

Shaping Attitudes: How Literature Influences Perceptions Of Disability.

Literature has the potential to influence a magnitude of readers. It can affect their emotions, their attitudes and can increase awareness of and sensitivity towards diversity. Therefore, the possible influence of that literature shaping attitudes on the subject of disability is phenomenal. In the UK we live in a disabling society (Swain, French and Cameron, 2003, p.2). The study of literature relating to disability such as Barnes and Mercer (2010, p.27) along with vast and extensive journal articles (Odom, Buysse, Soukakou, 2011; Imrie, 2003; Roulstone, 2002) provides evidence that our society, which is controlled by the non-disabled, excludes those with disabilities within every aspect of living. These attitudes have been shaped and developed over time with various tropes (Barnes, 1992) and stereotypes created; in most instances leading to the stigmatisation of people with disabilities. A historical context and the progression of these will be discussed further by critically analysing societal discourses linked to the models of disability. Various literary examples will be used to amplify these discourses in order to highlight the opportunity within text to shape opinion.

Books have the ability to provide a valuable insight into a subject area that is not well understood, conversely it can reinforce negative stereotypes which are readily accepted by society and used to exclude and oppress others. In 2006, the Disability Equality Duty (DED) an extension to the Disability discrimination Act (2001) instilled a duty to ensure that people with disabilities are discussed and the issues they face confronted within the classroom, in order to promote positive attitudes towards disabled people. Leicester (2007, p.8) argues that an absence of literature in which

there are disabled characters, provides the image that disabled people are 'less valued' within society and are therefore not worth mentioning. Consequently, it could be perceived that literature plays a fundamental role in constructing societal discourse; therefore authors should be more aware of portraying a realistic characterisation of people with disabilities in order to present a true reflection if that is what is intended. It is reasonable to assume that by providing children with inclusive literature that reflects our social diversity, it can promote positive attitudes towards peers of all abilities and support the development of positive self-image for children with disabilities. Andrews (1998, p.421) suggests that it is equally important to recognise the value of inclusive literature as a resource for teaching to increase awareness of disability in general. Furthermore, Vuran (2014, p.137) acknowledges that there is a distinct lack of published children's books with characters who have disabilities. Therefore, although there is a duty for classrooms to provide inclusive literature, there is still the concerning debate as to whether the selection of books presented instil the stereotypes and tropes associated with disability.

A selection of young adult novels including 'the curious incident of the dog in the night time', and 'The fault in our Stars', will be used alongside young children's literature 'Susan Laughs', 'Don't call me Special', 'Just Because' and 'What's wrong with Timmy?' to provide examples of good inclusive literature, conversely it will also highlight the continuous use of discriminatory language and reinforcement of negative stereotypes. An informed view as to whether 'inclusive literature' actually promotes inclusion will be gained. It will be argued that it is a basic human right to have a positive self-image promoted through literature; the effects of this will be

discussed throughout in an attempt to understand why this remains unsuitably addressed.

During the course of history people with disabilities have been and in some instances still are defined by their impairment; with a significant focus on the functional limitations rather than empowering the person (Tassoni, 2003, p.9) referred to as the medical model of disability. Moore (2002, p.402) states this model is based on the assumption that there is a 'normal' body. Consequently, people with a disability were seen as abnormal and ultimately their own problem, as it was not society's place to intervene. Structural forces such as industrialisation, urbanisation, the change in work patterns, and supplementary ideologies: utilitarianism, medicalisation, eugenics and social Darwinism, each contributing to and compounding ancient fears and bigotries. Together these provided the state with a rational justification for more extreme discriminatory practices, markedly, the systematic segregation of disabled people from the mainstream of economic and social life (Oliver, 1990; Barnes, 1991, 1997; Gleeson, 1999; Borsay, 2005).

Since the mid-1960's, in the UK there have been significant developments which have had a massive impact on both international and national policies for people with disabilities. The negative attitudes surrounding the meaning and causes of disability have been actively challenged by various disability groups collectively known as the international disabled people's movement. They have persistently fought for equal rights and rightfully argued that the main problems facing people viewed as disabled are the disabling environmental, economic and cultural barriers

(Barnes, 2007, p.204). After various attempts to get an anti-discriminatory law passed, many years later in 1995 the Disability Discrimination Act was introduced. Amended several times over the years to include; education, employment, transport, and goods and services. Essentially it's criticised for its 'medical' definition of 'disability', with limited scope and impact mainly due to the get out clauses, and caveats that inevitably give only limited protection under the law. However, societal discourse had now after a grave battle, gradually progressed to the social model of disability. This focuses on the problems caused by disabling environments, barriers and cultures.

