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**The Power of Inclusion:
Deconstructing “Normality” in Primary Education**

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Abstract

The goal of this thesis is to critically analyze the structures currently present within the education system that exclude individuals possessing certain brains and bodies from the socially constructed “norm.” The lens of critical disability studies is utilized to shed light on the spatial, curricular, historical, and disciplinary elements of the education system as we know it. Specifically, this thesis focuses on the primary education classroom, since students solidify many of their biases and schemas about the world and people around them at this juncture. After reviewing the ableist rhetoric that manifests itself in schools and society as a result of the social construction of “normal,” the specific mechanism of disability children’s literature is analyzed in order to shed light on an avenue for fostering greater inclusion in primary classrooms. The aim of critically analyzing the current education system is to work for a better, more inclusive future for differently-abled students that views the incredible strengths that exist outside the lines of “normal”.

Keywords: primary education, neurodiversity, disability, disability children’s literature, social model of disability, critical disability studies, inclusion

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Introduction

“Schooling is the process by which you institutionalize people to accept their place in society...

Education is the process through which you teach them to transform it.”

-- Dr. Jeff Duncan Andrade

The goal in writing this thesis is to assert that “normality” is socially constructed, and that difference (and the range of abilities that comprise difference) are natural components of being human. This assertion is one that I hope will manifest itself in the education system, beginning with inclusion of students with disabilities in the primary education classroom and continuing throughout students’ educational journeys and into their future lives. A disability is defined by the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health as “an umbrella term for impairments, activity limitations, and participation restrictions” (as cited by WHO, 2010). 2010 data released by the World Health Organization indicated that approximately 15% of the global population (over a billion people) had a disability of some form, a number that has likely risen in the past decade. According to 2020 data gathered by the Centers for Disease Control, approximately 26% of American adults are living with a disability. About 14% of these disabilities are constituted as physical, while approximately 11% of these disabilities can be described as cognitive (CDC, 2020). Looking specifically at the system of education, 2017-2018 data from the National Center for Education Statistics reports close to 7 million students with disabilities enrolled in public education in the United States (Schaeffer, 2020). 13% of public school students within the United States receive Special Education services of some kind (Pennell et al., 2018, as cited in NCES, 2018). Despite the significant portion of the population identifying as having some form of disability, schools are still unfortunately upholding many exclusionary standards, rooted in historical oppression of people with different brains and bodies.

These exclusionary standards are expressed in a variety of ways -- through such mechanisms as unsatisfactory resources for special education students, lack of representation in literary materials being presented in classrooms, absence of spatial accommodations for students who learn differently than the expectation of sitting still for eight hours a day, and harsh disciplinary standards that disproportionately target differently-abled students.

Through drawing on critical disability studies, the social model of disability, and the neurodiversity movement, this thesis presents an alternative approach to the narratives currently intrinsic to our society and education system. The thesis begins with a literature review of the social construction of “normal” and how this historical, cultural, arbitrary standard impacts individuals with disabilities across every sector of society. After establishing this groundwork, the literature review specifically delves into the sector of education and the inequities for disabled students within our education system as we know it.

Primary education in particular holds immense power in that this time in students’ lives provides the basis for many schemas and biases that will translate into how students interact with people who come from different identities, backgrounds, and lived experiences than themselves later on in life. Introducing inclusive models of education at this stage of the formal educational process establishes schemas more grounded in acceptance of different abilities as a natural variation of being human as well as an opportunity from different backgrounds to learn from one another. This incorporation of difference as an element of humanity into primary education students’ schemas about the world is largely a result of the contact hypothesis of social psychology, which recognizes the power of proximity to difference in the disruption of biases about difference (de Boer & Munde, 2015). Conversely, exclusion of students in the primary education classroom, through many of the avenues expressed above, can effectively excuse

structural violence against differently-abled individuals -- violence that manifests itself in ways such as horrific discrimination through employment opportunities, incarceration, and police brutality later on in life.

After emphasizing the immense importance of inclusion of students with disabilities beginning at the primary education level, and extending into future years of formal education and beyond, this thesis transitions to an analysis of a specific mechanism that holds the potential for inclusion or exclusion when presented in the primary education classroom. The mechanism critically examined in the analysis section is that of children's literature. Specifically, four children's books in the disability children's literature category are analyzed to determine how well these texts align with the critical disability studies framework. Two texts are presented as promoting inclusion through a critical disability studies lens, while two texts are utilized to point out areas within the texts that do not encompass full inclusion -- as they are more oriented towards the outdated medical model of disability. The intent behind the analysis of the effectiveness of these various disability children's literature texts is to call attention to the elements that should be intrinsic to any inclusive effort in the classroom, and specifically those elements that should be present in inclusive children's literature. Representation and giving a voice to the disabled subject are two of the most essential components of inclusive children's literature (and inclusion in general) that are highlighted in this section.

Lastly, this thesis concludes with major takeaways of the combined literature review and analysis portions. An acceptance of and celebration of difference within an inclusive model of primary education makes way for the voices of individuals with atypical brains and bodies and establishes a standard for inclusion in later sectors of society. These implications -- for both the

disabled student, and the temporarily-abled student, are astronomical in creating a future education system and a society that are a bit more inclusive than the ones we have right now.

Literature Review: Deconstructing Normality in Society and the Classroom

This literature review pulls in insights and theories from various disability studies and education journals, as well as multiple books that interrogate conceptions of normality, (dis)ability, and the view of disability as deficit. By interrogating these systems in society that reinforce and uphold the norm, the intention is to bring to light the inequities for disabled individuals in various areas of society, specifically the formal education system. This review incorporates and connects the work of a variety of authors, with an overarching critical disability studies framework as the backdrop. By definition, critical disability studies “views disability as both a lived reality in which the experiences of people with disabilities are central to interpreting their place in the world, and as a social and political definition based on societal power relations” (Reaume, 2014, p. 1248). Indeed, an examination of the system of education, or any structural system within our society through a critical lens, must analyze power relations and the multiple ways in which these relations work for the dominant group to effectively “other” brains and bodies which do not fall within a set “norm” (Moore et al., 2008).

Underneath the overarching lens of critical disability studies, this review also draws from multiple supplementary frameworks to analyze the social construction of “normality” and how this construct permeates into the primary education classroom. The framework of social psychology allows for a better understanding of how education serves as a socialization tool that can either serve to solidify or to disrupt the oppressive categories of “normal” and “abnormal.” The framework of developmental psychology is utilized specifically for an interrogation of the primary school age group as a time period when children are creating and solidifying their schemas about the world around them; and therefore, a time when many biases are established. At the same time, the overarching umbrella of critical disability studies is tapped into to critique

and push back on the historical emergence of developmental psychology as a field which inherently is rooted in the idea that there is a “normal” timeline and trajectory for the development of a so-called “normal” child.

The framework of evolutionary psychology is also brought into this literature review, in order to view neurodiversity through the lens of a form of natural variation necessary for the advancement of the human race. Lastly, the undeniable intersectionality of identity is brought in to examine the ways in which discrimination is only intensified for disabled individuals who hold multiple marginalized identities. This discrimination is expressed through the construction of which identities align within the “normal” or “abnormal” social constructs which have evolved to categorically label certain individuals. An intersectional viewpoint gives consideration to how race, class, gender, socioeconomic status, sexuality, and multiple other identity-based factors are inextricably linked to the structural and systemic inequities which effectively “dis-able” students with intellectual, cognitive, physical, and behavioral differences within the primary education classroom.

The goal in writing this literature review is to interrogate the social construction of “normal” within the primary education setting (grades K-2), specifically examining how the arbitrary categories and labels that comprise “normal,” function in the socialization process of students both with and without named disabilities in the educational setting. The work of critically examining the brokenness of the current education system is not to simply call out oppressive mechanisms historically and presently functioning within society. More significantly, this work is rooted in the belief that by naming the current systemic inequities for students with disabilities in the primary school classroom, teachers, policy makers, and advocates for change can be better equipped to create a more inclusive and accepting future for all students.

“Normal” as a Social Construct

Somewhere along the line of history, the so-called “normal” body and brain transformed from serving as a measure of the average to a marker of the ideal. This conception of “normal” has been put up on a pedestal to serve as a measure of who is a “good human” or a “good citizen” (see McGuire, 2016, Chapter 2). But to be able to grasp all of the flaws inherent to the societal uplifting of “normality,” it is essential to understand that the entire category of “normal” is a socially constructed category -- thus the quotation marks around the word “normal” as it appears throughout this thesis.

Before people were studied or classified based on their unique ways of being in the world, there was no categorization of “normal” or “abnormal,” there was simply human. And being human came with differences between each individual as a form of natural variation, that expressed differential evolutionary advantages. Armstrong (2015) notes that while universal standards have been established for various forms of measurement, such as the kilogram, there is no “normal” brain preserved anywhere from which to derive the standards of “normality.” Instead, “when it comes to mental disorders . . . , there appears to be substantial uncertainty concerning when a neurologically based human behavior crosses the critical threshold from normal human variation to pathology” (Armstrong, 2015, p. 348). Armstrong (2015) continues on to explain how many so-called cognitive or mental disabilities or disorders carry with them specific strengths which are not present in a more “normal” brain.

Despite the lack of a universal model for a “normal” brain, scientists still began conducting studies which served to establish their own set of standards which have negatively affected anyone who does not fit neatly within these categories. The Grant Study of Normal Young Men at Harvard in 1930 served as the first mass study of this arbitrary conception of

“normal,” at a time when only wealthy white males were granted access to the university (Mooney, 2019). Based on a variety of psychological, behavioral, physical, and social assessments, the researchers in the Harvard study declared that the wealthy college aged white males included in this study fell into the “norm” (Mooney, 2019). Unfortunately, research on wealthy white males has similarly established many of the scientific conclusions which back the social construct of “normality”. Thus, interwoven into the very fabric of the social construction of “normal,” is blatant discrimination in regard to race, class, gender, socioeconomic status, and ability, which illustrates the fact point that “normal” was a created category -- and that it was only created for a very narrow subset of individuals. As Mooney (2019) bluntly puts it, “Normal was created, not discovered, by flawed, eccentric, self-interested, racist, ableist, homophobic, sexist humans. Normal is a statistical fiction, nothing less” (p. 40).

Statistically fictional though it may be, the concept of “normal” has permeated into the field of developmental psychology, especially in terms of what is defined as the “typically developing child.” By setting benchmarks for certain ages of what this so-called “typically developing child” should be able to do at each stage of their life, parents are trained by society to feel alarmed if their child is not meeting these standards at certain ages. McGuire (2016) explains how this dangerous slope leads to parents who believe they are “good advocates” for their children and for society leaping to try to protect those who fall outside the “norm” by alerting others of the “red flags” of disabilities, and subsequently trying to “fix” those aspects of their children that fall outside this “norm”. Drawing from Michael Foucault’s descriptions of power relations, McGuire (2016) points out the reproductive elements of the dominant discourses in society which normalize some brains and bodies over others, and segregates those who do not

conform. In this way, discourse effectively functions to create categories which “limit the ways people can (are permitted to) move, think, act, and exist in the world” (McGuire, 2016, p. 72).

Indeed, discourse and unequivocal power relations within society function to uphold institutional and structural systems that reproduce concepts of ableism. By definition, ableism, is the “stereotyping, prejudice, discrimination, and social oppression toward people with disabilities,” which stems from a place of privilege channeled into oppression (Bogart & Dunn, 2019, as cited in Fine, 2019, p. 973). Fine (2019) calls for the examination of disability “as a social, cultural, and political phenomenon,” as ableism exists across multiple sectors and is ingrained within nearly every system in society. (p. 973). Ashia Ray, autistic self-advocate and founder of the organization Books for Littles, expresses that, “It’s very socially acceptable to be ableist. People with disabilities are very much second-class citizens in this country” (as cited in Cockcroft, 2019, p. 30). Erevelles (2011) also brings up the problematic standards of citizenship. To Erevelles, even the term “disability,” “serves as the political and analytical category deployed by the colonialist state to patrol the boundaries of citizenship” (p. 134).

Ray and Erevelles both draw attention to the historically exclusionary origins of the conception of citizenship -- a citizenship that only considered white, able-bodied, property-owning men as true citizens who were afforded full rights. The identity requirements necessary to be considered a “full citizen” align very closely with the identity features of the participants who were proclaimed “normal” in the 1930 The Grant Study of Normal Young Men at Harvard mentioned above. Thus, the conceptions of “normal” and “citizen” are intertwined -- with those counted as “normal citizens” according to these historical understandings being those with the most power and privilege in society, echoing the Mooney’s (2020) description of the “conflation of normal with the ideal” (as cited in Kaufman, 2020).

Erevelles (2011) explains that the rhetoric of ableism is intertwined with the hegemony of disability as “lack,” leading to a dominant discourse that requires the assimilation of disabled people in order to be accepted into society. This attempt at assimilation corresponds with the sentiments expressed by McGuire (2016) that the power systems in society exert their control over anything that falls outside of socially constructed norms in an attempt to “fix” those elements that do not fit neatly within the set power dynamic. Far too often, people are behind what the hegemony of power is trying to “fix.” This idea of “fixing” people coincides with a medical model of disability, which views disability as deficit and advocates for early intervention or some sort of medical help in order to try to “cure” disability or help a disabled individual better fit into society (McCain, 2017). While the medical model is outdated, discriminatory, and fully dismantled by a critical disability studies analysis, this model of pathologizing individuals with disabilities is still ingrained in many systems within society, none more apparent than the formal education system. Sentiments of the medical model appear in the education system through such tactics of harsh discipline or behavior intervention programs that target students with disabilities in an effort to “fix” the areas where they stray from the “norm.”

Erevelles (2011) notes that even attempts at advocacy for people with disabilities, based more closely on the social model of disability, may effectively exclude those with cognitive or severe disabilities, thus still drawing a circle around inclusion which certain individuals may fall outside of. The social model of disability looks at the disabilities that individuals are labeled with as failures in the setup of an inaccessible society, that effectively dis-able people possessing certain cognitive, developmental, physical, or behavioral differences (McCain, 2017). Unfortunately, to fully realize the social model in all of its context would allow all disabled individuals to fully be able to participate in society. Erevelles (2011) notes how this goal of full

societal participation sometimes excludes individuals who do not meet the standard for participation as a function of “becoming an autonomous individual” (p. 170), since individuals with severe disabilities may never reach this level of independent participation.

