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## Reading Aloud to Tweens and Teens to Create Empathy: A Functional Criteria

Elizabeth Good

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## Reading Aloud to Tweens and Teens to Create Empathy: A Functional Criteria

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READING ALOUD TO TWEENS AND TEENS TO CREATE EMPATHY: A FUNCTIONAL  
CRITERIA

A Graduate Research Paper  
Submitted to the  
Division of School Library Studies  
Department of Curriculum and Instruction  
In Partial Fulfillment  
Of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts  
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by  
Elizabeth Good  
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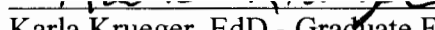
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Karla Krueger

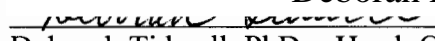
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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was twofold: to develop criteria to analyze literature and determine if it would make a good classroom read aloud, then to apply this criteria to three young adult texts identified by Jen Scott Curwood's (2012) in *Redefining Normal: A Critical Analysis of (Dis)ability in Young Adult Literature* as appropriately depicting teens with disabilities to determine if they would make good classroom read aloud selections. The researcher developed seven criteria by which to judge texts and identified themes within the readings that encompassed the traits the studied texts all possessed in regard to the research questions. The criteria determined to analyze the texts include vocabulary at or above grade level; appropriate social emotional content; plot driven engaging/ exciting; novelty, humor, conflict, or suspense used for attention purposes; believability; experience different from own to promote learning; and appropriate amount of dialogue. Applying this criteria revealed three themes. . In response to the question, what characteristics of a text make it a good candidate for a read-aloud for young adults, the theme necessity of *immediate connection to teen real-life experiences* arose. The second theme that emerged from the data in response to the research question, what benefits do accurate depictions of teens with disabilities bring to read alouds, was *accurate depictions create believability*. The last theme, *intellectual freedom does not equate to appropriate for all occasions*, arose from the research question, what qualities do these YA texts possess that may or may not situate them as strong candidates for read-alouds?

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

*Scenario: A sixth grade teacher sees her students struggling. Her students just don't seem to understand empathy. They pick at each other and consistently put down people in situations their limited world view does not allow them to understand. They also seem to be struggling with reading comprehension. The students are tired of reading independently and are often off task. The teacher confides in her teacher librarian her frustration with this class. The teacher librarian knows that read alouds can boost student comprehension and that literature has an amazing way of bridging social gaps. These gaps include the fact that there are several students in the building with physical disabilities that range in severity and who are often excluded from social situations. The teacher librarian runs through the rest of the day with the teacher's burning questions regarding books to help her students engage in reading and to build empathy replaying in her thoughts. The teacher librarian wonders if there is a way to quickly locate and evaluate texts that would remedy this teacher's situation.*

#### **Problem Statement**

According to *Empowering Learners* (AASL 2009) one of the roles of a Teacher Librarian (TL) is to be a partner with classroom teachers. One positive way TL's can partner with teachers is by supplying them with text sets to meet specific classroom needs. Through text sets, a TL can support a classroom while still giving a teacher choice to use whichever resources best fit their exact needs. These text sets are extremely important for TL's who can have many of them ready to distribute to teachers to benefit students. These teachers can then supply their students with valuable resources.

One example of text sets that TLs can provide to teachers is those for read alouds.

Historically, reading aloud to students has been widely accepted as a best practice for teachers and students for over 30 years. The 1985 *Becoming a Nation of Readers* report (Anderson, 1985) states, “Reading aloud to children is the single most important activity for building the knowledge required for eventual success in reading” (p. 23). Yet according to more recent research on read alouds by Marchessault and Larwin (2014), “many times the association will be made with the word ‘elementary’” (p. 187). However, Marchessault and Larwin argue that according to their research, reading aloud to young adults is just as important and just as exciting for students as reading aloud to elementary aged students. Still, as students get older, both teachers and students fail to see reading aloud as an age appropriate use of time. Likewise, Jim Trelease (2006) states in his book, *The Read Aloud Handbook*, that by the time students reach middle school very few people read aloud to them. This neglect of reading aloud to young adults directly correlates with a decline in their reading for pleasure.

Furthermore, research by Marchessault and Larwin (2014) shows that “students who are read to are exposed to new - experiences with literature that they may not have otherwise had access to if forced to read everything independently” (p. 190). The same research also shows that when students are read aloud to, they are more engaged and invested in the literature itself. They are exposed to diverse situations they may not have chosen for themselves. Reading aloud to students is important not just at home, but also in the classroom to create environments where students are actively engaged in literature and wanting to pursue more diverse literature for both academic purposes and for pleasure reading.

Literature, when read aloud, allows teachers and students to engage in a conversation about topics represented in the text. Given that reading aloud exposes students to diverse

situations they may not otherwise have encountered, teachers may be able to use read alouds to expose students to issues related to persons with disabilities. This connects directly with the fact that, according to the National Council on Disabilities (2012), “Students with visible and non-visible disabilities are subject to more bullying than their non-disabled peers” (p. 2). Trelease (2006) states in *The Read Aloud Handbook* that reading aloud to students creates an opportunity for kids and adults to have conversations around complex subjects like morality and right and wrong. Jen Curwood (2012), in her study *Redefining Normal: A Critical Analysis of [Dis]Ability in Young Adult Fiction* very carefully examined three young adult novels for the express purpose of careful discernment of the depiction of the characters and honest representation of disabilities while avoiding stereotypes. All three books used in her study were found to be of good quality and to have accurate depictions. that would benefit students by providing them with sensitive and accurate lenses through which to view disability. Although analyzing the books for the appropriateness for reading aloud was not an intended part of the Curwood study, the next step with these titles would be to analyze them a second time to ensure they would make good classroom read-alouds.

In summary, reading aloud to students is important. Reading aloud not only helps students academically, but helps give adults opportunities to introduce students to topics like bullying and disability. Teachers have a wonderful opportunity to use literature to connect students to situations they might never understand otherwise.

Teachers are busy filling a student’s day with core classes and meeting standards, so any extra time in the classroom is extremely valuable. If teachers choose to read aloud during this time, they want to ensure the books will benefit their students in multiple ways. Although there are resource lists available with books that make good read alouds, and there are resource lists of

books about persons with disabilities; there is not a resource that combines these components and analyzes characteristics of the best books to read aloud that are widely available, and that have positive portrayals of persons with disabilities.

### **Deficiencies**

There is currently no analysis of widely available books that would make good read-alouds for upper elementary and middle school students while also depicting teens with physical disabilities in an effort to encourage empathy. *Disability in Kidlit* reviews books that depict students with disabilities, but does not offer suggestions of texts that would be good classroom read-alouds. *Read Aloud America* publishes a list every year of the top books for middle level classroom read alouds but does not explicitly attend to considerations such as their depiction of disability. There is no resource that unites these two topics and analyzes text contents in depth.

### **Summary of Problem Statement**

Teacher Librarians would benefit from an analysis of what makes a good read aloud text for young adults to help build empathy toward persons with disabilities that also analyzes several books that positively depict young adults with disabilities and determines whether they would also make outstanding read aloud texts.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this study is twofold: to develop criteria for what makes a good read aloud text to help young adults build empathy regarding persons with physical disabilities, and to analyze three young adult texts identified in Jen Scott Curwood's (2012) study *Redefining Normal: A Critical Analysis of (Dis)ability in Young Adult Literature* that appropriately depict teens with disabilities to determine if they would make good classroom read aloud selections.

## Research Questions

1. What characteristics of a text make it a good candidate for a read-aloud for young adults?
2. What benefit do books with accurate depictions of teens with disabilities bring to read-aloud texts?
3. What qualities do these YA texts possess that may or may not situate them as strong candidates for read-alouds?

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this study is twofold to develop criteria to analyze literature and determine if it would make a good classroom read aloud, then to analyze three young adult texts identified in Jen Scott Curwood's (2012) study *Redefining Normal: A Critical Analysis of (Dis)ability in Young Adult Literature* that appropriately depict teens with disabilities to determine if they would make good classroom read aloud selections.

There are three issues that must be explored before delving into how well texts fit into the mold of being great read alouds, but also help students develop empathy by depicting teens with disabilities. The first issue to be explored is the examination of how classroom read-alouds impact student learning. Reading aloud to students is not only an excellent use of class time, but it also benefits students in multiple ways. Second, this literature review covers how empathy education impacts instances of bullying. The topic of young adults with disabilities was chosen because it has the ability to affect teens and the way they treat their peers. Finally, past studies of

literature for youth depicting students with disabilities are explored with attention to the current state of these depictions.

### **Classroom Read-alouds Impact Student Learning**

The first topic, classroom read-alouds impact student learning, is the most important. According to several studies, it is the most important thing you can do for a child's eventual success. Reading aloud to children affects them in a myriad of ways and impacts their education positively throughout life.