A social model perspective does not deny the importance or value of appropriate individually based interventions in the lives of disabled people, but draws attention to their limitations in terms of furthering their empowerment and inclusion in a society constructed by 'non-disabled people' for 'non-disabled' people. (Brown, 2007, p.206). Its holistic approach attempts to explain the specific problems experienced by disabled people including: inaccessible education, information and communication systems, working environments, inadequate disability benefits, discriminatory health and social support services, inaccessible transport, housing and public buildings amenities, and the devaluing of disabled people through negative images in the media – films, television, and newspapers. Swain and French (2002, p.569) argue that in recent literature there is a new disability model emerging; the affirmative model encompasses positive attitudes and social identities, it is a non-tragic, empowering view of disability and impairment. However, they do highlight that this is mainly present within literature written by people with disabilities, so it could be

assumed that they have a vested interest in presenting positive self-images for disabled people rather than signifying a society accepting and embracing an inclusive discourse. Therefore, by critically reviewing literature we can identify the common characteristics associated of characters with disabilities and critically analyse these depictions to provide a unique perspective on society's views of these individuals.

The Influence of Literature on perceptions and attitudes towards disability has been noted by Ostrosky *et al* (2015, p.30) and Brenner (2009, p.2) as being able to promote positive awareness towards the acceptance and understanding of those with disabilities. In the UK the Disability Equality Duty (DED, 2006) provides an opportunity to promote education as a fundamental factor in changing children and young people's attitudes towards disability (Beckett, 2009, p.317). Findings from a report from The Children Society (2008) suggests that although it is a statutory requirement the DED (2006) could have more of an impact in schools if teachers were more aware of it. Signifying a need for legal obligations to be enforced; raising awareness and implementing training, ensuring that each practitioner values it's importance. This indicates that opportunities are still being missed to promote positive attitudes in the classroom, and appropriate resources and literature are lacking. It is recognised that disability is extremely complex and multidimensional therefore in order to portray a realistic character within literature writers must ensure they are not only knowledgeable about the area they have chosen to depict, but that they are aware of the influence their representation may have on the attitudes of others. As the alternative could have detrimental effects to the way in which people with disabilities are perceived. Barnes (1992, p.7) proposes that

authors tend to categorise common traits of disabilities into 'tropes', he suggests there are eight negative and two positive tropes. These images are internalised by disabled and nondisabled people alike and build social stereotypes, create artificial limitations, which Shapiro (1993, p.30) suggests contribute to the discrimination and minority status 'hated by most disabled people' creating a discourse of invisibility.

Young adult novels, celebrated for speaking through the young adult consciousness must present characters that are relatable yet have the depth to keep the reader engaged. The writer has the opportunity to inform their audience about a specific topic yet their approach determines whether they portray positive images of disability or reinforce negative stereotypes further oppressing people with disabilities. For instance the representation of Christopher in 'The curious incident of the dog in the night time' by Mark Haddon (2003) resonates with several of these suggested tropes and stereotypes such as pitiable and as a genius. As a reader, the depiction of Christopher presents a complex character who will never understand the havoc his existence expels on those around him. It could be suggested that this identifies with the burden trope, evoking many emotions within its audience but specifically the overwhelming sense of the patience required to live with such a character. Although Hadden (2003) never divulges the nature of Christopher's disability, Olear (2012) argues that this is a misrepresentation of Asperger's syndrome. In an article posted in huff post books, Olear (2012) suggests it is a 'stereotypical, inaccurate and horribly offensive' depiction, and in no way similar to anyone with Asperger's he has ever met. However, personal experience suggests that there are particular aspects of the novel that depict a realistic representation of