Erevelles (2011) calls to mind limited or partial forms of advocacy and inclusion by pointing to the Disabilities Rights Movement and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), which seek to remove barriers to access in society. While such initiatives are certainly a starting point, what is clear is that these initiatives can never be an ending point, as the societal barriers targeted still do not fully include every disabled individual. For example, the ADA called for full participation of people with disabilities in society, but disproportionate access to healthcare, education, and employment are still perpetuated, with those with severe or multiple disabilities being excluded at even higher rates (Anti-Defamation League, n.d.). In these cases, a partial inclusion is engaged, which is predicated on the ableist assumption that disabled people can be included, as long as they are not “too disabled.” Conversely, an authentic implementation of inclusion would recognize the societal barriers still in place that maintain conceptions of “normality” and “abnormality” and standards of how “normal” one has to be to be included. This authentic inclusion stems from the understanding that historical and cultural conditions that produce the category of “disability” to begin with, and somehow differentiate “disability” as distinct from the category of “normal.” Titchkosky (2007) asserts that the whole idea of “disability” is “made by culture” (p. 12).

In dismantling the cultural idea of a “good parental advocate” who attempts to “fix” or “rid” their child of a disability, I believe it is necessary to look to the words of an autistic self-advocate for a more comprehensive view of what advocacy should look like. Sinclair’s (1993) speech entitled “Don’t Mourn for Us,” which he presented at the International Conference on

Autism in Toronto, can offer some of these insights. According to Sinclair (1993), the autism advocacy of parents should not focus on the grief of a parent losing what society would consider a “normal” child. Instead, true advocacy should revolve around what the parent can learn from the child they do have. In essence, parents should not try to change or fix their child in any way, but instead seek to understand them, learn from them, and support them. In Sinclair’s (1993) words, “let your child teach you a little of her language, guide you a little way into his world” (p. 2).

Moreover, Sinclair (1993), explains the unique skills and personality that each autistic individual has to offer, and draws attention to the pervasiveness of autism by asserting that, “There’s no normal child hidden behind the autism. Autism is a way of being” (p. 1). This idea that society’s definitions of so-called “disabilities” are simply different ways of being in the world aligns with the neurodiversity movement in the recognition of variation in the brain and body as forms of identity to be celebrated and learned from. Sinclair’s (1993) appeal to parents can be transferred into a classroom setting as well and expressed to teachers in the same way as, “let your child teach you a little of her language, guide you a little way into his world” (p. 2). Imagine the implications if inclusive education truly allowed for forms of learning and expression that existed far outside the normalized standards present across the educational landscape today.

Instead of attempting to normalize individuals to fit into categorical molds constructed by the metaphorical police of normal, the goal should be to work for a world that is more open to diverse ways of thinking, expressing, and being in the world. After all, if everyone thought, expressed themselves, and existed in exactly the same ways, this world would contain a whole lot less creativity, excitement, and opportunities for growth and learning. In fact, there are

connections between conditions often labeled as “disabilities” and a whole amalgamation of traits that add creativity and value to the world. Mooney (2019) provides examples of this phenomenon, referring to the links between ADHD/ADD and heightened creativity, between autism and intense knowledge about particular subjects, even between the mental health disorder of anxiety and increased levels of empathy. The condition of disabled individuals possessing unique abilities is also demonstrated by the wide array of individuals who are identified as twice-exceptional (2e) students. The concept of 2e is defined by Arky (n.d.) as those who have both “exceptional ability *and* disability. They are gifted in some way, but they also face learning or developmental challenges” (paragraph 1). This is just one reason why inclusion in society and education is so important -- differently abled students may struggle in one area or subject but offer elevated insights and knowledge into other areas.

Yet while Mooney (2019) calls attention to those with twice-exceptional capabilities, he also cautions against inclusion of disability only when it comes with some unique “superpower” to be unlocked. In a similar vein, McGovern (2014) asserts that “We don’t need to sell disability or put a polish on it. We need to show the humanity that lies beneath the difference” (p. 37). This humanity should not be based upon any specific gift or even the capacity for independence, as noted by Erevelles (2011). Instead, it should stem from a rejection of “normality”, and the recognition that every individual possesses the rights to life, respect, and inclusion in society through education. In summary, the goal of writing this literature review is to provide evidence for why our society and education system as they presently stand, are ill-equipped to recognize and include the individual needs and strengths of disabled citizens and students. This gap between societal structures and individual citizens is precisely why the structures need to change so badly. This change requires a dismantling of attempts to constrain difference within the

confines of “normality.” Only then, can a true acceptance and celebration of difference (in whatever form it takes) as a reflection of humanity can be achieved.

Now that the historical and positional context of the rise of “normality” and ableism within society as a whole have been established, this next section will transition into a deeper exploration of how the social concept of “normal” has become so entrenched within the education system. The education system of the United States, as well as a more global view of education, will both be brought into this examination. When considering this next section, it is imperative to hold fast to the notion that the goal of education should never be to change a person to fit within the preconstructed systems. On the contrary, the systems as we know them must be dismantled and transformed to be truly inclusive of an array of bodies, brains, and ways of being in the world.

The Concept of “Normal” within Educational Settings

The fact of the matter is that students are people. And people, by nature, are equipped with a wide array of diverse bodies and brains, in conjunction with the natural variation of evolutionary theory. Yet, the modern-day education system seems to overlook many forms of variation present in the students enrolled in this system, as evidenced by the one-size-fits-all approach to formal education. One obvious way in which the education system perpetuates ableism is through the exclusion of individuals with certain disabilities from the general education process. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2020), while the proportion of students with some form of disability in a general education classroom has improved over the past twenty years, still only 17% of students with intellectual disabilities and 14% of students with multiple disabilities spend the majority of their school day in a general education classroom. While the recognition that neurodiverse students may not learn their best in

a traditional classroom setting, a critical disabilities studies approach would push for a classroom setting to move away from “tradition,” and all the historical and cultural inequities that comprise the establishment of the traditional classroom.

More covert forms of ableism that excludes students with disabilities from full participation in the educational process appear through multiple mechanisms present in the general education classrooms even when differently-abled students are allowed to learn in these spaces. A short sample of these exclusionary mechanisms include: the spatial constructions of classrooms; physical and behavioral requirements for students; representation in the versions of history and literature presented; the use of standardized tests to measure intelligence; and the disciplinary measures present. To further elaborate on these exclusionary components, spatial constructions includes everything from the architectural plan of a classroom or school, if there are available ramps for wheelchair users, enough room to navigate between rows of desks, enough space for autistic students or those overwhelmed by close proximity to others to learn comfortably, among many additional possible factors. Physical and behavioral requirements refer to expectations of students to sit still all day, stay seated in a small uncomfortable desk chair, remain quiet at all times, and speak only when it is their turn. Representation includes whose versions of history are being shared, who wrote the textbooks being utilized, and who the characters and authors are that show up in literature presented to the class. The analysis portion of this thesis takes a deep dive into the issue of representation, through analyzing specific examples of disability children’s books, and assessing these texts’ effectiveness (or lack thereof) in promoting full inclusion of differently-abled students.

One of the earliest standardized tests that gained widespread circulation was the Intelligence Quotient (IQ) test developed by the white Frenchman Alfred Binet in the early

1900s (Fletcher, 2009). The IQ test was originally utilized to test white male soldiers, but by the 1920s and 30s, the standardized tests of SAT and ACT found their way into schools (Fletcher, 2009). The roots of the formation of these tests come with many issues -- as they were developed for and utilized primarily for white males (and in the education system -- rich white straight able-bodied property-owning males) for many of the preliminary years these tests were in circulation. Therefore, the standards imposed by standardized tests still cater to this subset of the population today. Secondly, standardized tests only measure a very specific subset of intelligence. Indeed, of Gardener's (1983) Theory of Multiple Intelligences, standardized tests only test for linguistic and logical-mathematical skills, largely ignoring the seven other forms of intelligence. Gardner offered his own insight into the disconnect between the mandated curriculums and standardized tests employed by schools and the many forms of intelligences: "the idea of a number of relatively independent cognitive abilities is not itself daunting. What is daunting is the notion that one should therefore change one's pedagogy, curriculum, or means of assessment" (p. 60, as cited in Phillips, 2010, p. 5).

In terms of discipline, discipline has unfortunately become what is utilized to punish a student who does not conform to the ableist, normed approach present in all of these aforementioned restrictive standards. As Erevelles (2011) puts it on page 66, "even though educational contexts teem with diverse bodies, traditional policy analysis prefers to focus on outcomes and standards, rather than having to deal with unruly, messy, unpredictable, and taboo bodies." I would argue the same could be said about the "unruly, messy, unpredictable, and taboo" brains of neurodiverse students.

As Mooney (2019) states on page 58, "Schools are designed for the middle of the bell curve." Unfortunately, the "normalizing" practices and standards of society have conditioned us

as a society to react with an underlying element of fear when confronted with difference. This fear is exhibited through exclusion and segregation of those who do not fall within the “middle of the bell curve,” as often plays out within the classroom setting. However, the roots of this fear response extend much deeper than simply the education system; they are intertwined within many of the scaffolds upon which our societal systems as we know them stand. As Erevelles (2011) indicates:

When brought face to face with this “unruly body” (Erevelles, 2000), humanism’s only defense is exclusion -- an exclusion that can only be achieved by a strict adherence to normative concepts that are narrowly defined, and that, if challenged, would topple the entire edifice on which liberal individualism and capitalism is erected (p. 152).

These “narrowly defined” “normative concepts” manifest themselves through the labeling process that is so integral to the formal education system. Erevelles (2011) argues that the modern-day education system in the United States and across many other cultures, is based on the goal of productivity within a capitalistic landscape. Moreover, social and economic measurements of status are inextricably linked to the definitions of success or productivity within this framework. The confining interpretation of “success” is also referenced by Halberstan (2011), who notes the inherent privilege that positions people coming from certain backgrounds to fit into pathways to “success” much easier than others. Erevelles (2011) goes on to reference the standards imposed on schools across the country by the nationwide curriculum, strategies for the evaluation of students’ achievement such as standardized tests, and the unequal distribution of educational resources (moderated by race, class, and ability) as specific examples displaying inherent disparities in measurements of “productivity” of the educational process.

Additional measurement tools should also be considered for their complicity in perpetuating unequivocal standards which privilege certain students over others. For example, if all tests for a class are constructed and administered in a similar manner (such as all multiple choice, or all writing-based tests), the method chosen upholds a certain type of learner over a student who may learn and express themselves in better ways. To add onto this point, a classroom culture based on rote memorization and regurgitation of information does not allow much room for collaboration between different types of learners, or between students and teachers. Instead, this type of model re-emphasizes the “no-questions-asked” authoritative position of the teacher, where students have less opportunities to think critically or form their own opinions about a subject. The lack of critical thinking afforded to students is a component of the socialization process of the educational system which can harmfully ingrain narrow definitions of success and productivity into students that they will carry with them for the rest of their lives. Titchkosky (2007) points to disability as an “interpretive issue” (p. 9). The interpretation of disability as a problem or lack that impedes disabled students from being “successful” originates from the social and cultural conditions which lead to how individuals (and specifically students) make meaning of the world around them.

Brint et al. (2001) present five different levels through which socialization messages can enter the primary education classroom. The levels of socialization include interactions initiated by teachers, the curriculum presented, daily classroom routines, extracurricular programs offered, and rituals that are enforced (Brint et al., 2011). These levels presented are arguably not the only ways for the socialization process to present itself within an educational setting. However, the analysis conducted by Brint et al. (2011) does indicate the multifaceted channels present to introduce either harmful or productive messages within a classroom setting. Erevelles

(2011) and McGuire (2016) both note that the educational process is oftentimes utilized as an assembly line of sorts in the production of “good citizens.”

If students do not conform to the narrow set of expectations placed upon them in order to attain this arbitrary standard of good citizenship, which will supposedly lead them to success and productivity later in life, the consequence is often harsh disciplinary measures. Any transgression outside the expectations of “normalcy” can result in the discipline of a child. There are countless examples of students’ behaviors that could yield punishment when education takes the form of this assembly line. To name just a few: the inability to sit still for the eight long hours of a traditional school day within the United States from grades K-12, trouble staying quiet or focused during an extensive lecture, or even the refusal or struggle to read aloud in front of the class if called on by the teacher (which could stem from anything from social anxiety to dyslexia). All of these examples take on characteristics of the medical model of disability, a model which pathologizes the disabled individual, as opposed to critiquing the systems and structures in place that create conditions that exclude the individual in question.

While the intentions of educators in carrying out all of these aforementioned disciplinary practices may be to manage a consistent, orderly classroom, each one of these practices comes with the assumption that all students possess similar ways of thinking, learning, and expressing themselves. However, this assumption could not be farther from the reality. The fact of the matter is that students with ADHD may be unable to sit still for long periods of time or remain quiet during a lengthy lecture. Students with social anxiety may experience a great deal of stress over the prospect of having to read aloud. Students with dyslexia may be physically unable to get through the overwhelming jumble of letters on the page in front of them. Students with autism

may find certain elements of a traditionally constructed classroom over-stimulating or overwhelming from a sensory perspective.

These are just a few examples of the multifaceted ways of being that individual students carry with them into any space they enter, including a classroom. Unfortunately, many of these behaviors are not understood as individual differences, but instead, disruptions to the “normal” flow of the classroom, which result in disciplinary measures. Foucault (1995) calls out the concept of discipline as a mechanism that drives the reproduction of historical power structures. These power structures further the “constant division between the normal and the abnormal” that is reinforced by “a whole set of techniques and institutions for measuring, supervising and correcting the abnormal” (Chapter 3).

Not only do these disciplinary measures stifle individual creativity and uniqueness in a classroom setting, but they also can lead to more severe consequences later on in life for students who are continually disciplined and dismissed as disruptive and misbehaved. Erevelles (2011) and Mooney (2019) provide statistics which illustrate the long-term implications of such repeated disciplinary actions against students who learn differently. Mooney (2019) points out that 41% of states in the United States do not have any guidelines for restraint or seclusion (as disciplinary measures of students in public schools), with a staggering 90% of states allowing restraints against students when teachers deem it necessary. Additionally, stark disciplinary disparities in schools exist between students with defined disabilities and other students, with these disparities translating into later stages of life (Mooney, 2019). 2013-2014 data from the U.S. Government Office of Accountability indicates that students with disabilities only comprise approximately 12% of the students in grades K-12, but over 25% of suspensions and expulsions, as well as 30% of referrals to the police (Jacobson, 2018).

