

Florida Southern College

Representations of Children with Disabilities in Young Adult Novels

An Analysis of *Wonder*, *Fish in a Tree*, *Rules*, *Out of My Mind*, and *El Deafo*

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December 6, 2020

Introduction

Over the past few decades, educators have researched the importance of representation in educational materials and settings. (Bishop, Wopperer). This research overwhelmingly suggests that representation of diverse groups is beneficial in schools, as representation can help students feel accepted and seen (Bishop 2). Additionally, representation in media can help students become educated on groups of people that they otherwise would not learn about in a classic school curriculum. Though this research exists, there is still an extreme lack of representation in, and research on, children's literature that includes characters with disabilities. This thesis analyzes the question: How are children with disabilities represented in young adult novels? To answer this, I selected five young adult novels that feature at least one character with a disability: *Wonder*, *Fish in a Tree*, *Rules*, *Out of My Mind*, and *El Deafo*. I explore the way different disabilities are represented in these novels, the impact of these disabilities on the characters, the power the character with a disability exhibits, and the impact each author had on their book. Ultimately, the results will be used to explore how literature featuring characters with disabilities can be used in classrooms in a beneficial way.

Research

According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, a disability is "a physical, mental, cognitive, or developmental condition that impairs, interferes with, or limits a person's ability to engage in certain tasks or actions or participate in typical daily activities and interactions" ("Disability"). Today, 26% of all adults in the United States have some sort of disability. The main areas in which adults have disabilities are in mobility (13.7%), cognition

(10.8%), independent living (6.8%), hearing (5.9%), vision (4.6%), and self care (3.7%) (“Disability impacts all of us”).

Whereas disabilities used to be seen as medical deficits, they are now being embraced as “diversity in the human condition” (Gilson and DePoy 208). As a result of this, many people with disabilities are able to find comfort in belonging to a group of people who understand the way they think and feel. Disabilities are another way in which people can be multicultural.

Many researchers have explored the importance of representation of multicultural identities. Rudine Sims Bishop specifically explores the importance of representation in children’s literature through her article *Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors*. Bishop explains that books can be mirrors, windows, or sliding glass doors. Through windows and sliding glass doors, children are able to look at, and even enter into, the new worlds that books create for them. However, when books are mirrors, children are able to see themselves represented in literature. Often, books are not representative of all of the populations that read them; this causes marginalized populations to feel devalued. When books accurately represent all populations, students can interact with both windows and mirrors in books. Through this, similarities and differences can be embraced by all readers (Bishop 2).

Students of all different races, ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds, and identities are represented in schools today. One identifiable trait that distinguishes certain students from others is the presence of disabilities. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, during the 2018-2019 school year, approximately 7.1 million public school students in the United States received special education services; this is 14% of the public school population. The main disabilities students had were a specific learning disability (33%), speech or language

impairment (19%), other health impairment (15%), and autism (11%) (“Students with disabilities”). It is estimated that there are even more students with disabilities, but they are either undiagnosed or not receiving these special education services. Though many students have disabilities, the topic of disabilities is typically not covered in schools.

Of the 7,701 Florida Education Standards found on CPALMS for PreK - 8th grade students, only four explicitly deal with the topic of disabilities. One of these standards is a Career & Technical Education standard that requires students to discuss the Americans with Disabilities Act. The second standard is a physical education standard that requires students to offer respect to classmates with disabilities through acceptance and encouragement. The third standard is a special skills standard that requires students to explain how disabilities can impact someone’s learning and life. The final standard is a social studies standard that has students learn about the treatment of people with disabilities as well as the effect of this treatment (“Standards: Info & Resources”). Though these standards do fit under the topic of disabilities, they do not require that students explicitly learn about different types of disabilities, and only one explores the impact disabilities have on people. This means that in a majority of classrooms, students will not be learning about people with disabilities. Because this topic will not be covered in everyday classroom learning, it is important for teachers to find other ways to expose students to multicultural education including people with disabilities. A simple and impactful way for teachers to do this is through children’s literature (Erbas 405). There are 434 English/Language Arts standards for PreK - 8th grade in the state of Florida listed on CPALMS, which means there are a lot of opportunities for teachers to select texts to use in their classrooms (“Standards: Info

& Resources”). Teachers should take advantage of this and select books about people with disabilities to use in their classrooms.

Though there is some children’s literature that includes characters with disabilities, there is not a large amount. Dyches et al., analyzed Caldecott Medal and Honor book winners from 1938 to 2005, and only found 11 (4%) of the books included a character with a disability (4). There is a paucity of research exploring children’s literature that includes characters with disabilities. When searching for articles using DiscoverRoux on the Roux Library website at Florida Southern College, I found 183 results when I entered “picture books,” “disabilities,” and “representation” into the search engine. When I changed “picture books” to “young adult novels,” there were only 27 results. A potential reason why more research has been done on picture books that feature characters with disabilities than young adult novels is because picture books are easier to incorporate in a classroom setting and are typically understood by a greater number of students (Pennell et al. 414).

Though there is a minimal amount of research done on picture books with characters with disabilities, there is even less when it comes to young adult novels. As there is a gap in research that discusses children’s literature in the area of young adult novels that feature characters with disabilities, this is where I focused my research.

