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The Evolution of the Child Character with Learning Differences

Mary Viera

Submitted in Partial Completion of the  
Requirements for Commonwealth Honors in Elementary Education and English

Bridgewater State University

May 1, 2023

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## Abstract

In this paper, I will analyze the various representations of learning disabilities in selected children's literature from the early twentieth century to recent literature published in the last decade. In the typical American classroom specific learning disabilities account for about 20% of students. It is the largest classified group to receive services in special education, and also the broadest: "Learning disabilities are disorders that affect the ability to understand or use spoken or written language, do mathematical calculations, coordinate movements or direct attention" (NIH, 2022). I will use the term "learning differences" as it encompasses all children who learn differently from neurotypical students.

For children, literature is a way to develop empathy, understand their world, and develop a sense of identity. When this literature features characters with disabilities, it reveals society's values and attitudes about how they should be treated and what their role in society is. How disability is imagined in fiction will shape how it is viewed in the real world (Pollard, 2013). Often children's stories are told from the perspective of a neurotypical person. If a character with a disability *is* represented, they often play a sidekick or minor role. The dominant perspective in literature is from a neurotypical point of view. This prioritization of non-disabled character narratives suggests that disabled characters lack agency. Over time this has changed as modern characters with disabilities share their stories from a first-person point of view. This brief survey of children's literature analyzes the ways in which the narrative point of view has evolved over the last century to reflect an increasing focus on the subjectivity and agency of child characters with disabilities. The shift to a learning differenced child narrator reflects a cultural and social shift as well as changes in special education over the last century.

This analysis was based on Critical Literacy Theory and is applied later on in the paper within an instructional format. Critical Literacy Theory critiques the sociopolitical system through its texts (NCTE, 2019). It is reading the world critically to determine the various perspectives and stigmas hidden within media. This becomes important as a pedagogy as it makes learning meaningful and relevant while teaching students to read the world carefully because “Texts are socially constructed from particular perspectives; they are never neutral” (Vasquez, NCTE, 2019). By questioning the messages presented in the text, a more critical analysis of social stigmas surrounding people with learning differences can be conducted through children's literature.

I have chosen four popular children's novels to close-read and analyze: *A Little Princess* (1905) by Frances Hodgson Burnett, *StepSister Sally* (1952) by Helen F. Daringer, *Freak the Mighty* (1993) by Rodman Philbrick, and *Fish in a Tree* (2015) by Lynda Mullaly Hunt. These are chapter books written for readers around the ages of nine to twelve years old. This age range was chosen as it is the developmental stage where identity formation occurs according to developmental psychologists Lev Vygotsky and Erik Erikson. The date of publication was also considered. Books were chosen based on their proximity to monumental moments in developing special education programs in America.

Most critics agree that the child character with a disability reflects the role that disability plays in society; however, there doesn't seem to be a consensus about *how* these disabilities are represented in literature. This essay engages in four scholarly conversations regarding disability studies and children's literature. Ann Dowker focuses on the portrayal of child characters with disabilities in 19th-century literature. Prior to World War II, these characters were presented as two-dimensional stereotypes. Dowker argues that this archetype changes over time so that by the

end of the 19th century these characters with disabilities are humanized more (Dowker, 2004). I will argue against Dowker's point by illustrating how Ermengarde in the early 20th-century novel *A Little Princess* becomes a vehicle for the neurotypical Sara's growth. Holly Blackford's research supports this point as she shows how the child character reveals society's inner workings more clearly than adults. She argues that children are closer to society's values because they are learning the social rules and therefore the "child's mind and voice are used to cut through adult nonsense" (Blackford 285). The subjectivity of the child's character (what they think and how they experience physical and cognitive challenges) provides a different perspective of the world. When these characters are learning difference and are able to share their view with the world it enhances their agency or ability to make decisions independently.

I extend this point in my analysis of the domination of a neurotypical narrative in a non-neurotypical classroom setting in *Stepsister Sally*. Abbye Meyer contends that this lack of voice signals a lack of identity for individuals with disabilities. She argues when individuals are not able to match society's expectations they feel isolated and lack a role and purpose in society. She recognizes how neurotypical points of view dominate the conversation about disability and observes that in children's literature about disability "[the] tone is directed at young, presumably able-bodied readers who are expected to treat a disabled person [with respect.]" (Meyer 270). I analyze this further in my close reading of *Freak the Mighty* and connect it to psychologist Erik Erikson's theory of developmental stages. Megan R. Brown's criticism most closely aligns with the close reading I conducted. She identifies the first-person disability narrative as an empowering representative of children with disabilities experiences (Brown 193). It is through this lens that the reader gets unmediated access to the subjectivity of the child character with a disability. While many scholars recognize the changing representation of characters with

disabilities they fail to identify the key formal element affecting this change. Through my research, I have identified point of view as one of the main text features that allow for characters' disabilities to be fully understood.

## **PART I: *A Little Princess* and her learning differenced companion**

*A Little Princess* (1905) by Frances Hodgson Burnett tells the story of a rich, imaginative girl named Sara Crewe who is entering Miss Minchin's boarding school. While the story takes place in London, Burnett lived in the US and could speak to experiences on both sides of the Atlantic. Sara decides to become friends with a young girl who is struggling in her class named Ermengarde St. John. Around the time of its publication, there was not much understanding about learning disabilities, although there were a few schools in the New England area that had opened up in the late nineteenth century to serve children with physical and intellectual disabilities. Miss Minchin's boarding school permits Ermengarde to stay there only because her father has status and money; otherwise, she is a child who "never shone in anything" (Burnett 22). The description of a character's disability is vague because there's not much understanding of learning differences. The story is told from a third-person limited perspective with a focus on Sara. The experiences of a neurotypical child are prioritized throughout the story. Ermengarde is first introduced through the eyes of Sara as a

Little girl, about her own age, who looked at her very hard with a pair of light, rather dull, blue eyes. She was a fat child who did not look as if she were in the least clever, but she had a good-naturedly pouting mouth. Her flaxen hair was braided in a tight pigtail, tied with a ribbon, and she had pulled this pigtail around her neck and was biting the end of

the ribbon, resting her elbows on the desk, as she stared wonderingly at the new pupil.

When Monsieur Dufarge began to speak to Sara, she looked a little frightened. (Burnett 22)

Right away, based on Ermengarde's appearance, Sara can tell that she is "not [...] in the least clever." Even though intelligence is an abstract, invisible concept, intellectual differences are portrayed as physical. She is trying to fit into the uniformed school by wearing a tight ponytail, but she can't help herself from pulling it around so she can chew on the end of it nervously. She looks "frightened" when Monsieur Dufarge speaks in French to Sara because (as is described later on) she struggles to remember the meaning of any French words. She is amazed to find out that Sara can remember her lessons. Ermengarde's learning difference is introduced in comparison to Sara's academic giftedness. The third-person point of view shifts to Ermengarde's experience learning French which only briefly allows for insight into life with a disability before the perspective shifts back: "Having wept hopeless tears for weeks in her efforts to remember [...] it was almost too much for her to suddenly find herself listening to a child her own age who seemed not only quite familiar with these words, but apparently knew any number of others, and could not mix them up with verbs as if they were mere trifles" (Burnett 22-23). This is one of the only instances we get some proximity to Ermengarde's subjectivity. She knows that she is different from other people, and her feelings of nervousness and inadequacy manifest in her appearance. When she is disciplined for chewing on her hair, Sara notices her "poor, dull childish eyes" and feels "so sorry for her that she began to rather like her and want to be her friend" (Burnett 23). Although they are the same age Ermengarde is described as "childish" and through the description of their first meeting, a hierarchy is already established. Sara becomes a

savior by helping Ermengarde through school and also a role model that she can look up to. Sara recalls a time when her father described her charitable nature and her desire to help anyone that is in trouble:

“If Sara had been a boy and lived a few centuries ago,” her father used to say, “she would have gone about the country with her sword drawn, rescuing and defending everyone in distress. She always wants to fight when she sees people in trouble.”

So she took rather a fancy to fat, slow, little Miss St. John. (Burnett 23)

This suggests that Ermengarde is in “trouble” and in need of saving. Her learning differences isolate her from her peers and make her an object of pity and someone who needs to be taken care of. In this way, Sara uses Ermengarde to uplift herself. According to scholar Ann Dowker, there is a history in children’s literature of disabled characters serving an educational purpose in the lives of neurotypical characters. She argues that this “saintly invalid” stereotype is dwindling by the end of the nineteenth century (Dowker, 2004). Although *A Little Princess* is just one counter-example it’s important to note that this stereotype is still present and compelling in a popular children’s book at the start of the twentieth century. I will argue against Dowker in asserting that Ermengarde’s disability is a vehicle for Sara’s growth rather than an early sign of disability representation.

Although there are varying theories of human intelligence, the general definition is based on the ability to reflect on oneself, reason, and adapt (APA, 2023). Ermengarde does not fit into this definition and therefore becomes a social outcast. She is a student who struggles with retention and learns differently than the rest. Since the late nineteenth century, the preferred



pedagogical method was rote learning with an emphasis on repetition and memorization, and for a student like Ermengarde who has trouble with short-term memory this causes her to fall behind:

“She must be *made* to learn,” her father said to Miss Minchin. Consequently, Ermengarde spent the greater part of her life in disgrace or in tears. She learned things and forgot them; or, if she remembered them, she did not understand them. So it was natural that, having made Sara’s acquaintance, she should sit and stare at her with profound admiration. (Burnett 25)

Her learning differences are seen as a character deficit. Ermengarde is not able to fit into the mold of intelligence that her father expects her to fit into. She feels this rejection from her family and from society. The narrator’s explanation of her problems with memory retention alongside her struggle to learn reveal how she is a “disgrace”. Her learning differences are a personal shortcoming. When she sees Sara, a girl her age who is well-versed in French and has good manners, she becomes overcome with “profound admiration” that someone is able to meet these academic and societal standards. She clings to Sara in the hope that they can be friends and she can learn from her: ““You’re clever and I’m the stupidest child in the school”” (Burnett, 30). She recognizes that her inability to fit in with her peers is because of her difference in intelligence. Just as Sara is able to tell how smart Ermengarde is based on her appearance and demeanor in class, Ermengarde is able to do the same. It is a simple distinction between “clever” and stupid.