Mooney (2019) cites the Ruderman Family Foundation's report indicating that HALF of police shootings in the United States have occurred against individuals with physical or cognitive differences of some kind. The School To Prison Pipeline can be partially blamed for this trend; when law enforcement officers are present in schools, disciplinary measures can hold much more severe consequences that extend far beyond the walls of the school building. Erevelles (2011) notes that these disparities in recognition and accommodation of differences also permeate into the workforce, with 30% of disabled people who are employed living in poverty, and nondisabled adults who are within the common working age in the United States earning more than DOUBLE the annual income of disabled adults (as cited in Turpin, 1977). Ableist structures are embedded in the healthcare system as well, with approximately 33% of adults with disabilities not having access to a regular healthcare provider, and another 33% of adults with disabilities living with untreated health needs due to the extensive costs associated with treatment (CDC, 2020). Additionally, individuals with disabilities are at a much higher risk than nondisabled adults to experience unemployment, abuse, or hate crimes throughout their lifetimes (Mooney, 2019).

These disparities are alarming and extensive and highlight just how serious the lasting ramifications of recurring discipline and segregation of differently-abled students within a school setting can truly be. Also important to note is the intersectionality inherent to disciplinary disparities in the education system that exist along lines of race, class, gender, socioeconomic status, and many other identity-based factors. As one example, while Black students only made up approximately 15.5% of U.S. public school students in 2013-2014, they accounted for 39% of suspension cases (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2018). When students possess multiple marginalized identities (for example, Black or Brown student with a disability, or a

queer student with a disability), the disparities in discipline are even further compounded. Erevelles (2011) even explains that the concept of “citizenship,” as referenced earlier in this section, is an inherently intersectional concept in the sense that the structures of society, the economy, and the workforce have historically excluded marginalized groups from the full rights of citizenship -- a trend that clearly permeates into the educational sector as well. To put it bluntly, ableist ideologies that seek to categorize, discipline, and segregate are truly “a matter of life and death” (McGuire, 2016, p. 102).

Primary Education as a Starting Point

From a social psychological standpoint, the power relations mentioned in the above section are reinforced by the dynamic of outsiders and insiders in any social setting. These power dynamics are harnessed and maintained through multiple social psychological avenues such as stigma, fundamental attribution error, and social identity theories (Fine, 2019).

Stigma is defined by the American Psychological Association (2020) as “the negative social attitude attached to a characteristic of an individual that may be regarded as a mental, physical, or social deficiency.” Stigmas formed about individuals with disabilities therefore likely stem from societal messages grounded in a medical model approach that present disability as deficit. Moreover, these stigmas are linked to social disapproval which “can lead unfairly to discrimination against and exclusion of the individual” (APA, 2020). Stigmas and biases go hand in hand, as a bias is defined as “a tendency, inclination, or prejudice toward or against something or someone” that is “often characterized as stereotypes about people based on the group to which they belong and/or based on an immutable physical characteristic they possess” (Psychology Today, 2021). In this way, a stigma can be seen as a collective negative bias that has found its way into society. Implicit biases, which are based upon the “societal input that escapes conscious

detection” (Psychology Today, 2021) are especially harmful, as these biases often go unchecked and manifest themselves in a variety of ways that perpetuate the problems inherent to an ableist framework. Teachers’ biases can be observed through inequitable education practices against differently-abled students, while able-bodied or neurotypical students’ implicit biases can appear as avoidance of interaction with their differently-abled peers.

The fundamental attribution error of social psychology involves overestimating “the degree to which an individual’s behavior is determined by [their] abiding personal characteristics, attitudes or beliefs and, correspondingly, to minimize the influence of the surrounding situation on that behavior” (APA, 2020). By this definition, the fundamental attribution error can lead to reliance on the medical model of disability, when those in power over-attribute an individual’s struggles to their disability as a deficit, as opposed to critiquing situational and environmental characteristics that cause this discrepancy. In a classroom setting, the authoritative figures may be teachers, principals or school administrators who over-attribute differently-abled students’ lack of adherence to classroom “norms” to rebellious actions of the students as opposed to issues with the structure of the classroom “norms” in question. The fundamental attribution error can be especially dangerous when it is passed on from authority figures in school settings to able-bodied and neurotypical students, who can perpetuate an adherence to the one-size-fits-all model of education.

Social identity theory refers to the sense of alignment with a group which can enhance self-esteem while contributing to a preference for the “ingroup” over the “outgroup” (APA, 2020). The human aspect of the need to belong is expressed through the social identity theory through a deep want to be part of the so-called ingroup. This can arise in friend groups, partners chosen for class work, and many other channels present within a classroom.

I bring up all of these aspects of social psychological theory, because the primary level of education is a time period in many students' lives when they are beginning to develop social relationships with other students, and better understand their place in a social world. As a result, primary school is a time period when stigmas, fundamental attribution errors, and social identity theories often begin to take hold. As a result, students' biases and schemas about the world often begin to become solidified during this phase of their educational journey. A schema is defined as "a collection of basic knowledge about a concept or entity that serves as a guide to perception, interpretation, imagination, or problem solving" (APA, 2020). In essence, schemas are "mental file cabinets" that individuals use to make sense of the world around them. As described in the previous section of this literature review, schools are a central site for the socialization of "citizens" (see Erevelles, 2011), which hold immense potential in providing messages that impact students many years down the line. Since the time in which primary schooling occurs is such an impressionable age in children's lives, the material teachers are providing their students with, the histories they are teaching them, the reasons presented for disciplinary actions, and the opportunities students do or do not have to engage with difference during these years can hold lasting and powerful implications.

This is why inclusion of those with different abilities in the educational process, especially at this age, is so incredibly important. If students are able to engage with difference as a natural entity that is absorbed into their schemas about the world around them, this should lead to greater acceptance later on in their lives. However, if exclusionary methods of teaching are introduced at this time in students' educational careers, the door is opened for views of differences as deficits and a fear of the "abnormal" to work their way into students' biases and views of the social identities of themselves and their peers. These biases and schemas formed at

an early age pave the groundwork for expansion upon problematic ideals and perpetuation of fear of difference marked by exclusion later on in children's lives. The gravity that the perilous crossroads of inclusion and exclusion presents for primary school students both with and without disabilities, both those students that fall within and outside the "norm", must be acknowledged. Not only is it necessary for students without disabilities to have the opportunities to learn from those who are different than them in order to practice inclusion, acceptance, and growth in their own lives, but it is also essential for differently-abled students to understand that their differences are not weaknesses but instead opportunities to offer something unique to the world.

When primary schools practice exclusion, they further constrain the circle of the "ever-exclusionary space of human" (see McGuire, 2016, p. 102). This exclusion can take the form of self-contained classrooms for students with disabilities, lack of resources for students who need some sort of assistive technology to learn best, inequitable grading standards, disproportionate disciplinary measures, lack of representation of people with similar identities in class materials, and ignorance of the voices and needs of differently-abled students in conducting classes. While these are only some of the many examples in which students with different ways of learning and expressing themselves are excluded in the classroom on a day-to-day basis, they provide insights into the numerous ways in which a rhetoric of ableism has rooted itself in the formal education system.

Beginning the process of labeling and exclusion at a young age sets the stage for a whole realm of instances of structural violence to be imposed on individuals with different brains and bodies as they progress through their lives. Fine (2019) describes how the normalized hegemonic structures established in society can manifest themselves in violent and even fatal manners if an ableist rhetoric is preserved in classrooms. In essence, an ableist framework can be utilized to

justify a whole range of horrific actions, practices, and systems that oppress difference and uplift normativity (Fine, 2019, as referenced in Dunn, 2019). Examples of the continuation of structural violence after individuals exit the formal education system include vast disparities in police brutality, housing opportunities, and the employment market for people with disabilities in comparison to the able-bodied population (Fine, 2019).

Intersectionality

When engaging in these discussions about the disparities in a wide array of societal systems, disparities which stem from biases and schemas often established at a primary education age, it is also essential to consider issues of intersectionality. As touched upon in prior sections of this thesis, no individual holds just one identity at a time. Therefore, individuals who possess multiple marginalized identities experience exponentially more opportunities for discrimination and exclusion from a space of “normality” in a historically racist, classist, ableist, sexist culture. As illustrated in the previous section, future prospects are limited on multiple levels for individuals who may possess, for example, an intellectual disability in addition to being a Person of Color. Moreover, under-resourced countries and communities are more likely to experience higher prevalences of disabilities, as well as less support for disabled individuals -- in both the education system and access throughout society as a whole (World Health Organization, 2011). In the words of Lorde (1982): “There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives” (as cited in Fine, 2019, p. 980).

In this way, when examining the issue of ableism in society, we cannot ignore how racism, xenophobia, homophobia, transphobia, and multiple other forms of structural violence interact to comprise the brokenness present in society. The historical structures in American society in particular have provided the guise of “rugged individualism” or “pulling oneself up by

your bootstraps” without acknowledging that some members of society were not even provided these metaphorical boots with straps they may use to pull themselves up with. As Halberstam (2011) puts it, “Indeed believing that success depends on one’s attitude is far preferable to Americans than recognizing that their success is the outcome of the tilted scales of race, class, and gender” (p. 3).

For these reasons, a complete examination of any system in society (with the education system being at the forefront of this examination), must be from a historical and international perspective, that reveals the extensive roots of oppression that traverse across both time and space (Erevelles, 2011). In order to reimagine forms of resistance to oppressive systems such as the education system, it will take organization and collective action that uplifts the voices of those coming from differential marginalized identities. As Erevelles states, “At the intersections of race, class, gender, sexuality, and disability, we find that a collective resistance is more fruitful than individualized forms of resistance” (p. 120).

What if We Changed the Narrative?

The previous sections of this literature review point out the multitude of flaws within the current systems in society, in particular the education system, and how the power structures inherent to these systems operate to paint a false picture of the social construction of “normal.” I have highlighted many authors throughout this literature review who contest these conceptions of “normalcy”, and the destructive roles this rhetoric can have on shaping the formal education process of students both with and without disabilities. Many of the authors referenced are either disabled themselves or close to someone with a disability, which is essential in bringing the voices excluded from the “norm” to the forefront of the conversation about educational transformation. The main ways in which the formal education system perpetuates the inequities

for differently-abled individuals include through the suppression of exposure to difference, the lack of room for individuality within the education system, and the future implications that exclusion at an early age may hold for students later on in life.

However, as stated at the beginning of this review, my goal in critically examining the glaring flaws within the formal education system as it stands, is not only to point out the brokenness of our current education system. Instead, the goal in conducting this research and critically examining the evidence at hand is to be able to deconstruct the constraining categories and labels intrinsic to the current picture of school, in order to rebuild and create a better future for the next generation of students. A better future relies upon a different narrative, one based in a rejection of “normal” and a celebration of the ways in which humanity and creativity deviate from the exclusive, ableist norms that plague society. The World Health Organization (2011) notes that “Disability is part of the human condition -- almost everyone will be temporarily or permanently impaired at some point in life” (p. 7).

This recognition of the humanity and creativity intrinsic to the disabled experience corresponds with the words of Halberstam (2011) that “Under certain circumstances, failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing, may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world” (p. 2-3). These sentiments align with an anti-ableist, anti-normal, dismantling of the structures in place that preserve exclusion -- in society and the education system. An “unmaking, undoing, unbecoming” of the exclusionary practices currently situated within the primary education classroom is exactly what I envision for a society which celebrates “more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world.”

So what do I propose? Nothing more and nothing less than the inclusion of difference within the primary school classroom -- with the hope that this inclusion will extend into later years of education, and subsequently, later years of life, if it starts during this formative period of children's lives. Inclusion. Sounds simple enough, right? In theory, yes, in practice, unfortunately not -- as the previous sections of this literature review have referenced countless examples of the depth and strength of ableism within classrooms in the United States and worldwide. The oppressive social shackles exerted on each individual by the invisible "judges of normality" (see Mooney, 2019), are exactly why I believe inclusion must begin at the primary educational level, in order to reach children before they have already deeply internalized the arbitrary notions of "normal." The WHO proposed a series of recommendations in 2011 to improve the educational experience of students with disabilities, grounded in the awareness that "Including children with disabilities in education requires changes to systems and schools" (p. 15). Among the recommendations proposed include "more learner-centered approaches with changes in curricula, teaching methods and materials, and assessment and examination systems" (WHO, 2011, p. 15). The recognition of the systemic inequities embedded in education is the first step to dismantling and transforming the system.

Inclusion works. The contact hypothesis of social psychology, as proposed by Allport (1954), asserts that "under appropriate conditions, interpersonal contact is one of the most effective ways to reduce prejudice" (de Boer & Munde, 2015, p. 180). When inclusion of students with intellectual and cognitive differences is implemented from the beginning of the formal education process, students are more attuned to different forms of thought, expression, and being as part of the learning process. Moreover, if the home situations of some of these students is not conducive to promoting acceptance of difference, their everyday experiences in

the classroom with students who are different than them will help to disrupt the prejudices or biases that may be imposed on them by external environments. If primary school students can form schemas about the world that are contingent on the collaboration of individuals with diverse brains and bodies, they are more likely to carry these schemas with them into other areas of their lives.

While experiencing inclusion in practice is clearly important for the primary school students themselves, especially as they are forming their own ideas about the world and those around them, an inclusive model of education can hold important implications for parents and teachers as well. According to Yuke (1998), “as teachers implement inclusive programs and therefore get closer to students with significant disabilities, their attitudes might become more positive” (as cited in Avramidis & Norwich, 2002, p. 138). So even if teachers come into school settings with their own preconceived biases, the consistent contact of actually spending time with students with diverse abilities can work to disrupt and shift some of these internalized biases.

Similarly, de Boer and Munde’s (2015) study conducted in the Netherlands on parental attitudes associated with educational inclusion indicated that parents who had less experiences with students with disabilities were less likely to express support for inclusion. Conversely, parents who had more experience with diversity in terms of ability were more likely to support educational inclusion (deBoer & Munde, 2015). These findings provide further support for the power of the contact hypothesis in fostering better understanding and acceptance. This phenomenon of proximity to difference in prompting greater inclusion can be considered from a relational perspective as well. Educational environments that allow for the establishment of relationships between individuals possessing a variety of brains and bodies bring the importance of inclusion closer to home.

Let me introduce a hypothetical example to illustrate this phenomenon. A five-year-old whose best friend has a disability will be naturally inclined to protect their friend, advocate for their friend, listen to their friend's struggles and triumphs, and learn from their friend. In contrast, a five-year-old who was never allowed to have class with students with disabilities will be more likely to begin to establish their own preconceived biases and schemas about disabled students based not on fact but on an outside perception. These ungrounded biases cause harm when they lead to more exclusionary behaviors in their own lives.

