

KHC HC 450

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Kilachand Keystone Proposal

Abstract

Many authors, researchers, teachers, and parents have been giving more attention to representation of underrepresented groups in children's literature. This type of representation is important because it validates the experiences of children who identify with these minority groups, while normalizing these different groups for children who are not part of them. There are now children's books that focus on a variety of cultures, races, genders, and sexual orientations, but children's literature is still lacking variety in the physical and mental abilities of the characters. Specifically, there are few books written with characters who have disabilities or developmental challenges. This lack of information for children about these issues can contribute both to the exclusion or alienation of children with disabilities or developmental challenges and to misunderstandings and misconceptions regarding these groups of children. In order to address this gap in the diversity of children's literature, I will be writing a book for children in preschool classrooms about children with sensory processing disorders or autism spectrum disorders. Ideally, this book will be distributed to classrooms to begin increasing the representation of people with disabilities in literature for children in this age group.

Introduction

Children's literature has long been one of the main sources of information for children, apart from experiential learning through play and social interaction. This genre can entertain children, as they listen to stories about pirates or mermaids or talking dogs. It can be used to teach children fundamental lessons about the society we function within and how our cultural norms should affect their behavior. However, children's literature is not immune to our biases or our misguided beliefs about specific groups of people. This flaw in children's literature is often manifested as a lack of minority representation in children's books.

When beginning this project, I could not name a single book I had read in my childhood that included a character with a disability. Part of this is due to the fact that there simply are not many books that have disabled characters, especially not in children's literature specifically. As I researched more about representation of people with disabilities in children's literature, I realized that there were a couple well-known characters in story book who had disabilities: Captain Hook, Quasimodo, Tiny Tim. As Tina Taylor Dyches points out in her study of children's literature, all of these characters represent stereotypical examples of people with disabilities, perpetuating these stereotypes. Just as harmful, though subtler, are the roles that these characters serve in their stories. Dyches argues that characters with disabilities traditionally fulfill one of two tasks in children's literature. Their disability is either meant to reflect the character's otherwise hidden personality traits, or it functions as a tool for another character to use in their own character development, as is the case with Tiny Tim. The study then continues by saying that since these classic stories were written, representation of disabled characters has begun to change slightly. This claim may be true by the metrics used in the study, but in eight years of working with preschool-aged children, I have never come across a children's book that had a disabled character of any substance.

The goal of this project is to address this gap in the content of children's literature by writing a book that includes several characters with sensory processing disorders or autism spectrum disorders. This will allow other children in a classroom to understand a bit more about what children who do have these disorders deal with in a classroom setting each day. In addition to this, children with sensory processing disorders or autism spectrum who read this book will hopefully feel validated, as they see their experience or a similar experience to their own reflected in the book. The final goal, by reading this story to preschool classes, is that teachers will be able to cultivate an environment where children with sensory processing challenges can feel more supported and more included.

Background

Since the 1970's, there has been an increasing focus on representation in children's literature (Dyches). Many different fields, including child development and medicine, study the impact that representation has on member of groups that are typically underrepresented. For the topic of my particular book, it is important to consider both the medical aspect of sensory processing disorders, as well as the social implications for children with these disorders. It is also imperative that I avoid writing characters that are based on stereotypes in order to avoid the problems associated with nearly all past representation of characters with disabilities.

Sensory processing disorders and their impacts are not entirely understood by professionals and researchers, but studies suggest that these sensory challenges affect the way children participate in activities (Hochhauser and Engel-Yeger). Sensory processing disorders manifest themselves differently in each child, but typically, sensory inputs that would not affect many of us can elicit a more dramatic reaction in children who have trouble processing these stimuli (Hochhauser and Engel-Yeger). I have noticed this behavior in the children I have worked with; many children with sensory processing disorders avoid activities that may contribute to sensory overload. This dramatically impacts how they interact with other children in the classroom and can have many effects on their social development for this reason.

It is widely agreed that characters with disabilities are a rarity in children's literature. A study published in 1992 revealed that only 6% of children's books published between 1987 and 1991 included a character with a disability, and this character was a significant character in only 60% of these books (Blaska). Issues associated with a lack a representation include an attribution of otherness to members of underrepresented group, contributing to their alienation in society (Nelson). Therefore, children with autism spectrum disorders will feel further removed from other children in their classroom. Other children in the class will also feel as though the children

with sensory processing challenges do not match their expectations for children their age and will see them as removed from the rest of the class.

In recent years, there has been a rise in the number of children's books that contain characters with disabilities (Blaska). On the surface, this appears to be a trend in the right direction. However, even these books failed to address the multifaceted issues of representation (Ayala). For example, very few of the 59 books in the Ayala study contained ethnically diverse character, few of them were written in languages other than English, and none of them mentioned specific cultural practices. Over half of the books studied contained only male characters (Ayala). Ayala also points out the prevalence of what she calls the "poor little thing" narrative style, which characterizes children in the book only in the context of their disability and focusing on what they cannot do, rather than how they interact with their environment slightly differently because of it. This narrow approach to representation of disabilities in children's literature makes the increase in the number of books with characters who have a disability harmful to children with disabilities. Rather than validating their experience, these books victimize these children and produce the opposite effect than the original goal.

Since alienation and division of people into groups is so deeply entrenched in our society, there is the question of whether or not representation will even make an impact on issues like these. The Osario study clearly shows that the children in her classroom felt heard and validated by the diverse literature they read in the classroom. Osario also points to various other studies that came to the same conclusion: representation of diversity in children's literature does have an impact on the classroom dynamic among children who do and do not identify as part of these groups.