When Sara loses financial status the connection between intelligence and appearance becomes plainer to see. Lower social status is associated with lower intelligence. When Sara

discovers that the scullery maid, Becky, has fallen asleep in front of the fire in her private playroom she does not get angry. Instead, she comforts her; ““We are just the same--I am only a little girl like you. It's just an accident that I am not you, and you are not me!” (Burnett 51). Sara is secure in her socioeconomic status and intelligence. She takes pity on Becky because they “are just the same”; however, Sara knows this is not true. She only offers compassion and empathy *because* Becky has a much lower status than she does. It is only later in the story when Sara loses her financial support after the death of her father that she becomes aware of how fragile that status is. She becomes fearful that she will begin to slip into the lower ranks of society after being taken out of the classroom and forced to do housework; ““I am almost a scullery maid, and if I am a scullery maid who knows *nothing*, I shall be like poor Becky. I wonder if I could *quite* forget and begin to drop my h’s” (Burnett 95). Sara feels anxious that she could “forget” her upper-class accent and lose her sense of self. She connects her loss of financial privilege to her intelligence. Her intelligence remains the same; however, she no longer has the opportunity to show this because she has been taken out of school and will likely not be taken seriously as a “scullery maid” which is the lowest servant position in the house (ThoughtCo, 2023). Those who are “forgetful” like Becky are in the lower ranks of society because they cannot demonstrate intelligence in a socially acceptable way. Although Ermengarde comes from a wealthy, elite family she is marginalized to some degree like Becky because of her inability to fit in socially. While money plays an important role here in status distinction, Sara’s sudden fearfulness and change of attitude show how high intelligence is held as a value. This suggests that intellectual achievement reflects status. When Sara first arrives at the boarding school she feels this pressure. She doesn’t have the chance to explain her education to Miss Minchin and anxiously waits for Monsieur Dufarge to come in so she can prove her fluency in French. Once he arrives she begins

to “feel rather desperate as if she were almost in disgrace” (Burnett 20). Her knowledge of French raises her status to an elite group. When she does not have the chance to show this knowledge she begins to feel “desperate” and in “disgrace” simultaneously because to be associated with a lower, less intelligent class is embarrassing. She feels pressure to show what she knows, not due to pride in having an education, but out of fear that her status and privilege will not be recognized. She wants to be treated by others according to her true status. For a moment Sara experiences what Ermengarde struggles with on a daily basis. The experience of being socially rejected due to a lack of intelligence, which children with disabilities sometimes face, is seen through the lens of a neurotypical character.

In Sara’s eyes, Ermengarde’s difficulty to learn makes her someone to take pity on; however, her helpfulness is not to make space for people with learning differences but to advance her own ego. Although she is just a child she understands the cultural desire for self-actualization. In general, during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, children were taught to “submit to misfortunes” in order to grow spiritually. The idea was that submitting to God’s will would soften misfortune and shape character (Dowker 2004). Sara is actively seeking out this kind of journey as she asks Ermengarde, ““How shall I ever find out whether I am really a nice child or a horrid one. Perhaps I am a *hideous* child, and no one will ever know, just because I never have any trials”” (Burnett 32). Sara recognizes her privilege, and she is thankful for the opportunities she has. Yet, she is looking to further prove to herself and everyone else that she really is a “nice child”. Later when she is faced with the trial of losing her money and potential status, Ermengarde’s difficulty reading offers Sara a way to demonstrate her charitableness. Ermengarde’s father sends her some books that he expects her to read, and she expresses her worries about being able to remember what they are about. Sara is eager to help

her friend and offers to read them for Ermengarde and help her remember them. At first, Sarah thinks “‘It’s not your fault that you are stupid’” but then tells her “‘It’s not your fault that [...] you can’t learn things quickly’” (Burnett 177). Sara doesn’t want to hurt her friend’s feelings, but her substitution of “can’t learn things quickly” for “stupid” reveals how learning differenced people are viewed as inferior. Her understanding of Ermengarde’s learning differences and her effort to remain sensitive demonstrate that by 1905 there is some advancement toward diversity; even so, there are still gains to be made for disabled voices and representation.

Ermengarde’s reliance on Sara shows that learning differenced people can’t be on their own; they need support. The limited access to Ermengarde’s point of view is indicative of how much agency she is believed to have. When Sara first arrives Ermengarde praises her: “‘Ermengarde was as dull as she was affectionate. She clung to Sara in a simple, helpless way; she brought her lessons to her that she might be helped; she listened to her every word and besieged her with requests for stories’” (Burnett 98). Ermengarde’s dependence on Sara would otherwise leave her “helpless”. No one else cares for Ermengarde at the boarding school as she is socially rejected by her peers and Miss Minchin. When Sara shows her attention Ermengarde clings to her because it is possibly the first time she’s ever felt accepted. When Sara is exiled to the attic and forced to work as a scullery maid Ermengarde becomes anxious without her support and friendship. She seeks Sara out while she is confined to the attic: “‘I dare say you could live without me, Sara, but I couldn’t live without you. I was nearly *dead*’” (Burnett 102). Sara has helped her feel supported academically and personally. Without her, she feels like nobody. She feels “dead”. She’s not a complete person if she doesn’t have someone to support her and believe in her. This dependence on Sara’s friendship works to catalyze the story. Early in the novel, Sara feels that only a true trial of her character could prove that she is a good child. She faces that trial

with the death of her father and being demoted to a scullery maid in the attic, which causes her to lose her spark of imagination. But significantly, it is Ermengarde who brings it back:

“Sara,” she said, “do you think you can bear living here?”

Sara looked round also.

“If I pretend it’s quite different, I can,” she answered; “or if I pretend it is a place in a story.”

She spoke slowly. Her imagination was beginning to work for her. It had not worked for her at all since her troubles had come upon her. She had felt as if it had been stunned [...]

Ermengarde was at once enraptured and awed [...]

“Adversity tries people, and mine has tried you and proved how nice you are.” (Burnett 102-103)

Imagination is an expression of intelligence. Sara’s strong imagination is what sets her apart from the other students. It becomes the defining feature of her intelligence—it’s a gift.

Ermengarde lacks imagination, which conveniently allows Sara to stand out and answer Ermengarde’s questions. At a low point in her story, it is Ermengarde’s lack of understanding about imagination that causes Sara to begin to think imaginatively again. Ermengarde cannot lift her friend's spirits as “Ermengarde was too slow a girl to be equal to such a situation. She could not think of anything to say” (Burnett 98). Her learning difficulties in a way bring back the old Sara. It is also Sara's adversity that proves Ermengarde’s character as she points out to her friend, “mine has tried you.” Sara’s struggles have kept her from being able to support Ermengarde, the fact that Ermengarde dares to seek her out in the attic (despite Miss Minchin’s prohibition)

reveals her dire need. Ermengarde cannot succeed in school without Sara's help. Sara's imagination and stories are also fuel for Ermengarde socially and she craves that interaction as can be seen through her asking Sara for stories constantly. She wants Sara to be the way she used to which is why she asks if Sara "can bear living here". Ermengarde needs Sara because of her learning differences which help the plot and helps Sara feel more empowered.

Sarah's compassion for Ermengarde does highlight the difficulties of having a learning difference; however, it develops into a sense of pity. The focus is also on Sara's development rather than Ermengarde's; therefore, her difficulties and need for Sara's support merely become a device to reveal Sara's character. Ann Dowker has pointed out that children's books of the early twentieth century depicted disability as having educational value by reforming a child's temper or having their disability be miraculously cured. A child that is out of control learns and becomes tame through their struggles. Dowker argues that this humanizes children with disabilities as they are "not always treated as helpless pitiable characters" (2004). *A Little Princess* is just one instance of learning disability representation in early twentieth-century literature that does not fit this description. Ermengarde is not totally reformed or cured in any way by the end of the story. Her learning difference cannot be represented fully because the story is not focused on her character. Her disability and struggle serve as a vehicle to support Sara's character growth and to highlight her intelligence and gift of imagination (2004). What Ermengarde lacks, Sara has. It is necessary for Ermengarde to be a "helpless pitiable" girl in order to help Sara's self-actualization. Sara's relationship with Ermengarde normalizes the infantilization of people with learning differences. They cannot be self-sufficient, and helping them is beneficial to one's self-growth process. Ermengarde is a flat, two-dimensional character who does not change or grow

throughout the story. The representation of her learning differences encourages empathy but it does not suggest that they are or should be equals yet.

### ***Stepsister Sally and her adventure in a learning differentiated classroom***

*Stepsister Sally* (1952) by Helen F. Daringer published almost fifty years after *A Little Princess*, presents a similar main character to Sara Crewe. Written in the third person limited point of view the reader learns about Sally Brown. An independent, creative, and headstrong little girl who, like Sara, is invested in her appearance and her social status. The difference between them, however, is that Sally is not interested in her moral and personal growth. She has just moved to Dorcaster to live with her father's new family, which means adjusting to a new school and finding a place she can belong. She is intent on making a good impression. This desire is crushed when the principal enrolls her in the lower section:

Sally had come from a smaller town, and the work here would be more difficult. She must not think she was being demoted. The half apologetic, half jovial air with which he assured her she would still be in the same grade, only in a less advanced group, was perhaps a concession to Sally's report card. (Daringer 78)

The book's publication is just two years before the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision that separate is not equal which would extend to other minorities like children with disabilities. This marked the beginning of a movement towards special education programs, and a surge of advocacy that would follow in the 60s. Sally's new school places her in a special education setting in an effort to adjust her academically and make sure she is getting a full education. But Sally, who had good grades at her old school, will not stand for this. She does not want to be

associated with the “less advanced group” and sets her mind “to get promoted into [her friend] Ellen’s section as soon as possible” (Daringer 84). As a middle child, she seeks attention. She wants to please everyone and be recognized. Throughout the story, she puts on her best appearance and manners. This becomes important later in the narrative when Sally realizes that she wouldn’t mind staying in the lower class if it had a positive impact on her reputation.