The book *Why Johnny Doesn't Flap*, as examined in the analysis section of this thesis, instead provides an example of a friendship based on understanding and acceptance of difference between an autistic kid and his neurotypical friend. These friendships formed between differently-abled kids hold immense potential for transformative narratives that do not require "normality" as a prerequisite for belonging or personhood. In this way, I propose that we can truly begin to work to change the broken systems in society one child at a time.

Exposure to difference, especially at an early age, also combats a fear of difference. I believe that many of the discriminatory practices in our society which uplift an arbitrary norm, are fear-based, stemming from a lack of understanding. The whole basis of the neurodiversity movement encapsulates the acceptance of and celebration of differences, an acceptance and celebration that dispels the fear. As defined by Kapp et al. (2012), the neurodiversity movement "seeks to provide a culture wherein [neurodiverse] people feel pride in a minority group identity and provide mutual support in self-advocacy as community" (p. 60, as cited in Baker, 2011; Jaarsma & Welin, 2012; Jordan, 2010; Ortega et al., 2009). Similarly, Kaufman and Mooney (2020), point to the neurodiversity movement as "contesting the pathologizing of certain brains" [audio podcast]. Based on these definitions, the neurodiversity movement lends itself to the

recognition that variation in the brain is natural and provides opportunities for unique expressions of creativity and intelligence. Gardin (2001) postulates that, “It is likely that genius in any field is an abnormality,” pointing specifically to genetic connections between individuals on the autism spectrum and historical geniuses such as Einstein and Bill Gates to illustrate her point. This ideology rejects the structures that uphold the socially constructed notion of “normality” and contest a one-size-fits-all educational agenda.

Just as the contact hypothesis holds weight in relation to specific school settings, it also holds weight in the formation of self-perception, and of the perception of difference in everyday settings. This is displayed in the context of neurodiversity through the study conducted by Kapp et al. (2012) on 657 individuals with different relationships to autism. Key takeaways from this survey include that autistic people were more likely to have an awareness of the neurodiversity movement, as well as hold more positive views of autism as a facet of their identity (and not as something that needed to be cured or fixed). Taken together, these examples all point to the necessity of inclusion within educational settings, for enhanced learning opportunities for both students with disabilities through socialization with those students without disabilities, but also for the students without disabilities to learn from the “geniuses” with atypical brains or bodies.

Another important acknowledgement to make is that just because we may fit into a specific socially constructed “norm,” at this moment in time or space, if we look inward, every individual falls short of what is considered “normal” in some context or setting. As evidenced by the research presented throughout this literature review, some people fall much closer to the middle of the bell curve, as a result of their own privilege of being born into a specific identity or background -- a privilege that is deeply intertwined with the unequal power relations which are constantly at work in our society. But even individuals who fall into these “norms” in certain

aspects of their identity, may struggle with a mental health issue, or struggle to sit still in class. They may be far “below grade level” in one subject in school, or wrestle with insecurities about one aspect of their identity. Perhaps they are even fully considered “typically developing” at this point in time but will later be diagnosed with a chronic health condition which will move them outside this norm.

Mooney (2019) reflects on his own journey to understanding that no one fully fits within these narrow categories our society has constructed as “normal,” with the remark “I’ve learned that we are all temporarily bodies and minds moving in and out of states of ability and disability every day of our lives” (p. 206). The sooner we come to recognize this fact that our own bodies and minds are temporary entities, and that ability always exists on a multifaceted spectrum, the sooner we can begin to advocate for true inclusion -- in our society and our education system. This full inclusion is so difficult because it pushes back on historical conceptions of success and productivity, it deconstructs privilege, and it uplifts new voices. True inclusion involves embracing deviation from the educational “norms” because from these margins come the greatest incidences of creativity. After all, deviation from the “norm” is inherently human.

When considering ways to make the primary school classroom a more inclusive environment, the brainstorming of multiple grand schemes to foster inclusivity is an excellent first step. Yet policymakers, educators, and advocates for change must make sure the voices of those possessing atypical brains and bodies are the voices being amplified in any conversation directed towards change. McGuire (2016) criticizes the parent who thinks they are being the “good advocate,” when they are in actuality pathologizing atypical brains and bodies, in an effort to try to “fix” these individuals in some way. True advocacy does not separate the disability from the person but understands that the disability is an intrinsic part of personhood. McGuire’s

(2016) words ring true that “Without autism there is no autistic person. Without autism, there is no person” (p. 102). In this way, inclusive education cannot involve erasure or ignorance of disability, but instead acceptance of individuals that recognizes and respects disability as a way of being.

The spectrum and temporality of disability and ability also acknowledges that every student learns a little differently. For this reason, students who have been historically marginalized and excluded from the “norm,” should always receive the space to express their own educational needs and strengths in educational decisions being made. This is how the role of the “good advocate” that McGuire (2016) critiques is cut into -- through recognizing the autonomy of differently-abled students to be able to advocate for themselves.

Moreover, by allowing students to have a voice in the educational process, the model of education can move towards a more collaborative approach to learning. Here, teachers can begin to realize they have just as much to learn as they have to teach. Here, students are unafraid to ask for help or share their own struggles. In this collaborative space, primary school students can begin to understand that differences are not weaknesses, but instead areas of strength that make any community better. Sinclair (1993), a strong autistic self-advocate, explains that “The ways we relate are different. Push for the things your expectations tell you are normal, and you’ll find frustration, disappointment, resentment, maybe even rage and hatred. Approach respectfully, without preconceptions, and with openness to learning new things, and you’ll find a world you never could have imagined” (p. 2). This is the world I envision for future generations of students, a world I believe that begins with inclusion of the diverse range of abilities within primary school classrooms.

Analysis: Disability Children's Literature as a Mechanism for Inclusion

Drawing upon the framework of critical disability studies introduced in the previous Literature Review section of my thesis, and incorporating the related elements of social psychology, developmental psychology, and intersectionality, I wish to focus on one specific mechanism for promoting inclusion within the primary education classroom. While there are a variety of mechanisms through which inclusion can be incorporated into the curriculums and spaces present within the primary education landscape, and while there is a vast need for the entry of inclusion within multiple avenues (since there is a multifaceted issue of exclusion which needs to be addressed), I wish to look specifically at the mechanism of children's literature for the purposes of the analysis portion of this thesis project.

By narrowing in on this one entry point, I believe I can take more of a deep dive into the ways the social conception of "normal" is perpetuated through much of the children's literature currently within the primary education classroom. Through critically examining and analyzing two examples of primary grade level disabilities children's literature which falls short of truly representing students with disabilities, I hope to bring to light some of the structural problems embedded in much of the current literature. Conversely, by showcasing two examples of disabilities children's literature that promotes inclusion and the celebration of difference, I hope to provide the groundwork of what inclusive literature should look like. My hope is that this analysis can help primary educators in making their selections of literature for their classrooms, as well as provide a better understanding of the importance of representation in children's books -- to function as mirrors for students with disabilities and well as windows for students without categorized disabilities in the primary education classroom.

The Current Literary Landscape

Comparison of Statistics

The first issue at play is that despite the vast number of students with disabilities in the education system (around 7 million students in United States public schools (Schaeffer, 2020)), the available sample of disabilities children's literature is anything but vast. As an example of this fact, we can turn to a survey of 1,156 school librarians conducted by the School Library Journal on representation of disabilities in children's books. 62% of the librarians interviewed in this survey expressed that books featuring characters with disabilities were both in demand and hard to find within their own libraries. Similarly, 61% of these librarians indicated that books with neurodiverse characters were in high demand. The majority of these librarians (81% of those surveyed) expressed that it was "very important" to have access to diverse literature in their libraries (Cockcroft, 2019).

So, if these libraries expressed the need for books with diverse characters, specifically those with disabilities, why is actually finding books to feature in their collections so difficult? Part of it has to do with the simple lack of literature in the field that features disabled characters. The Cooperative Children's Book Center's 2019 Diversity Statistics revealed that only 3.4% of children's and young adult books received from United States book publishers in this year featured a main character with a disability (Tyner, 2020). The issue of finding inclusive literature for school libraries and classrooms is further compounded by the numerous issues inherent to much of the disability children's literature that is currently in circulation. This next section digs into some of the common issues with the ways in which disabled characters are portrayed in children's literature even when they appear.

Issues with Common Portrayals of Disabled Characters

Apart from the extensive need for the simple availability and volume of more disability children's literature, problems abound within much of the disability children's literature that currently exists for a primary grade audience. Well generally well-intentioned, many of the examples of literature intended to promote inclusion, unfortunately uphold ableist conceptions of "normality." Among the issues within the current realm of disability children's literature are: the need to "overcompensate" when crafting disabled characters; the narrative erasure of difference through attempts to "normalize" characters with disabilities; the lack of diversity within the disabilities represented and stories told; the intended audience of these stories; and the lack of representation of disabled authors.

Firstly, comes the need to effectively "overcompensate" for disabled characters in children's books. This problem holds severe implications because it relies on the supposition that somehow characters need to have something to make up for their disability, which again echoes the disability as deficit model that inclusive literature should work against. From the perspective of Mooney (2019), the uplifting of only people with disabilities who also demonstrate some kind of exceptional so-called "ability" connotes the idea that certain brains and bodies are prioritized over others. Intertwined with the idea of overcompensation is that of an "overcoming narrative," in which characters in a story are uplifted as succeeding *in spite* of their disability (Aho & Alter, 2018).

These messages can be harmful to children and effectively work against the use of inclusive literature for the promotion of inclusion and acceptance just as people are. By presenting disability as something that needs to be overcome, the idea is upheld that disabled individuals can only be accepted if they can come close enough to a certain "norm". This

harmful rhetoric obstructs a reader's view of the humanity intrinsic within disability and promotes a conditional form of acceptance and inclusion. As McGovern (2014) puts it, "We don't need to sell disability or put a polish on it. We need to show the humanity that lies beneath the difference" (p. 37).

Similar to the overcompensation technique of many authors of disability children's literature is what Aho and Alter (2018) term the "narrative erasure" of disability, in which disability is constructed as "an individualized problem that needs to be hidden" (p. 303). In this way, the inclusion of disability within children's literature is still operating underneath an ableist framework in which "disability is only superficially engaged" (p. 303). Examples of the narrative erasure of disability can occur in both the text and illustrations of children's picture books. This issue can occur in the text, when the words used in a book navigate around the issue of disability without overtly mentioning it. In this way, disability is not named, which functions to exhibit disability as some secret, as if there is some level of shame that comes with this facet of identity. The problem of narrative erasure can arise in the pictures when the images do not present embodied disabilities to the audience in their fullness. Aho and Alter (2018) cite examples of this narrative erasure of disability through illustrations by referencing picture books in which it is only revealed through illustrations at the very end of stories that characters are wheelchair users.

While most likely intended to promote inclusion, these types of books that utilize "narrative erasure" promote a very narrow form of inclusion that is based on the assumption that characters with disabilities can be included in spite of their disabilities. This assumption is problematic because it again stacks disabled individuals up against a norm and extends the inclusion by "normal" people as some sort of gift afforded to the disabled subject. In my estimation, inclusion should instead be all-encompassing, in the sense that people should be

included and accepted in all of their complexities, and that this should not be seen as an exception to the rule but as the standard. Narrative erasure also may paint a very unrealistic picture of the lived experience of disability, in the sense that by only revealing at the very end of the story that a child is a wheelchair user, for example, would ignore the daily barriers that may be faced by a wheelchair user, as a result of the faults within society that effectively “dis-able” those with divergent brains and bodies. Moreover, if disability is not named through the accompanying text of a picture book, the societal issues ever-present within an ableist society are not brought into the light.

Not only does much of the disability children’s literature currently represented in primary education classrooms present very narrow conceptions of inclusion, but it only further narrows these ideas of inclusion through the lack of diversity of disabilities represented in the literature. For example, Fritsch (2013) points to wheelchair-users as the poster child of sorts for the embodied experience of disability in much of the disability children’s books on the market (as cited in Aho & Alter, 2018). Moreover, the majority of characters with disabilities represented in children’s books published in the United States are white characters, which ignores the intersectionality of a multitude of other factors that can affect the daily experience and educational inequities that realistically impact individuals with disabilities (see Fritsch, 2013 & Leininger et al., 2010). Cockcroft (2019) echoes the need for a more expansive range of stories within the disability children’s literature framework. Even the books that feature characters with different intellectual abilities, as opposed to simply different physical abilities, mostly feature characters with autism, thus ignoring a whole range of other neurodiverse brains (Cockcroft, 2019).

Additionally, it is not only the characters themselves that lack representation, but it is also the authors. Much of the current children's literature written about disabilities is written by able-bodied authors, which makes it more difficult to accurately reflect the daily experiences of those who are differently-abled (Cockcroft, 2019). This may be in part due to the lack of diversity of ability represented within the publishing industry. The 2019 Diversity in Publishing Baseline Survey conducted by Lee and Low Books indicated that only 11% of people working in the publishing industry are reported as having a disability. Even within this 11%, the majority (45%) of these individuals defined their disability as a mental illness. While mental illness is an incredibly important issue to represent in the literature industry, this high proportion reveals the lack of intellectual, developmental, or multiple disabilities represented in the publishing scene (Lee & Low Books, 2020). The need for self-advocacy is essential within the disabilities landscape, as indicated by McGuire (2014), Mooney (2019), and Erevelles (2011). Disabled self-advocates are needed to cut into the uncritical advocacy work wherein the able-bodied advocate serves as "a defender of normalcy" (McGuire, 2014, p. 102). While the burden should never be on differently-abled individuals to share their stories with the world, their voices also should be amplified in the spheres they inhabit. One example of how this can be done is through greater representation of disabled authors in disability children's literature presented in primary education classrooms.

Not only are the authors of disability children's literature important, but so too is the intended audience that these authors are writing for. Pennell et al. (2018) explain how many of the books in the field were written to "explain the nature of disability to typically developing children" (p. 412). As a result, these stories may present patronizing messages about children with disabilities, without really offering the full inclusion that disability children's literature

should be focused on. An example of this discrepancy can be found in the distinction between autism awareness and autism acceptance (as mentioned in Cockcroft, 2019). Autism awareness corresponds with the idea of “raising the red flags of autism” that McGuire (2014) so heavily critiques. In contrast, autism acceptance does not seek to raise alarm or warning signs, but instead cultivates acceptance of the unique ways autistic people experience the world.

