

# Expanding Preservice Special Educators' Conceptions about Disability Through Young Adult Literature

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## ABSTRACT

This article provides information and resources to help special education teacher educators improve preservice teachers' competence for working with disabled<sup>1</sup> students and addressing ableism in their classrooms, by incorporating young adult (YA) literature into special education teacher preparation experiences. Embedding YA literature with representations of disability can address ableism in education by helping preservice special education teachers to conceptualize disabled adolescents differently. Current approaches to teacher education may reinforce dysconscious ableism (Broderick & Lalvani, 2017) and undergird educational segregation on the basis of disability. After reviewing current literature on addressing ableism during teacher preparation and using YA literature in teacher education, this article models how special education teacher educators can critically examine YA texts by providing criteria for evaluating representations of disability and a unit plan with three lessons for use in an introductory special education course. A bibliography of young adult books featuring characters with disabilities is also provided.

## KEYWORDS

**Ableism, disability studies, teacher preparation, young adult literature**

**A**bleism remains an active system of oppression in American education, resulting in the stigmatization of disability and exclusionary educational practices (Broderick & Lalvani, 2017; Lalvani & Broderick, 2013; Storey, 2007). One consequence of this is the way many PK-12 schools have not recognized disability as an aspect of diversity (Connor & Gabel, 2010) or included it in curriculum (Nusbaum & Steinborn, 2019). To correct this, recommendations for combating ableism in schools include: (a) explicitly including ableism in diversity initiatives; (b) including disability content in literature, curriculum, and school activities; (c) hiring teachers with disabilities; (d) expanding teachers' conceptions about disability; and (e) focusing teacher learning

on multi-modal communication and Universal Design for Learning (UDL) (Hehir, 2002; Storey, 2007).

General and special education teachers' beliefs and attitudes about disability may contribute to the perpetuation of ableism, and as Hehir (2002) and Storey (2007) highlight, teacher education can address this by expanding preservice teachers' conceptions about disability (Baglieri & Lalvani, 2019). Special education teacher preparation plays a critical role in influencing educators' attitudes about inclusion and disabled students, in addition to equipping teachers with the requisite pedagogical content knowledge (Bialka et al., 2018). Thus, special education teacher preparation can use social justice and equity frameworks to disrupt ableism and other systems of oppression (King, 1991). One way

<sup>1</sup> This article uses identity-first language (e.g., disabled students) rather than person-first language (e.g., students with disabilities). Identity-first language is preferred by disability rights activists and used in disability studies literature toward the goal of recognizing disability as a valued identity (Back et al., 2016; Gernsbacher, 2017).

special education teacher educators can engage in this work is through preparing teachers to critically evaluate and include representations of disability in their instruction.

Anti-ableist curricula and disability studies have not been emphasized in PK-12 schools and special education teacher preparation programs along with other social justice efforts, namely anti-racism and anti-sexism (Lalvani & Broderick, 2013; Muellerr, 2021; Nusbaum & Steinborn, 2019). The limited preparation of special education teachers on student disability identity development and stigma around disability labeling contributes to what Broderick & Lalvani (2017) term “dysconscious ableism,” or limited, distorted understandings of disability (Muellerr, 2021). Dysconsciousness (King, 1991), includes perceptions, attitudes, assumptions and beliefs that construct and reinforce inequity, particularly around race and other marginalized identity categories. Dysconsciousness, then, creates particular kinds of attitudes and knowledge that often distorts work towards equitable education. Among other experiences, this is evident through the continued use of disability awareness days in special education teacher preparation, which often feature problematic simulations of disability (Lalvani & Broderick, 2013). Challenging ableism as a system requires deconstructing notions of ability and normative bodyminds<sup>2</sup> in the classroom, both through teachers’ own conceptions, as well as curricular and pedagogical choices.

Special education teacher preparation can engage in this deconstructive work as part of critical, transformative pedagogy aimed at expanding preservice teachers’ conceptions using literature. Young adult (YA) literature offers a unique opportunity to model

evidence-based, inclusive pedagogy and simultaneously expand preservice special education teachers’ knowledge about disability when integrated into introductory coursework (Curwood, 2013; Kurtts & Gavigan, 2017). This is especially important for prospective special education teachers, who need an understanding of the realities of inequity in schools, alongside the capacity to reflect on their own role and growth inside that reality (King, 1991). Reading and reflecting on representations of disability, especially those that meet quality indicators, offers preservice teachers the opportunity to engage in such a reflective growth experience (Kurtts & Gavigan, 2017).