Sally understands the lower social status of children with learning differences, so when she is assigned to Miss Clancey’s class she feels that her reputation is devastated. The principal even recognizes this as he tries to reassure her that the class is not a demotion. But Sally is not convinced, “For no matter what the principal said, being assigned to a slow group is the same as being put back” (Daringer 79). “Being put back” has both an academic and social connotation. Sally is being put in a less advanced group as a precaution because of the difficult material that her new school offers. This will also hold her back socially because she will be associated with the “slow group,” which will negatively tint others’ perceptions of her. Sally is assured of her intelligence, but it is being physically associated with the lower group that embarrasses her. When her step-sister Dorothy finds out what class Sally is in, she is shocked:

“Why, Miss Clancey teaches the dumb-bells.”

“I wouldn’t say that,” interposed Dorothy’s mother. “Some of the children are special cases. Everybody knows that Sally gets good marks in school.” (Daringer 99)

Mrs. Brown shuts down Dorothy’s use of derogatory terms. She demonstrates how there is some more understanding of learning differences in 1952 compared to Miss Minchin’s treatment of Ermengarde in *A Little Princess*, even if the language is as vague as “special cases”. Her



intervention and defense of Sally, however, show that there is a separation between Sally and the lower class because of her “good marks in school”. Sally has demonstrated her intelligence by meeting society’s standards and that is good enough for her stepmother. The children, however, recognize how Sally will be socially affected. Holly Blackford writes about the ability of the child character to observe society’s inner workings more clearly than adults. Children are observing and learning about their culture and society constantly, and as a result, internalize what they see. Blackford argues that this is why child characters may have a clearer view of societal standards than adults because they are interacting with cultural values and norms in a different way. In the modern novel then, the “child mind and voice are used to cut through adult nonsense” (285). Blackford’s analysis suggests that Dorothy and Sally’s perception of the slower class is franker than Mrs. Brown’s. Although Mrs. Brown is a little more compassionate to those with learning differences, she does not understand the children’s social reality. It is humiliating to be placed in a “slower” class whether you actually have learning differences or not.

Sally’s non-disabled perspective makes her an outsider and keen observer in the learning differenced classroom. The material is so easy for her that she does not bother to take notes or participate in class. She spends most of her time observing her classmates: “Sally noticed that the boys who bent themselves most promptly over their desks were only going through the motions of writing, their fingers quite empty of pencils” (Daringer 82). The boys are working hard, but it is a ruse. Sally picks up on this but the teacher does not. She is able to see how the boys have mastered how to keep up the appearance of studiousness without actually having to do any of the learning. Not only are they cunning, but they can be disruptive and rowdy as well. She describes the room as chaotic with paper airplanes flying everywhere (Daringer 80). Angelina Tubbs, a girl in Sally’s class, is another example of how appearances are manipulated. She wears imitation

diamonds and “a different dress to school almost every day, some with fancy trimmings, but the dresses weren’t always clean” (Daringer 105). Even though Angelina is friendly, Sally won’t be friends with her because of this fake appearance—she doesn’t trust her. Her plastic and unclean accessories indicate to Sally that she is someone who would talk behind her back. In Daringer’s novel, one’s appearance gives away defects in moral and intellectual character. Angelina’s imitation diamonds and dirty dresses indicate that she has a tawdry and dirty personality.

Stepsister Sally depicts the children in the slow learners’ class as charlatans who can only mimic studiousness and pretend to be poised and intelligent. Appearance is important to fit into society just as Sara, in *A Little Princess*, realized as she navigated changes in status. Sara’s fear that the clothes of a scullery maid would change how her intelligence is viewed is legitimized through Sally’s observations of her classmates. The more the children in the lower class try to fit in, the more tawdry they appear. Claudia Mills identifies that “The linkage Sally has drawn between mental disability, moral turpitude, and poor hygiene is left unchallenged” (534). Sally exposes her classmates for faking “normalcy” in an attempt to fit in. Her description of their physical flaws and bad behaviors is associated with children with learning difficulties. None of the students in her class change by the end of the story, nor are their perspectives or experiences shared. Just as Mills notes, Sally’s observations are “left unchallenged” and therefore become the dominant narrative.

Sally even takes advantage of her classmates based on what she learns about them. The teacher asks the class to copy a list of vocabulary words. When Sally realizes that the boy next to her, Whitey, is pretending to write, she decides to prank him by using her shoes to make it sound as if the teacher is walking up behind him. As she makes her shoes tap faster, “The boy’s tow-colored head bowed lower and lower over his empty hand, which still kept up a pretense of

writing [...] Sally could hardly keep from giggling” (Daringer 82). She does not need to focus on copying down the spelling words because she already knows them. Instead, she uses the opportunity to trick Whitey. She knows that he is not paying attention, otherwise, he would have seen Miss Bird at the front of the room. Whitey’s embarrassment after realizing Sally pulled a prank on him shows that the joke was hurtful. Later, when Sally is given the privilege to correct spelling papers, she decides to purposely make marks on the papers of people she does not like (Daringer 130). Sally’s good rapport with the teacher grants her a certain kind of power over the other students. She is at first resentful of being put in the lower class, but once she realizes the special privileges she has as the highest performing student, she becomes a bully.

Sally’s outsider perspective (both as a child and a non-disabled person) allows her to look at the bigger scope of the reality of education. Even though she is a child, she does not respect the decisions of her substitute teacher Miss Bird. The students are allowed to get away with bad behaviors, and Sally suggests that the cause is Miss Bird’s lack of discipline. She also makes a connection between the learning difficulties of the class and Miss Bird’s own intelligence:

It was useless to study your lessons for Miss Bird. Frequently she didn’t know the answers herself. She had to keep the book open where she could see what it said. Often the boys, and girls too, for that matter, asked questions they had gleaned from other brothers and sisters to trip her. But Miss Bird would never admit she didn’t know. She would smile a superior little smile and advise them to look it up themselves, so they would be sure to remember. Which of course fooled nobody. (Daringer 109)

The behavior of the children makes sense when Sally explains how this teacher manages her classroom. The students are not motivated to learn but prefer to pretend because the teacher herself does not know the curriculum. Her sense of superiority, and her superficiality, fool “nobody” just as Sally can see through the students’ deceptive appearances and behaviors. Under Miss Bird’s instruction, it is “useless to study your lessons”. Sally is making a connection here between the teacher’s knowledge and the student’s knowledge. If the teacher doesn’t know the answer then the students definitely will not learn the answer. The teacher is responsible for the success of the class. When Miss Clancey comes back, the class is restored. They stop misbehaving and are more respectful and attentive to Miss Clancey than they were to Miss Bird. She picks out Sally’s valentine to show off to the class, and this changes Sally’s perspective of being put in the lower class: “Honestly and truly it was such a friendly class she wouldn’t mind if she didn’t get promoted out of it, so long as Miss Clancey was going to be their teacher” (Daringer 116-117). Sally has been looking for recognition and praise from other characters since she moved to Doncaster. When she finally receives attention from Miss Clancey for her art she feels fulfilled. Her happiness in the class is contingent upon the teacher as well as the disposition of the class since they now have become “a friendly class”. The sudden change in the class’ behaviors and willingness to learn reveals how teachers are one of the defining factors in a successful classroom.

In the forty-plus years between *A Little Princess* (1905) and *Stepsister Sally* (1952) disability representation in children’s literature did not change much. Child characters are still focused on appearances as they try to learn and navigate society’s standards and expectations. Understanding disability happens through the perspective of a non-disabled narrator, and in the case of *Stepsister Sally*, having a learning difference is depicted as embarrassing. Blackford’s

analysis shows how child characters are more reliable when it comes to being in touch with social standards. The third-person limited perspective of Sally allows us to see these societal expectations reflected in her actions and anxieties. Her outsider perspective while she is in the “slower” class shows how society views children with learning differences and the power that she has over them. She becomes a critic suggesting we need more skilled teachers for classes with struggling students.

This critique is happening at a time when more special education programs are being put in place, which is a move from Sara and Ermengarde’s time when learning difficulties were seen as a character deficit and an inability to act independently. While the representation of those with learning differences hasn’t changed much, how they are recognized in education is changing. As Sally experiences, there are now separate classes intended to benefit students who are lagging behind their peers and need different instruction. This reflects the acceptance and inclusion of children with learning difficulties in education. Sally’s neurotypical perspective reveals that this acceptance and inclusion are not being reflected in society.

***Freak the Mighty: a puzzle piece friendship between a physically disabled character and a learning differenced one***

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) was passed in 1990. An amendment to the original Education of Handicapped Children Act promised free, appropriate public education for all children with disabilities. Special education programs now were responsible for providing more services and opportunities. This was a big time of change when people with disabilities were being heard and revolutionized education. *Freak the Mighty* (1993) signaled this change in children’s literature as Max’s first-person point of view gives a voice and

perspective to children with learning differences. Max knows he is different from his peers and hates that he is placed in a separate class. Then he meets Kevin (also known as Freak) who has a physical disability. The two become friends and realize that they fill in missing parts of each other: ““You’re the one with the brain [...] I’m the long legs”” (Philbrick 151). Max’s strength and build protects Freak, and in turn, Freak helps Max understand and remember new concepts. Their friendship suggests that disability signifies a specific lack. Freak the Mighty is an entity that represents how people with disabilities aren't complete on their own. Kevin and Max complete each other, and this gives them confidence in the classroom and in their daily lives.

Max’s learning difficulties make him feel inferior but being around Freak gives him a confidence boost about his intelligence. He opens the story with the claim, “I never had a brain until Freak came along and let me borrow his for awhile” (Philbrick 1). Max has struggled with memory and learning retention, and being called names has reinforced his sense of inferiority. He has “never had a brain” because of his learning difficulties. His lack of intelligence is only made up for when he finally meets Freak. The choice to open the story with Max’s dramatic assertion shows how Max still views that he is missing parts of himself because of his disability. Abbye Meyer recognizes this loss of identity and argues that “in the end, there is no place for intellectual disability; intelligence is both privileged and necessary for a normative identity” (282). Max will never be normal because his intelligence does not match up to society’s standards. He can only experience having a brain when he is with Freak. He goes along with Freak’s imaginative quests because he likes “how it feels to have a really smart brain on my shoulders, helping me think” (Philbrick 64). Max has accepted that he is “stupid” (as his classmates call him), and so having Freak around allows him to pretend what it would be like if he was smart. Max carries Freak on his shoulders as Freak shouts out directions and guides Max

around the neighborhood. During the time of its publication in 1993 learning differenced students must be evaluated and placed into the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE), which sometimes means including disabled students in a typical classroom. One study from 2019 found that “ $\frac{3}{5}$  of students who receive special education services spend more than 85% of the school day in regular education classrooms” (Pennell). This is accurately represented in the novel as Max is moved into a typical classroom; however, he is only moved to be with Freak. Neurotypical students sit on top of the learning-differenced students' shoulders guiding them in the right direction “helping [them] think.”

