intellectual disability, Down’s Syndrome, and Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD), within a group of texts that included portrayals of characters with other disabilities. The inclusion of developmental disabilities in this study sample of novels contrasts with the lack of characters with these particular challenges in picture books. It appears as if particular disabilities are considered more ‘appropriate’ for inclusion in children’s picture books...
than other disabilities, just as polio and blindness were common disabilities included in classic
texts (Keith, 2001), and this hierarchical treatment of ability is a finding worth further
consideration by contemporary researchers, disability rights activists, and educators.

Comparisons between characters with autism and characters with FASD in another
previous study (Barker, Kulyk, Knorr, & Brenna, 2011) demonstrated that North American
novels for young people seem to present autism much more avidly than FASD, and, in fact, the
single title dealing directly with FASD—*The Moon Children*—was one of my own books
(Brenna, 2007). Certainly more investigation of the lack of representation of characters with
FASD is warranted, especially when considering that incidences of autism and FASD are similar
in number.

**Writing Characters Who Are Differently Abled**

As a classroom and special education teacher working with populations of children with
FASD, I began to notice how few community resources were available to elicit discussions of
this condition outside the traditional medical model. The children I worked with were complex
and different from each other, and yet had challenges similar to those faced by other children—
challenges related to acceptance and support of their unique profiles—in addition to the negative
stigma associated with their biological mothers. The medical model didn’t seem to be affecting
prevention or further support in the context within which I was working, nor did it assist with
positive parental engagement, and I wondered whether a model based on the arts could help.

What if a travelling gallery containing artistic representations of FASD could visit communities
to elicit discussion and deepen understanding of children and their parents? In addition to assisting with additional support for the population of people with FASD and their families, could such a gallery—Faces of FASD, I thought it could be called—affect prevention? Not an artist myself, this idea, provocative as it was to me, slowly faded.

What replaced the idea of a traveling gallery was the notion of a children’s novel—accessible to adult readers as well—featuring FASD and including a non-negative depiction of a biological mother whose son was affected by prenatal alcohol consumption. It took some research, and a lot of time, but when I finished the manuscript that would become my novel *The Moon Children*, I hoped it would be a good story and, in addition, I hoped it might exemplify how people might become more mindful of FASD-related issues through response to literature.

Billy is a ten-year-old boy with gifts as a storyteller and an open loving heart. Because he can’t read, he doesn’t easily access what to others is simple communication, and this makes for challenging experiences that make him angry at the way he is. While the plot of the story involves a developing friendship between Billy and a girl with selective mutism, including for Billy the importance of winning a talent show in hopes his father might return to the family, the book is also about Billy’s special needs and the relationship he has with his mom. A few readers have suggested to me that the story’s close was less than satisfying—that Billy deserved a happier ending, although the ending as it stands is not exactly unhappy. The reason this isn’t a ‘happily ever after’ book is that for kids like Billy, happy futures are going to take more than what we are currently offering in our communities to people with FASD. I hope that readers of this book will begin to think more deeply about what kind of supports Billy and his parents need.
in order to stretch into a happy future, as well as what kind of human heartaches prenatal alcohol consumption causes.

In addition to *The Moon Children*, I have written a number of other books spotlighting characters who are differently abled. *Something to Hang On To* is a collection of a dozen short stories for teens, and includes stories about characters who have Down’s Syndrome, pervasive developmental disorder, and cerebral palsy in addition to a cameo of the character of Taylor Jane, a teenager with Asperger’s Syndrome who appears as the protagonist in my trilogy of young adult novels: *Wild Orchid*, *Waiting for No One*, and *The White Bicycle*. The series about Taylor Jane took considerable research, as I wanted to make sure I achieved as authentic a voice as I could without actually understanding autism first-hand. I was lucky enough to attend a lecture by Dr. Tony Attwood where an introduction to the positive characteristics of Asperger’s Syndrome made coherent the argument that Asperger’s is a different, not defective, way of experiencing the world. Trying to see the world through Taylor’s eyes taught me a great deal, and I am grateful for the perspective that working with her fictional characterization provided to me as an educator, a researcher, and a writer.