In Jim Trelease's (2006) book, *The Read Aloud Handbook*, the first chapter is entitled "Why Read Aloud." The purpose of this chapter is to detail the effects of reading to children and not reading to children. Trelease compiled research from multiple sources as well as anecdotal reports. He found that children who are read aloud to by adults in their life associate reading with pleasure. When a human experiences pleasure, one is likely to repeat that event. The more children are read to, the more likely they are to read recreationally on their own. The more they read recreationally, they more likely they are to be successful as adults. One example used was the fact that 62% of children in a high socioeconomic status were read aloud to every day. In comparison, only 36% of children in a low socioeconomic status were read to everyday. This impacts vocabulary development. When children are read to, they are exposed to new vocabulary. By the time children get to Kindergarten, there is a 36-million-word gap between children of high and low socioeconomic status. Finally, the research Trelease presents in this chapter analyzed data from schools that were employing read alouds. One case described Lewdenberg Middle School in Boston, Massachusetts that was suffering with low test scores and a bleak school community. In an effort to impact the situation, the principal implemented 10 minutes of read alouds in the beginning of the day and 10 minutes of sustained silent reading at

the end of the day. The results were phenomenal. In just three years, the reading scores of this school climbed to the highest in the city. Trelease's chapter shows that reading aloud is an extremely valuable use of time regardless of the listener's age. Reading aloud to students has the ability to bridge gaps both socially and academically. The reviews of texts created here aim to also help teachers choose texts that can bridge social and academic gaps.

The purpose of Marchessault and Larwin's (2013) study *Structured Read Alouds in School: The Potential Impact on Reading Achievement* is to research the effectiveness of read-alouds at a middle school level. The study sought to answer the question if read-alouds were the best solution to reader apathy particularly among non-special education students. The researchers compared four sixth grade classes in two schools. Some classes were instructed to use read-aloud techniques, while others were instructed not to. The control group was not given any instructions at all. Students were tested on both vocabulary and reading comprehension. The results showed that read-alouds had a positive impact on both areas studied but had a much larger positive impact on reading comprehension. Read alouds work as a tool to improve learning. This study showed that read-alouds are a way to reach students. The study also showed that reading aloud to students is an extremely valuable use of classroom time. It also justifies having a list of texts that make good read alouds available to teachers to utilize in their classrooms.

Finally, Luft Baker, Santoro, Biancarrosa, and Baker (2015) studied how read alouds affect reading comprehension in their study, *Effects of Quality Instruction on Student Vocabulary and Comprehension During Read Alouds*. The purpose of the study was primarily to look at listening comprehension but also reading comprehension skills and how they affect word identification. The study observed 39 first grade classrooms from 12 different schools across the Mid-Atlantic region; including a total of 638 students. Students were read aloud 12 narrative

books and 12 expository books all involving animals and related to a larger science unit. The lessons paired with the books included grammar lessons and pre-reading strategies. Students were questioned by the teacher after the read aloud to check for understanding. Students were either in the control group that was not read aloud to or in the intervention group that was. The results of the study found that the comprehension varies greatly based upon instructor quality. However, the students in the class that was read aloud to improved their reading comprehension and word identification scores significantly showing that reading aloud to students does impact their vocabulary. This demonstrates that reading to students not only fosters a love of reading but also creates better learners and improves students' comprehension and vocabulary. Teachers who use read alouds in the classroom are benefitting their students in multiple ways through social emotional growth, achievement rate, and academic skills.

In conclusion, reading aloud to any age child positively impacts them immediately and in the long term. Reading aloud to children in the classroom positively impacts student learning (Trelease, 2006). Skills such as vocabulary building and comprehension are fostered and developed (Luft Baker, Santoro, Biancarrosa, & Baker, 2015). These skills are then utilized throughout a child's life, creating lifelong readers, learners, and successful adults (Marchessault & Larwin, 2013). Regardless of a child's age, socioeconomic status, or abilities, reading aloud to them directly impacts their rate of success in and out of the classroom.

### **Empathy Education Impacts Bullying**

Bullying is a topic on the mind of many students and administrators. Entire TV programs aimed at students and adults alike take on this sole theme. The issue of bullying is one that permeates students from all walks of life according to stopbullying.gov. Through literature,



teachers can impact this sensitive and important issue. By introducing students to characters different than themselves, students can gain empathy.

First, the purpose of Espelage, Rose, and Polanin's (2015) study *Social-Emotional Learning Program to Reduce Bullying, Fighting, and Victimization Among Middle School Students with Disabilities* was to look at how the Social Emotional Learning Second Step program affected incidences of bullying, physical aggression, and peer victimization. The research sought to answer whether or not Social Emotional Learning (SEL) impacted instances of bullying, particularly bullying of students with disabilities. The study included 123 sixth grade students with disabilities in 12 schools across two districts. A random number table was used to decide what level of SEL education each student received. The test group was solely students who were identified with disabilities. The purpose was to impact bullying within this subgroup of students. The SEL curriculum consisted of 15 lessons on empathy, communication, problem solving, emotion regulation and substance abuse prevention. The results showed that the students with the SEL education reduced bullying behavior compared to their control peers. When students with disabilities were explicitly taught empathy, they did not engage in bullying as frequently. This shows that helping students gain skills like empathy and problem solving, larger issues like bullying are impacted. A teacher can teach these skills through lessons, or through experiences. Literature is one way a teacher can introduce experiences to students that may be different than their life experiences.

Similarly, Stanbury, Bruce, Jain, and Stellern (2009) studied how empathy programs can affect bullying in their study *The Effects of an Empathy Building Program on Bullying Behavior*. The purpose of their study was to answer the question "does an empathy building program for middle school students affect bullying behavior?" (p. 5). The study's participants were 172

seventh and eighth grade students from a single middle school. The control group attended regularly scheduled academic classes, while the study group had lessons on empathy augmented into their day. The study group was given 15 minutes of instruction on empathy one day per week. The instruction drew upon literature and personal experience specific to the school leading discussions related to reducing bullying behavior. The study found that the group who received empathy instruction reported engaging in bullying activity far less than the control group. This shows that teaching students about empathy helped to control bullying. When students are allowed to discuss situations both different and similar to their own, bullying behavior decreases. Literature often gives students the ability to discuss important topics.

In summary, developing empathy in children is a crucial piece in the bullying puzzle (Stanbury, Bruce, Jain, & Stellern 2009). Students need to be directly taught empathy (Espelage, Rose, & Polanin 2015). Literature is a wonderful way to introduce these types of social lessons into a child's life while keeping the information fun and light-hearted. When students can reduce bullying, they can feel safe to learn.

### **Depiction of Disability in Young Adult Literature**

Literature is both a window and a mirror. (Sims Bishop 1990, p. 3) It can be a window into another world and a mirror reflecting our own society back to us. When young adults look at literature, one hopes that the mirror reflected back is one of tolerance and accurate depiction (We need diverse books, 2017). In the case of disabilities, it is even more important that young adults see windows and mirrors that portray characters correctly and accurately.

First, Irwin and Moeller (2010) examined characters with disabilities in their study, *Seeing different: Portrayals of disability in young adult graphic novels*. The purpose of the study was to examine how people with disabilities were portrayed in popular graphic novels. The

researchers asked if there was a positive portrayal of the characters with disabilities in these texts. The texts were from the 60 graphic novels listed on the Youth Adult Library Services Association's Great Graphic Novels for Teens 2008 website. The researchers read the novels three times each. Researchers then examined visual presentations the first time, text only the second, then visual and text combined. The characters were put into categories based on their disability as defined by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, their role in the story, and their positive or negative portrayal. The researchers concluded that while disabilities were represented in these graphic novels, primarily they were negatively portrayed. The characters were often evil or stock characters. Most of the characters were defined by their disability, having no ability to overcome it or grow from it. The most represented disability was a physical impairment. This information, while opposite from what one would hope for, shows that literature must be carefully selected. The study by Irwin and Moeller demonstrates the need for a list of books that depict teens with disabilities accurately and would make good classroom read alouds because not all books fit these criteria.

Second, Irwin and Moeller (2012) conducted a follow-up study entitled, *Seeing the same: A follow up study of portrayals of disability in graphic novels read by young adults*. This time the purpose was to look at best seller lists and identify if characters with disabilities were represented and if so, examine how they were depicted. A primary research question identified was whether graphic novels identified as best sellers depicted characters with disabilities differently than graphic novels identified as "best" by librarians. The methods were very similar. Thirty books were chosen from the *New York Times Graphic Books Best Seller List*. Books were read three times each searching for not only whether characters with disabilities were present, but how they were depicted as well. The results showed that a majority of these books contained

characters with disabilities. This was very different from the initial study. However, the portrayal of the characters was still overwhelmingly negative. This shows that there is still a need to bring attention to the fact that disabilities are not being accurately portrayed in texts. A list of texts that empowers students with disabilities is needed.

Price, Ostrosky, and Mouzourou (2015) crafted a study entitled *Exploring Representations of Characters with Disabilities in Library Books*. The purpose of this study was to look at children's books that were available at a local library in a midwestern town of about 100,000 people to examine the books for accurate portrayal of disabilities. The researchers wanted to see if the books would receive favorable or unfavorable reviews based upon how they depicted characters with disabilities. To conduct this study, key word searches were done using the terms "special needs" "children" and "disabilities" in one Midwestern library's database. This online search plus a manual search of the physical library yielded 205 books. These books were then evaluated for their depiction of humans or animals with disabilities and their appropriateness for 5-7 year-olds. The age group was selected because research shows children develop their attitudes about disabilities at this age. Nasatir and Horn's (2003) guidelines were used to evaluate the book's depiction of disabilities. Seventy-nine percent of the books examined showed no stereotypical depictions of disabilities. In 88% of the books a character with disabilities took on a leadership role. And 95% of the books had a positive role model. In these books, characters with disabilities were portrayed positively. This grouping of texts was only targeted for young children though. This group of texts was comprised of works that specifically were about special needs or disabilities. According to Price et al. (2015) children's books do a better job of depicting characters with disabilities than young adult texts. The research shows

how important it is to have a vetted list of texts for teens to reference for books that accurately depict teens.