The relationship is reciprocal in that Freak benefits from Max's strengths. It is this symbiotic relationship, where both friends have something to offer to each other, while also being supported in their weaknesses, that gives them the confidence they didn't have on their own. Freak's physical disability doesn't allow his body to grow at the normal rate of his peers making him shorter and frailer. Max's strength and height allow Freak to experience the world from a different perspective. Freak's disability is outwardly visible while Max's disability is invisible; however, the boys never make these connections. Even so, Freak looks down on Max at some points in their relationship. During their imaginative quests he pretends Max is a horse: ““Now lift up your hoof—I mean your foot...That way, mighty steed!”” (Philbrick 48-49). This kind of correction from “hoof” to “foot” is reminiscent of the way Sara had to correct herself when talking to Ermengarde in *A Little Princess*. Freak and Sara are similar in that they both feel responsible for taking care of and supporting their learning differenced friends. Freak, however, is different because he is benefitting from this transactional relationship and at some points views Max as a tool. His objectification of Max is due to his own physical limitations, but is also an example of how “intelligence is linked to humanity and normality” (Meyer 228). Later in the

story, however, Freak realizes that Max is more important to him than that. Freak is protecting Max from bullies in the typical classroom, and when he gets the teacher's attention he tells her, "Sometimes I'm more than Kevin". When she asks him what he means, he climbs up on top of Max's shoulders to demonstrate (Philbrick 77). Freak recognizes that he finds the missing piece of his identity in Max. Sitting on top of his shoulders allows him to experience a physicality that he would not be able to experience on his own, and so this makes him "more than [just] Kevin". When he is with Max he feels that he appears different from others. His disability lies in his physical appearance so when he is up on Max's shoulders he is able to experience a new height and physical ability like walking that he would not be able to experience on his own.

Freak does not understand why Max learns things differently. This allows Max to explain his perspective. Max explains what goes on in his head when he faces mental obstacles and therefore gives voice and space to others. At one point, Freak is giving Max directions, but Max is having trouble remembering his right from his left, "If I don't think about it I know, but if I have to think about it quickly my mind goes blank" (Philbrick 35). Max says this to himself, but his perspective still gives insight into what goes on inside a person's head who has learning difficulties. In this particular instance, it is the pressure of having to answer that causes his mind to go "blank". He knows the answer, but it's having to show his knowledge that seems to be the problem. Freak does not know this, however, which causes him to get frustrated with Max. He doesn't understand the processes that are going on in Max's head because his disability is invisible. This happens again when he is trying to teach Max how to read the dictionary. Although what Freak *says* makes sense, Max explains that it's "Easy for a genius to use a dictionary, since he already knows how to spell the words. And Rs never look like backward Es" (Philbrick 46). It is the visual processing of words that Max struggles with, not Freak's



directions. While it is never explicitly stated, his description of his problems implies a specific learning difficulty in reading. Max keeps quiet about this issue with Freak. By revealing to the reader what is difficult about learning he allows for more understanding of learning differences. If this was written in the third person point of view the reader would not have the same access to that personal feeling and experience. Allowing Max to share his experience with a learning difference from his point of view gives him more authority and agency both as a character and as someone representing the learning-disabled community. Max is able to describe exactly how the words look on the page which creates more understanding of the experiences of people with learning differences. In contrast to *A Little Princess* when Ermengarde is only able to give vague descriptions of her difficulty with remembering lessons Max's first-person point of view shows the progress that children's literature is making towards inclusivity.

Max and Freak's friendship reflects the ways in which disability is perceived in the early 1990s, an era in which schools are becoming more inclusive of children with disabilities. Abbye Meyer argues that the description of Max's character does not reflect this same inclusivity. She identifies intelligence as highly valued in society, and people with disabilities are grouped according to a social stigma surrounding their intelligence (Meyer 228). Although Max is placed in a separate class he never reveals an exact label or diagnosis. This supports Meyer's point that children with learning differences are grouped together with children that have other disabilities in the public eye. While this may be true, small strides are being made towards recognizing their individuality as the story is told from Max's point of view, and his unique experience is able to be shared. Mitchell and Snyder expand on this idea to point out that it is the characterization that is responsible for these stereotypes. People with disabilities are not only marginalized because of the lack of representation in media but also because when they have been represented the

descriptive imagery emphasizes their inferiority to “able-bodied” people. They define how disability is constructed through appearance by using the term: “Narrative prosthesis” (Mitchell and Snyder 376). A lack of accurate representation of people with learning differences is responsible for the perpetuation of ableist thinking in society.

*Freak the Mighty* adds a new, important perspective to children’s literature. A narrator who has learning differences can be better understood as a three-dimensional character. We learn more about Max as a person (not just as a character with learning differences) and the difficulties he faces as an adolescent boy. Unfortunately, he feels that pieces of him are missing because of his disability. Meyer points out this pattern in the disability narrative where society’s standard is too narrow for individuals to ever feel normal or accepted. In the end, Max’s identity does not grow. His dependence on Freak to fill in that piece is what urges him to create the narrative.

### ***Fish in a Tree: Reframing learning differences as a strength***

Lynda Mullaly Hunt’s *Fish in a Tree* (2015) gives a voice to the learning differenced community with the narrator, Ally. She struggles in school; however, she learns that her brain thinks differently than other people and that this is not a deficit, merely a difficulty. Ally realizes *she* is the source of her intelligence, and the teacher merely becomes a guide in helping her through the process of finding what she is good at. *Fish in a Tree* builds off of *Freak the Mighty* in the subject of giving children with disabilities a voice to share their perspectives on how they learn. What is unique about Ally as a child narrator is that she is the source of power, and recognizes that her intelligence lies within her; it's just a matter of finding the right way to access it. This book was chosen as it was recently published within the last 10 years and more accurately reflects children’s literature today. The most recent advancement in special education

legislation in proximity to *Fish in a Tree* is the Higher Education Opportunity Act (HEOA) of 2008 which promotes individuality for people with learning disabilities by giving them access to post-secondary education (Bain de Los Santos, 2019).

Through Ally's point of view as a child narrator, we gain an understanding of how her mind works when she acts differently than her neurotypical peers. When she is at a classmate's birthday party at the butterfly garden, she is pleased to find a butterfly land on her hand, but she describes how her impulses interfere:

I would never grab a butterfly, but once again, my hands do things without my say-so. When a beautiful, bright orange-and-black one lands on my hand, I loosely close my fist around it. And then my thinking part steps forward and quickly realizes what I've done. I open my hand and the butterfly zigs and zags before landing on the ground. (Mullaly Hunt 117)

She explains what impulsivity feels like to her. Moreover, she is in charge of sharing these difficulties. In contrast, *A Little Princess* and *Stepsister Sally*, deny autonomy and voice to child characters with learning difficulties. Once her "thinking part" kicks into gear, she realizes that she's squeezed the butterfly too hard and injured it. Though she tries to explain, her peers are disgusted by her, and Ally feels misunderstood. One critic describes this feeling as the "tension between society's perception of disability and the realities of individuals living with the consequences of these perceptions" (Eyler 321). Ally is acutely aware of how her brain works, and what works best for her; however, it is the dissonance between her capabilities and society's expectations that makes her feel like an outsider.

Just like Max in *Freak the Mighty*, Ally's struggle to accept her learning challenges stems from shame. She doesn't tell anyone about her struggles in school but rather decides to keep quiet because of a fear that she will be rejected. When her teacher Mr. Daniels tries to learn more about why she is struggling, she tries to hide from him because "He doesn't want to know about the real me" (Mullaly Hunt 40). She believes that he may be angry or disappointed when he learns about her difficulties in reading. It is this shame that causes her to hide the "real" parts of herself. She expects to disappoint people so she holds herself back whether she knows the answer or not. Mr. Daniels asks her which character she has picked for her writing project and she replies that she has chosen Roy G. Biv. Ally has not chosen a book or movie character like her other classmates but rather an abstract character created to help children remember the colors of the rainbow. When Ally finally reveals her thinking for this writing project to Mr. Daniels, he compliments her:

"That's clever, Ally," he tells me. "I actually like that you chose someone who isn't a book character, exactly. You think out of the box.[...]

You think differently than other people."[...]

Great. Just once, I want to be told I'm like everyone else.

"It's a good thing to be an out-of-the-box thinker. People like that are world-changers."

(Mullaly Hunt 129)

If Ally can understand that there is a place for "out-of-the-box" thinkers and that her type of thinking is valued, she will begin to believe in herself. Ally has internalized society's definition of what it means to be intelligent. She does not think and act like everyone else but would like to

so she can feel accepted. Mr. Daniels is trying to broaden that definition of intelligence to include all types of learning differences. Although Ally is never given a label for her learning differences her description of her issues with impulsivity and reading suggests a specific learning disability. She describes how the “letters squiggle and dance” (Mullaly Hunt 17) and how the thoughts in her brain “get lost on the way down [her] arm” (Mullaly Hunt 83). The way she takes in reading is different than her peers which makes her feel like “a failure at everything else”. Her description of what the letters look like on the page gives insight into how she perceives the world differently than her peers. Her point of view also allows her to share her experiences of how she has difficulty producing the output of the information she knows. This insight would not be possible without the first-person perspective of Ally.