Several studies have demonstrated the positive impacts of incorporating literature on disability within teacher preparation (Donne, 2016; Marable et al., 2010; Marlowe & Maycock, 2001). Donne (2016) employed an action research design to address the limited emphasis on augmentative and assistive communication (AAC) devices in teacher preparation programs. Participants ( $n=10$ ) were graduate-level preservice teachers enrolled in a course on special education, which included an assigned YA novel focused on the use of AAC. The primary themes identified from written artifacts and discussions were understandings of disability, communication as a universal human need, AAC devices, collaborating with families, friendship, and inclusive education. Similarly, Marable and colleagues (2010) utilized book talks to investigate the impact of literature on preservice teachers’ knowledge of and attitudes toward disability. Undergraduate students ( $n=40$ ) read a nonfiction book on disability as part of their introductory special education course. From written reflec-

tions, the researchers identified themes of increased insight into the complexity of disability, enhanced empathy, and more expressed respect for disabled people. Kurtts and Gavigan (2017) examined the impact of bibliotherapy on preservice teachers’ understandings of disability. Their qualitative analysis highlighted the ways in which preservice teachers “began to see disabilities as a very human condition that goes beyond their factual textbook knowledge about disabilities” (Kurtts & Gavigan, 2017, p. 26). Results of these studies indicate that book study using YA literature can be a useful way to both shift preservice teacher attitudes about disability and increase the likelihood they will apply these attitudes to their future instructional practice.

Building upon the work of Blaska (2004) and Hazlett et al. (2011) and addressing the limited resources for special education teacher educators to integrate representation of disability into their instruction, we offer updated criteria for evaluating YA literature, model the application of the criteria with selected YA texts, and provide accompanying lesson plans use in special education teacher preparation. The criteria can be applied by both special education teacher educators and PK-12 special education teachers to evaluate texts with representations of disability through a feminist disability studies lens. For the purposes of this article, we applied the criteria to selected texts for use by special education teacher educators and recommend integrating this work into introductory coursework on disabilities, which often address each category of disability identified by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004). YA literature can supplement the overview of disability categories under IDEA and help preservice special educators

<sup>2</sup> Bodyminds is a term used in critical disability studies. Margaret Price defines the bodymind as “the imbrication (not just the combination) of the entities usually called ‘body’ and ‘mind’” (2015, p. 270). We use the term here to intentionally acknowledge multiple categories of disability (e.g., emotional/behavioral disability, physical disability) and to connect special education to critical disability studies (Schalk, 2017).

**FIGURE 1:** Criteria for Evaluating Young Adult Literature

QUESTION	YES	NO
Is the author disabled? If not, consider what their knowledge and background is in relation to disability.		
Does the text portray disabled adolescents as needing peer relationships (platonic or romantic)?		
Does the text portray disabled adolescents as interested in sex and dating (or identify the character as asexual)?		
Does the text use identity-first language or discuss the choice of language in referring to disabled characters?		
Do the disabled characters have intersectional identities and represent diverse races, socioeconomic status, religions, languages, sexualities, and gender identities?		
Does the text emphasize competence, self-determination, and bodily autonomy?		
Do the disabled characters have relationships with others without having to prove themselves or be exceptional?		
Are the disabled characters shown as complex, three-dimensional humans with dynamic personalities, emotions, and interests described with realistic details?		
Are disabled characters presented as more than inspirational, victims, or heroes?		
Are events in the plot related to issues other than disability?		

develop more robust and nuanced understandings of disabled peoples' experiences. The corresponding lesson plans were designed for use in such an introductory special education course and include layered texts, key vocabulary, and reflection questions to support preservice teachers in developing new attitudes about disability, as well as understandings of the disability labels used in special education.

### Updated Criteria for Evaluating Young Adult Literature

The first step for special education teacher educators to take in this process is selecting texts with representations of disability to include in introductory special education courses. Many representations of disability perpetuate harmful stereotypes and

assumptions about disability, and these stereotypes contribute to low academic and social expectations for disabled students, as well as exclusionary educational practices (Blaska, 2004; Broderick & Lalvani, 2017). Thus, clear criteria are necessary for teacher educators to evaluate the quality of young adult literature featuring disabled characters (Prater et al., 2006).

There are several existing criteria for evaluating disability representation in children's and YA literature (e.g., Blaska, 2004; Hazelett et al., 2011). From an edition of *Disability Studies Quarterly* on disability culture in children's literature, Blaska (2004) addressed the limited inclusion of disability in children's literature. After reviewing 500 bestselling and award-winning children's books yielded only 10

books featuring a disabled character, Blaska (2004) established criteria for reviewing literature featuring disabled characters, which included promoting empathy, acceptance, and respect, as well as portraying disability in a realistic manner.