Finally, Curwood (2012) explored three YA novels whose main characters have disabilities in her study *Redefining Normal: a Critical Analysis of (Dis)ability in Young Adult Literature*. The purpose of this study was to analyze the construction of disability in three young adult novels. The study aimed to not only analyze the characters and characterization, but also to examine how literacy teachers can promote literacy skills using novels that depict a character with a disability. The study maintained that if literacy teachers do not choose novels with diverse characters and character representations, schools are inadvertently promoting stereotypes. The novels to be studied were chosen from the Schneider Family Book award list. This award, administered by the American Library Association, goes to a book that captures the disability experience. The specific novels were *Jerk*, *California Five Flavors of Dumb*; and *Marcelo in the Real World*. The novels were analyzed for their normalcy or how the characters are normalized. Categories observed were how characters' express normalcy, how characters' challenge normalcy, how the author integrates disability into the storyline, and how disability shapes the character's identity. Each of the novels begins with the main character not being in control and experiencing frustration or anger at others who treat them differently because of a disability. Each book has an antagonist who is also a family member who impedes them from reaching their potential. In conclusion, each of the novels offer characters that are complex and realistic while also struggling with a disability. Each character must make a choice to redefine his or her self-identity. It is important that students read about characters who have disabilities that are not sensationalized or over-emphasized. The books Curwood examined do an excellent job of this. The current study analyzes the three texts further for their appropriateness for classroom read

alouds in order to expand a view of what makes a good read aloud for young adults to build empathy toward persons with disabilities; this list could assist teachers and librarians in choosing texts for classroom read alouds.

While depiction of young adults with disabilities has come a long way, there is still room to grow. Focus is still needed on this topic to ensure students are getting an accurate depiction of students with disabilities (Irwin & Moeller, 2010, Irwin & Moeller, 2012). Students, particularly in small towns, are in need of books that depict children in many different ways (Price, Ostrosky, & Mouzourou, 2015). This is not just important for students who have different abilities, but also for other children as well to build skills like empathy mentioned in the above reviews. While there are some recognitions for books that do accurately depict teens with disabilities, this sensitive issue still needs to be in the forefront of education and examination (Curwood, 2012).

In conclusion, read-alouds are very beneficial to students because they improve vocabulary and comprehension skills. Reading aloud to students is not just an activity for young children, but can positively impact older students as well (Luft Baker, Santoro, Biancarrosa, & Baker, 2015; Marchessault & Larwin, 2013; Trelease, 2006). Empathy enables children to connect with other children and reduces bullying creating a safer space for students to feel free to learn (Espelage, Rose, & Polanin, 2015; Stanbury, Bruce, Jain, & Stellern, 2009). It has also been shown that appropriate depiction of disabilities is lacking in current literature despite attention given the problem through the conduct of multiple studies. Depictions are improving over the years, but more attention needs to be brought to this issue, (Irwin & Moeller, 2010, Irwin & Moeller, 2012; Price, Ostrosky, & Mouzourou, 2015; Curwood, 2012). When students are read aloud to, they are not only free to make connections in comprehension and vocabulary, but they are given a safe space to discuss sensitive issues such as bullying and disability with an

adult who can help them process complex emotions like empathy. Couple this with the current need to bring the appropriate depiction of teens with disabilities to the forefront of conversation, and the need for this study becomes apparent. The current study will examine the books identified as including accurate depictions of individuals with disabilities in Curwood (2012) and determine whether or not these texts would serve well as read-aloud books. Students and educators alike will benefit from this analysis and its determination.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **METHODOLOGY**

The purpose of this study is twofold: to develop criteria for what makes a good read aloud text to help young adults build empathy regarding persons with physical disabilities and to analyze three young adult texts identified in Jen Scott Curwood's (2012) study *Redefining Normal: A Critical Analysis of (Dis)ability in Young Adult Literature* that appropriately depict teens with disabilities to determine if they would make good classroom read aloud selections.

#### **Research Design**

This study used a qualitative analysis of content. "Qualitative content analysis goes beyond merely counting words or extracting objective content from texts to examine meaning, themes, and patterns they may manifest" (Wildemuth & Zhang, 2009, p. 308). Qualitative analysis was used because this method, "uncovers patterns, themes, and categories important to a social reality" (p. 312). When applying this method, the researcher is then allowed to construct new meaning from qualitative data while making inferences on how it impacts society as a whole. The qualitative content analysis approach brings a systematic approach to data sources that are not easily broken down into numbers or figures. The researcher followed the procedure set forth by this approach.

Wildemuth (2009) sets out a series of steps to be followed when conducting a qualitative content analysis. These are “(1) prepare the data, (2) define unit of analysis, (3) develop categories and coding scheme, (4) test your coding scheme on a sample of text, (5) code all the text, (6) assess your coding consistency, (7) draw conclusions from the coded data, and (8) report your methods and findings” (pp. 311-312). The research was guided by these afore mentioned steps.

Applying stage 1, *Prepare the data*, as the researcher, I grouped passages and quotations from the texts together to analyze the books’ qualities and characteristics that would make them good candidates for a classroom read aloud using a beginning list of characteristics and criteria set by previous professionals such as Trelease (2006). Wildemuth and Zhang (2009) describe qualitative content analysis as “designed to condense raw data into categories or themes based on valid inference and interpretation. This process uses inductive reasoning, by which themes and categories emerge from the data through the researcher’s careful examination and constant comparison” (p. 309). The analysis first involved determining criteria by which to judge books for potential read alouds with the intent to build empathy among young adults toward persons with physical disabilities. Wildemuth (2009) tells us that the researcher will, “make inferences and present your reconstructions of meanings derived from the data” (p. 312). The Trelease (2006) text was used as preformed data. The researcher interpreted Trelease’s findings into categories to which the books from the sample would later be compared.

## **Procedures**

### **Data Sources**

In stage 2 of) qualitative content analysis, (Wildumuth 2009) *Define the unit of analysis*, I studied Trelease’s (2006), *Read Aloud Handbook* as the unit of analysis for what makes a good



read aloud, and I studied three novels identified by Curwood (2012) as the unit of analysis for novels that represent strong depictions of persons with disabilities. As Trelease's book is highly regarded as a resource for both teachers and parents, this text was used to formulate the criteria for good read-aloud texts. Additionally, Jen Scott Curwood (2012) took a unique approach when analyzing young adult novels with characters having disabilities. She specifically looked at the power and agency of the characters, and their ability to move and propel their plots. The three texts she selected, all award winners, each gave their characters both power and agency while keeping the stories realistic and honest. Due to her high recommendation of each of her selected novels, I chose to expand upon these three books already vetted by her study. Curwood tells us these types of novels are important because, "By using a critical lens to examine representations of disability in contemporary young adult literature, it is possible to trace the roles that identity and power have in shaping the novel's plot, characterization, and theme" (p. 26). Trelease (2006) talks about these same literary elements being positively impacted by reading aloud. Combining the two, a critical literary analysis of disability and the vast benefits of reading aloud to young adults, provided the researcher with the ability to impact a target audience.

The three books selected to be studied from Curwood (2012) were *Marcelo in the Real World* by Francisco Stork, *Five Flavors of Dumb* by John Antony, and *Jerk, California* by Johnathan Friesen. These books were chosen for her study because they had all won the Schneider Family Book Award from the American Library Association for capturing the disability experience. These books won between the years of 2008 and 2012.

The three books chosen are also listed in the H.W. Wilson Core Collection database of recommended titles for junior high schools. The purpose of the core collection resource is to inform librarians when making book selections and weeding books according to their relevance.

This list was used to select the three books for analysis because librarians would be most likely to purchase and retain these three books over time, given their status as core collection titles. Once the specific books were chosen, the researcher read and reviewed each book to create a unit of analysis. Each theme was first analyzed to create a unified message. This was done by analyzing specific word choice, sentences, paragraphs, and over-all message.

### **Data Analysis**

Guided by stage 3 of qualitative content analysis as described in Wildemuth (2009), *Develop categories and coding scheme*, I determined the initial categories using Trelease (2006). I read the Trelease text three times to gain a deep understanding. The first reading was to understand the content. In the second reading, passages that spoke to specific positives for read-alouds and/or offered specific advice on how to pick a read-aloud text were color coded. The third time, the color coded sources were examined and constantly compared to find themes and groupings. I then created an initial criteria list (see Appendix A). The initial read aloud criteria (see Appendix A) were determined through careful reading of Jim Trelease's (2006) book, *The Read Aloud Handbook*.

Next, in fulfilling Wildemuth's stage 4 of qualitative content analysis, *Test your coding scheme on a sample text*, I carefully analyzed one of the Curwood (2012) texts, *Marcelo in the Real World*, to use inductive reasoning to decide the best fit category for each identified text excerpt. The analysis included pieces of text that best demonstrate each of Trelease's criteria, where possible.

Following stage 5 of Wildemuth's qualitative content analysis, *Code all the text*, I made brief anecdotal notes for each book in each category. These notes were observations and then later categorized.