In addition to her struggles at school, Ally must contend with fear about her future as she worries about how these reading difficulties will follow her into adulthood. She imagines how her friend Albert will grow up to be a famous scientist one day but when she thinks about all the difficulties she has in school she says, “It makes me feel like I’ll grow up to be a nobody” (Mullaly Hunt 183). Her learning difficulties feel permanent, and she worries that there is no future for her. This is reminiscent of Ermengarde’s worry that without Sara’s help, she will be dead. Learning differenced children feel so separated from the rest of neurotypical children that they don’t feel there is a place for them in society. Mr. Daniels challenges this thinking by presenting a group of famous people (including John Lennon, Walt Disney, and Albert Einstein) to the class who have dyslexia and learning challenges (Mullaly Hunt 239). He tells the class, ““But of course, we know their struggles weren’t because they were stupid. It’s just that their minds worked differently”” (Mullaly Hunt 241). He challenges the idea that struggling with something means that you are incapable of doing it. He stresses how thinking differently changes

the world. People who have learning differences can accomplish big things; they just need to take the right path that works for them.

Megan R. Brown writes about how the fish is an easily accessible way for children to understand this idea. Brown writes that if Ally is the fish then “She may not learn like her other peers but her learning differences do not have to make her feel like a fish trying to climb. She becomes a fish trying to learn to swim instead” (205). Her learning differences are natural just as a fish swims in water. This metaphor does not essentialize disabled characters but is rather used as a tool for clarifying their experience. Perspective-taking through the literature allows neurotypical peers and teachers to understand how learning differences present themselves in the classroom. Children’s and young adult literature can be used as an instructional tool for teachers as they learn the importance of differentiated instruction in serving students who perceive and learn content differently. With Mr. Daniels’ guidance, Ally is on her way to feeling more confident in her differences.

Ally’s first-person perspective is an opportunity for learning differences to be understood and represented in an accurate way. Ally shares her experiences and difficulties in school which serves many purposes as it allows non-neurotypical readers to connect with her, and neurotypical readers to learn about the experiences of a marginalized group. Ally’s mentorship with Mr. Daniels provides a model of how teachers can support learning differenced students in the classroom. By changing Ally’s perception of herself and revealing her strengths he challenges ableist thinking.

## **PART II: Developmental psychology and the importance of identity for children with learning differences**

In the previous section, I analyzed selected examples of fiction for children over the last century, arguing that a shift in narration helped to enable the evolution of child characters with learning differences. In this section of my thesis, I will explore how developmental psychology emphasizes the importance of developing an identity at a young age and how that identity is formed by peer acceptance.

Each character represented in the children's literature discussed above goes on some sort of identity journey. This exploration of the self takes place within the context of society's acceptance, and developmental psychologists Erik Erikson and Abraham Maslow would agree with this idea. Ermengarde in *A Little Princess* (1905) tries to fit in with the other girls at the boarding school and relies on the guidance of Sara to help her find her place in society. Sally experiences a similar situation in *Stepsister Sally* (1952) when she is placed in a lower class which she fears will negatively impact her reputation and identity at the school. Max and Ally have different experiences of disability than Sally and Ermengarde as they find more acceptance. This has a visible influence on their identities as they grow to develop a positive sense of self and play an important role in society. The importance of finding your identity is a theme explored across different disciplines. Psychologists like Erik Erikson and Abraham Maslow define identity formation as a key desire built into the biology of humans. Erikson and Maslow are developmental psychologists who studied the various stages one will move throughout their life as one navigates who they are in relation to society. Developmental psychology is a lens to look at how identity is developed from childhood, and how childhood experiences can shape identity into adulthood. I will also define how the Social Identity Approach can help children with

disabilities develop a more positive identity of themselves. The following research below will emphasize the importance of supporting the development of children's identities.

Abraham Maslow defined his Hierarchy of Needs in 1943 in his paper "A Theory of Human Motivation". His idea that each human is born with an innate set of latent, actively present needs suggests that humans will work towards fulfilling those needs throughout their lives. He identifies two categories of needs: deficit needs and growth needs. Deficit needs are elements needed for survival like food and water. This refers to the first stage of physiological needs where a person is seeking those biological requirements. A person cannot function or move on from this stage if their basic needs are not met. Growth needs are elements that aren't necessary for life but for self-actualization and self-growth. The second stage defines a person's desire to experience order, predictability, and control in their lives (also known as the safety stage). The third need refers to a desire for love and belonging which is especially noticeable in childhood. Maslow's definition of this stage was largely influenced by Bowlby's Attachment Theory that there is a strict window (from birth to roughly 5 years old) in which a child needs to make connections to help with survival. These attachments set the foundation for the cognitive understanding of the world, other people, and themselves. Connections and relationships are necessary for cognitive and physical development during these early years. The fourth stage of esteem needs is also strongly present in childhood and adolescence. A person must feel accepted and valued by others before they can begin to feel their own self-worth and self-esteem. The fifth and highest stage, according to Maslow, is the self-actualization stage. This is when a person seeks personal growth and experiences to elevate their sense of personhood. The experiences of these needs are flexible and not linear. Maslow identifies that human motivation may come from multiple needs; however, this model allows educators and caregivers to take a more holistic



approach when working with children. Behavior is not just a response to the environment but a response to internal motivation and needs going on biologically (McLeod, 2023). Maslow's model informs educators that the developmental pathway impacts learning and motivation for learning. In order for students to be ready for learning they need to feel emotionally and physically safe to progress. An educator is responsible for supporting all these various aspects so that students have the most success in the classroom.

Erik Erikson's Psychosocial Theory (1950) defines a pattern of developmental stages that focus on the development of the self. These stages are linear and require the completion of one stage before moving on to another. This suggests that as a human develops they are developing foundational elements of their sense of self and belonging in the world. The first stage of the eight steps is the trust v. mistrust stage which takes place from birth to eighteen months. The attachments they create at this point with their caregivers will shape their view of the world and its predictability. Whether or not they receive stable and consistent care will instill either hope or fear about their own internal abilities and motivations as well. The second stage is the autonomy v. shame/doubt stage (18 months to three years). A child who is encouraged to be independent shows increased levels of confidence. Children are supported as they make mistakes and learn along the way without experiencing constant failure. The third stage is the initiative v. guilt stage (3-5 years) where children start to experiment with leadership and decision-making. The fourth stage is the industry v. inferiority stage (5-12 years) where the child's identity is heavily developed and influenced by society. Whether a child is accepted by their peer groups determines their social esteem and therefore influences their self-esteem. When they feel that they cannot meet society's expectations to be accepted they develop a sense of inferiority and insecurity. The fifth step is the identity v. role confusion stage (12-18 years) which reflects a

strong desire to belong to society and fit in. This seems to connect heavily to the previous stage of industry v. inferiority as students begin to learn where they fit in society and how they can change themselves to fit in more. This is when a teenager takes everything they have learned as a child about the world and their own moral values and start to develop this into their own personal set of ethics as they develop into adulthood. They use their identity to find a place in the world and their role in it. This is also the point that people develop fidelity which is the acceptance of other people even though they may be different and have other ideas than you. The sixth stage is intimacy v. isolation (18-40 years) which is whether a person can achieve the feeling of safety in a relationship. The seventh stage is generativity v. stagnation (40-60 years) which is the reflection on a person's life and the development of a legacy to leave behind. There is a desire to contribute to the world in some way and to give back to their community and make an impact. The final eighth stage is ego integrity v. despair which is a reflection and acceptance of the life they've lived (Donahue, 2023). While each of these stages is typically associated with an age range they are present in some capacity at all ages and remain malleable.

Both Erikson's and Maslow's developmental psychosocial models include the formation of identity as a major component. One study examined this more closely by looking at the "Implication of Identity Resolution" which included five assessments across a span of fifty years. They used alumni of the Rochester Adult Longitudinal Study (RALS). It was specifically tied to Erikson's stages of intimacy, generativity, and integrity and the role that identity formation played in each of these stages. Researchers Mitchell, et. al (2021) discover that a sense of one's own identity and mental health had strong connections and laid a foundation for later developmental stages. In the intimacy stage, if people were not secure in a sense of who they were they had a fear of opening themselves up for connection which ultimately led to isolation

and further psychological distress. Researchers did not find a clear connection between the Generativity and Integrity stages, however, they hypothesize that people without a secure identity won't take risks to create and achieve goals throughout their life leading to a lack of satisfaction into late adulthood. Ultimately Mitchell, et. al (2021) identified identity formation as a "prerequisite for healthy adult functioning". You can't "catch up" on development without having a stable foundation first, and these researchers suggest that a sense of identity is key. A strong identity will open a person up to connections, relationships, and opportunities which can be maintained over time when the foundation of the self is kept intact. This study suggested that the earlier identity is developed the more lasting the positive effects.

Just as Maslow suggested educators use a holistic approach to the child's development and learning in the classroom this study suggests the same. If identity formation begins in childhood and sets the foundation for a successful adult life it is the educator (and any other adult caregiver) who plays a vital role in supporting this. A child builds their sense of identity in their peer group and community. An educator who instills values of diversity, understanding, and compassion can help support this community and the formation of their students' identities. This is especially important for students with disabilities who may not see others like them or may feel rejected by their peer group. Forming an identity can become an unstable part of their development which is an area of concern according to Erikson and Maslow's models which highlight identity as a key developmental part.

Another study examined the self-beliefs of twenty-six high school students who were receiving special education or language services. These students were chosen as a focus for the study because of their multidimensional identities. While multi-cultural students were not examined in this study Trainor et. al (2022) bring to attention the large population of multilingual

students who are receiving special education services: “Nationally, 16% of students receiving EL services also receive special education across grade levels” (Trainor et. al, 2022). For these children, identity formation becomes an intersectional experience. It is not only the language they speak and the color of their skin that influences who they are and how they are perceived but how they learn is a part of that identity. Students identified that having agency was the key to their success and confidence in transitioning out of high school. Researchers encouraged educators to plan instruction and transition plans on building students’ self-determination. Students should not only be involved in this process but should be supported in building independence and decision-making throughout their time at school. Students recognized this agency as part of their identity. Being able to be in control of their life decisions, and recognizing the role that disability plays in their identity are key elements of developing into successful adults.