Hazelett and colleagues (2011) explored intersections of sexuality, gender, and disability in YA literature. The authors provide a brief review of titles that portray characters with intersectional identities, as well as recommendations for evaluating YA novels to avoid relying on problematic representations of queer and disabled youth. The authors recommend YA texts feature disabled, LGBTQ characters and include other identity categories, including racial, socioeconomic, age, family, and religious diversity.

**FIGURE 2:** Selected Young Adult Literature

TITLE	AUTHOR	BRIEF SUMMARY
<i>Say What You Will</i>	Cammie McGovern (2015)	Amy has cerebral palsy and uses both a mobility aid and an AAC device. Tired of being isolated from her peers because of having an adult aide with her at school, she convinces her parents to hire peer assistants for her senior year of high school. One of her peer assistants, Matthew, has undiagnosed obsessive-compulsive disorder. Amy and Matthew develop a friendship over the school year that grows into romantic feelings for each other. Their relationship is challenged by the transition from high school to adult life. This text addresses issues of gender, sexuality, disability, and bodily autonomy.
<i>Good Kings Bad Kings</i>	Susan Nussbaum (2013)	This novel portrays disabled teenagers who are institutionalized. They fall in love, make friendships, and engage in the difficult process of constructing their identities on the verge of adulthood. Their story examines the emotional and physical consequences of exclusion based on disability status, as well as the importance of self-determination in adolescents' lives.
<i>Queens of Geek</i>	Jen Wilde (2017)	In this feminist, queer take on geek culture, two friends discover love and friendship in the context of their favorite fandoms. Charlie is an outgoing vlogger and actress while Taylor, who is Autistic, prefers to be out of the spotlight and experiences social anxiety. Charlie is straight-sized, Asian, and bisexual. Taylor describes herself as chubby, and harbors a secret crush on their friend, Jaime. With humor and dignity, this book tackles ableism, body shaming, and sexuality.

The authors also suggest representing varied examples of the lives of queer and disabled youth, including characters who care and nurture others, possess unique talents, have productive lives with deep and complex emotions and personalities, and who wrestle with other issues unrelated to their disability or sexuality. (Hazelett et al., 2011).

Many of the criteria created by Blaska (2004) and Hazelett et al. remain relevant today; however, some need to be updated to reflect identity-first language and an explicit focus on anti-ableist classroom representation. Additionally, some existing criteria were not developed for evaluating YA literature specifically, thus the updated criteria we present here emphasize the importance of textual representations of peer relationships and authentic experiences of disabled

adolescents. We recommend that special education teacher educators model how to apply the criteria presented in Figure 1 to select YA literature with representations of disability as part of introductory special education coursework. The criteria can be applied using a yes/no response to each question. An affirmative response is not needed for every question to consider the text quality; rather a majority of the responses should be in the affirmative to judge a YA text as high-quality. After experiencing this process modeled in their coursework, future special educators will be better prepared to critically evaluate texts in their own teaching. Preservice special educators can practice applying these questions with the full list of YA books featuring disabled characters in the online *Supplemental Materials (Young Adult Books)*

## SELECTED YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE

As a model for special educator teacher educators, we have applied the criteria to three YA books featuring complex, disabled, teenaged characters and explicitly addressing adolescent romantic relationships. Plot summaries are provided in Figure 2. The selected texts provide examples of how novels dealing with sex and sexuality extend authentic representation of disability and challenge dominant conceptions about disabled people. In addition, the selected books can also help preservice teachers better understand disability, augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) devices, the barriers adults create for students with disabilities under the guise of helping them, and challenge presumptions of disabled people as desexualized or uninterested in romantic relationships.

## Critical Evaluation of Selected YA Literature

For this paper, we selected examples of YA literature focused on romance and dating to address the recommendations from Hazelett et al., (2011) and Blaska (2004) that disabled characters should be presented as complex individuals with authentic experiences that include romantic relationships. While this is not the only dimension of diverse representations of disability in YA, there are few examples of YA literature that feature female, disabled characters as interested in sex and dating, and these examples offer special education teacher educators the opportunity to discuss these relationships with preservice teachers. Although the texts featured in Figure 2 represent significant contributions to diverse representations of disability and particularly of dating and romance, it is essential for special education teacher educators to model how to critically consider the depictions of disability and sexuality in the narrative so that preservice teachers are prepared to engage in this process. As an exemplar, we applied the criteria from Figure 1 to the three selected texts from Figure 2. Integrating this process into special education teacher preparation coursework will help preservice special educators become critical thinkers about disability representation in texts and eventually become more fluent in discerning types of disability representation, so that they can select texts for use in their own teaching. We have divided the critical evaluation into three areas to emphasize how to engage in conversation about types of disability representation.

