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Reflecting on Books That Include Characters With Disabilities

Charis L. Price, Michaelene M. Ostrosky, and Rosa Milagros Santos

Mrs. Johnson moves around the reading corner in her classroom, arranging books on the bookshelves. The first day of school for the children in her inclusive kindergarten classroom will soon be here, and she wants all the children to feel welcome. She knows that there will be a child with autism spectrum disorder, a child who uses a wheelchair, and a child who wears hearing aids. As she pores over one bookshelf, she pulls out two books, *Looking After Louis* and *Andy and His Yellow Frisbee*. Although the books highlight children with disabilities, one book is 12 years old and the other is 20 years old. Mrs. Johnson wonders whether these books are suitable for the children in her class. Is there a way to evaluate the books to make sure they are appropriate for young children with and without disabilities? She remembers a set of book evaluation guidelines she was given at a literacy conference. She decides to review these guidelines on her lunch break to determine whether or not she should keep these books in her classroom library.

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Finding appropriate books for children that reflect the diversity of today's early childhood programs is a challenging yet important task. According to the US Department of Education (2015), 65.9 percent of 3- to 5-year-olds with disabilities and 95 percent of children ages 6 through 21 with disabilities spend at least part of the school day in general education settings with peers without disabilities. High-quality general education classrooms include materials that reflect the diversity of children in the school and community (DEC & NAEYC 2009; Favazza, Ostrosky, & Mouzourou 2016). These materials can help teachers promote positive attitudes about children with disabilities. Knowing that children's attitudes and perceptions about individuals with disabilities are influenced not only by their direct experiences with peers but also by their indirect experiences, such as exposure to media and print materials, practitioners should provide young children with positive images of individuals who have disabilities (Favazza & Odom 1997).

One way to promote acceptance of children with disabilities—and of individual differences in general—is through shared book reading (Yu, Meyer, & Ostrosky 2013). Shared book-reading experiences can promote children's understanding of the world around them, introduce children to perspectives that differ from their own, and help them make personal connections to the text (Meller, Richardson, & Hatch 2009). Critical reading and discussion of high-quality children's literature can be an avenue for teachers and children to explore similarities in individuals with and without disabilities and for children to embrace and accept peers who are different from themselves (Ostrosky et al. 2015).

Representation of characters with disabilities in books

Characters with disabilities are infrequently represented in positive ways in books for young children (Dyches, Prater, & Jenson 2006). They are often featured as observers who are not engaged in interactions with peers who do not have disabilities. Additionally, storybooks featuring characters with disabilities frequently highlight major differences between characters with and without disabilities instead of focusing on their similarities. Characters with disabilities seldom assume major roles in the plot; when they are an important part of the story line,

Summary of Books

Looking After Louis

By Lesley Ely, illus. Polly Dunbar, 2004

Looking After Louis is a story about a boy with autism, written from the point of view of his first grade classmate. Throughout the narrative, Louis is highlighted as the new student in the classroom who is not quite like the rest of his peers. As the story details Louis's interactions throughout the school day with his peers and teachers, the author describes the thoughts and behaviors that Louis's peers and teachers experience as Louis is included in a general education classroom. His peers try to make sense of Louis's behavior by describing him as "different" and "special." Louis is shown sitting at his desk and out on the playground with his classmates; he paints a picture, communicates verbally, and tries to play soccer with his peers. A few classmates interact with Louis and remain physically close to him, directing him on how to engage in various activities (e.g., painting, playing soccer, climbing on a tire). The word autism is not used in the story.

Andy and His Yellow Frisbee

By Mary Thompson, 1996

Andy and His Yellow Frisbee is a story about a second grader who has autism. Similar to *Looking After Louis*, the plot features Andy's interactions and behaviors at school. Throughout much of the story Andy spins his yellow Frisbee during recess while his classmates play soccer, climb on monkey bars, and swing. Andy enjoys spinning coins and dinner plates and spinning on the tire swing. This is "Andy's special talent." As Andy enjoys playing with his yellow Frisbee, a peer named Sarah, watches him and is curious and puzzled by his behavior. Sarah compares Andy's fascination with his yellow Frisbee to the comfort she experiences when she holds her favorite teddy bear. Sarah eventually approaches Andy and tries to engage him by showing him her pink Frisbee. Throughout the book, the key characteristics of autism are discussed.

the narrative generally diagnoses and describes their disabilities rather than providing insights into the characters' lives (Dyches, Prater, & Cramer 2001; Price, Ostrosky, & Mouzourou 2015).