Unfortunately, the former tactic is more often mobilized, which reinforces the power dynamic that the nondisabled students who are “learning” about disability are often afforded in an educational space. Disabled individuals are not sat down and taught about ability in the same way in a classroom setting, as if it is simply another way of experiencing the world. Instead, disabled students are expected to conform to the ableist structures that make the educational experience more accessible for able-bodied and neurotypical students.

Additionally, these didactic texts for able-bodied and/or neurotypical children generally include “you/them language” which speaks to a certain intended audience while simultaneously segregating individuals with diverse brains and bodies as the proverbial “them” in question (Pennell et al., 2018). Aho and Alter (2018) call for a more critical examination of who is being written to and for in these children’s books, with the assertion that, “If we look closely, the moral and ethical message mainly relates to children without disabilities in whom educators assume they will need to develop more respectful attitudes” (p. 309). While there is certainly functionality of literature serving as “windows” into the lives of people who are different than oneself, there is also a great necessity for “mirrors” for differently abled students to be able to see themselves represented in the literature they are reading (Pennell et al., 2018). And when this representation occurs, it should be realistic and truly representative of the multifaceted ways of

being in the world, in a way that encourages inclusion not *in spite of*, but *because of* the humanness of difference.

Importance of Inclusive Children's Literature

The literature review portion of this thesis delved into the importance of primary education in the social and emotional development of children, especially in relation to how they interact with difference. Children's literature, as examined in this analysis portion of the thesis, is one specific element in the primary education classroom that holds extensive potential to either promote or disrupt inclusion and celebration of difference in this setting. As Aho and Alter (2018) note, inclusive literature can promote inclusive classrooms by providing students access to a variety of human experiences, which can aid in the emotional development of children in a primary education classroom. Disability literature that authentically portrays the lived experience of those with a diverse range of brains and bodies can help to work against any stereotypes or biases that students may have already started to construct and can instill instead a "politics of wonder" (see Titchkosky, 2011) in which difference is presented as a way of being to learn from instead of something to be feared (Aho & Alter, 2018, p. 304-305).

Moreover, Pennell et al. (2018) describe how inclusive children's literature can diversify spaces by serving as mirrors for students with disabilities who are not often represented in the literature, as well as windows for students who are overrepresented. These authors go on to reference the explanation of children's literature serving as "doors" (see Botelho and Rudman, 2009), in which students can form connections between their own experiences, and those of characters who come from different backgrounds or identities than themselves (Pennell et al., 2018). Aho and Alter (2018) point to the significance of children's books as a channel through which young students receive information about the spectrum of ability and disability. With this

significance in mind, it is essential that the literature that primary school children are being provided with can aid in helping students possessing any range of abilities and identities view diversity as a necessity. That is why disability children's books that act as "doors," in that they serve in "transporting the reader both into and out of everyday conditions" (Botelho & Rudman, 2009, as cited in Pennell et al., 2018), can be so important to the creation of positive perceptions of the range of disabilities -- for both abled and disabled students.

Proposed Goals of Inclusive Children's Literature

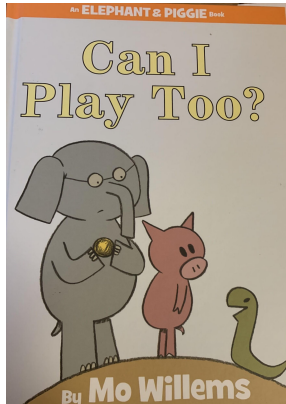
The current gaps in the children's literature present in primary schools can lead us to a set of goals for the disability children's literature that is desperately needed in these classrooms. Aho and Alter (2018) sum up the primary role of inclusive children's books, in that these stories should, "reimagine disability while remaining mindful of the lived experience in an ableist world" (p. 304). That is to say that disability children's literature should not ignore or erase the challenges and everyday realities of living with a disability in a world that is constructed for those who fall into a narrowly defined "norm." Neither should disability children's literature present disability as something to be overcome, feared, or changed. Instead, this genre should represent the whole spectrum of ability and disability that is an intrinsic part of being human, with the recognition that existing within an able body or brain is truly a temporary state of being (Pennell et al., 2018). As Pennell et al. (2018) so clearly assert, every child deserves to "find themselves within the pages of a book" (p. 411).

Critical Analysis of Four Disability Children's Literature Texts

Introduction to Texts and Reasons for Analysis

After delving into elements that can contribute to either a detrimental form of disability children's literature or a truly inclusive representation of disability in children's literature, it only seems fit to provide specific examples of each kind of text. In this following section, I will analyze four texts total -- two of these examples of faux inclusion, and two of them good representations of inclusive literature for children with disabilities. The thought process behind choosing these specific examples of children's literature was to illustrate a range of types of stories (in terms of characterization, illustration style, book length, and authors), while maintaining the common grade level of books that could find their way into a primary grade classroom (K-3). I also chose all books that had been published in the past 25 years, in order to maintain a relatively consistent time period. I researched and read through many different examples of primary grade level children's literature before settling on the four texts I chose.

BOOK 1: Can I Play Too? By Mo Willems



Growing up, I loved Elephant and Piggie books. I thought they were fun characters, with cute illustrations, and the books were easy for me to read with my siblings. Indeed, the author and illustrator Mo Willems, is known for his playful style, use of non verbals through illustrations, and a certain joy that comes with childhood and can be derived from the animal characters who take on human characteristics. The book *Can I Play Too?* by Mo Willems tells the story of Piggie's and Elephant's game of catch and the process of trying to include Snake in this game after Snake asks the simple question of, "Can I play too?" (p. 8-9).

In theory, books such as *Can I Play Too?* are intended to promote inclusion. Unfortunately, any materials constructed within an ableist society hold the risk of not extending full inclusion. This story sadly falls into that trap. At first glance, this story promotes the message of Piggie and Elephant finding a creative way to include Snake. To myself, as a kid growing up enshrined within the social construction of normal, the manner in which Snake becomes part of the game seemed fun and even humorous. However, when examining this piece of children's literature through a critical disability studies lens, the inclusion extended by Piggie and Elephant is surface-level at best, and derogatory and demeaning at worst.

Firstly, come the reinforced social roles intrinsic to any "norm" that appear in the decision by Piggie and Elephant to play catch. As expressed on pages 6-7, "I will throw."

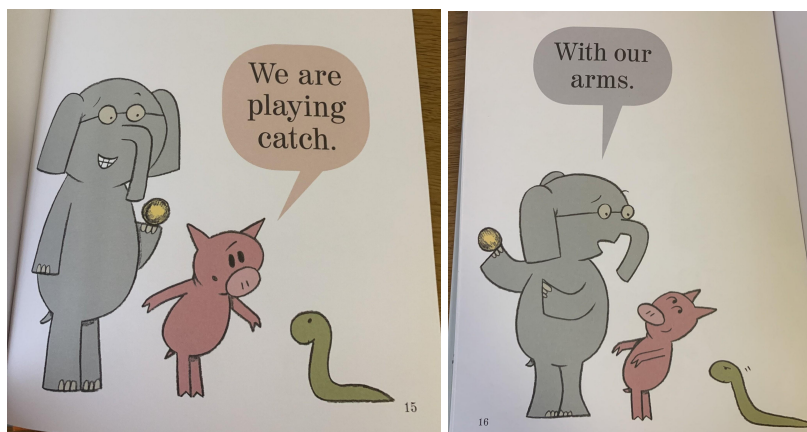
(Elephant) and “I will catch!” (Piggie). Throwing and catching are Piggie’s and Elephant’s pre-established roles in this context, just as sitting still, listening, and learning in a specific way are roles enmeshed in the ableist context of the education system. Catch is an intrinsically ableist game in the sense that it assumes those engaging in the game have functioning arms and hands they are able to throw and catch with. Moreover, the game of catch requires a certain amount of motor development, which excludes the “atypically developing individual” as referenced by McGuire (2014) from full participation in this endeavor. The issue of intersectionality also rises to the forefront of the discussion when considering the cultural context, as catch is a historically American game which assumes an understanding of these cultural rules.

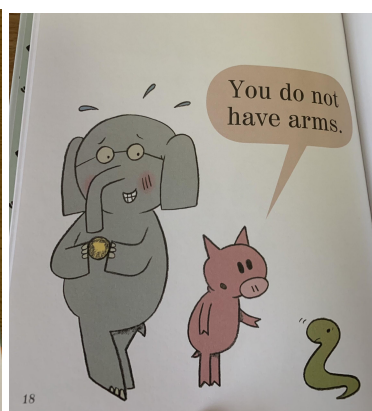
Snake enters the scene on pages 8-9 with the inquiry of “Can I play too?” The following two pages deliver a sense of discomfort to the reader, as the textless illustrations show confused looks from Piggie and Elephant at Snake followed by quizzical expressions aimed at each other. Willems’ technique of multiple pages without words functions to draw out the prolonged suspense of the moment. The characters’ expressions throughout this period of suspense demonstrate a lack of understanding of why Snake is asking to join their game when he does not have the means to play within this normalized construction of how the game of catch is supposed to be played. A further analysis of these expressions from a critical disability studies lens indicates a level of ignorance of the plight of Snake that stems from Piggie’s and Elephant’s own privileges. Piggie and Elephant have never had to think about another way of playing catch, as characters with arms and motor skills that function in a certain manner.

As the response of silence from Elephant and Piggie drags on, Snake’s hopeful smile melts to a hurt expression as he hangs his head. As a reader, I cannot help but feel for Snake. The looks between Piggy and Elephant as displayed in the illustrations give off emotions of

judgment, as well as conveying the hypervisibility of Snake (in all of his difference). These illustrations tie back to Erevelles' (2011) assertion that disabled bodies are simultaneously invisibilized and hypervisibilized, in the sense that they are excluded from certain facets of society while also being judged for the ways they do not conform to these narrow spaces which have been socially constructed.

Snake breaks this uncomfortable silence with the disheartened query of, “You do not want to play with me?” most likely familiar to his lived experience outside the exclusionary spaces of the norm (p. 12). In this way, the burden of giving voice to what has been invisibilized, falls on the differently-abled character. While Elephant and Piggie assure Snake that they do want to play with Snake, there is a continued “But...” existent within their answer (p. 13-14), a “But...” that continues to “other” Snake from the exclusionary confines of “normality.” This hesitation by Elephant and Piggie leads into their patronizing description to Snake that they “are playing catch... with our arms... you do not have arms” (p. 15-18). Throughout this interchange, the illustrations which present Elephant and Piggie as visibly sweating, grimacing, and blushing indicate their understanding that they are effectively excluding Snake through the very game they are so insistent on continuing.





(images from p. 15-18)

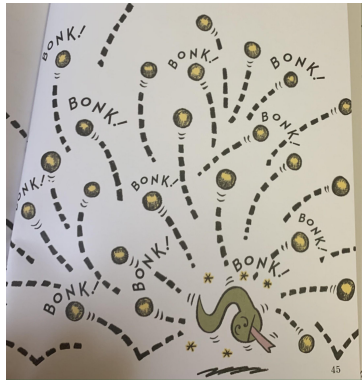
It is so difficult for Elephant and Piggie to put a name to the difference between them and Snake, and to call it out as difference. These characters' lack of acknowledgement of Snake's obvious differences can be viewed as a form of "narrative erasure" of disability (see Aho & Alter, 2018). Understanding of and celebration of difference should be the goals of engagement with those exhibiting a diverse range of brains and bodies, yet neither of these things can happen without first recognizing that individuals learn and experience the world in different ways. On the flip side, I do like Snake's response to the patronization he experiences, where Snake acts surprised as if his bodily difference is news to him. In this scene Snake's mock surprise is indicated by the italicized large print words "I do not have arms!?!)" (p. 20), followed by an illustration of him running away screaming "Aaaaaaagh!!!" (p. 21-22). The running away and screaming is difficult to interpret, as this tactic is certainly utilized by Snake to mock Piggie and Elephant. However, we must also understand as readers that individuals who are excluded from the norm their whole lives may attempt to overcompensate in some way in order to receive a level of acceptance. Mooney (2019) speaks to his own experience of overcompensating with wit and humor in an attempt to divert the attention away from his perceived "deficits" that come with his neurodiverse brain. Snake's tactic here could potentially be seen as a form of overcompensation. However, Snake returns to the scene laughing hysterically at Piggie's and

Elephant's ignorance exhibited by their clear alarm when Snake runs away, with the obvious statement of "I know I do not have arms. I am a snake."

Following this interchange, Piggie and Elephant do attempt to include Snake; however, their inclusion is still within the framework of the current social structure they are situated within -- the game of catch. Without attempting to alter the game on Snake's behalf, Piggy and Elephant instead try to fit Snake within the activity and space that is already present. First, they try to throw to Snake, then they try to add more balls to the mix, but both of these attempts end in Snake getting hit with the ball, an experience of pain only amplified by the repetition of the sound effects of "BONK!" (p. 30-45). These steps of operating only within the framework available to them could be seen as steps indicative of a fake sort of inclusion -- the kind of inclusion that is unfortunately employed in educational settings in many cases. For example, students who have developmental or intellectual disabilities are often sent to a "resource room" which is ironic in the sense that many of these resource rooms are devoid of the same level of resources, funding, or materials provided to the students learning in a traditional educational setting.

As Piggie and Elephant try multiple times to put the ideas present within their own limited perspective to work, they fail over and over again. But their failure to effectively include Snake does not hurt them within their own positions of privilege; instead, it just continues to hurt Snake. As Piggie and Elephant add more balls to the mix, Snake just gets hit over and over again. The constant bombardment of the balls thrown at him could be viewed as the constancy of microaggressions and ableist rhetoric that continually plague students with different brains or bodies. In this way it is not the first, second, or even third hit that is the breaking point, but rather the cumulative effect of the constant beratement that stems from an ableist society. This concept

is personified in the battered and bruised Snake featured on page 45 with eyes swirled into spirals and the repetition of the word “BONK!” as ball after ball ricochets off his body.



(image from p. 45)

Despite that whole mess, pages 52-53 of the book are actually really promising because this is when Piggie and Elephant appear to have a change of heart. Before Snake has the chance to depart the scene, Piggie adamantly proclaims that, “You are our friend! WE WILL *ALL* PLAY CATCH!” Willems’ books often include letters of different sizes in order to convey different levels of excitement. By employing these all capitalized letters in this scenario, emphasis behind Piggie’s decision is provided. Piggie’s expression of friendship and dedication to make the game work are admirable; unfortunately, the means through which Piggie and Elephant make the game work are less than satisfactory from a critical disability studies lens.