From childhood to adolescence to adulthood the importance of identity formation is stressed at all ages. Identity is multidimensional—being formed by multiple parts and forces (internal and external). Maslow and Erikson identify social groups as the main influence on esteem and identity formation. It is a human need to be accepted and a human desire to fulfill roles within one’s own community. Students with disabilities who don’t fit that social norm may lag behind their peers in achieving this. They may have an insecure sense of self and have a difficult time becoming autonomous outside of school support.

Although Maslow and Erikson’s theories were published before special education reform appeared at a national level their work can help reveal the gaps in instruction and social stigma. Both Maslow and Erikson stress the importance of identity formation in living a fulfilled life,

and this applies to all individuals (neurotypical or not). Literature is just one way to access and assess how people with learning differences are treated socially.

The classroom is one of the first communities (outside of the home) that children will experience. For children with disabilities, this is the first community where they may recognize their differences. Educators make a difference here. How they address these differences and learning needs will shape that individual's identity and the values of their peers. One of the ways this can be addressed is through accurate representation in literature. Children who are exposed to those various identities (whether present in their own life or not) will learn more about what a diverse community looks like and the role they play in it. For students with disabilities, this is setting the foundation for successful relationships and careers as they begin to grow confident in their sense of self.

### **The Social Identity Approach in promoting inclusivity for learning differenced people**

If developmental psychology emphasizes the importance of identity creation formation in the classroom then the Social Identity Approach (SIA) tells us one of the ways educators can get there (Dirth and Brascombe, 2018). It is a group-based approach that takes some influence from Albert Bandura and his social learning theory. People learn how to behave and act in their world based on their observations. When disability is ignored then there leaves no space for them to exist in society. Dirth and Brascombe argue that there needs to be a social category for disability (despite the diversity and vastness) so that their experiences can be recognized politically, structurally, and culturally (2018). Often there is criticism that the labels and classification of individuals with disabilities lead to stereotypes and isolation. The SIA argues the opposite. Firstly this group-based approach ensures security and recognition as a sociopolitical group. The more recognized and celebrated disability is in the culture and community the more likely they

will be recognized in politics and receive services. How the government treats disability reflects how normalized it is in society.

SIA has a presence in Disability Psychology as well as strong connections with Disability Studies. It is a social model of disability rather than a biomedical one. People experience disabilities differently because of society's perceptions and attitudes. A biomedical model would suggest that a disability can be "fixed". This perpetuates the stereotypes of people with disabilities and continues to isolate them from society. A social model rather accepts disability as a social group with their own needs and characteristics. Within this theory disability is diversity, not a medical issue. SIA acknowledges the variety of disability experiences and emphasizes a priority of the disability studies approach to recognize this: "[that by] emphasizing the knowledge base of PWDs [People With Disabilities] as insiders and experts of disability experiences" they will begin to be accepted as a social category (Brascombe and Dirth, 2018). This not only strengthens society as diversity is embraced but allows those individuals to embrace a sense of self. Erikson and Maslow identified the importance of belonging to a group and finding peer acceptance. When this is achieved identity formation and self-actualization follows. The SIA identifies people with disabilities "as a meaningful social category who share experiences of systematic marginalization" that play a role in the diversity and strengthening of communities (Brascombe and Dirth, 2018).

### **The need for more inclusive children's literature**

Prioritizing marginalized perspectives from people with disabilities allows these voices to be heard which is the first step towards acceptance of people with disabilities as a meaningful social category. One of the places where we can hear these voices is within the literature.

Children's literature is a powerful tool to promote understanding of disabilities as seen in the stereotypes and characters represented. Margaret Kingsbury zones in on publishers' lack of awareness. 85% of employees in the publishing business are white and 13% are disabled. These statistics provide background to what kind of voices are writing these stories and what experiences they may have (CCBC, 2023). Kingsbury notes that writers with disabilities may feel pressured to write a stereotyped narrative where a person overcomes their disability. In the brief literature survey above this was seen in such books as *A Little Princess* (1905) and *Stepsister Sally* (1952). James Catchpole, children's book author and agent, noticed that as far as representation in literature goes "disability tends to lag behind race and gender, but there are signs of things shifting nonetheless" (Kingsbury, 2021). Representation does not have to be categorized but can rather define the intersectionality of identities that are so often seen in classrooms (like in Trainor's study). Or a book where the story has nothing to do with their disability but rather presents the reality of disability as just an existing piece of your life. There are so many varied experiences and stories of disability that ultimately it comes down to letting those people tell their stories. Kingsbury urges publishing companies to hire more authors with disabilities, hire sensitivity readers to read books specifically for ableism (which some publishing companies like Candlewick Press have already started doing), and encourage writers to include these perspectives through disability training and exposure to narratives that feature disabled voices.

Literature diversity also needs to be seen within classroom libraries. Teachers need to be aware of the different populations represented within their schools so they can adjust their teaching accordingly. One aspect of culturally responsive teaching is making sure that diverse literature and people are represented within your classroom (whether that be posters or books).

Diverse classroom libraries provide students in the classroom with characters who look like them or share their experiences. The importance of identity formation throughout the Elementary school years was stressed earlier by developmental psychologists, and diverse literature is one way to support this. Books can be a way to help children understand themselves and others. It is multifaceted as it supports the development of literacy skills and is used as a tool for cultural understanding (this includes the culture of the disability community).

Knowing how important diverse classroom libraries are, I created a suggested book list for each grade K-12 to help teachers incorporate books that feature characters with disabilities. My original focus was to find books featuring characters with learning differences; however, I found very little literature representing this community. The Cooperative Children's Book Center does extensive work researching and documenting the types of representation revealed in newly published children's literature. As of 2019, only 3.4% of children's books featured disabled main characters. 3.4%. Studies revealed in 2020-2023 make no mention of disability in literature at all (CCBC, 2023). I broadened the classification to include all types of Cognitive/Neurological disabilities. The Cooperative Children's Book Center provides a database for the books they have inventoried in their research. I have vetted these books with the Children's Literature Comprehensive Database to make sure they have been reviewed, and each book has either won or been considered for an award. All books listed have been published within the past six years. I have also included three sample read-aloud lesson plans for fourth grade, seventh grade, and tenth grade. These lesson plans use Critical Literacy Theory to prompt students to examine how learning differences are represented.

As I compiled the book list I noticed that significant progress has been made toward featuring multidimensional main characters. Many of the books offer intersectional diversity that



highlights BIPOC characters that have different kinds of disabilities (ranging from physical to psychological). Progress has also been made in including first-person narrators who are experiencing a disability or learning difference. This list offers a broad range of representations; however, one group seems lacking: characters with learning differences. This is especially noticeable in picture books for younger children. Future research may be dedicated to this gap of representation. In the future, I would like to extend this research to local classrooms to see whether school diversity is reflected within classroom libraries. Steps might be taken to see how students respond to literature that reflects their identities versus literature that does not reflect their identities.

## Sample Lesson Plans

### Fourth Grade: *Thank you, Mr. Falker*

Interactive Read Aloud Lesson Plan Template	
<b>Text:</b> <i>Thank you, Mr. Falker</i> by Patricia Polacco	<b>Time Frame:</b> 40 min
<b>Massachusetts Curriculum Framework Standards:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>4.RL.3: Describe in depth a character, setting, or event in a story or drama, drawing on specific details in the text (e.g., a character's thoughts, words, or actions).</b></li> </ul>	

- **4.W.2: Write informative/explanatory texts to examine a topic and convey ideas and information clearly.**

**Learning Outcomes:**

- **Students will explain how Trisha’s feelings about her learning difficulties change throughout the story and use details from the story to support their answer.**
- **Students will demonstrate understanding of the meaning of the text by writing a response in their writing journals to the prompt: How do Trisha’s feelings about her learning differences change throughout the story? And what causes them to change?**

<b>Before Reading</b>	
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	<p><b>Activate Prior Knowledge:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Students will fill out two bubbles from the graphic organizer of what they know about problems with reading             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>“What does it look like? Do you know anyone that has problems reading?”</li> </ul> </li> </ul> <p><b>Build Background Knowledge:</b></p> <p><b>Purpose:</b> Students will view a simulation of what reading with dyslexia looks like. They will be asked to read it, and what they notice about how they feel about reading it.</p> <p><b>Activity:</b> <a href="http://geon.github.io/programming/2016/03/03/dsxylea">http://geon.github.io/programming/2016/03/03/dsxylea</a> A volunteer will read the passage the best they can.</p> <p><b>Discussion:.</b> Ask the volunteer:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>“How did you feel while reading that? What made it difficult?”</li> <li>“For someone with dyslexia they have a similar experience. This isn’t what it looks like for all people with dyslexia; however, it’s important for us to understand a little bit about what it is like to read when the text looks different like this”</li> </ul>
<p><b>Comprehension Skills Focus</b></p> <p>.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>o Making Connections</li> <li>o Questioning</li> <li>o Visualizing</li> <li>o Making Inferences</li> <li>o Determining Importance</li> <li>o Synthesizing</li> </ul>
<p><b>Purpose Setting</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>“While you are listening to the story I would like you to pay attention to how Trisha’s feelings about her reading problems change throughout the story”</li> </ul>

<b>During Reading</b>	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• p. 5-6 How does Trisha feel about her reading problems? (Turn and talk)</li> <li>• last page: How did Trisha's feelings about her reading problems change? (think, pair, share)</li> </ul>
<b>After Reading</b>	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Think about how Trisha felt about her reading problems at the beginning of the story compared to the end. What caused them to change?</li> <li>• <b>Writing Prompt:</b> How did Trisha's feelings about her reading disability change from the beginning to the end of the story? Why did it change?</li> </ul>

**Seventh Grade: *Freak the Mighty***

<b>Interactive Read Aloud Lesson Plan Template</b>	
<b>Text: <i>Freak the Mighty</i> by Rodman Philbrick</b>	<b>Time Frame: 40 min</b>

**Massachusetts Curriculum Framework Standards:**

- **7.RL.3:** Describe in depth a character, setting, or event in a story or drama, drawing on specific details in the text (e.g., a character's thoughts, words, or actions).
- **7.W.2:** Write informative/explanatory texts to examine a topic and convey ideas and information clearly.