One of the decisions I made in the books about Taylor Jane was to concentrate on filling a gap in literature regarding characters who are differently abled in that these characters don’t often travel. In my trilogy, Taylor spends time at Waskesiu—Saskatchewan’s national park—then Cody, Wyoming, and then Lourmarin, France. The latter setting was achieved in part due to financial support from a Canada Council grant that allowed me research funding in order to capture the setting with as much real detail as possible. A conceptualization of gaps on the
contemporary landscape of books for children is important to authors as we attempt to produce original work that affects social justice. There is still more work to be done—in research as well as authorship—if we are to create a world in fiction that truly represents the world we have at hand.

Changing the World

In addition to representing the world and its contents, I believe that stories can change the world. By offering mirrors and windows to readers, stories build understandings of self and other critical to positive renderings of identity and community. As an educator, I think that the stories we offer to children in our homes and classrooms matter. As a researcher, I think there is important work yet to be done in cataloguing the messages children receive from contemporary texts portraying characters with different abilities, as well as noticing voices yet unheard on the textual landscape. As a writer, I know that my stories have changed me—have changed how I think about the navigation of disabilities from a personal standpoint as I attempted to create characters from the inside out. I predict that as more people who are differently abled are supported in telling their own stories, and as these authentic autobiographies follow biographies into supporting fictive works, we can improve the possibility of authentic mirrors and informative windows offered in children’s reading—helping our leaders of tomorrow see and actualize the world in a more complete way.
References

Barker, C., Kulyk, J., Knorr, L., & Brenna, B. (2011). Open inclusion or shameful secret: A comparison of characters with Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders (FASD) and characters with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) in a North American sample of books for


**Annotated Bibliography of Award Winners**

**Governor General Awards: Illustration**


Vanessa attempts to cheer up her sister Virginia, who is in a “wolfish” mood, and eventually succeeds by painting a magical scene on the wall. Illustrated by I. Arsenault.


Choonyi, a teenager with a physical disability from China encounters her dead father’s ghost on a train. Illustrated by H. Chan.


Ten birds who are differently talented cross a river in their individual ways.

**Governor General Awards: Children’s Text**


Scully, a little girl with hearing aids, experiences anger and redemption on a rainy day.

Illustrated by G. Sauve.

**Caldecott Awards**


The familiar Grimm’s tale—enhanced with early Italian and French elements and Renaissance illustration—in which a prince, blinded for several years, regains his sight when Rapunzel’s tears fall upon him.

**Schneider Family Awards**


A poetic story of the life of Django Reinhardt, jazz guitarist, who re-taught himself to play guitar after he was injured in a fire.


Based on a true story about a guide dog and his owner—a teacher, dancer, and musician—this book illustrates the (wo)man-dog relationship.


A young girl runs into things and faces ridicule until she is diagnosed with double vision and becomes the pirate of kindergarten. Illustrated by L. Avril.


An (auto)biography of Art Tatum, written from the perspective of the pianist as a youth with low vision.


A jazz pianist loses his hearing but gains a band when he joins other deaf musicians on the subway. Illustrated by R. G. Christie.


A Sherpa boy who is deaf rescues his family’s yaks high in the Himalayan mountains of Nepal. Illustrated by B. Dodson.


Baseball player Jackie Robinson plays a special role in the lives of a boy and his father, who is deaf. Illustrated by C. Bootman.

**Annotated Bibliography of Other Picture Books Featuring Characters with Disabilities**


Toby’s sister Clemmie is his best friend. Without mentioning the word ‘disability’ this lyrical text promotes sibling friendship with humour and grace.


A young boy uses his imagination to help him deal with cancer.

Ian Goobie collects rocks, and connects with a storyteller who does the same thing.
Illustrated by Helen Flook.


In the group home where Cindy lives, no dogs are allowed. How she befriends a puppy, and finds an opportunity for him to live at the Hospice where she works, offers opportunities for strong critical discussions about decision making and independence. A picture book for older readers where the disability—Down’s Syndrome—is portrayed in the illustrations rather than the text. Illustrated by Ron Lightburn.

Illustrated by S. W. Evans.