autism. For instance Christopher sees everything and forgets nothing, and his thought processes in social situations provide a valuable insight in to the possible behaviours of those on the autistic spectrum. It sheds light on the social challenges faced and the impact of the individuals 'triggers' (Horwood and Caldwell, 2008, p.34) on their daily life. Therefore it is reasonable to assume that due to the vast and varying spectrum and its complexities that there are numerous characteristics that some people may not be aware of. Furthermore Matos (2013) states there are various instances within the book that reflect the medical model of disability, as although it is never specified that Christopher is autistic, the actions of various characters including his father are driven specifically by his disability. For instance, when Christopher's mother abandons him, his father engulfed by his condition opts to tell him his mother has died, rather than acknowledging the facts, assuming that due to his autism he would be unable to comprehend the truth. However, it could be argued that this was Haddon's (2003) attempt to present societal discourse towards disability at the time which although predominantly seen through the social model, realistically there are still situations in which the person is defined solely by their disability. Therefore, it could be assumed that Haddon's attempt to raise awareness of these instances would influence people's opinion in a positive way. Although it could be acknowledged that readers do not always challenge these perceptions, and so relate to the attitudes presented as the societal norm and continue to treat those with disabilities in an oppressive way. A particular example of the social model of disability is identified through the barriers set in place in Christopher's attempt to complete his A levels, highlighting the basic human right to equal opportunities in education. However, in this instance a realistic portrayal of the challenges faced due

to the attitudes of others is presented illuminating the concerning concept that, as a society, perceptions of disability are still restricting individuals from their basic human rights. Throughout the novel there is an identifiable thread which provides evidence towards the affirmative model of disability. Christopher is completely confident in his own abilities, particularly in maths; he does not view himself as having a disability and finds comfort in his logic and intelligence. Whereby his exploits throughout his journey as he defies expectations, empowers him to reach his aspirations of a degree and instils a positive self-image and self-belief that he can achieve anything. Although it is evident, it is not the predominant model of disability throughout the novel, which suggests there is still work to be done towards this model if a realistic attempt to change societal discourse through literature is to be made.

The tropes and stereotypes used within media imagery enable us to critically analyse the subliminal messages about disability. In John Green's 'The Fault in Our Stars' (2012) there are three complex characters, who just happen to have cancer. Nearly ten years after 'The Curious Incident of the Dog in The Night time' there is evidence that societal discourse predominantly reflects the social model of disability still, however the emerging affirmation model is evident. It is explicit in the details about both the physical and emotional effects of having cancer, which is crucial. It allows the reader to be informed on these issues yet it does not define the characters as they continue to live their lives. The burden trope (Barnes, 1992) is also present but it is Hazel who fears she will become a burden to Augustus, a 'grenade', she is also aware of how hard it is for her parents to have a child living with cancer and the

hopelessness and depression of family and friends. It could be argued that by reinforcing this stereotype it depicts a negative image of disability although it is recognised by Brenner, (2013, p.514) that a realistic portrayal of the effects is extremely important and worthwhile in promoting awareness. However, she is a strong character who reflects the affirmative model of disability in that she does not allow her disability to define her, and is vocally blunt on their joint hatred for 'cancer perks'. The book reinforces the trope that both Hazel and Augustus are capable of taking part in the community (Barnes, 1992); they are intelligent and articulate enabling them to express themselves and cope with the demands of society. Challies (2014) suggests the language used is unrealistic of teenagers and the author's voice is apparent throughout. Although it could be assumed that due to their time spent in hospital for treatments their wide reading has influenced this and therefore provides a true reflection of such individuals. These positive images of disability dispel the pitiable trope and as the characters overcome the barriers that their illnesses impose the audience is compelled to see them as normal teenagers who happen to be suffering from cancer and not as cancer patients. It could be argued that the ending of the book may evoke emotions of pity in some readers; however Green presents the chilling reality of people living with cancer and therefore provides the audience with a realistic depiction.

Argent (2014) argues that the literature children are introduced to from a young age can transform attitudes and promote positive images of people with disabilities. Therefore, by addressing these issues at an early age the inequality within society can be challenged and discourse shaped in a positive way. As children with

disabilities are increasingly being included in mainstream classrooms the notion of representing children with disabilities within the books and resources within the class becomes extremely important (Nasatir and Horn, 2003, p.2). However, Ostrosky *et al* (2015, p.32) argues that choosing appropriate inclusive literature about disabilities and using them to successfully facilitate understanding can be challenging.

Historically, research has shown that young children's attitudes and understanding of disabilities develop over time (Diamond 1993, p.127). Favazza and Odom, (1997, p.406) suggest that these attitudes are complex and multidimensional, constructed by direct personal encounters and indirect experiences such as; books, media and film. Research carried out by Okagaki *et al* (1998, p.67) suggests that through book reading and further discussion this early exposure to information surrounding people with disabilities can increase children's acceptance of peers with varying abilities. In 2001, Maria Shirver's 'What's wrong with Timmy?' an attempt to portray a curious young girl and an awkward conversation between her and her mother when she sees Timmy playing at the park, unfortunately explicitly highlights the medical model of disability as the societal discourse. Although the reality is that children ask inquisitive questions, the title and language used such as 'retarded' and 'mental retardation', clearly depicts a character presented as an object of curiosity and defined by his disability. The heavy handed approach here never quite engages the reader and the message is lost within its dense text.