Instead, ableist systems are upheld, when Snake *becomes* the ball, whom Piggy and Elephant throw back and forth. Snake has effectively become an object within the system of the game of catch, which dehumanizes an animal character with human characteristics. While he was excluded from participating in the game entirely before, the image of Snake being thrown through the air by able bodied characters could arguably be worse in that the discriminatory system has effectively taken ownership of Snake, as he is at the same time being edged out from “the ever-exclusionary space of human” (McGuire, 2016, p. 102). In this way, the other characters attempt to change Snake to fit the system, as opposed to changing the system to make

it accessible to Snake. All the while, Piggie and Elephant fail to recognize the problems with the game in perpetuating exclusion of individuals with certain bodies. They instead view this oppression as a form of inclusion.

Thinking back to the influence of the years of primary education in creating messages of socialization (Brint et al., 2001), and the way these socialization messages can permeate into the way children grow up to understand the process of “becoming a [normative] citizen” (see Erevelles, 2011), examples of children’s literature such as *Can I Play Too?* can hold negative consequences. This piece of children’s literature fits more within the medical model of pathologizing disabilities or differences, as opposed to the social model of examining the problems in society that effectively dis-able those with bodies or brains that diverge from the socially constructed norm, or a critical disability studies lens which extends even further to understand the historical and intersectional roots of these societal structures. Since the only way Elephant and Piggie include Snake is within the social framework of the game, they have already created that is non-inclusive of Snake’s differences, Snake is thus included in a demeaning manner. The message of creativity in methods of inclusion and the assertion that Snake is their friend, are elements of this story that hold potential; however, the potential of this story is unfortunately overshadowed by the pursuit to “normalize” Snake into a broken system.

BOOK 2: Susan Laughs By Jeanne Willis



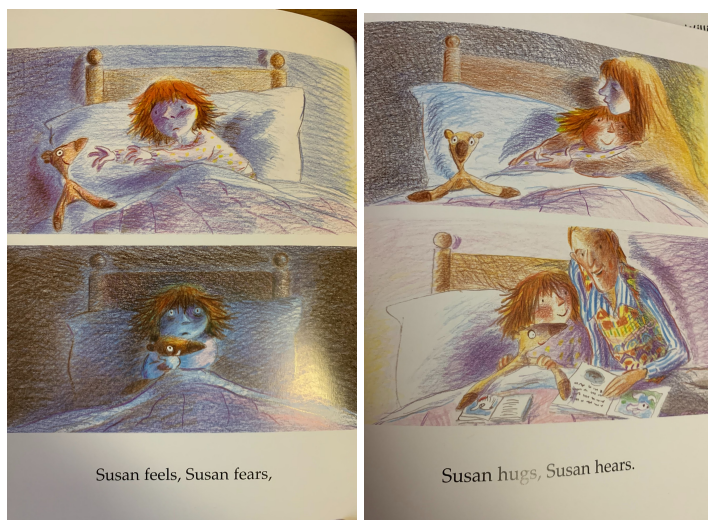
The book *Susan Laughs*, written by Jeanne Willis and illustrated by Tony Ross is intended to promote inclusion of children who are differently-abled. In essence, this book describes the day-to-day activities that the main character, Susan, engages in. Each page includes a new sentence about something that Susan does, with impressive illustrations accompanying the words on each page. Unfortunately, similar to the Piggie and Elephant story, this book is also directed towards an able-bodied audience. As opposed to having Susan narrate the story, her daily activities are instead reported from an outsider perspective. This contrasts with McGuire's (2014) push for disabled self-advocates and creates a space where Susan's lived experience can be misinterpreted or misreported.

Moreover, Susan's disability is treated as something of a secret throughout the duration of this book. It is not revealed until the very end of the story that Susan is a wheelchair user, through the illustration on the last page of the book. The illustrations on every page prior to this one show Susan participating in activities without her wheelchair, which unfortunately paints a false picture of the disabled experience. To ignore the structural barriers that would prevent a wheelchair user from engaging in all of the activities that Susan does in this story is problematic. Also similar to the Piggie and Elephant story, Susan is only included within the social and structural frameworks already present. While Susan is not objectified in the same way Snake is when he becomes the ball in *Can I Play Too?*, Susan's physical difference is not voiced in the

same way as Snake's is. In this sense, the inclusion of Susan is unrealistic to her actual lived experience. Consequently, the hegemony of the norm is upheld, and power dynamics that prioritize able-bodied people are reinforced. Moore et al. (2008) cite the necessity of analyzing these power dynamics from a critical perspective, in order to push back against the ableist systems in society, a perspective which is sadly not utilized in this book.

While I wish to delve into the problems inherent with the portrayal of Susan as separate from her disability, I first wish to highlight two positive messages that are communicated in *Susan Laughs*. The first positive message is the range of emotions and behaviors that Susan expresses. The message that it is okay to have good days and bad days, positive and negative emotions, and that these emotions are a form of expressing humanity, is a beautiful message. Erevelles (2011) may push back on this notion with the assertion that humanity is not based on the capability of feeling or expressing certain emotions, to which I would certainly agree. However, the fact that Susan is portrayed as someone who is "good" and "bad," as well as "happy" and "sad" (p. 5-6), steers the story away from overcompensating for Susan's disability by painting her as a perfect or exemplary child in other regards.

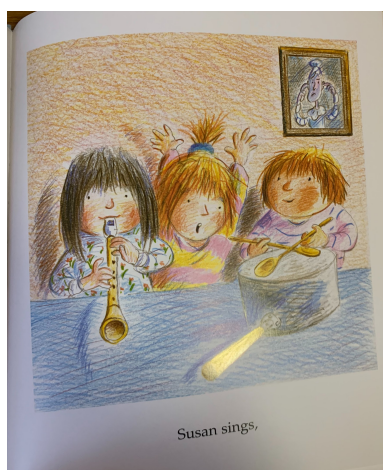
Similarly, on pages 26-27, "Susan feels, Susan fears, Susan hugs, Susan hears." These textual phrases are each accompanied by an illustration of Susan in her bed, with her facial expressions conveying these various emotions -- emotions that are both positive and negative in nature.



(images from p. 26-27)

Mooney (2019) emphasizes the danger of an inclusion that is dependent upon the differently-abled individual displaying exceptionalities in other contexts, as this form of inclusion assumes that to be accepted one has to compensate for their differences in other ways. This societal expectation of overcompensation for disabilities contains undertones that to achieve what able-bodied individuals are achieving, disabled people have to work harder, be better, and do more than the average “normal” person. The fact that the book *Susan Laughs* does not present the reader with a perfect child in the character of Susan creates room for an authenticity within the range of emotions and behaviors demonstrated by this character and pushes back on this unrealistic expectation.

Another potential positive is the work of the illustrations in displaying Susan engaging in activities with her friends and family members and actively being included in these activities. For example, on page 2, the text of “Susan sings” corresponds with the picture of Susan conducting a musical performance (on pots and pans) with two of her friends. Similarly, on page 25, “Susan paints,” with a friend or sibling.

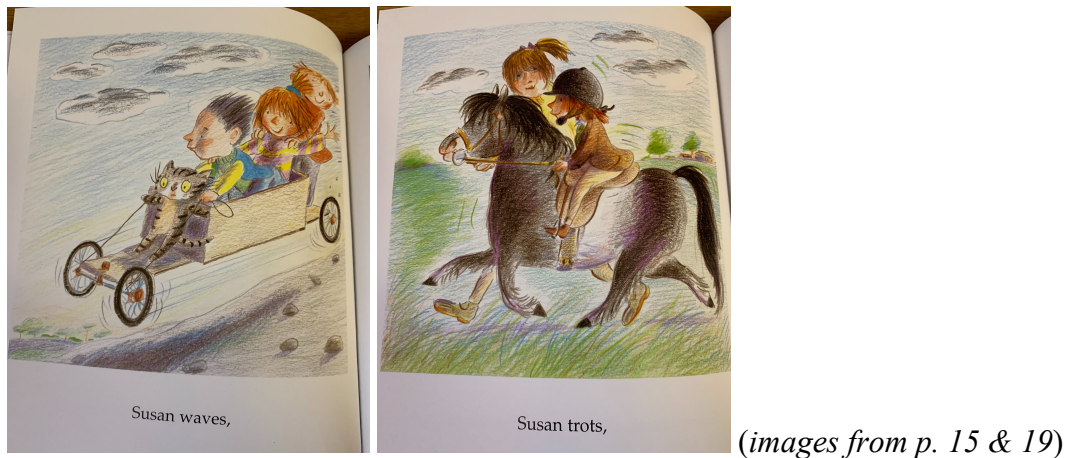


(images from p. 2 & 25)

The visual representation of inclusion in this picture book can potentially help to promote these positive messages to primary school children through the social psychological concept of exposure theory. This theory often manifests itself in terms of the contact hypothesis, that the more time students and parents experience contact with students with intellectual or physical differences, the more likely they are to promote inclusion of such students (deBoer & Munde, 2015). Illustrations displaying inclusion can provide a preliminary form of “contact” in which primary school students could be visually exposed to messages of inclusion.

However, unfortunately, as expressed above, the manner in which Susan is illustrated as being included is not a realistic representation, and thus creates a false ideal. While I previously cited activities that Susan is included in that make sense for a wheelchair user, there are far more examples of unrealistic representations of Susan’s inclusion. For example, on pages 3-4, “Susan flies” through the air with her dad spinning her around in circles and “Susan swings” with a friend with no wheelchair in sight. On page 7, “Susan dances” while standing fully upright, on page 14, “Susan spins” around on a merry-go-round with her wheelchair again absent from the scene. On page 15, the text “Susan waves” is coupled with an illustration of her riding a wagon with two other kids piled on top of her, and on page 19, “Susan trots” is paired with an image of her riding a horse, legs fully in view. The commonality of Susan’s legs being presented in full

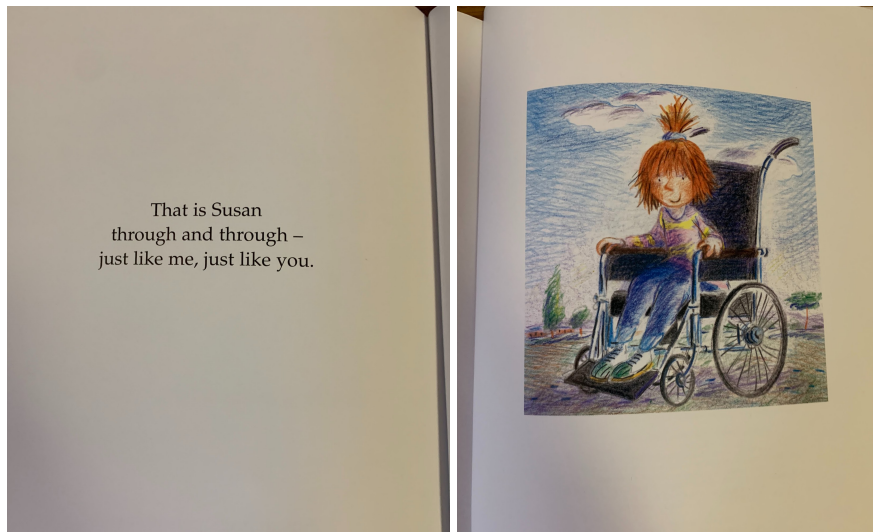
view, in addition to her not being in her wheelchair in any of these illustrations is carried across the range of activities presented throughout the duration of the book. This conveys a message that Susan does not fully need her wheelchair, which contradicts the rhetoric presented at the end of the story that despite the fact Susan is a wheelchair user, she fits in.



Moreover, this tactic does not engage with the ways that Susan may not be able to participate in all the same types of activities as other children, as a result of the disabling social fabric of society that uplifts the “normal” body. A realistic representation of Susan’s lived experience may instead illustrate that the fact she cannot do the same things as some of the other children does not make her any lesser than them. Instead, Susan’s different ways of doing things would simply be regarded as her individual way of being in the world (see Sinclair, 1993). Unfortunately, this story falls short in this regard. A book written from a critical disability perspective would instead illustrate Susan participating in some of these activities in different ways (for example, perhaps she could wheel along next to the wagon while still joining in the fun or play wheelchair sports with the other kids). Other activities themselves may have to be changed in order to better provide entries for Susan to join in.

The book ends with the revelation for readers that Susan is a wheelchair user, through an illustration on the last page of the story of Susan sitting in her wheelchair and smiling. This

image is paired with the text, “That is Susan, through and through, just like me, just like you” (p. 25-26).



(images from p. 25-26)

While the goal is undoubtedly to show readers that there are similarities between Susan and able-bodied children, despite her physical differences, the presentation of the images and text together communicates the message that to be accepted, there has to be a level of sameness. This rhetoric corresponds with Erevelles' (2011) assertion that disabled people who fall outside the socially constructed categories of “normal” can only be accepted from an ableist perspective when they are assimilated into the categories constructed. In the same vein, the words, “just like me, just like you” function as a form of narrative erasure (as introduced by Aho and Alter, 2018) of Susan's disability, which ignores intrinsic elements of her identity and personhood. The way Susan moves through space is inherently different from the way able-bodied children move through the world, and to present Susan's experience as the same as everyone else's, glosses over the problematic social structures that dis-able Susan in an ableist society. This is an example of the systematic invisibilization of disability in society that Erevelles (2011) calls out. Susan's disability is invisibilized throughout the story, only to be tacked onto the end, as if an

afterthought, without authentically portraying Susan's disability as an intrinsic element of her identity.

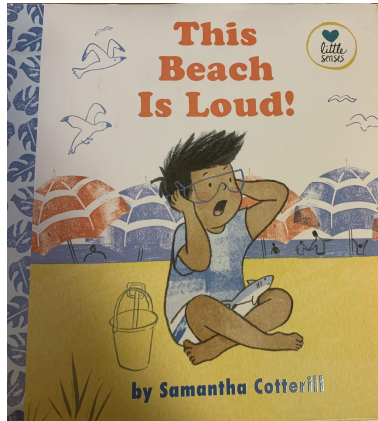
Also important to note are the pronouns utilized in the text of the final two pages of *Susan Laughs*. "Me" and "you" draw a similarity between the able-bodied narrator of the story and the assumed able-bodied reader of the story. In this way, the book is not intended for a disabled audience, but is instead presented as a teaching experience for the able-bodied reader. This is especially problematic in that the education system itself is already constructed specifically for the brains and bodies that fall within the "normal bell curve" (as Mooney, 2019, refers to it). By centering conversations of inclusion around examples of children's literature that are again written for this narrowly constructed middle of the bell curve, the hegemony of exclusion is perpetuated.