In keeping with Wildemuth's stage 6 of qualitative content analysis, *Assess your coding consistency*, I read the books three times to insure objective and careful analysis, as well as constant comparison. Wildemuth (2009) defines constant comparison as "the systematic comparison of each text assigned to a category with each of those already assigned to that category, to fully understand the theoretical properties of the category" (p. 311). The first reading was to glean the plot and characters. The second reading was used to code the passages of text that seemed to fit within the existing categories. The third reading was of only the coded passages to carefully determine if the existing categories were accurate.

After this, the list was analyzed for commonalities. In the end, the researcher identified no new categories that also indicated the books would make positive read alouds. In this way, the researcher carefully confirmed the distinct categories, both initial and emerging, ensuring correct and consistent coding. In fulfilling Wildemuth's stages 7 and 8 of qualitative content analysis, *Draw conclusions from the coded data*, and *Report your methods and findings*, the conclusions and the final list of categories were drawn from the process of coding and were reported in the findings.

## CHAPTER 4

### FINDINGS

The purpose of this study is twofold: to develop criteria to analyze literature and determine if it would make a good classroom read aloud, then to analyze three young adult texts identified in Jen Scott Curwood's (2012) study *Redefining Normal: A Critical Analysis of (Dis)ability in Young Adult Literature* that appropriately depict teens with disabilities to determine if they would make good classroom read aloud selections.

To complete this qualitative analysis of content, I began by closely examining Trelease's (2006) *The Read-Aloud Handbook* to develop criteria by which to judge a text based upon whether or not it would make a good candidate for a classroom read aloud. I was particularly interested in a read aloud's capacity to build empathy among students toward persons with physical disabilities. I carefully developed the following seven criteria after close analysis of the text. I then applied the seven categories to the three books identified in Jen Scott Curwood's (2012) study to determine whether those texts would make good classroom read alouds for young adults to help build empathy. The analysis of the data and answers to the research questions follow.

### **Characteristics of a Good Read Aloud**

Seven distinct categories of suggestions for read alouds intended to build empathy arose from the data. They are vocabulary at or above grade level; appropriate social emotional content; plot driven engaging/ exciting; novelty, humor, conflict, or suspense used for attention purposes; believability; experience different from own to promote learning; and appropriate amount of dialogue. While these categories do not explicitly identify empathy, together they imply the foundations of empathy building.

The first category is *Vocabulary at or above grade level*. According to Trelease (2006), students can understand much more complicated content than they can read. This read to understand ratio does not converge until about eighth grade (p. 37). Even after eighth grade, hearing a rich and diverse vocabulary builds students' vocabulary skills giving them access to a communication dependant culture (p. 39). By ensuring read aloud books are at or above grade level vocabulary, teachers are giving students access to vocabulary they may not be able to tackle on their own and may not come across in their everyday lives.

The second category is *appropriate social emotional content*. Trelease describes that beginning about age nine, students begin to crave more realistic stories that focus on emotional issues. Along with this, maturity must be kept in mind. Special attention must be given to ensure content is not too mature for students (p. 67). A thirteen-year-old is not at the same level as a nine-year-old emotionally. Some nine year olds may be mature enough to handle content well beyond their years, while some thirteen year olds may not be able to emotionally handle content typically acceptable for other thirteen year olds. This category is the most sensitive. While generalizations can be made, it must be considered on a case by case basis. Trelease (2006) reminds teachers to “never read above a student’s social emotional level” (p. 79). According to McMahon (2017) of commonsensemedia.org, teens are developing both physically and cognitively. They need guidance because, “they can fall for naïve opinions and one-sided arguments” (p.1). Commonsensemedia.org also tells us that, “most kids are going through puberty, though they can be in a wide variety of stages. The accompanying hormonal imbalances can trigger strong emotions that kids don't always understand. Sex experimentation can begin, and body consciousness is a big issue” (p. 1). While some teens may be ready both physically and mentally for more mature content, others may not. When using read alouds, it is better to err on the side of caution rather than expose a child to something for which they are not socially or emotionally ready. Teacher librarians never want to censor a child from learning, but student individual development must be taken into account.

The third category is *plot driven, engaging, and exciting*. Trelease (2006) states, “Beginning at about age three, plot plays an increasingly important role in holding a child’s or class’s attention” (p. 67). If a book does not hold the student’s attention, the student will not be invested. Without attention, the benefits that come with reading aloud to students will be

negated. If they are not paying attention they won't gain anything from the plot line, the varied vocabulary, or rich and diverse grammar. When the plot is intriguing, students are invested, and that investment breeds learning.

The fourth category is *Experience different from own to promote learning*. This category is especially important in the current content analysis because the analysis specifically is intended to determine criteria for read alouds for young adults to help build empathy for persons with physical disabilities. Trelease (2006) discusses two of the most important types of education, education of the mind and education of the heart (p. 48). Education of the mind takes place through traditional schooling. This is the type of education needed to advance academically. Education of the heart is needed to create empathy. Trelease states there are two ways to gain this education, "life experience, and stories of life experience, which is called literature" (p. 48). This empathy education is vital to students' development and maturity. Education of the heart builds empathy. Trelease states that this education of the heart is nothing new. Everyone from Aesop to Confucius to Jesus has used stories about vineyards, mustard seeds and sheep to get this point across and educate the heart (p. 48).

In addition to Trelease' attention and implication of empathy, Espelage, Rose, and Polanin's (2015) study *Social-Emotional Learning Program to Reduce Bullying, Fighting, and Victimization Among Middle School Students with Disabilities* also focused on the importance of empathy. They implemented a SEL curriculum that consisted of 15 lessons on empathy, communication, problem solving, emotion regulation and substance abuse prevention. The results showed that when students with disabilities were explicitly taught empathy, they did not engage in bullying as frequently. This shows that by helping students gain skills like empathy and problem solving, larger issues like bullying are impacted. Literature is one means through

which a teacher can introduce experiences with empathy and problem solving to students that may differ from their life experiences.

The fifth category is *humor, novelty, conflict, or suspense used for attention purposes*. Trelease (2006) cites a study by Warwick Elly in which he notes “books which hold children’s attention will garner larger learning benefits, especially books that include novelty, humor, conflict, and suspense. In other words, the more interesting the book, the keener the child’s attention and the more learning results” (p. 56). When a child is invested in a book, that child pays close attention. This attention is what allows students to absorb both the content and the style of the text. The students are learning while having fun. The investment and the fun converge to create powerful learning.

The sixth category is *believable*. Trelease (2006) cites this criteria as the most important. Conflict and drama drive stories, but also maintain interest. When a plot line is too squeaky clean, students become disinterested because it does not mimic real life, which is often messy and complicated. Trelease notes that in an attempt to shelter children, parents often pick books that will keep a child forever young, then become confused when the child loses interest in reading (p. 58). By choosing books that are believable, children are not only being engaged with exciting texts, but they are being prepared for the trials and tribulations of the adult world.

The seventh category is *appropriate amount of dialogue*. Trelease (2006) warns to stay away from books that are too heavy with dialogue. These books are difficult to read and listening to them is even more difficult. When silent reading, the reader at least has the clues of the quotation marks and paragraph indentations; the listener does not have these luxuries (p. 79). If the person reading aloud does not change voices consistently, this can make dialogue even more difficult to parse out for a reader. In short, plot driven is good, but dialogue driven is difficult.

### **Characteristics Represented in *Marcelo in the Real World***

*Marcelo in the Real World* by Francisco Stork follows a 17-year-old young man by the name of Marcelo. He has Autism Spectrum Disorder. His specific type is most closely related to Asperger's Syndrome. The story begins with Marcelo telling us about his personal interest, internal music, as he calls it. Music that is pure feelings that only he can hear. His other interest happens to be Haflinger Ponies. He attends a private school, Patterson, for students who learn differently. The best part about this school is it also has therapy horses to help the children who attend there work on motor skills and social skills. Marcelo has been given the high honor of stable attendant for the summer. He will work at Patterson with the ponies training and caring for them. This is a dream come true for Marcelo. A new foal has just been born and he looks forward to the responsibility of training the horse.

Marcelo's world comes crashing down in an instant though when his father gives him an ultimatum. Either work for Patterson for the summer and attend Oak Ridge, a public high school for his Senior year, or work at his father's law firm for the summer to learn the rules of the "real world" and attend Patterson in the fall. Marcelo's father worries his son has been too sheltered from "normal" social interaction by the private school and ponies. With the law firm, he would be outside of his comfort zone making small talk, looking people in the eye, and navigating Boston alone.

Begrudgingly, Marcelo chooses the law firm. He is given the task of working in the copy room. It is here he meets Jasmine. Gentle but intense, Jasmine has secrets of her own. The two develop a friendship over the summer through their love of music and personal quests for something bigger and better. Jasmine helps Marcelo navigate the law firm where Marcelo must



learn that sometimes people are dishonest and deceitful, including members of Marcelo's own family.

Everything gets turned on its head though when Marcelo finds a picture in the trashcan of his father's office of a young girl that has been horribly disfigured. This girl seems to be calling to Marcelo. When he digs deeper, it seems the girl has been hurt by a windshield manufactured by one of his dad's clients, and Marcelo's dad may be withholding the truth to make sure the girl doesn't win her lawsuit.

In the end, Marcello must make a choice: be true to his family or be true to himself. He surely learns the rules of the "real world" are not always black and white.