It can be a challenge to find high-quality books that positively portray characters with disabilities. While stereotypes in illustrations and text, accuracy of information on disabilities, and literary quality have

Evaluating Two Children's Books Using the Three Guidelines

Guideline	<i>Andy and His Yellow Frisbee</i>	<i>Looking After Louis</i>
Resolution of problems	Yes	No
Role of the character with a disability	No	No
Weight of the relationships between characters	Yes	No

been noted as important guidelines in evaluating books that feature characters with disabilities, other critical book guidelines are often overlooked (Bland & Gann 2013). Derman-Sparks and the ABC Task Force (1989) created a checklist for teachers that includes evaluating whether books are appropriate in the ways they display characters who differ in ethnicity and gender. From this list, Nasatir and Horn (2003) developed guidelines to identify stereotyping and bias in books that feature characters with disabilities.

Based on research conducted using Nasatir and Horn's guidelines to explore representations of characters with disabilities in storybooks (Price, Ostrosky, & Mouzourou 2015), we authors identified three guidelines that are critical to consider when selecting books that feature characters with disabilities: a) resolution of problems, b) role of the character with a disability, and c) weight of the relationships between the characters. These three guidelines focus specifically on characters with disabilities and are discussed in this article as they pertain to two children's books, *Looking After Louis*, by Lesley Ely (2004), and *Andy and His Yellow Frisbee*, by Mary Thompson (1996). Reflecting on these three guidelines will assist teachers in selecting books that portray characters with disabilities in a way that can promote nonstereotypical and positive views of children with disabilities. (See "Evaluating Two Children's Books Using the Three Guidelines" for an evaluation of both books discussed in this article, using the three guidelines.)

This article also includes examples and reflective questions for teachers to use as they analyze early childhood books. (See "Summary of Books," p. 31, for a précis of the two books discussed in this article.) We also provide sample reflective questions that teachers can ask children during book-reading activities. (See

"Sample Reflective Questions for Children.") These questions are adaptable for any book appropriate for young children that features characters with disabilities. The questions are designed to support children's meaning making as they develop their own understanding about the text, make personal connections, and analyze and synthesize information from the text (Sipe 2012). As the two books discussed in this article are limited in scope—both focus on a child with autism spectrum disorder (ASD)—see Ostrosky et al. (2015) for a list of books that have been evaluated for their appropriateness using Nasatir and Horn's (2003) guidelines. Although the discussion in this article is intended for practitioners who serve children in inclusive early childhood classrooms, parents, librarians, media specialists, and reading specialists may also find the information useful.

The resolution of problems

In examining the role characters with disabilities play in resolving problems that arise within a story, three main questions should be considered.

1. Does the character with a disability take an active role in resolving a problem?

Children need to see characters of all abilities actively involved in resolving problems that occur in a story. This helps to develop a positive perception of children with disabilities as individuals who have strengths as well as challenges. When characters are involved in resolving a problem in the narrative, they are portrayed as contributing members of society. Societal membership supports a sense of belonging and peer acceptance in inclusive settings. When characters with disabilities are actively involved in activities similar to those of characters without disabilities, including resolving problems, they are more likely to be seen as equal to their peers, thus encouraging children to embrace and accept differences. In *Looking After Louis*, first-grader Louis plays soccer at recess with his peers. His peers are portrayed as helpers who guide and direct him, and Louis's participation in the soccer game is limited. In fact, Louis is portrayed as a perplexing boy who needs direction and support. At the end of the story, however, Louis's teacher arranges for him to play a game of soccer with a few peers, who demonstrate their acceptance of him as they enjoy the game together.