Additionally, the word choice of "*That* is Susan" as opposed to "*This* is Susan" on the final page of the story works to position Susan within a separate space or category as the intended audience. This word choice conveys contradictory messages within the same sentence page, as the following sentence is, "Just like me, just like you" (p. 26). While the language of inclusion is superficially engaged, Susan is simultaneously being presented as if she belongs in a separate category through the connotation of the word "That."

Going back to the point expressed by Pennell et al. (2018), all children should be able to "find themselves in the pages of a book" (p. 411). Unfortunately, *Susan Laughs* is an example of disability children's literature that does not realistically add to this opportunity for children with atypical brains or bodies, since the representation of disability is not realistic, and the book is not written for these children in the first place. While *Susan Laughs* may serve as a window for non-disabled readers to get a better glimpse into ways to include people who are different from them,

it does not simultaneously serve as a mirror for differently-abled readers to see themselves represented in a children's book (Pennell et al., 2018). Even as a supposed form of inclusion is extended, it does not comprise full inclusion because it erases the actual lived experience of disability, and the societal structures that work to disable the character who is a wheelchair user. *Susan Laughs* also falls short of comprising inclusive disability children's literature in that the narrator telling Susan's story presents an outside view that removes Susan from her own experience and positions her in a space separate from able-bodied characters when her disability is finally revealed.

BOOK 3: This Beach Is Loud! By Samantha Cotterill



In contrast to the two books analyzed thus far, *This Beach Is Loud!* promotes a form of true acceptance and inclusion in the disability children’s literature realm. This book is a clear example of the efficacy of individuals with intellectual differences in advocating for themselves and providing an accurate representation of the lived experience of neurodiversity. Author Samantha Cotterill, who is on the autism spectrum, “wishes there were picture books when she was growing up four decades ago that depicted someone like her” (NYS Writers Institute, 2020). *This Beach Is Loud!* tells the story of a kid who is likely on the autism spectrum who is excited to go to the beach but finds many of the sensory elements of the beach to be overwhelming. This book is part of Cotterill’s *Little Senses* series which is “a series Samantha feels is much needed and one that she wishes had been a part of her own childhood.” The back cover of this book goes on to note that the goal of this series is to “allow kids to recognize themselves in a playful, fun, yet therapeutic way” and that “Every story in this series is presented without labels, allowing parents to step into their kids’ world and see their point of view.” By allowing for self-recognition, this book can serve as a mirror for kids who are on the spectrum or have some other form of sensory difficulty. Simultaneously, this book can function as a window for parents to

more accurately see into their neurodiverse children's lived experiences, and to provide representations of ways that parents can better support their children just as they are.

While many of the main character's behaviors appear to be characteristic of someone diagnosed with autism, the fact that no specific label is ever assigned to the boy corresponds with a critical disabilities studies perspective. This critical approach pushes back on the arbitrary labels and categories that function in society to draw the lines between "normal" and "abnormal" (see Mooney, 2019). Instead of these sensory differences being displayed as a deficit or a lack as Mooney (2019) explains is often the case, these differences in perceiving the world are instead simply reflected as part of the main character's "way of being" (see Sinclair, 1993, p. 1) in *This Beach is Loud!*.

Another important element of this book is that the main character is not white. While the racial identity of the character is not explicitly stated during the story, the illustrations portray a boy with brown skin, which pushes back against the commonly recurring trope of the "white wheelchair user" as the only representation of disability in children's literature (see Fritsch, 2013 & Leininger et al., 2010). Erevelles (2011) may argue that intersectionality is not being fully engaged in the fact that race is not mentioned through the text, and therefore the experience of living with multiple marginalized identities is not fully represented. However, I would argue that the simple inclusion of race through visual techniques is an important element of increasing representation and diversity within the realm of disability children's literature. Moreover, the lack of labels in terms of race allows for the same form of expression of showing instead of telling about the diversity of identity that is utilized by Cotterill in displaying our differently-abled main character. I also think that it is important to note the duality of the text and illustrations in children's picture books, in that they function together to create meaning in a

work. By recognizing that some individuals with disabilities may be nonverbal or may develop their reading on their own timeline, the pictures may hold even greater weight for this audience.

The book begins with the main character's clear excitement for the beach day, as evidenced by the early wakeup call (the father's alarm clock reads 4:00 when the boy starts jumping on his bed to awaken him), as well as the exclamation on the first page of "Beach Day!" as the boy comes charging into the room with his toy shark (Sharkie) in hand (p. 1). The next sequence of pages illustrates the aspect of routine through both the words and pictures. "I made you breakfast, did *all* the packing... and even got myself dressed" is coupled with images of each of these activities which the reader can observe the boy doing in a particular order (p. 3-5). In this way, the daily experience of a character likely living with autism is introduced at the beginning of the story in a way that is neither invisibilizing nor hypervisilizing the main character's sensory and processing differences (Erevelles, 2011).

The creative mix of words and pictures throughout the duration of the story reflects a pushback against the set structure of the "norm" of how many readers may conceive that a children's book should be. Pages 6-7 are creative in that they show the drive to the beach through a series of snapshots of the car traveling along a hilly road, with the dialogue interwoven into the image of the road. This dialogue consists of the boy's continued excitement in the variety of beach facts he is rattling off to his dad ("did you know that crabs and some insects live in the sand"), interspersed with sensory observations about what is happening in the present moment, ("I don't like these crackers. I'm hungry. I really can't eat them").



(images from p. 6-7)

This style of presenting words and text together is also unique in that the words do not evenly fit on the page, nor are they written straight across. Instead, they are cut off on the edges, following the rise and fall of the road, exhibiting more of a stream of consciousness than a set, structured way of speaking or thinking or even writing. In this way, Cotterill weaves her own lived experience into the page in a way that is innovative and engaging. Mooney (2019) would likely point to Cotterill's method as deviating from the constraints of the "normal bell curve" which is prioritized in educational settings in most scenarios.

However, once the car ride ends and the boy and his dad arrive at the beach, the main character's excitement of the "Beach Day!" shifts to an observation that "This beach looks... busy..." (p. 8-9). The illustrations on these pages show a beach crowded with colorful umbrellas and lots of people running around, swimming, and hanging out on the beach. I would also like to pause on these two pages and note the diversity represented by the characters at the beach. From simply observing the colors utilized in the illustrations, one can find a variety of skin tones, as well as a variety of manners of dressing (from a mother in a headscarf to a shirtless kid frolicking around), in addition to a mix of body shapes and sizes. The employment of this visual representation of diversity is something that is not seen enough in children's literature, and further helps to combat the lack of intersectionality within disability children's literature. I would

even venture to say that in some ways, the combination of visual and textual elements works to form a “collective resistance” steeped in intersectionality (Erevelles, 2011, p. 120).



Yet the sensory overload of the beach continues for the main character. The sound effects of, “dig dig, pat pat, stomp, STOMP!” on pages 10-11, linked with illustrations of characters engaging in a wide range of activities further heighten the main character’s uncertainty, and he notes that not only is the beach busy, but it is also “loud.” The illustrations depict the main character glancing back over his shoulder with a worried expression as his attention is caught by all of these sounds, while his dad remains looking forward with a smile on his face. However, the dad seems to notice his son’s uneasiness on the next page, as he points to an empty patch away from the hustle and bustle of the beach, paired with the words, “Let’s try over there...” (p. 12-13).

Suddenly everything becomes too overwhelming for the main character. Again, Cotterill deviates from the “normal” structure of children’s books that equivocally pair pictures with text, generally in a format that involves some degree of separation between these two entities. Instead, the overstimulation that the main character feels is progressively combined throughout the next few pages. This overstimulation occurs in terms of the tactile feeling of the sand (p. 14-17), as well as the auditory input of digging, the waves, and the birds and planes overhead (p. 18-19).

The images and words become more interspersed, with the words taking the form of sound effects (“SPLISH! SPLASH! SPLOOSH / skraww FLAP skraww! FLAP!”), marked by the main character trying to take everything in and process it all, before attempting to escape the overstimulation by covering his ears and burying his head (p. 18-19). Pages 20-21 intensify to a crowded jumble of sound effects, bright colors, and illustrations, as the boy scrunches his body even further in an attempt to escape it all, covering his ears with his eyes screwed shut. The overstimulation for someone on the spectrum is thus embodied through these pages, in terms of providing not a neat text to picture pairing but instead a mixture of a million things going on at once. The colors, words, images, and sounds flow into and over each other in a portrait of synesthesia. Indeed, synesthesia, which is “a neurological condition in which a sensation in one modality triggers a perception in a second modality” has been found to share mechanisms of increased neural connectivity with characteristics of autism (Baron-Cohen et al., 2013, p. 1-2).



(images from p. 20-21)

All the while, the main character's dad offers him helpful coping techniques to deal with the overwhelming nature of everything going on around him. The dad offers the gentle words of “Take a deep breath and give Sharkie a squeeze. Now tap your fingers and count to three...” (p. 16-17) followed by the continued encouragement of “You’ve got this. 1-2-3 tap... 1-2-3 tap...” (p. 21). These words do not try to change his son to fit the situation as we unfortunately see

within some disability children's literature, but instead recognize his individual needs and provide tangible techniques within the moment to best aid his son in functioning best and reaching his full potential within this moment. This corresponds with Sinclair's (1993) plea for parents of autistic kids to take cues from their child and support them within this "alien world" (p. 4) which was not built for them but was instead constructed for the "normal" child.

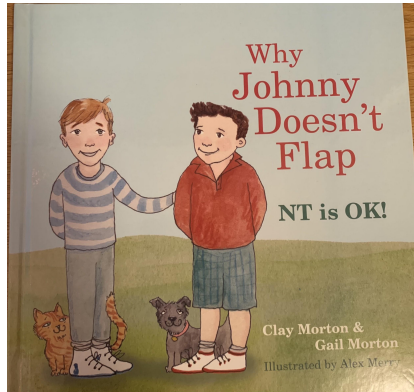
Tactics like those employed by the father in this scenario would be so beneficial in the setting of a primary education classroom for students with different abilities and learning needs. Instead of shaming students for not fitting within the "norm" (which was not built for these students anyway), what if the expectations for students, as well as the feedback offered, could be altered to fit the individual student? Erevelles (2011) and Mooney (2019) point out that when students with disabilities do not conform to the "norm" in classrooms, they are often disciplined, but what if instead their individual needs in these moments were recognized, and students were offered coping strategies for intense moments in the classroom?

Additionally, the recognition of individual gifts and accomplishments is so necessary within the educational setting. This type of recognition is displayed on pages 22-23 by the dad when his kid makes it through the sensory overload, with the positive reinforcement of, "You did it. You are so brave." Furthermore, an outlet to transition to something new is offered by the child's father through the dialogue of, "I'll set up your fort while you choose a drink from the cooler." After this, the dad and son are able to have fun at the beach, in their own way, away from other people and within their fort. While the sounds are still there, they are able to focus on their own little space away from the busyness of the rest of the beach.

The book ends with the trip back home. Page 30 echoes the scene on pages 6-7, in that the car is depicted traveling over the hills of the road, all the way back home, with the curves of

the road interspersed with the dialogue of the boy (“Dad! DAD! When can we go back? Can we go back tonight? What time is it? It’s 6:00pm.”) In this way, the main character’s individual way of expressing himself is not altered or changed, but his view of the situation has shifted to a positive view of the beach, since he has found a way to function well and enjoy himself even within a situation that may be stressful at times. These are the types of educators so desperately needed within the educational system -- those who understand that the system was never built for the autistic student, or the student with the learning disability, or the emotional-behavioral difficulty. But those educators who offer supports for students within an ableist system that deconstruct aspects of this pervasive ableism, just as the father in this story provided his son with outlets to address his individual needs. Such methods counteract the one-size-fits-all approach of the educational system which has led to much of the marginalization of differently-abled students that exist today. The understanding that education as an experience that should be individualized for different students depending on their needs, allows for a more collaborative, inclusive, understanding space to be created.

BOOK 4: *Why Johnny Doesn't Flap* By Clay Morton & Gail Morton



Why Johnny Doesn't Flap also paints a picture of difference that is authentic and promotes true inclusion for a primary school audience. The first and most obvious sign of acceptance of neurodiversity is that the story is narrated from the point of view of a kid with autism. While authors Clay Morton and Gail Morton are not autistic themselves, they have a child who is autistic and are able to expertly intertwine their child's experiences into the words and pictures of this book. Through writing from the perspective of an individual with autism and basing it off of real-life experiences, these authors do not fall into the trap of conforming to the role of the stereotypical parental "good advocates," who call out the "warning signs" of autism as "red flags" (McGuire, 2014). Instead, these authors present neurodiversity as a natural variation of life (Mooney, 2019), without presenting autism as deficit or inaccurately overcompensating to make it more palatable for neurotypical readers. The text reflects the thoughts and experiences of the main character and amplifies the voice of an autistic character as opposed to having someone else tell his story. The main character in this story is constructed through both the personal individualized experience as well as more extensive research efforts of the authors, which provides an authentic portrait of the sensory and perceptual experiences of someone with autism. Indeed, Gail and Clay Morton are both researchers in neurodiversity, as well as strong advocates for the neurodiversity movement (Moorad, 2016)

This book effectively flips the concept of difference on its head by portraying the narrator's friend Johnny as the one who is different. The autistic narrator, who begins the story with the statement, "This is my friend Johnny," (p. 1) allows for this possibility. Even the label that Johnny is given as being "NT" or neurotypical pushes back against the social construction of normality, in which neurodiversity is portrayed as difference. Instead, as expressed by the narrator on pages 2-3 of the book, "sometimes he [Johnny] acts pretty strangely. Mom says it is because he is NT or neurotypical. He doesn't have autism, so his brain works differently than mine." The categorization of those whose brains fall into the so-called "normal bell curve" as "NT" is an interesting diversion from the common labeling process that only affects those whose brains do not conform to this narrow range implicated by an arbitrary set of standards (Mooney, 2019). This tactic also allows for the cognitive differences between someone with autism and a neurotypical character to be explicitly named from the onset of the story, as opposed to these differences being invisibilized or disregarded in any way.