Rationale and Significance

Based on the research I have already completed, there is a clear need for more representation of people with disabilities in children's literature. Several studies have shown the positive impacts of representation in books on the classroom setting, as was seen in Sandra Lucia Osario's study of her classroom of bilingual second grade students in 2018. The students in this study were a bit older than the target audience of my book, so Osario focused more on the children's interpretations of the book and the application of these interpretations to more abstract concepts, like the ethics of immigration. The goal of my book is a little simpler, due to the young age of children who will be reading it. Ideally, this book will introduce children to sensory processing challenges and help teachers foster a more inclusive classroom setting based on this understanding.

Having worked closely with children of this age, I have seen the issues that arise when this information is unavailable to children in the classroom. Preschoolers and other children around this age tend to feel frustrated when another child responds to a stimulus in a way that is very different from how they themselves would respond to a similar stimulus. This is normal and often is because the child simply does not understand the sensory processing challenges that the other child struggles with. I believe this conflict could easily be resolved with a children's book that directly addresses these issues. This book will also allow the children who do have sensory processing disorders to feel seen as they navigate a world that can sometimes be overwhelming.

Timeline

- Fall 2019: Preliminary research, find a project advisor, submit proposal and budget to Kilachand (by December 15) for review and approval
- Spring 2020: Continued research, drafting and executing surveys of teachers and parents
- Summer 2020: Complete first draft of the book, continue conducting surveys of teachers and parents (if necessary)
- Fall 2020: Conduct interviews of children with parental consent, illustrations complete, all edits made to text, layout complete by the end of the semester
- Spring 2021: Print a proof of the book and make any necessary edits, get feedback on the book from teachers and children, complete orders of the books, distribute to classrooms in the area, “trial runs” in classrooms

Research Methods

The final deliverable of this project will be a completed, published children's book that will include pictures and possibly textures. Preliminary research will include reading both children's literature itself and peer-reviewed articles published about children's literature and sensory processing. This research will also include reading about representation in children's literature, both specifically regarding autism spectrum disorders and sensory processing and more generally regarding minority representation in children's literature. This phase of the research will hopefully inform the structure of the book, including length, language used, and details regarding other physical aspects of the book. The research will also offer insight into what types of characters to include in the book and what specific challenges these characters may have to overcome in the story itself.

The second phase of the research will include surveying teachers in preschool classrooms to learn about their encounters with sensory processing disorders; this will help to confirm or deny the existence of social problems that may stem from the lack children's literature on this topic. Parents of preschool-age children will also complete surveys to determine their knowledge of sensory processing disorders and their experiences with these disorders in their own children or at their children's schools. Finally, children with sensory processing disorders or autism spectrum disorders will be interviewed, with parental consent, in order to gain insight into the challenges these children face in a classroom setting. Most of the participants in these surveys and interviews will be selected from one of two preschools: the Boston University Children's Center in Boston, Massachusetts or Angels' Place, Inc. in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. This is mostly because I have worked at or volunteered at each of these preschools and already have a relationship with the parents, teachers, and children at these centers. The populations served by these two schools are also very different from one another and represent many different races,

cultures, and ethnicities between them. This is very beneficial to my project, since I am attempting to expand representation of minority groups or other underrepresented groups in children's literature.

After conducting research, I will begin the writing phase of the project. Ideally a first draft of the book will be completed by the beginning of fall semester 2020, so that there is ample time to make any necessary edits and finish illustrations before printing any copies of the book. My advisor, Karen Jacobs, will serve as a second author on the book; her previous experience writing children's books and her background in Occupational Therapy will very helpful in this process. I have already been in contact with an illustrator, Emerson Lawton. She is a student in the College of Fine Arts studying graphic design, and her collage work specifically seems to fit the style I was looking for in these illustrations. Once the final draft is complete, we will order a proof of the book by January 2020 and seek feedback from teachers, parents, and children. After completing all phases of editing, we will order approximately 100 copies of the book, or as many as the budget will allow. These books will be given to classrooms in the Greater Boston Area and potentially the Greater Pittsburgh Region in Pennsylvania, if copies remain. Since the surveys were conducted in these two cities, it makes the most sense to see how these two communities respond to the book. I hope to arrange several sample readings in some of these classrooms and send feedback forms to the other classrooms. In order to make the book more widely available, we will publish it and sell it at the cost of production on Amazon or a similar online retailer.

Feasibility and Challenges

There are several challenges associated with this project, including both monetary and legal ones. First of all, the Institutional Review Board (IRB) will need to approve certain aspects of the research, namely the surveys and interviews. The surveys will likely fall into one of the six categories for Exemption Review, but the interviews with children may not, due to their designation as a special population. The parental consent forms will also likely have to be approved by the IRB. Other legal issues include protecting the identities of the children who were interviewed when writing the book (by not using one of their names as the name of a character in the story, etc.) and including a disclaimer within the book itself to indicate that the children in the story are fictional and do not represent any real children.

I also anticipate that there may be challenges regarding the budget. One of these challenges is simply determining how much the books will cost. Depending on how long the book is when it is finished, what types of illustrations and textures are included, and other miscellaneous details that may change throughout the writing process, the price of each copy may vary. A way to overcome this challenge is to determine a likely range of prices of the books and include enough money in the budget to order 100 copies in the middle to the higher end of the price range. The budget will also affect the options we have for an illustrator; for similar projects in the past, Kilachand has paid illustrators about \$800, which is a large portion of the Keystone budget. I hope to work with a graphic design student in the College of Fine Arts on the illustrations for this book, and I have already been in touch with a student who is willing to serve as the illustrator for this project.

One issue that has both monetary and legal components is actually selling the book online after we publish it, since we cannot make a profit from a project that was funded by Kilachand. Fortunately, a group of students who wrote a children's book last year set a precedent for this by

selling their book at exactly the cost of production so that they would not make any profit from the sales. We will pursue a similar approach for this project.

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