In contrast Thomas wrote 'Don't Call Me Special' in 2001, which although focuses on disability in general attempts to explain to young children what disability is and how people overcome the barriers and challenges they may face. It allows teachers to

use it as a resource to introduce a discussion surrounding disability and provides guidelines as to how to use the book to support this. Reflecting the social model of disability it could be argued that although the focus within this book is disability in general, in order for children to understand the complexity of disability and equality they must first be introduced to the topic. Therefore the simplistic tone and brief explanations within this book could provide children with a positive attitude towards disabilities by keeping them engaged. However, steps could be taken to eliminate the patronising and condescending tone in parts.

Burnell (2014) argues that subtlety is key in children's literature, and that children become disengaged when a book is overly educational. In a picture book by Jeanne Willis and Tony Ross, 'Susan Laughs' (2001) a more progressive step towards the affirmation model of disability is made. The story describes a range of various activities, emotions and experiences that a little girl may go through. However, it is not until the last page of the story when it is illustrated that Susan is in a wheelchair. It delivers a powerful and positive image of disability, focusing on Susan's abilities rather than her limitations, which Ruth Ng (2011) suggests that 'Susan Laughs' is ideal to initiate discussion within the classroom as you it is not until the end you realise she has a disabilities, and are therefore faced with the realisation that you have assumed the character was able bodied throughout. The illustrations and simple concepts promote awareness of the affirmation model in a skilful way evoking emotions within the reader and a realisation of the power literature can hold. This is further cemented in Elliot's 'Just Because' (2010) with an engaging story and beautiful illustrations, personal experience suggests that children are immediately

drawn in. Promoting a positive identity through the character 'Clemmie', the book acknowledges the wheelchair but it is merely a detail that further enhances the story of a special bond between brother and sister. Ellis (2010) concurs 'Just Because' promotes a positive message of disability within a story focussed friendship and family. This allows for Clemmie to just become part of the fiction landscape, her disability does not hinder her in anyway in fact, this book celebrates Clemmie's differences; her rocket wheelchair, but also her similarities as a big sister, and a playmate. It provides children with a positive example that everyone is different, in a variety of ways but uses the disability to enhance the experiences of the other character. It could be suggested that at some of the realistic limitations to character informs the audience and amplifies their relatability, adding to the realistic depiction it is attempting to portray. There is no perfect inclusion book; disability is a complex and multidimensional construct which many people claim to understand yet still have not even scratched the surface. However, with evidence of the affirmation model becoming more and more prominent it provides hope towards more inclusive literature being published in the near future.

It is clear that there is not enough inclusive literature available and what does exist provides inconsistent portrayals. Golos, Moses, and Wolbers (2012, p.239) advocate that picture books are powerful and popular in the education of caring and educating young children. Cole and Valentine (2000, p.305) insist that the words and illustrations in children's books can develop a child's identity and sense of self-worth, supporting them as they construct their understanding of different people and cultures. Human rights state that people with disabilities have the right to be

accepted and included within their community. In order for this to become a societal norm, attitudes must be shaped towards the affirmative model from an early age. Literature can help aid this progression by providing its audience with positive perceptions and images of disability, to promote awareness to all ages. Although the DED (2006) places a requirement on schools to have a range of appropriate literature and resources to promote positive awareness and discussion, it is not sufficiently imposed due to it not holding any legal obligations. Therefore schools are not fulfilling this limited duty to its potential; it's importance undervalued by government ensuring that schools apply more focus to other provisions. This leads to a continuous lack of positive self-image for children with disabilities in the younger years, and therefore not adhering to their individual human rights leaving them stuck within an invisible discourse. Matthew and Clow (2007, p.66) advocate that the casual inclusion of characters with disabilities in everyday fiction will benefit all children. They suggest that stories with the inclusion of disabled characters do not appeal to young audiences, simply due to the lack of exciting storylines and images. The affirmation model of disability is emerging within our society. In order to address the current 'invisibility' within literature and further progress these positive attitudes towards disabilities, everyone working in the early years sector must play their fundamental role; in actively seeking out positive inclusion literature and fostering a market for such books alerting publishers and booksellers of the need for more of them. It is evident that through literature, societies attitudes and perceptions can be changed, encouraging the essential transformation of societal discourse.

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