### **Vocabulary at or above grade level**

*Marcelo in the Real World* was given a Lexile score, or a scientific scoring to match difficulty of texts to readers (MetaMetrics, 2014), of HL700. This is approximately a 6th grade reading level. It was also given the distinction of *high-low*. This means "high-low books are useful when matching older (7th grade and beyond) struggling or reluctant readers with books about age-appropriate topics and issues written at elementary-school reading levels" (MetaMetrics, 2014, para. 8). This book, unless being read to a 6th grade class, would not meet the read aloud criteria of vocabulary at or above grade level. It would not be enriching to the vocabulary of the majority of the students listening because it is intended for lower readers.

### **Appropriate Social Emotional Content**

As Trelease (2006) indicated, it is important to consider social emotional maturity and to err on the side of caution when considering read aloud books for a larger group or class of students because these levels can be different for every child, even if they are the same age. Of the 312 pages in *Marcelo in the Real World*, 27 of them contained content that would not be

suitable for a read aloud for tweens or young teens. Students would likely be too distracted to a read aloud of this book because it has multiple cases of swearing using words such as ‘fuck’ or ‘shit’. In addition, the book contains over twenty sexual references. While Curwood (2012) recommends the book for students’ individual reading, this is one example of a different standard that needs to be addressed for read alouds. Thus *Marcelo in the Real World* would not be appropriate for a read aloud for a young adult class.

### **Plot Driven, Engaging/ Exciting**

The book had several plots intertwining that made the story engaging and exciting. The first plot line was whether or not Marcelo would get to attend Patterson, his school of choice for his Senior year of high school. This hangs in the balance the entire story. Marcelo tells his mother at the very beginning, “Father is wrong .. about going to Oak Ridge High next year. I know that’s what you are reluctant to tell me. Paterson is where Marcelo belongs,” (p. 15). Marcelo struggles to keep control and agency on his own life throughout the story.

The second plot line is Marcelo’s evolving relationship with Jasmine. Marcelo initially sees her as a co-worker, until Wendel, another young intern at the law firm, opens Marcelo’s eyes to Jasmine as a sexual object. Wendel corners Marcelo asking him intimate and uncomfortable questions about Jasmine like, “Do you notice things like that, Marcelo? You know, when a woman is hot to look at, pleasant to the eyes, attractive?” (p. 70). Marcelo has trouble grasping this concept, but his relationship with her gets complicated by romantic feelings nonetheless. The romance plot line is complicated by Marcelo’s unique view on the world.

The final plot line that is simultaneously running is Marcelo’s conflict over whether to help Ixtel, the young girl injured by a faulty windshield, and betray his father, or to do nothing and endure the guilt of more young people being devastatingly injured like Ixtel. Marcelo voices

his frustration to Jasmine, “I felt something. It was like fire ... I wanted to fight for [Ixtel], fight the people who hurt her. But then I realized that might include my father. I was confused” (p. 165). The events of the story are driven by these three plot lines, propelling the action. This action keeps readers engaged throughout the story.

### **Experience Different from Own to Promote Learning**

The story is told from the point of view of Marcelo, a seventeen-year-old boy with a version of Autism Spectrum Disorder. Marcelo describes himself by saying, “From a medical perspective, the closest description of my condition is Asperger’s Syndrome[AS]. But I do not have many of the characteristics that other people with Asperger’s Syndrome have, so that term is not exactly accurate” (p. 55). The unique perspective of Marcelo gives readers a glimpse into the mind of a teen with AS or an AS like condition. This is a new experience for most readers and garners an opportunity to learn from others.

### **Novelty, Humor, Conflict or Suspense Used for Attention Purposes**

The multiple plot lines lead to multiple conflicts within the story. These include both external, like Marcelo’s conflict with his father over his future schooling, and internal, like Marcelo’s struggle with whether or not to help the disfigured girl Ixtel even if it means hurting his father.

The conflicts are magnified by Marcelo’s unique perspective and cognitive processing. Because Marcelo takes more time weighing his choices than his typical peers, the intense examination of each conflict creates suspense within the story. Jasmine observes Marcelo’s unique way of processing problems, “Did you know when we were out there on the canoe you sat still for almost two hours?” (p. 253) Readers are engaged through the suspense, wanting to continue reading to find out what decisions Marcelo makes.

Each of the conflicts are over-arching as well. They are not resolved in a few pages or chapters. This suspense and conflict also helps to hold reader's attention because they are not quickly satisfied with easy solutions. Here depth is also added to the plot through the complex conflicts.

### **Believable**

*Marcelo in the Real World* is very believable due to its real-world situations and settings. The setting is in Boston, Massachusetts. The year is not explicitly stated but it can be gleaned that it is current day. There is not extensive technology mentioned or specific pop culture references. This would allow the book to remain relevant through several years. The situation, Marcelo working at his father's law firm, is very believable. Many teens are asked to work at their parent's establishments or places of business to gain experience and skills for their future.

The issue of the defective windshields injuring people is also very believable. "The girl was hurt by a Videromek windshield; you know that right? The windshield is supposed to shatter into little, harmless pieces on impact," (p. 163). There are recalls on vehicles regularly. The idea that a company would be subversive about the safety of a product in order to save face and money is also believable. This type of situation is often reported in the mainstream media.

The characters themselves are also very believable as well. Marcelo, even with his AS, is very relatable. He has faults and flaws, but he also has moments of clarity and self-discovery. Marcelo asks himself, "are your ugly parts any uglier than mine?" (p. 303). This question is an essentially human one.

### **Appropriate Amount of Dialogue**

The book is narrated by Marcelo. The thoughts and narration are his own. This does not mean the book is without dialogue though. It is told in present tense, so others speak their own

parts. A few pages, like page 44 for example, are solely conversation; but these conversations are between two characters and are still fairly easy to follow. Even though the text does not perfectly meet the criteria on this specific item, it does not rule itself out due to careful author's craft.

### **Characteristics Represented in *Jerk, California***

*Jerk, California* by Jonathan Friesen (2008) follows Sam Carrier and his personal evolution through an epic road trip. Sam has Tourette's Syndrome, which causes the muscles in his body to jump and spasm uncontrollably. It came on when Sam was only six-years-old. He lives with his mother and stepfather, Old Bill. Old Bill detests Sam. He finds Sam to be an embarrassment and ridicules him at every turn. Old Bill is not without his own faults though. Alcoholic in an attempt to self-medicate his Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, Old Bill is abusive verbally and physically to both Sam and his mother. Sam is not only ridiculed at home, but at school as well. He is labeled as "Socially maladaptive" and placed into special education classes. Sam has been told by Old Bill all his life that his father, now dead, was a loser drunk who also happens to have Tourette's Syndrome. His one escape is running. However, Old Bill will not allow Sam to join any sports teams.

When Naomi comes to town, she is the catalyst for a dramatic change in Sam's life. He meets her on several chance occasions, falling madly in love with her, but he is deeply ashamed of himself and his disability. At his graduation ceremony, Sam embarrasses himself in front of the whole town in a dramatic episode of explosive tics. This is perpetuated by his running out of the ceremony.

The town mystery, George or Old Coot, is the only person to attend Sam's graduation party. He leaves behind a letter written to Sam from his biological father, James. This begins the unwinding of everything Old Bill has ever told Sam about his father.

George invites Sam to live and work with him. George also insists on calling Sam his birth name, Jack. Sam is very resistant to it at first. The name was given to him by his father, whom Sam is still convinced was a drunk and a dead beat. The very night George is about to tell Sam all about his father and Sam is ready to embrace his new self, George dies of a heart attack. Sam/Jack discovers a map George was going to give him that leads Sam/Jack on a road trip across the entire United States. Sam decides to go on the trip to honor George's memory.

Naomi comes as well. She seems to be running from something, but it is unclear what. As Sam/Jack travels across the country, he stops at places where his father has built windmills and meets people his father touched. He rediscovers his identity and himself in the process. He begins to embrace his new name and see his father for what he really was, a kind and wonderful human being who transcended struggles and never let his Tourette's get in the way of his dreams.

Naomi goes through a transformation as well. Half way into the road trip it is revealed that she is pregnant through some shady circumstances. She struggles with whether or not to end the pregnancy and how to deal with the aftermath of her situation. Her and Jack's relationship grows together and apart, and back together again.

The trip ends in Jerk, California, where Jack meets his grandmother for the first time. She also has Tourette's Syndrome. James, Jack's father, and his mother had a falling out just before he died, and she regrets this. Jack finds a final windmill. This windmill contains tapes his father recorded for him in case of the event of his untimely death. Naomi, Jack, and his grandmother all listen to the tapes together, and Jack discovers the man his father truly was.

In the final scene, Jack flies home, confronts Old Bill, and takes back his family. He is a changed man with a new purpose and spirit. The ending is left quite open as to what happens with Naomi's baby and Jack's future.

### **Vocabulary at or above grade level**

*Jerk, California* was given a Lexile score, or a scientific scoring to match difficulty of texts to readers (MetaMetrics, 2014), of 510. This puts the reading level at about 3rd grade. This is meant to be a *high-low* book, or a book with a very high interest level that would entice reluctant readers. If the text were being read aloud, the vocabulary would not be enriching the listeners in sixth to eighth grade.

### **Appropriate Social Emotional Content**

The content focuses on self-discovery and overcoming obstacles. This is very appropriate and relevant content for tweens and teens. The vulgar language is minimal. The text only uses two curse words and the frequency is only four times throughout the entire text.

