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The Representation of Autism in Children’s Literature: An Analysis and An Alternative

Sadie King-Hoffmann, Indiana University-Purdue University Fort Wayne

Introduction

With the prevalence of autism on the rise, one would expect to see an increase in literature for young children focusing on the topic. After all, children are more likely to have a classmate or sibling on the autism spectrum now than ever before. However, it seemed that picture books I encountered focusing on this topic were often falling into a pattern of isolating the character with autism or inaccurately depicting the disorder. For my Honors Project, I investigated this corner of the picture book market by analyzing available works. I then identified problem areas with the literature that is currently available and developed a list of evaluation criteria. Finally, I created my own picture book that avoids many of the common stereotypes and tropes.

Methods & Analysis

- I created my own definition of a picture book for children based on multiple sources: A picture book, for the purposes of this project, is a book that uses pictures or illustrations to tell a story to a juvenile audience. Those images must illustrate and/or expand upon the story told in the text.
- I developed selection criteria (see below) based on research in the children’s literature discipline on representation of disabilities.
- I researched widely available picture books on the topic to see if they held up to this criteria and served as effective teaching tools.

Selection Criteria

**WORDS**
- Is the story interesting?
- Is the writing style and content of the narrative suitable for the age group at hand?
- Is people-first language utilized, if necessary?

**IMAGES**
- Is the composition of the illustrations engaging?
- Do the illustrations complement the story, rather than detracting or distracting from it?

**CHARACTERS**
- Is ASD represented accurately, in line with recent diagnostic criteria?
- Are the characters human and believable?
- Is there tokenism or singling-out of the character or characters with autism?

Applications

I sought to accomplish two things with this project. First, I wished to create a resource for teachers, therapists, and families to be able to quickly determine if a picture book existed to suit their needs for teaching young children about autism. Second, I hoped to make my own contribution to the field in the form of a picture book that avoided all the stereotypes and problematic concepts I found in many of the books I read during my preliminary research.

There is a noticeable lack of high-quality literature for young children. Producing something to help solve the problem isn’t easy, but it can and should be done. Children should be exposed to autistic characteristics in fiction from an early age, to avoid growing up fearing or discriminating against an entire subset of the population.