2. Is the character's disability considered the problem in the story line?

In *Looking After Louis*, it is apparent that Louis is different. His peers make statements that indicate they are puzzled by and curious about his actions, such as "I wonder what he's thinking" and "I don't know what his pictures are about," and are depicted as being overly directive—they tell him which crayons to use, and they make statements that suggest he needs to be looked after or cared for constantly. His behaviors are presented as problems. For example, Louis's peers become angry when he wanders into the middle of their soccer game, highlighting a problem caused by his lack of awareness of events around him.

Children need to see characters of all abilities actively involved in resolving problems that occur in a story.

In *Andy and His Yellow Frisbee*, Andy's sister, Rosie, shows concern about her brother's adjustment to his school environment. Rosie worries that Andy's peers may not understand his behavior, and she is concerned about the way Andy, a second-grader, might respond if a classmate tries to play with him. However, the author does not depict Andy as having a problem or being a nuisance or an annoyance to others. Although Andy engages in isolated play, his peers are inquisitive about his behavior. Rosie's concern for her brother subsides when a peer, Sarah, tries to engage Andy with her pink Frisbee. Andy continues to play with his own Frisbee

during this exchange, but he does look at his classmate out of the corner of his eye. Although Andy's peer is curious about his fascination with his yellow Frisbee, this does not appear to be a problem for her. His actions are valued and at least partially understood by his classmate.

3. Does the author highlight things a child with a disability can or cannot do?

It is important for children to see one another's strengths and not simply limitations. When children are encouraged to reflect on the abilities of their peers, this creates an environment of peer acceptance and understanding. Children with the same disability are not all alike and should be portrayed with unique abilities. For example, in *Andy and His Yellow Frisbee*, Andy seems to communicate predominately through nonverbal means. In *Looking After Louis*, Louis is portrayed as engaging in echolalia—self-generated vocal behavior that involves repetitive utterances (Stiegler 2015). While children with disabilities have different characteristics—as do all children—the way these characteristics are represented in a book can lead to stereotypes. Stereotypes contribute to limited perceptions of what a child with a disability can or cannot do. That is, the characteristics of children with disabilities portrayed in storybooks should not be presented as if they represent all children with disabilities.

One way storybooks can highlight the abilities, rather than the differences or challenges, of characters with disabilities is to show them engaged in activities similar to those of other characters. For example, *Looking After Louis* shows Louis playing soccer with his peers.

Sample Reflective Questions for Children

Guideline	Questions to explore with children
Resolution of problems	<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Why do you think Andy plays by himself and not with the other children?■ Tell me about a time when you wanted to play alone like Andy.■ What else might Sarah do to encourage Andy to play with her?
Role of the character with a disability	<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Some of you have leadership roles in class, like line leader and weather person. When do you see Andy "leading" in the story?■ How are your friends leaders in our classroom?■ Does Andy have a big role or a small role in the story? Give an example.■ Everyone has strengths. Some of you are good readers, some are good at painting, and some are good at basketball or other things. What is Andy good at?
Weight of relationships between characters	<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ What do you see Andy doing in the story?■ What activities do you think Andy likes to do?■ What activities do you like to do?



In *Andy and His Yellow Frisbee*, Andy plays with the same type of toy as his peer, Sarah, who does not have a disability. These stories emphasize specific characteristics of ASD exhibited by Louis and Andy; however, they also show the boys engaging in similar activities to their peers' in ways that highlight their abilities and their similarities to the other children.

The role of the character with a disability

In examining the role of the character with a disability with regard to the prominence of the disability and leadership, three key questions should be considered.