**Learning Outcomes:**

- Students will explain what we learn about Max and how he feels about his learning difference through his introduction in chapter 1
- Students will demonstrate understanding of the meaning of the text by writing a response in their writing journals to the prompt: What does Max's introduction reveal about how he perceives his learning difference?

Before Reading	
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	<p><b>Activate Prior Knowledge:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Students will fill out a KWL chart and work in partnerships to talk about what they know about learning disabilities and what they want to know about learning differences.</li> </ul> <p><b>Build Background Knowledge:</b></p> <p><b>Purpose:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Students will watch the following interview of a high schooler with a learning disability. Students will be asked to pay attention to how he talks about his learning difference.</li> </ul> <p><b>Activity:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7o_l-yBWFik">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7o_l-yBWFik</a></li> </ul> <p><b>Discussion:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How does he reveal how he feels about his learning difference?</li> </ul>
<b>Comprehension Skills Focus</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>o Making Connections</li> <li>o Questioning</li> <li>o Visualizing</li> <li>o Making Inferences</li> <li>o Determining Importance</li> <li>o Synthesizing</li> </ul>
<b>Purpose Setting</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>“While you are reading the first chapter I would like you to pay attention to how Max talks about his learning disability and what that reveals about how he feels about it”</li> </ul>

<b>During Reading</b>	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• p. 1: What do you think Max means by “I never had a brain”? How does this relate to his learning disability? (Turn and talk)</li> <li>• p. 2: Notice how he talks about Freak’s physical disability. Why do you think talks differently about physical differences than he does learning differences? (think, pair, share)</li> </ul>
<b>After Reading</b>	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Think about how Max’s introduction to himself and his learning difference.</li> <li>• <b>Writing Prompt:</b> How does Max’s introduction to himself reveal his feelings about his learning difference? Provide at least 2 specific examples from the text.</li> </ul>

<b>Interactive Read Aloud Lesson Plan Template</b>	
<b>Text:</b> <i>A Little Princess</i>	<b>Time Frame:</b> 40 min

**Massachusetts Curriculum Framework Standards:**

- **9-10.RL.6:** Analyze a case in which a character's point of view and actions signal acceptance or rejection of cultural norms or intellectual ideas of a period or place, drawing on a wide reading of world literature
- **9-10.W.1:** Write arguments (e.g., essays, letters to the editor, advocacy speeches) to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

**Learning Outcomes:**

- **Students will analyze whether Sara's actions signal acceptance or rejection of people with learning disabilities (like Ermengarde)**
- **Students will write a response to the writing prompt: Does Sara's actions signal acceptance or rejection of people with learning disabilities (like Ermengarde)? Provide at least 3 details with evidence from the text**

<b>Before Reading</b>	
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	<p><b>Activate Prior Knowledge:</b> Students will talk about how what they know about learning differences and how they are accepted in modern society and share out in small groups</p> <p><b>Build Background Knowledge:</b> <b>Purpose:</b> Students will watch the following video and will be asked to pay attention to how the teacher reacts to Ermengarde's mistake in the classroom</p> <p><b>Activity:</b> <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FjWm8dm-k08">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FjWm8dm-k08</a></p> <p><b>Discussion:.</b> What did you notice about how the teacher reacted to Ermengarde's mistake? What does this tell you about values in education?</p>
<p><b>Comprehension Skills Focus</b></p> <p>Select one of the areas to focus on.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>o Making Connections</li> <li>o Questioning</li> <li>o Visualizing</li> <li>o Making Inferences</li> <li>o Determining Importance</li> <li>o Synthesizing</li> </ul>
<p><b>Purpose Setting</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “As we read chapter 3 I want you to pay attention to how Sara reacts to meeting Ermengarde”</li> </ul>

During Reading	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>p. 24:</b> Why do you think Sara makes an effort to introduce herself to Ermengarde? (turn and talk)</li> <li>• <b>p. 23</b> Why do you think Sara feels that she needs to befriend Ermenegarde? (<b>think, pair, share</b>)</li> </ul>
After Reading	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Think about how Sara reacts to meeting Ermengarde.</b></li> <li>• <b>Writing Prompt:</b> Does Sara's actions signal acceptance or rejection of people with learning disabilities (like Ermengarde)? Provide at least 3 details with evidence from the text</li> </ul>

## Book List

**Grade Level:** Kindergarten

### Books that feature characters with disabilities:

- Robbins, R. (2020). *Talking is not my thing*. Eerdmans Books for Young Readers.
  - A girl with autism who has selective mutism explains how she communicates to her brother and grandmother in other ways
- Ansloos, J. P., Ansloos, S., & Pawis-Steckley, J. M. (2021). *Thunder and the noise storms*. Annick Press.

- Thunder has a hard time staying at school with so many different noises (sensory disorder) until his grandfather teaches him a native Cree practice to calm him down
- Scott, J., & Smith, S. (2022). *I talk like A river*. Findaway World, LLC.
  - A boy has a hard time saying what he wants to say and struggles with being unable to communicate with his peers
- Sotomayor, S., & López Rafael. (2021). *Just ask!: Be different, be brave, be you*. Findaway World, LLC.
  - This book introduces different characters who need tools to help them but it's important to focus on what people can do
- Felder, M., Christopherson, N., & Sweeney, T. (2019). *Henry the boy*. Penny Candy Books.
  - Henry is bullied for his use of crutches to walk until he learns to express himself through friendship and art

## Grade Level: 1

### Books that feature characters with disabilities:

- Ellis, S., & Vo, N. (2022). *As Glenn as can be*. Groundwood Books/House of Anansi Press.

- The story of the famous pianist Glenn Gould who has lived his whole life by a certain set of “rules”
- Reynolds, E. (2021). *Amara and the bats*. Simon & Schuster Children's Publishing.
  - Amara rallies her friends to fight for the environmental protection of bats in the park (featuring one of her friends in a wheelchair)
- Pimentel, A. B., Ali, N. H., & Keelan, J. (2020). *All the way to the top: How one girl's fight for Americans with disabilities changed everything*. Sourcebooks Explore.
  - Jennifer was born with cerebral palsy and she’s just 8 years old but that doesn’t stop her from being a driving force of the Americans with Disabilities Act
- Cotterill, S. (2019). *This beach is loud*. Dial Books.
  - This little boy was so excited to go to the beach until he realized how many different things there are to notice. His dad gives him some strategies to help calm down
- Kensky, J., Downes, P., & Magoon, S. (2018). *Rescue & Jessica: Life-Changing Friendship*. Candlewick Press.
  - After losing her leg in 2013 Boston Marathon Jessica finds friendship and healing with her new service dog

## Grade Level: 2

### Books that feature characters with disabilities:

- Reynolds, J., & Third Raúl the. (2021). *Stuntboy*. Atheneum Books for Young Readers.

- Portico converts his anxiety of taking care of other people into a superpower as he tries to intervene and help everyone in his community
- Scott, J., Spangler, B., & Sweet, M. (2021). *Unbound: The life and art of Judith Scott*. Knopf Books for Young Readers.
  - Judy, who is nonverbal, deaf, and has Down syndrome, isn't able to express herself accurately until her twin sister enrolls her in art therapy
- Pla, S. J. (2018). *Benji, The Bad Day and me*. First Nations Child & Family Carin.
  - Sammy has a hard time with the fact that Benji (his little brother with autism) has more attention on his bad days than he does
- McDivitt, L., & Ewen, E. R. (2018). *Nature's friend: The Gwen Frostic Story*. published by Sleeping Bear Press.
  - Gwen's weak hands and slurred speech were strengthened around nature which she used to inspire her creation of stationary tools for soldiers during WWII
- Cao, W., So, M., & Wang, H. (2017). *Bronze and sunflower*. Candlewick Press.
  - \*\*multidimensional- Chinese village, nonverbal
  - Bronze, who is nonverbal, finds an opportunity, voice, and strength through his friendship with Sunflower
  - Elena and her family are trying to clean up their neighborhood in Puerto Rico after Hurricane Maria
- Sheth, K., & Kocsmiersky, J. (2022). *Nina Soni, Snow Spy*. Peachtree.
  - Indian American Nina introduces family friends to winter weather when a snowman mystery occurs

## Grade Level: 3

### Books that feature characters with disabilities:

- Collier, N. D. (2022). *Just right, jillian*. Versify, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.
  - Jillian struggles with confidence due to her social anxiety but the hatching chicks in her classroom teach her about growing at the right time
- Ormsbee, K., Brooks, M., Glendining, B., & Schuenke, E. (2022). *Growing pangs*. Random House Children's Books.
  - After Katie's close relationship falls apart with her best friend a flood of bad thoughts come and she reaches out for help to learn about her OCD
- Harper, C. M., & Lucey, R. (2021). *Bad sister*. First Second.
  - Charise hates being the “antagonist” in her family but for some reason, she can't seem to stop being mean to her brother (ODD)
- Murdock, C. G., & Schoenherr, I. (2020). *The book of boy*. Greenwillow Books, an imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers.
  - Boy is an orphan who is bullied for the hump on his back. He agrees to go on an adventure with the hopes of finding the relics to heal his physical disability but learns a bigger and better secret
- Bradley, K. B. (2017). *The war I finally won: The war The saved my life bk. 2*. Dial Books for Young Readers, an imprint of Penguin Random House LLC.
  - Ada's mother died in the London Blitz and now she's trying to cope with a club foot. She's unsure of how to deal with all these complicated, messy feelings.

## Grade Level: 4

### Books that feature characters with disabilities:

- Lowe, M. (2022). *Aviva vs. the dybbuk*. Levine Querido.
  - Aviva struggles with taking care of her mother who is suffering from depression while their synagogue faces antisemitic violence
- Willis, M. E. (2022). *Smaller sister*. St Martin's Press.
  - Lucy and Livy used to be best friends until Livy suddenly didn't want to hang out anymore. Lucy realizes that Livy is starting to struggle with body image and an eating disorder and gets her help.
- Melleby, N. (2021). *How to become a planet*. Algonquin Young Readers.
  - Pluto had to miss seventh grade because of her struggle with depression. Now she's trying to recover while also forming a friendship (and crush) on Fallon who is experimenting with gender expression.
- Draper, S. M. (2021). *Out of my heart*. Atheneum Books for Young Readers.
  - Melody, who has cerebral palsy, is spending her summer at a camp for disabled pre-teens where she discovers a feeling of belonging and community.
- S., A. R. K. (2021). *The in-between*. Walden Pond Press, an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers.