The book does depict domestic violence briefly at the beginning and end of the book. It is implied that Old Bill hits Sam's mother and gives her a black eye at the beginning, and at the end, Sam/Jack beats up Old Bill to remove him from his family's life. While these scenes are brief, it is still important to note them.

Finally, Naomi is discovered to be pregnant half way through the book. The pregnancy is shrouded in mystery. Naomi describes the relationship as, "I felt like such an idiot after Andrew left. Andrew -- my *free* personal coach ... it can get so lonely, so when they say *love*, you know it's a lie, but right then it doesn't matter" (p. 239). It is hinted that the relationship was not pure in intention, but it is left at that.

Overall, the book highlights women triumphing over their oppressors. Naomi becomes empowered to keep the baby, and Jack's mother becomes empowered to leave Old Bill. This is a positive social message and very appropriate for tweens and teens.

### **Plot Driven, Engaging/ Exciting**

The plot follows Sam/Jack's life and his mysterious father. The other main characters such as George and Naomi both have shrouded pasts as well. The mystery of each of the characters keeps readers engaged. The whole identity of Sam/Jack changes, as evidenced in the name change. The plot of Sam/Jack's transformation grabs readers early on through the foreshadowing of death when George plants a gravestone reading "Samuel Carrier, 1989-2008, It's time for him to go" (p. 86), outside his house. Through this plot foreshadowing, readers are engaged and invested to find out what the gravestone represents. They are not disappointed through the literal and figurative deaths that follow.

The plot not only keeps reader's attention through following characters transformations, but also through the cross-country road trip that takes place. Whether or not Naomi and Jack will complete the road trip is in constant concern through the many obstacles they encounter. Between car breakdowns and relationship breakdowns, their future is uncertain. This plot also keeps readers turning pages to determine the success of the character's journey.

### **Experience Different from Own to Promote Learning**

Jack/Sam has Tourette's Syndrome, and the story is told through his eyes. In the opening scene, we learn of Sam's diagnosis through Old Bill's reaction of, "Go away? Your twitches won't ever stop' ... even at six years old, I knew I was alone" (p. 3). Sam's deep hurt and shame of his diagnosis are felt throughout the book, while these feelings are often universal, the experiences with Tourette's Syndrome are not. This promotes learning through bridging a gap



between a relatable situation and one many students have no experience with by utilizing the first person experiences of a character different from typical peers.

### **Novelty, Humor, Conflict or Suspense Used for Attention Purposes**

Sam/Jack uses humor as a coping mechanism. Throughout the book, he uses quick one liners to make light of terrible situations. Most of them are sarcastic in nature. The humor keeps the book light while discussing very deep and heavy topics. Looking forward to what Sam/Jack will say next keeps readers engaged and reading.

There are many conflicts throughout the book that keep attention. The first and foremost is the entire Sam/Jack internal conflict. The main character is on a journey of self-discovery and is in constant conflict with who he is. The name change is a perfect illustration of this change. Sam struggles to accept his Tourette's and whether or not to let that define him as a person. He finally accepts himself at the end by exclaiming, "this whole disease thing, it ain't your fault" (p. 315). The author maintains the engagement with the reader by taking the whole book to reach acceptance.

The conflict, both physical and emotional, between Sam/Jack and Old Bill takes the entire book to resolve as well. Waiting to see how Jack reconciles, or doesn't, with this piece of his past keeps readers in suspense.

### **Believable**

The plot line of a young person discovering himself while taking a cross country road trip is extremely believable and has been the plot line of many other stories like the movie *Crossroads* (2002) for instance. Jack's cross-country trek is fraught with setbacks that give authenticity to the journey. His broken relationship with both his mother and his stepfather is

also very believable. The broken family dynamic is not only believable, but also relatable to students.

In the story, Jack just happens to find a key on Old Bill's person that just so happens to open a lighthouse in California that just so happens to contain a box of tapes that James, Jack's father, just so happened to create telling his life story just in case James died an untimely death. This portion of the story gets a little far-fetched. Even the characters recognize it is far-fetched. Francine, Sam/Jack's grandma recalls questioning, "I said 'what does an eighteen-year-old need with a windmill?'" (p. 301) While it makes a beautiful and dramatic ending where Jack truly gets to know his long-dead father, the whole premise stretches the believability a little. It is not enough to discredit the entire book though.

### **Appropriate Amount of Dialogue**

*Jerk, California* is told in first person through the eyes of Sam/Jack. This does allow for dialogue, but primarily it is told through Sam/Jack's narration of what is going on around him. Conversations between characters are interrupted with Sam/Jack's observations so they do not become cumbersome and hard to follow. This would make reading aloud feasible as long as the reader used some variation in voice to indicate the difference between thoughts and spoken word.

### **Characteristics Represented in *Five Flavors of Dumb***

*Five Flavors of Dumb*, by Antony John, follows the main character Piper. Piper is deaf. She was born with a condition that slowly robbed her of her hearing throughout her childhood. Her grandparents are deaf, and her baby sister is also going deaf. Her grandparents, before their deaths, had set aside a generous college fund so Piper could attend a college specifically for deaf students. She has grown up in a family that accepts her disability and understands her struggles,

except for her father. He has always been reluctant to learn sign language, instead choosing to rely on Piper's ability to lip read to communicate with her. Piper has also just discovered that her parents have raided her college fund to pay for a surgery for her baby sister to get special implants so she can hear again. They did this for the baby, but not for Piper.

Feeling betrayed, Piper must now come up with a plan to get the money to go to college next year. Luckily, or unluckily, the local high school band, named Dumb, has just won a battle of the bands and a recording deal. To celebrate their success, they decide to put on a surprise concert, against school policy, on the school steps. Piper jumps in, challenging the principal and her good girl status to save them from certain expulsion. She makes a deal with the band that she can be their manager if she can get them a paying gig.

Their recent win of a recording deal includes three songs, unfortunately, Dumb only knows one song. They also only have three members and no drummer. Piper recruits her friend and musical prodigy, Ed, to drum for the band, even though he sees it as below him. The drama ensues. The lead singer, Josh, is an egomaniac who tries to control every aspect of the band, including Piper. He brings on Kallie, eye candy for sure, but she does not know how to play an instrument. His sole purpose in bringing her into the band is to impress her and get her to date him. This does not work. The other members Will and Tash, the guitarists, have prickly personalities. Will is an introvert with no emotion at all, and the only emotion Tash knows is anger. Tash is immediately angry with Kallie and her lack of talent, through no fault of Kallie's.

The band rehearses and records their first song, telling the recording manager they will be back later to do the other two once they have them. Piper convinces the band to write a soft rock ballad, completely out of character for them, in order to gain publicity and air time on a local soft rock station. A mysterious fan recognizes the bands misguided direction and messages Piper on

Facebook. This fan sends Piper and the band members on soul seeking missions around Seattle to rock pilgrimage sites to try and help Piper find the true meaning of rock and roll.

The soft rock ploy works, and the band lands a gig on a local live talk show. It ends disastrously. Josh spitefully outs Kallie as faking playing, because she recently rejected his romantic advances and a fist fight breaks out on live TV.

Fortunately for Dumb, this was just the catalyst to band together against Josh and grow closer both personally and musically. The performance also forces Piper to confront her parents and heal her family relationship.

Their final track, and the TV performance catches the eye of rock band ABH. They offer a contract for Dumb to open for their performance, requiring the performance of all five band members in order to receive payment. Josh, being spiteful again, refuses to go on stage and sing, nearly voiding the contract. Kallie steps up to sing, and is amazing, and Piper steps in to play air guitar for the opening song. The audience is amazed by the band and all ends well.

### **Vocabulary at or above grade level**

*Five Flavors of Dumb* was given a Lexile score, or a scientific scoring to match difficulty of texts to readers (MetaMetrics, 2014), of 890. This puts the reading level at about 6th grade. This would make the reading level at many middle schoolers, but below some high schoolers. The vocabulary used would be enriching to middle school students and would be appropriate to use. While it would be below some upper middle school students, it would still be enriching a majority of young adult listeners.

### **Appropriate Social Emotional Content**

The content in *Dumb* is appropriate for both tweens and teens. Very little strong language is used, and sexual content is nonexistent. Midway through the book 'hooking up' is mentioned,

but the extent to the sexual nature of this act is not discussed. The text even sensors itself. In one scene, the band is interviewing on live TV. Josh, the lead singer tells the anchor, “It’s a *bleep* joke. She’s a *bleep* joke” (p. 214). The story line focuses on the dynamics of the members of the band and the dynamics of Piper’s family. While some members develop romantic interests, they are very innocent in nature.

### **Plot Driven, Engaging/ Exciting**

The plot follows not only Piper’s personal evolution and transformation from smart, quiet good girl to forceful, confident rocker, but also the evolution of the band and the other members within it. While the characters are a driving force, the plot of whether or not Piper will bring the band to stardom shines through. The band begins as a few stragglers held together by a chance win of a battle of the bands and ends with a full on rock concert punctuated by dramatic rock star temper tantrums. She describes the epic journey as, “Dumb had died. Dumb had been born again. Dumb was an unstoppable force of nature” (p. 334).