Since these differences are named, this story is consequently able to accurately represent the lived experience of autism for many individuals, thus serving as a good representation of disability children's literature. Aspects such as punctuality, routine, and quiet are emphasized as being important to the narrator, who highlights the ways in which Johnny deviates from these ways of being. For example, on page 4, the narrator asserts that "Johnny is supposed to come to my house at 4:00, but sometimes he comes at 3:58 or 4:03." The narrator goes on to explain that he got Johnny a watch for his birthday in hopes that this would help him show up on time, but he still sometimes arrives late or early. This perspective is indicative of the differing levels of impact that punctuality has on the narrator and his friend Johnny, and their distinctive conceptions of time.

Similarly, the importance of routine to the narrator is expressed on page 5, as well as the ways in which Johnny deviates from this routine, in terms of the games Johnny wants to play first on different days that he comes over: “He doesn’t know to follow the same order every time.” However, the narrator recognizes that since Johnny is NT, he learns and moves through space and experiences life in different ways. The repetition of the phrase “that’s OK” after every statement about how Johnny and the narrator do things differently emphasizes that while Johnny does not always fit within the narrator’s perception of what is “normal,” that doesn’t mean that Johnny is wrong, it just means that his brain works differently. The main character’s acceptance of neurodiversity (or being neurotypical) as natural forms of human variation, “contest[s] the pathologizing of certain brains” (Kaufman & Mooney, 2020).

Due to the differences between their autistic and NT brains, the narrator and Johnny react differently to exciting, overwhelming, and adverse situations. For example, in the face of excitement, Johnny “doesn’t flap his arms or jump up and down” like the narrator does. Instead, Johnny “just moves the sides of his mouth up and slightly widens his eyes.... Maybe he doesn’t know much about how to express emotions” (p. 10-11). Similarly, “Johnny never has a meltdown when disasters happen, like a fire drill or art class being cancelled” like the narrator does. The narrator asserts that, “It seems like he is bottling his feelings up” (p. 18). On pages 20-21, the reader is forced to reckon with the narrator’s ponderings that Johnny is so busy playing with the other kids on the playground that “He never goes off into his own world” and “Maybe he’s a little too obsessed with social interaction.”

All of the aforementioned instances offer different perspectives on the social “norms” of how one is supposed to deal with emotions or feelings, or what someone is supposed to do in certain situations. Thus, this book departs from the attempts to try to “fix” those who deviate

from these “norms” (McGuire, 2016). The observations that the narrator makes about his own interpretations of Johnny’s behaviors align with a critical disability studies framework in this sense that they call into question the societal structures and power relations that prioritize certain categories of brains and bodies over others (Reaume, 2014). Through offering his own reasoning for the potential incentives behind Johnny’s actions and forms of expressing emotions, the narrator provides the reader with the opportunity to view each of the scenarios in question from a different perspective. The chances to engage with diverse perspectives is one of the central reasons inclusive educational spaces are so essential. These spaces allow for a better understanding of how people coming from a variety of backgrounds experience the world and help to dismantle limited viewpoints.

One page that really stood out to me is the page that describes that “Johnny functions very well at school. He understands the rules and gets all of his work done” (p. 14-15). This reinforces the idea that the education system as we know it is set up for neurotypical students to succeed in a way that is not provided to neurodiverse individuals (see Erevelles, 2011; Mooney, 2019). However, also expressed are the skills and forms of intelligence that the narrator has that Johnny does not possess. Examples include memorizing the “opening credits word for word” (p. 8) for his favorite TV shows or having “a topic that he knows everything about” (p. 12). Unfortunately, these skills are less likely to be seen and empowered in a traditional educational classroom, because the focus is too closely aligned with a very narrow form of success. Halberstam (2011) divulges that this narrow conception of success is one by a heteronormative, white, masculine (and I would add ableist) definition, that aligns with efficiency, productivity, and capitalism. However, just as Halberstam (2011) advocates for “failure” within this constraining definition of success, my deepest hope is that the inclusion of books that celebrate

differences in learning, being, and expression in primary education classrooms can spark a ripple effect that involves the deconstruction and reconstruction of the very fabric of the “normal” and “successful” classroom.

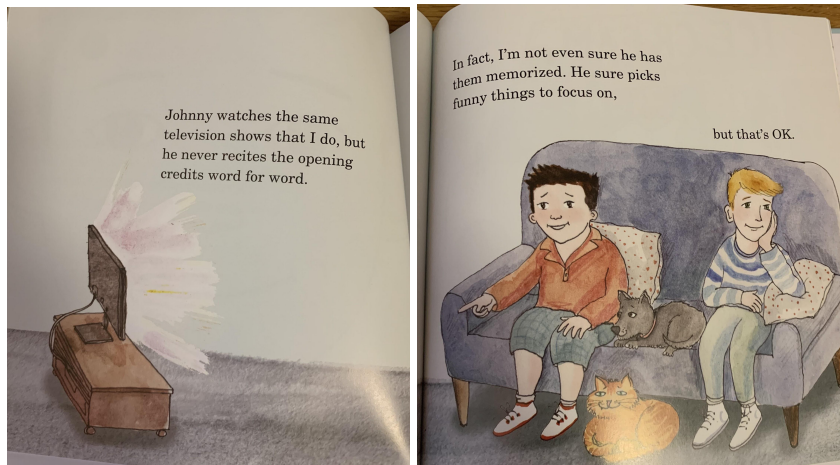
The illustrations by Alex Merry add to the messages presented in this book about neurodiversity -- that people with different brains will experience the world differently, and that these divergent experiences of the world are fully valid. The illustrations put images to the text about different ways of being in the world through displaying contrasting pictures of the narrator and Johnny reacting to the same situations. For example, the close up of Johnny’s face illustrating his big brown eyes centered in the page, paired with the text “When he talks to you, Johnny looks directly into your eyes, which can make you pretty uncomfortable” (p. 6-7) allows for the reader to visually understand how the close, direct eye contact could be overwhelming.



(image from p. 7)

The illustrations also communicate certain nonverbal cues by each of the characters which show the differences between them. For example, in many of the scenes present in this book we see the narrator’s hands clasped together, perhaps in order to establish a sense of tactile comfort. By contrast, Johnny is illustrated waving, pointing, and gesturing at everyday occurrences (but not when exciting things happen -- this is when the narrator flaps his arms, but Johnny does not). The imagery provided on pages 8-9 of the narrator and Johnny watching TV

together do well to highlight variations in their ways of being in the world. While Johnny is leaning forward, pointing at the TV and staring directly ahead, the narrator is on the corner of the couch tilted slightly away from Johnny and all of his excited energy, looking off to the side a bit.



(images from p. 8-9).

While the book points out many differences between the autistic narrator and his NT friend Johnny, it also highlights their similarities. For example, the characters play the same games together (p. 4-5) and watch the same television shows together (p. 8-9). However, within each of these similar interests that they share, there are differences in the ways the characters experience and enjoy each of these activities. These are elements essential to the true representation of the disabled experience that are not expressed works such as *Can I Play Too?* (where Snake was objectified through when he was allowed participation in the game) and *Susan Laughs* (where the representations indicated that Susan's experiences of activities were exactly the same as those of able-bodied characters).

But in *Why Johnny Doesn't Flap*, for example, while the autistic narrator and Johnny watch the same TV shows, Johnny, "never recites the opening credits word for word" while the narrator has memorized these words and recites them each time the show comes on (p. 8-9). Another especially important instance of the unity between their similarities and differences is communicated with the text that Johnny, "understands some things but has trouble with other

things. That's true of all of us, and that's OK" (p. 16-17). This assertion recognizes that while the narrator and Johnny have different challenges and strengths, both of them do, in fact, have both challenges and strengths -- which is an essential component of humanity. Likewise, Johnny "just has his own way of dealing with things" (p. 18) which acknowledges the importance of recognizing individual differences in working through challenges. Another impactful sentence that expresses a unified picture of humanity that is reliant upon diversity is that "Mom says everyone's brain is different, and different isn't always wrong" (p. 23). This way of explaining differences in an uncomplicated manner to a young audience is exactly what the literature selection and the teaching methods employed in primary education classrooms should seek to accomplish.

The book ends with the sentence, "I like Johnny. I think that being NT is OK" (p. 24). This matter-of-fact statement wraps up the ideas present throughout the story in the simple take-home message that difference is real and present, but it is okay. This book does not try to ignore or erase difference, but instead names it and presents an authentic portrayal of how autism affects the ways the narrator perceives the world, and how Johnny's neurotypical brain affects the way he perceives the world. Thus, *Why Johnny Doesn't Flap* reflects Aho's and Alter's (2018) understanding of the goal of truly inclusive disability children's literature -- to "reimagine disability while remaining mindful of the lived experience in an ableist world" (p. 304). These elements are clearly present in this book. The narrator respects the differences between his brain and Johnny's brain and how this informs how each of them function on a day-to-day basis. This harkens back to the autistic self-advocate Sinclair's (1993) advice that, "The ways we relate are different. Push for the things your expectations tell you are normal, and you'll find frustration, disappointment, resentment, maybe even rage and hatred. Approach respectfully, without

preconceptions, and with openness to learning new things, and you'll find a world you never could have imagined" (p. 2).

A respectful approach to difference is not only essential for primary school students, both with and without disabilities, but also for their parents. *Why Johnny Doesn't Flap* features "A Note for Parents" at the end of the story. Just as the story itself is told from the perspective of an autistic individual, "A Note for Parents" is directed towards parents of kids with autism.

Throughout this Note, the authors continue to promote respect for neurotypical children for autistic children and their families, with explanations of how NT kids will behave differently than parents' autistic children. By writing about NT children from the perspective of how they deviate from autistic children, the idea of neurotypical brains upheld as the standard is reconfigured. An example of the writing style employed by the Mortons is through their presentation of statistics that, "According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, as many as 67 in 68 children may be neurotypical" (p. 25). After explaining some manners that NT kids behave that may diverge from the way parents' autistic kids behave, a message of inclusion and acceptance is expressed. This directive affirms that "it is important for autistic young people to understand that NTs are people too, and the fact that they are different doesn't mean that there is anything wrong with them" (p. 25). The recognition of diversity as an essential component of humanity is one of the most compelling themes throughout this book.

Why Johnny Doesn't Flap has the capability to serve as a mirror, a window, or a door for readers, depending on the audience. The narrator conveys his own perspective throughout the book, and in the rare occasion he does use "you" language, he is addressing an audience that would view the world in a similar manner as he does, as communicated by the statement, "Johnny doesn't respond like you would expect" (p. 10). In this way, *Why Johnny Doesn't Flap*

could serve as a mirror for autistic readers. At the same time, this book could serve as a window or a door for autistic readers and NT readers alike. By presenting the character of Johnny and the character of the autistic narrator in relation to one another throughout the story, there is room for readers to view multiple perspectives in this story at the same time. This helps steer away from the hegemonic power devices in society that often present only a single story or a single way of doing things. *Why Johnny Doesn't Flap* provides the chance for neurodiverse children to learn about neurotypical children, neurotypical children to learn about neurodiverse children, and parents and teachers to play a role in facilitations of inclusiveness of difference, because “the differences between people make life interesting” (p. 25). In order for these differences to “make life interesting,” in the settings of schools and society, there must be space for people all along the spectrum of ability and disability to relate to each other. After all, disability is a relational identity, one that depends on interaction with those coming from divergent identities. Contact is a necessity for understanding others’ perspectives and for creating a more inclusive society, and this close proximity with difference should begin in the primary school classroom.

Why Analyze Children's Literature?

As expressed by Mohammazadeh et al. (2017), “The deeper empathy and emotional ties with the disabled characters can enhance disability awareness in students and, as a result, the new generations can be equipped with more social values which lead to be attentive and responsive towards their surrounding and milieu” (p. 584). More than anything, this thesis project is focused on the investment in current and future generations of students, one student at a time. Children's literature is a deep and powerful avenue for beginning to break down the walls constructed by the false social conception of “normality” that serve as barriers to inclusion for all students. The more that children's literature can serve as a tool in the primary education system for a reflection of self to differently-abled students and an understanding of difference as a way of being in the world for all students, the closer that I believe we can move to a classroom culture focused on inclusion, understanding, acceptance and celebration of diversity as a natural part of being human. It is my most sincere hope in writing this that these values can be instilled in the process of primary education and thus translate into future spheres of these students' lives in the ways they engage with difference throughout their lives.

Conclusion: Creating a More Inclusive and Accepting Future

Armstrong (2015) states that “There is no normal flower or culture. Similarly, we ought to accept the fact that there is no normal brain or mind” (p. 349). This statement aligns with the neurodiversity movement which views different forms of brain development as essential for the future of humanity and creativity. Indeed, Harvey Blume asserted that, “Neurodiversity may be every bit as crucial for the human race as biodiversity is for life in general. Who can say what form of wiring will prove best at any given moment?” (as cited in Armstrong, 2015, p. 349). If our society as a whole could realize that difference offers unique and creative ways to experience the world and add new perspectives and thoughts to society, our world would be such a more inclusive, creative, exciting place to be. While actually achieving this level of transformation would take generations of deconstruction and rebuilding of the historical structures of oppression and inequity, beginning to foster such inclusion and celebration of difference within the primary education system provides the opportunity to empower the next generation to carry this inclusion with them into their various sectors of society throughout their lives. In this way, inclusive primary education offers the potential for a domino effect. If the next generation can make society just a little more inclusive, hopefully they can empower the generation after them to make society a little more inclusive than that, and so on.

This begins with creating the classroom spaces, providing the representation in the materials presented (such as children’s literature), and making space for the voices of differently abled students that empower different ways of being in the world as opportunities for learning for the entire class and community. By shifting the narrative of the need to conform to “normality” and reconstructing the classroom and curriculum starting at the site of primary education, education could better “point up the permeabilities and fungibilities shared by all

bodies, and the vulnerabilities we necessarily bear to one another” (Chen, 2007, p. 380). In this way, disabilities and abilities alike can be understood as ways of relation to one another, pointing the way to a form of education based more firmly in empathy and understanding, realizing that differences are not to be feared but are to be learned from and uplifted.

If the whole spectrum of abilities is understood as differing forms of relation, the binary between disability and ability has to be disrupted, because it becomes clear that there is no one way to be disabled, nor is there just one way to be smart. When the disruption of the binary between disability and ability, between normality and abnormality occurs, the rupture of a one-size-fits-all approach to education must follow. A critical disability lens allows for the critique of the broken system of education, grounded in a hope and a belief that it can and will be transformed and that one day every child will be included, in education and society.

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