- Cooper and his sister Jess (whose type 1 diabetes plays an integral role in the plot) have become involved in a strange mystery going on in their community involving the strange, accidental deaths throughout history and a strange symbol.

## Grade Level: 5

### Books that feature characters with disabilities:

- Zarr, S. (2022). *A song called home*. Balzer + Bray, an imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers.
  - Lou and Casey are struggling with the adjustment of their new step dad and they are having trouble dealing with their emotions and with accepting their father's alcoholism.
- Johnson, V. (2021). *Playing the cards you're dealt*. Scholastic Press.
  - 5th grader Anthony is trying to win the card tournament, manage his changing friendships, and learn how to navigate his father's alcoholism
- Frazier, S. T. (2021). *Mighty inside*. Levine Querido.
  - Melvin is about to start high school but feels that his stutter and anxiety will prevent him from doing everything he wants to do. He begins to learn more about the racism in his community.
- Lucas, C. (2021). *Thanks a lot, universe*. Amulet Books.
  - Alternating between two different points of view. Ezra who is experiencing racism and homophobia, and Brian who has social anxiety and is in and out of



foster care as his mom struggles with opioid addiction all while these two boys are entering middle school.

- Day, C. (2021). *The sea in Winter*. Heartdrum, an imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers.
  - Maisie has always wanted to be a professional ballerina dancer which all comes to end when she has a devastating knee injury. She learns about her depression and reconnects to her ancestral native roots.

## Grade Level: 6

### Books that feature characters with disabilities:

- Trehan, M., & Miles, N. (2022). *The view from the very best house in Town*. Walker Books US, a division of Candlewick Press.
  - Sam and Asha are autistic and best friends until Sam is accepted to Castleton for seventh grade and their friendship begins to navigate rocky times as they learn new social dynamics.
- Medina, M. (2022). *Merci Suarez plays it cool: Merci Suarez*. Candlewick Press.
  - Merci Suarez is trying to navigate starting 8th grade while also trying to navigate her grandfather's Alzheimer's at home
- Medina, M. (2021). *Merci Suárez can't dance*. Candlewick Press.
  - Cuban American Merci Suarez has been asked to be paired up with Wilson who is struggling with a physical disability while her grandfather struggles with Alzheimer's at home

- Makechnie, A. (2021). *Ten Thousand Tries*. Atheneum Books for Young Readers.
  - Golden is in-denial of his father's progressively worsening condition of ALS and thinks that winning the soccer championship will make everything run around
- Chang, V., & Nam, L. (2020). *Love, love*. Sterling Children's Books.
  - Frances has been observing her sister's hair falling out and is supportive even though she doesn't know what's going on. She comes to learn that her sister is pulling it out herself (trichotillomania).

## Grade Level: 7

### Books that feature characters with disabilities:

- Wong, A. (2021). *Disability visibility: 17 first-person stories for Today*. Delacorte.
  - 17 short memoirs spanning a variety of disabilities, sexualities, and races and what they have to say/ insights
- Fernandez, C. (2022). *How to date a superhero (and not die trying)*. Katherine Tegen Books, of HarperCollins Publishers.
  - Astrid has anxiety that makes it feel like she needs to control everything in her life. That all goes out the window when she learns that her boyfriend Max is secretly a superhero and that she will be kidnapped randomly.
- Russo, M. (2021). *Why is everybody yelling?: Growing up in my immigrant family*. Farrar, Straus & Giroux Inc.

- A graphic novel about a young girl named Cookie who is struggling with intergenerational trauma as well as dealing with the effects of it in her family
- Jamieson, V., & Omar, M. (2020). *When stars are scattered*. Dial Books for Young Readers.
  - A graphic novel telling the story of how a young boy named Omar took care of his brother who has a developmental disability and seizures in a refugee camp
- LeZotte, A. C., & Morstad, J. (2020). *Show me A sign*. Scholastic Press.
  - Mary lives in a deaf community on Martha's Vineyard until she is kidnapped by a scientist to test his theory that people who are deaf are less intelligent.

## Grade Level: 8

### Books that feature characters with disabilities:

- McWilliams, K. (2020). *Agnes at the end of the world*. Little, Brown and Company.
  - 16-year-old Agnes is the model for strict obedience in her Christian isolationist community except for one rule which she breaks to get her type 1 diabetes brother insulin
- Woodson, J. (2020). *Before the ever after (Golden sower 2022-2023)*. Nancy Paulsen Books.
  - ZJ struggles to watch his ex-NFL player father suffer from CTE

- Bradley, K. B. (2020). *Fighting words*. Dial Books.
  - Della and her sister Suki have been placed into foster care after experiencing sexual abuse from their stepdad and their mom's abuse of heroin. Through their journey in counseling, they learn more about their trauma and emotions
- Alexander, L., & Drummond, A. (2020). *A sporting chance: How Ludwig Guttman created the Paralympic Games*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.
  - A Jewish doctor who fled Germany during WWII and helped changed disabled vets' attitudes and recovery paths by setting up the Paralympic games
- Mann, J. A. (2021). *The degenerates*. Atheneum Books for Young Readers.
  - London, an orphaned Italian immigrant, is institutionalized because she is pregnant and learns about society's attitudes towards people with disabilities as she makes some friends
  - Vero immigrated to the United States from Peru for a better life but instead she becomes frustrated when she realizes how limiting these opportunities are for people who aren't the "typical American"

## Grade Level: 9

### Books that feature characters with disabilities:

- McLemore, A.-M. (2022). *Lakelore*. Feiwel and Friends.
  - Bastian and Lore are both struggling internally but when they reach the underwater world they are able to escape. Lore is being bullied because of their

dyslexia, and Bastian just started on testosterone and struggles with ADHD and anxiety.

- Ho, J. (2022). *The silence that binds us*. HarperTeen.
  - After May's older brother commits suicide she decides to stand up against racist comments made in her community
- Miller-Lachmann, L. (2022). *Torch*. Carolrhoda Lab, an imprint of Lerner Publishing Group, Inc.
  - 17-year-old Pavol and his friends try to escape Czechoslovakia during the Soviet occupation
  - \*\*disability representation: autism
- Anderson, J. L. (2022). *Each night was illuminated*. HarperCollins Children's Books, a division of HarperCollins Publishers.
  - Cassie is trying to run away from a traumatic event she witnessed when she was younger, but she realizes that emotions must be dealt with
- Saedi, S. (2022). *I miss you, I hate this*. Poppy.
  - Best friends Parisa and Gabriela are trying to navigate the disruption that the pandemic has caused. Parisa in particular is struggling with agoraphobia and anxiety as a result of the virus.

## Grade Level: 10

### Books that feature characters with disabilities:

- Brown, L. (2020). *The phantom twin*. First Second.

- Jane and Isabel are conjoined twins in the 1920s who were sold to the circus.  
After performing surgery to separate them, Jane dies and Isabel must find a way to cope with a “phantom limb/sister”
- Khorram, A. (2020). *Darius the Great Deserves Better 2*. Dial Books.
  - Dairus is trying to work through his anxiety as he navigates the romantic, platonic, and familial relationships of teenagehood.
- Brown, E. (2020). *Black girl unlimited: The remarkable true story of a teenage wizard*. Christy Ottaviano Books, Henry Holt and Company.
  - Echo is intent on getting into Dartmouth despite the systematic racism she is experiencing. After falling into depression some personal traumas are revealed that she copes with by using her witch powers.
- Johnson, L. (2020). *You should see me in a Crown*. Scholastic Press.
  - Liz is running for prom queen while also caring for her brother who is sick with sickle cell anemia
- Desjardins, I., Ferrer, M., & Ouellet, S. (2019). *A story about cancer (with a happy ending)*. Frances Lincoln Children's Books.
  - This narrative is about a young girl explaining how her cancer has affected her relationship with her family and friends

## Grade Level: 11

### Books that feature characters with disabilities:

- DeWoskin, R. (2019). *Someday we will fly*. Viking.

- Jewish Lilia flees the country in 1940 with her father and developmentally delayed sister and describes what it's like to live in a refugee camp
- McCully, E. A. (2019). *Dreaming in code: Ada Byron Lovelace, Computer Pioneer*. Candlewick Press.
  - This is a biography recounting Ada Byron Lovelace's complicated familial relationships and how she coped with a mysterious chronic illness while also becoming a lead female mathematician
- Anderson, L. H. (2019). *Shout: A poetry memoir*. Viking.
  - By the author of *Speak* she shares her personal stories and trauma experiences and how she coped with alcoholism and drug abuse
- McGinnis, M. (2019). *Heroine*. HarperCollins Publishers.
  - After Mickey becomes injured from a car accident she becomes reliant on oxycontin
- Nunn, M. (2019). *When the ground is hard*. Putnam/G.P. Putnam's Sons.
  - 16-year-old Adele is learning about racism and ableism at her school as she learns how she and her friend with a developmental disability are treated differently

## Grade Level: 12

### Books that feature characters with disabilities:

- Drake, J. (2019). *The last true poets of the sea*. Disney-Hyperion.
  - A modern story of Shakespeare's *The Twelfth Night* exploring issues of depression
- Emezi, A. (2019). *Pet. Make Me a World*.

- Lucile and Jam (selectively nonspeaking) live in a utopian world that forces them to confront questions like what makes a person “good” or “bad”
- Grimes, N. (2019). *Ordinary hazards: A memoir*. Penguin Distribution Childrens.
  - A memoir describing living with a mother with schizophrenia
- Petrus, J. (2019). *The stars and the blackness between them*. Dutton Books for Young Readers.
  - Mabel comes to terms with her cancer diagnosis while also navigating a queer relationship with unsupporting parents
- Leno, K. (2019). *You must not miss*. Little, Brown and Company.
  - Magpie is struggling with the separation of her parents and her mom’s alcoholism so she escapes through a portal to another world





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