### **Experience Different from Own to Promote Learning**

The main character Piper, is deaf. She tells us, “Yes, my name is Piper. And no, I don’t see the funny side. Seriously, what family with a history of hereditary deafness names their child after the player of a musical instrument?” (p. 13). This is different from typical peers. However, her struggle and transformation from wallflower to assertive go-getter is a relatable experience that bridges this gap. Her humor also bridges the gap helping students relate to her unique situation. This humanizes Piper for readers. By helping students see past the character’s disability into her true motivations and inspirations the teacher can help students build empathy exploring unique situations and struggles they have never experienced.

### **Novelty, Humor, Conflict or Suspense Used for Attention Purposes**

Conflict is used throughout the story. The story starts off with the conflict between Piper and her parents. She feels undervalued because her parents paid for her sister's operation with the money that was supposed to further Piper's education. The conflict with her family continues throughout the book and readers are engaged throughout the resolution.

Piper is also a very witty and funny character. She has many quips and one lines, often used in defence of her hearing impairment that keep the story light and humorous. She begins the book by describing the first time she saw Dumb, "swoony Josh Cooke on vocals, his mouth moving preternaturally fast and his hips gyrating like a gerbil had gained unauthorized access to his crotch" (p. 2). Her quips get her in trouble and out of trouble throughout the book.

### **Believable**

The struggles Piper faces with the band are completely believable due to the diverse personalities. Some of them go through transformations, while others remain static. Tash, a guitar player is one of the characters who undergoes a dynamic transformation. She begins the story as a ball of teenaged angst and hate. She goes through a dramatic transformation, reaching out in true friendship to both Piper and Kallie. In a true showing of friendship, Tash gives Kallie a makeover and Piper catches the moment, "All I wanted to do was capture the moment forever, Tash and Kallie hand in hand the realization that Kallie's beauty radiated from the inside" (p. 234).

The setting is in a high school which also helps establish believability. The everyday setting gives the story the impression that it really could happen. The band breaks school rules and has to deal with authority figures and consequences the same as other teens. In fact, the first time Dumb is introduced it is while "celebrat[ing] their victory by giving an unscheduled

performance on the school steps first thing Monday morning. It would have been the most audacious breach of school rules ever if the teachers hadn't been attending their weekly staff meeting" (p. 2). The scene is set early on that Dumb are trouble makers and will often have to face consequences. This ups the believability because students who pull stunts are punished rather than glossed over.

The characters themselves are all flawed and make discoveries about themselves. The fact that the characters struggle and make poor choices makes them feel more real.

### **Appropriate Amount of Dialogue**

The story is told in first person from the point of view of Piper. While there is dialogue, it is broken up by Piper's narration. The pages that are conversations between characters do not dominate the story. The issue of difficulty readers may have with the story is the dialogue spoken in sign language. In the written text, the dialogue spoken in sign language is in italics. When being read aloud, the reader would have to denote this in some other way to avoid confusion for the listeners.

### **Summary of Themes**

This study first developed criteria used to determine what qualities a text should possess to make a good classroom read-aloud for young adults. I did this through careful analysis of Jim Trelease's (2006) *Read Aloud Handbook* as well as through analysis of research on empathy building to reduce instances of bullying in teens and careful analysis of texts themselves. I selected three texts to have the criteria applied to them. Each of the texts had already been given awards for their depiction of teens with disabilities and vetted as excellent books to capture reader's attention while giving accurate portrayals of characters different from typical peers. I read each text three times to ensure correct coding and careful analysis of each of the criteria.

Then, I recorded the analysis and drew conclusions from these findings as to not only the usefulness of the criteria, but the characteristics that made each book an excellent tool within a classroom read-aloud setting.

### **Characteristics of Young Adult Read Alouds**

Research question 1 asked what characteristics of a text make it a good candidate for a read-aloud for young adults. In response to this question, the theme, *necessity of immediate connection to teen real-life experiences are necessary* emerged from the data. The findings above show seven characteristics of good read alouds surmised from Trelease (2006), however Trelease is not focused solely on young adults as he writes about good characteristics of read aloud texts. As I noted important characteristics to create an initial list of criteria for read alouds, I was focused on the specific intent of this current study, which was to use read alouds about persons with physical disabilities to help build empathy among the young adults who hear these stories. In considering this task and the suggestions of Trelease, it became apparent that these seven characteristics were most important for young adults. Other suggestions of Trelease for good read alouds included diverse sentence structure and use rhyme and rhythm to stimulate listening skills. However, these characteristics appeared to have a greater purpose in read alouds for elementary students. In determining the seven criteria most important for reading aloud to young adults, I also considered my four years experience in the classroom with young adults. Interacting with youth on a regular basis lead me to several conclusions as to how students choose literature that interests them or how they can be led to literature they wouldn't normally pick, but are enriched by. Students, in my experience, gravitate towards plot driven novels that reflect and validate their own feelings and emotions. While this is enlightening, young minds



need direction to help them choose texts that will not only reflect their own thoughts and feelings, but also challenge them to grow as people and learners.

The three specific texts examined helped to make this discovery as well. Each of the books told the story of a young person discovering themselves and struggling against the authority figures around them. None of them found these discoveries without trials, but all triumphed.

In *Marcelo in the Real World* (2013), Marcelo begins the story with a power struggle with his father. Marcelo bucks his father by stating, “You said that if I follow the rules of the real world this summer, I will get to decide where I go next year. Who will decide whether I followed the rules?” (p. 21). This defiance and questioning of authority initially drew me to this book. The theme of questioning authority is something with which many young adults struggle and with which they will instantly connect. By placing this scene right away in the book, the author instantly connects the main character to young adult audiences and draws them in.

In *Jerk, California* (2008) the struggle with authority is present from the very beginning ringing very true with young adults. Sam struggles with his stepfather and with feeling like an outsider. This scene, the very first scene, frames the whole novel and is the one that immediately resonates with young adults. It draws them in and immediately draws parallels to the lives of other young adults.

Finally, in *Five Flavors of Dumb* (2010) the scene that automatically connects with young adults is a struggle not with parents, but with peers. Piper takes on the ‘popular crowd’ and challenges their authority. This theme of challenging authority drew me in as a reader and would also appeal to most young adults

### **Accurate descriptions benefit teens by creating believability**

Research question 2 asked what benefits books with accurate depictions of teens with disabilities bring to read-aloud texts. In response to this question, the theme *accurate depictions create believability* emerged. Believability allows connections and relationships to form.

Stanbury et. al (2009) tell us that empathy building does in fact have an impact on bullying behavior, and the factor that influences how much impact it will have is “an orientation toward relationships” (p. 10). Teens need to create a relationship with the character to internalize the message, otherwise they simply check out of the story.

When a character is believable, the relationship can form. So many times I have heard from students, “teens don’t talk that way,” or “teens don’t really act that way” when describing characters in books. By creating characters that are believable, act and talk like teens expect them to, authors are allowing the relationship to build between the reader and the story. This relationship, this trust, is what allows readers to internalize the message and in turn, as research has shown, build empathy and reduce instances of bullying. This is an extremely important issue and benefit of reading aloud to teens.

In *Marcelo and the Real World* (2013), Marcelo is a deeply flawed character. He is not always a trustworthy narrator due to his unique perspective on the world and his lack of empathy for others. His flaws make him more believable though. Through the author revealing Marcelo’s flaws, he becomes more human. He becomes more relatable. He becomes someone with whom teens would create a relationship. On page 87, Marcelo wrestles with the distance most people keep from him because of his disability. He asks himself, “I wonder whether anyone considered normal has ever called me ‘friend’ before. Even Joseph never called me ‘friend’ even though we

were.” Here we get a sense of Marcelo’s world as he sees it. This moment really sticks with readers as one that makes Marcelo believable, and creates empathy for his unique situation.

In *Jerk, California* (2008) the setting of the story makes it the most believable. The story begins in small town Minnesota. “I jog through Bland - population sixteen - past three houses and Crusty’s Coop, and read tiny Pierce” (p. 6). While the place is specific the primary point is that it is small town America. This story can repeat itself millions of times over in millions of tiny American towns. Students relate with the main character’s need to escape. Sam is running from both his past, and running so his future will not become stuck in the small town mentality like so many before him. Being able to relate creates more believability and in turn creates empathy for the main character who has disabilities.

In *Five Flavors of Dumb* (2010), the believability comes from relating to the character’s setting as well. The high school setting, the cliques and drama, are relatable, believable, and create connections with readers. A reader who is connected, builds a relationship with the main character. If that character is not believable, or relatable that connection isn’t made and the empathy isn’t formed. No empathy means no impact on instances of bullying.

### **Caring for Social and Emotional Maturity of the Read Aloud Audience**

Research question 3 asked what qualities these YA texts possess that may or may not situate them as strong candidates for read-alouds. In response to this question, analysis revealed that preserving intellectual freedom does not equate with being appropriate for all occasions. The category that created the most introspection was appropriate social emotional content. This category was so difficult because what is appropriate for some, is not appropriate for all. The line of appropriateness can be quite blurry as well, changing from day to day and even situation to situation. To insure everyone’s right to read is not being encroached upon, it is important to very

carefully judge appropriateness to ensure censorship is not actually taking place under the guise of protection from content.

The American Library Association Library Bill of Rights (1996) is very clear when it comes to censorship. Article V states, “A person’s right to use a library should not be denied or abridged because of origin, age, background, or views” (p. 1 Article V). No person should be denied access to a book because of their age. No outside force should dictate what a young reader can and cannot read. Censorship for the sake of preventing ideas from being shared is morally wrong. The reader alone can judge what is good material. All the texts examined for this research have value to readers. In an independent setting, each text has the power to challenge students’ thinking and push them to be more mature consumers of literature.