### Diverse Orientations and Identities

Across all three novels, the romantic relationships of disabled characters are portrayed as exclusively heterosexual. *Queens of Geek* (Wilde, 2017) includes a bisexual character; however, she is the friend of an Autistic person, Taylor, and does not identify

as disabled. This is particularly interesting because the author identifies as a bisexual, Autistic woman and states that she based Taylor's character on herself in the interview at the end of the novel (Wilde, 2017). As Hazelett and colleagues (2011) noted, it is important for representations of disability to include LGBTQ characters to represent the lived experiences of disabled teens more accurately.

### Diverse Races and Ethnicities

Similarly, both *Queens of Geek* and *Say What You Will* (McGovern, 2015) portray disabled characters as White, even as other characters are identified as people of color. It is unclear if authors have difficulty depicting disabled characters with intersectional identities, or if such representation is not frequently published. Including disabled characters with diverse racial and ethnic identities is an important component of realistically portraying disability (Blaska, 2004) and avoids relying on problematic notions of disability as a monolith (Hazelett et al., 2011).

### Author's Positionality

The authors of the texts have different relationships to disability, which ultimately impacts the way disability is represented (Wong, 2020). Two of the three texts, *Good Kings Bad Kings* (Nussbaum, 2013) and *Queens of Geek* (Wilde, 2017), are written by disabled authors. In contrast, *Say What You Will* (McGovern, 2015) is written by a parent of an Autistic child. A critical evaluation of this text reveals that this different authorial perspective impacts the representation of disability in the texts. For example, *Say What You Will* occasionally portrays disability as a flaw and something that would make platonic and romantic relationships with nondisabled people difficult or impossible. Amy, the main character in *Say What You Will*, is also presented as exceptional by excelling academically. This could be construed as an attempt

to make Amy inspirational and could convey the idea that disabled people must be extraordinary to deserve authentic relationships. As this example and analysis highlights, teachers' selection of texts must be accompanied by a critical lens on the depiction of disability and intersectional identities, including authorship of the text itself.

### Lesson Plans

After selecting and critically evaluating texts, special education teacher educators can include YA literature with representations of disability in coursework. To support teacher educators in utilizing authentic representations of disability in their practice, online *Supplemental Materials (Lesson Plans)* provide a unit plan with three corresponding lesson plans for use in an introductory special education course. The lesson plans are based on a historically responsive four-layered equity framework that positions literacy a transformational tool for social justice and equity (Muhammad, 2020). Applying this framework to special education teacher preparation courses emphasizes identity development, skill development, intellectual development, and criticality for future special education teachers. The criticality component is an especially important aspect for special education teacher preparation, as future special educators need to be prepared to recognize and challenge ableism. Muhammad's framework also calls for the use of layered texts, which ensures that multiple viewpoints and the lived experiences of disabled people are included in special education teacher preparation coursework. Additionally, the layered text format allows for texts to be changed to reflect new contributions to the field or to address concerns about including controversial topics without altering the spirit of the lesson. Taken together, the evaluation criteria and unit plans provide a way for special education teacher educators to include discussion about disability



representation in their classrooms, while building skills and competencies in prospective teachers that will allow them to do this important and ongoing work on their own.

## CONCLUSION

Addressing ableism as a system of oppression in schools requires a multi-pronged approach that includes more adequately preparing special education teachers to represent disability in more positive ways in the classroom, and challenge problematic notions about disability. One method of expanding preservice special educators' conceptions about disability is through integrating YA literature into special education teacher preparation coursework. This can be particularly impactful with literature that challenges stereotypes about disability, such as representations of diverse disabled people with meaningful romantic and social lives. Using YA novels can provide preservice teachers with opportunities to learn about disability and develop more favorable attitudes toward inclusion. Such an approach also allows special education teacher educators to model critically evaluating texts and applying historically responsive literacy practices by using lesson plans that specifically expand students' ideas about disability. Finally, incorporating YA literature into special education teacher preparation coursework equips future special educators with the pedagogical content knowledge necessary to design instruction using diverse texts. There is an urgent need for special education teacher education to prepare future educators to disrupt the dysconscious ableism experienced and perpetuated in general education classrooms so that disabled students can be more meaningfully included in their schools and communities.

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