1. What role does the character with a disability have in the story?

It is important to evaluate how characters are featured and how their portrayal might be perceived by the reader. If characters with disabilities are featured in subservient roles or only as observers, readers might view them as having limited abilities and incapable of fully contributing to their environment. When

characters with disabilities are featured in leadership roles, however, they are more likely to be viewed as capable individuals similar to characters without disabilities. Characters without disabilities are often featured in leadership or problem-solver roles, such as making new friends at school, conquering a fear, or helping a parent care for a new sibling. Characters with disabilities should be featured in similar ways. In *Looking After Louis*, Louis is not featured in a leadership role but is portrayed in subservient roles with his peers (e.g., he needs assistance coloring a picture). Had he been featured in a role of authority in his classroom, such as helping pass out crayons to his classmates, serving as a line leader, or choosing which soccer team kicks the ball first, readers would more likely view him as a character with a lot to contribute.

2. Does the story primarily focus on the character's disability?

In both books, the narratives are largely focused on the differences or limitations of the main characters as a result of their disabilities. In *Looking After Louis*, the story line depicts a young boy who shows limited social interaction skills (i.e., he does not

engage his classmates) and who has behaviors that are stereotypical of children significantly impacted by autism: Louis engages in verbal outbursts, repeating phrases and/or words that he hears in his classroom. As the narrative highlights his repetitive verbal statements and his difficulty following routines, it is apparent to the reader that he has a disability and that he is very different from his classmates. The story is heavily centered on Louis's disability, with Louis's peers trying to understand his behaviors. For example, Louis paints a picture that results in a peer exclaiming that she does not understand what he illustrated.

In *Andy and His Yellow Frisbee*, one narrative centers on Andy's intense concentration on his yellow Frisbee—a behavior that differs from that of his peers and is due to his disability. However, the author does not focus solely on Andy's disability; she also highlights a similarity between Andy and one of his peers as Sarah tries to engage Andy in social interaction.

3. Does the story line highlight activities that a character with disabilities enjoys (e.g., favorite toy, favorite song, preferred restaurant)?

Although Louis is largely featured as an observer in *Looking After Louis*, he participates in activities such as painting pictures and playing soccer with his peers. He is not shown participating in any activities he particularly enjoys or in routines of his choosing. In contrast, *Andy and His Yellow Frisbee* highlights a young boy who clearly has an interest—his yellow Frisbee. While Andy does not have a leadership role in the book, the story line features his unique interest in a Frisbee as he independently plays with it. Children with and without disabilities may enjoy a variety of activities. Teachers can highlight activities their students and book characters with disabilities enjoy to promote acceptance.



The weight of the relationships between the characters

In considering the balance of roles between book characters with and without disabilities, consider this primary question:

1. Who is featured as a doer and who is featured as an observer for the majority of the story?

Teachers should evaluate whether characters with disabilities are featured in active roles to the same extent as their peers without disabilities. In both *Looking After Louis* and *Andy and His Yellow Frisbee*, the narratives take place in general education contexts. Louis is shown at his desk in his classroom and also playing soccer with his peers. Andy is also shown outside at recess with his peers, although he engages in isolated play. For the majority of both stories, the two characters with disabilities are observed by their peers as they navigate their inclusive classroom settings. Louis is portrayed as an observer and often on the periphery. Andy is shown playing with his Frisbee and making a connection with a peer who also has a Frisbee. Throughout the story Andy is featured as a doer as he plays with a toy he enjoys.

Conclusion

Books are powerful vehicles for supporting the identity of children with disabilities and promoting acceptance and understanding of differences. Nasatir and Horn's (2003) guidelines can help teachers carefully examine the way characters with disabilities are represented in children's books and critically evaluate the books to see if they contribute to an acceptance of differences or encourage stereotypical beliefs. This important process helps to ensure a nurturing and inclusive environment for all children.

After reviewing the books according to Nasatir and Horn's guidelines, Mrs. Johnson decides to include *Andy and His Yellow Frisbee* in her classroom library. Although the publication date is not current, this book provides a good starting point for her to reflect on how young children with disabilities are portrayed in picture books. Mrs. Johnson also plans to look for books that

feature children with other types of disabilities—particularly children with a hearing loss or physical disability. She will share Nasatir and Horn's guidelines with the other early childhood teachers at her next professional development meeting. She believes these resources will help her colleagues evaluate their own classroom library books and encourage conversation about how to use books to promote a community of acceptance throughout the school.

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