However, in a large group or classroom setting each individual reader needs to be considered within the group for the good of the group. This means that selection is necessary. Selection is careful curation to ensure every reader’s needs are being met the best they can for the good of the whole group. For instance, *Marcelo in the Real World* (2013) has many uses of the word “fuck”. This could be too distracting for some students. The students distracted by this content would not receive the benefit of the book’s capacity for empathy building, the vocabulary building, and the listening comprehension because the content was not appropriate for that particular reader. The particular reader may even cause a distraction for other students, negating the positive effects for the entire class or group. This is in contrast with the other two texts, which have little content that may be at a level of maturity beyond that of the listeners.

While *Trelease* (2006) gives some nod to the idea of social and emotional maturity, he does not go into depth. This is an extremely sensitive topic, as it is different for every reader. While books should absolutely not be censored from children based upon what adults find

offensive, they should be selected carefully to ensure the needs of the group are being met. The need, in this case of selection for read alouds, is for the reading of the work to produce empathy in the readers/listeners. To create a culture of empathy, the text needs to present a character in a way that evokes empathy. By having a character come off too harshly, or in a manner that disrupts engagement and forces focus outside the story, the goal for empathy creating is diverted and the book is not a good fit for that particular situation.

It was also determined that *Five Flavors of Dumb*, due to its compelling storyline, challenging vocabulary, and well crafted, relatable characters would make an excellent classroom read aloud. *Jerk, California* would also make an excellent classroom read aloud due to its compelling storyline, and its well-crafted and relatable characters. *Marcelo in the Real World* would not be a good candidate due to social emotional content beyond the level for some young teens that would make the book unsuited for the read aloud situation; additionally, the vocabulary level would not challenge students' listening vocabulary.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this study was twofold: to develop criteria for what makes a good read aloud text to help young adults build empathy regarding persons with physical disabilities and to analyze three young adult texts identified in Jen Scott Curwood's (2012) study *Redefining Normal: A Critical Analysis of (Dis)ability in Young Adult Literature* that appropriately depict teens with disabilities to determine if they would make good classroom read aloud selections. The three guiding research questions for this study were:

1. What characteristics of a text make it a good candidate for a read-aloud for young adults?

2. What benefit do books with accurate depictions of teens with disabilities bring to read-aloud texts?
3. What qualities do these YA texts possess that may or may not situate them as strong candidates for read-alouds?

In this qualitative analysis of content, I began by closely examining Trelease's (2006) *The Read-Aloud Handbook* to develop criteria by which to judge a text on whether or not it would make a good candidate for a classroom read aloud. Though Trelease discusses what analysis revealed to be to nine aspects that contribute to a book working well as a read aloud, through the lens of aiming to create empathy in the reader, seven of these produced categories relevant to this purpose. After close analysis these categories included vocabulary at or above grade level, appropriate social emotional content, plot driven engaging/exciting, used novelty, humor, suspense or conflict for attention purposes, experience different from own to promote learning, and appropriate amount of dialogue. I then applied these seven categories a to three books identified in Jen Scott Curwood's (2012) study *Redefining Normal: A Critical Analysis of (Dis)Ability* to determine whether those texts she had already vetted as accurate depictions of teens with disabilities would make good read alouds for the purpose of exposing students to situations they were unfamiliar with and developing empathy.

From the research questions, several themes arose. First, in response to the question, What characteristics of a text make it a good candidate for a read-aloud for young adults, the theme necessity of *immediate connection to teen real-life experiences* arose. Each text formed a real-life connection immediately with the readers, proving it would be a good fit. The second theme that emerged from the data was *accurate depictions create believability*, which emerged in response to the research question, what benefits do accurate depictions of teens with disabilities

bring to read-alouds. Accurate depictions not only benefit the text by adding to its believability, but that believability contributes to connection building with readers. This in turn creates empathy in readers. Empathy has been shown to reduce instances of bullying (Stanbury., Bruce, Jain, & Stellern, 2009). The benefits to readers are not just for the texts and their believability, but it also contributes to empathy and benefits readers by reducing bullying. Finally, the last theme, *intellectual freedom does not mean appropriate for all occasions*, arose from the research question, what qualities do these YA texts possess that may or may not situate them as strong candidates for read-alouds?

### **Conclusions**

Reading aloud to students boosts their love of reading as well as their individual reading skills. According to Marchessault and Larwin (2014) “bottom line, when teachers read to students they enhance students’ understanding and their inclination to read independently” (p. 188). This can lead to gains in reading comprehension as well. Findings from this analysis show that reading aloud can have benefits not only for students’ reading abilities, but also for their ability to show empathy toward others in situations they have not experienced or do not understand.

First, the 7 categories developed from Trelease’s (2006) work help readers in a variety of ways. The obvious vocabulary building and reading comprehension gains cannot be ignored. Even though students are not practicing reading words from a page, their comprehension and vocabulary are being positively impacted through the read aloud. This alone is a very strong case for reading aloud to students in and out of a classroom setting.

Second, reading texts aloud to students can help them build empathy by introducing them to situations they would not have otherwise encountered. While students are in such a transition

period as middle school, it is important that they are exposed to situations and ideas other than their own to help them build empathy and self-confidence. As Stanbury et al. (2009) described, when students have direct instruction on empathy, instances of bullying decrease significantly (p. 8). A classroom teacher using literature is a perfect person to facilitate these experiences, discussions, and instruction. Through reading aloud, a teacher could do just that. He or she would have the ability to stop and discuss sensitive issues with the class, thus giving direct instruction on empathy building.

While one book, *Five Flavors of Dumb*, would make the very best candidate for a read aloud situation from the three studied, the categories and research questions and themes may be applied to any text. Reading aloud to students is beneficial in many types of situations, both in and out of the classroom. Each situation is unique - with unique students, challenges, and content goals. Every situation must be evaluated individually for appropriateness.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

This study focused on a very small sample of books due to utilizing ones that had already been identified as accurate depictions of teens with disabilities. Now that read aloud criteria have been developed to analyze texts to help young adults build empathy regarding persons with physical disabilities, it would be compelling to apply the read aloud criteria to a larger sample of texts about persons with disabilities or other differences to see if these young adult novels make good read aloud texts for the purpose of building empathy among students. Additionally, the criteria developed to analyze texts for reading aloud to young adults in the effort to build empathy could also be adapted and applied to young adult books on all subjects, not just novels depicting teens with disabilities. Would books on other subjects fit the same read aloud criteria, or would they need to be adapted? What would those adaptations look like?



Next, the books reviewed were intended for tweens and young teens of a middle school age. These books could also be read aloud in a high school setting. Further research reviewing them with this age group of students in mind may determine changes in suitability for read aloud for older students. How would this group of students benefit from these specific texts? Would they make good read alouds for older teens? Future studies focusing on criteria for reading aloud to students would be justified. Reading comprehension and empathy are not typically subjects thought of together, but when two powerful and important subjects are unified meaningful learning can occur. This is the need, meaningful and authentic learning.

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## APPENDIX A

## READ ALOUD CRITERIA

Adapted from The Read Aloud Handbook, Trelease (2006)

Title Author and book review grade level	Vocabula ry at or above grade level	Appropriat e Social Emotional Content	Plot Driven/ Engaging or exciting	Experienc es different from own to promote learning	Novelty, Humor, conflict, or suspens e used for attention purpose s	Believabl e	Appropria te amount of dialogue
Marcelo in the Real World, Francisc o Stork  Reviewe d for grades 6-8	Below HL700 Lexile High interest, low reading level. Approx. 4th grade reading level	No, extensive cursing, multiple discussion s of sexual intercourse . No depiction, but lots of conversati on around and about. Rape is alluded to.	Several intertwini ng plot lines. Plot driven to engage and excite	Told from Point of view of young man with Autism Spectrum Disorder. Very different from typical peers.	Conflict between characte rs holds attention . Several external and internal conflicts	Yes, very believabl e. Real world situation s.	Yes. Few places are a bit heavy, but overall good.
<i>Jerk, Californ ia</i> Jonathan Friesen  Reviewe d for grades 6-8	Below HL510L Lexile. High interest, low reading level. Approx. 3rd grade reading level	Yes, few curse words. Teen pregnancy is mentioned	Yes, Plot follows the mystery of main characters past	Yes, main character has Tourette's Syndrome . Very different from typical peers	Yes, Internal conflict of main characte r is engagin g. Sam/Jac k uses humor to cope.	Yes, ending is a little dramatic, but overall very believabl e	Yes, dialogue is used, but it is not so much it becomes difficult to follow

<p><i>Five Flavors of Dumb</i> Antony John Reviewed for grades 6-8</p>	<p>At 890 Lexile Approx. 6th grade reading level</p>	<p>Yes, few curse words and no sexual references</p>	<p>Yes, several plot lines of band, and Piper's personal life keep readers engaged</p>	<p>Yes, main character deaf, different from typical peers</p>	<p>The idea of a deaf girl managin g a rock band is very engagin g and keeps readers interest. Multiple conflicts between band member s. Suspens e used as well</p>	<p>Very believabl e. Real world situation s</p>	<p>Yes, dialogue used, but does not become difficult to follow</p>
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