Young adult novels are geared toward students in the beginning of their adolescent years (ages 10-14). According to Stopbullying, in a student’s adolescent years, they are likely to experience bullying; 49% of students in grades 4-12 reported being bullied within the past month. Additionally, children with disabilities are at an increased likelihood of being bullied than their peers without disabilities (“Facts about bullying”). Because of this, teachers who are in

upper elementary and middle school classrooms should select literature that includes characters with disabilities. As people with disabilities receive increased representation in the classroom, they will not seem as different to their peers. This is further reason why more research should be done regarding young adult novels and their representation of people with disabilities; not only is it an unexplored topic when it comes to research, but it is a topic that should be explored for its benefits to youth with disabilities as they are at an increased chance of bullying when compared to their peers.

Though it is good to incorporate literature with characters with disabilities in classrooms, book selection is critical. In the past, novels often represented people with disabilities as helpless, and it is important that the literature read to students today does not feed into this harmful stereotype (Wopperer 28). Pennell et al. explored what an accurate representation of people with disabilities in children's picture books may look like. They argued representation is important, because unlike other circumstances in which people may be different (race, gender, culture, etc.), disabilities have an inherently negative connotation. "The Latin prefix *dis-* means apart...creating the literal definition as away from ability," (Pennell et. al 412). To move away from the stereotype that disabilities are negative attributes, these researchers sought to find stories in which people with disabilities live and experience life just like any abled person would. Ultimately, they selected 10 picture books they believed fit their criteria for a positive representation of a person with disabilities, but they expressed that they would like to keep exploring new literature (Pennell et. al 416-417).

Methods

Once I noticed a gap in research that discusses children's literature in the area of young adult novels that feature characters with disabilities, I reached out to peers and professors to find books that would fall under this criteria. I selected five books written between 2006 and 2015: *Wonder*, *Fish in a Tree*, *Rules*, *Out of My Mind*, and *El Deafo*. I selected these books as they are all novels, include one or more character(s) with disabilities, are written for students ages 8-12 (approximately 3rd - 7th grade), and have won multiple awards. Two significant awards multiple books I analyzed have been awarded are the Newbery Medal and the Schneider Family Book Award. The Newbery Medal and Honor Book awards are given to the most distinguished contributions to American children's literature in a certain year ("Welcome to the Newbery..."). The Schneider Family Book Award is awarded to an author or illustrator who embodies the disability experience in a book for children or adolescents ("Schneider Family Book Award").

Wonder, by R.J. Palacio, was originally published in 2012, though the book gained a lot of popularity when it was adapted into a film in 2017. *Wonder* follows the life of a 5th grader named Auggie Pullman. Auggie has a craniofacial abnormality, which causes his face to look drastically different than his peers'. The events of the novel follow Auggie during his first year in school, and the bullying, friendships, and complications that come along with it. *Wonder* has received many awards, such as the 2012 Barnes & Noble best book of the year and being considered one of the 100 Best Young Adult Books of All Time by Time Magazine ("Wonder: Awards & Recognition").

Fish in a Tree, by Lynda Mullaly Hunt, was originally published in 2015. The book features a 6th grade protagonist, Ally Nickerson. Ally struggles greatly in school, both

academically and socially. About half way through the book, Ally is diagnosed with dyslexia. Ally struggles with this new aspect of her identity, but she eventually comes to terms with her learning disability with help from her friends and teacher, Mr. Daniels. *Fish in a Tree* received many prominent awards, such as the Amazon Best Book of the year (9-12 yo) in 2015 and the Schneider Family Book Award in 2016 (“Fish in a Tree: Awards and Honors”).

Rules, by Cynthia Lord, was written in 2006, making it the oldest book I selected. *Rules* follows a 12 year old girl named Catherine whose brother, David, has autism. Catherine also becomes friends with a boy named Jason, who has an unidentified physical disability. Catherine struggles with receiving judgement from others, developing friendships, and doing what she wants. Though Catherine herself does not have a disability, David and Jason’s disabilities still play a major role in the story. *Rules* was awarded the Newbery Honor Medal and Schneider Family Book Award in 2007. (“Rules: Awards and Honors”).

Out of My Mind, by Sharon Draper, was originally published in 2010. The book follows a 10 year old named Melody Brooks. Melody has cerebral palsy, a disability that affects her physically, but not mentally. Melody struggles with acceptance from peers and adults, but she still works to better her life and go after what she wants; mainly, Melody wants to join her school’s quiz team and become friends with the other members of the team. *Out of My Mind* was a New York Times Bestselling novel for almost two years, and it also received the Josette Frank award, which is awarded to a book that portrays a young character who positively and realistically deals with difficulties (“Out of My Mind: Reviews & Awards”).

El Deafo, by Cece Bell, was written in 2014. The book is a graphic novel rather than traditional prose. *El Deafo* follows the character Cece, a rabbit with a hearing disability, from

childhood through adolescence. Cece is based off of the author, Cece Bell, and the book loosely explores real events that Bell went through in her youth. *El Deafo* has also been awarded the Newbery Honor Medal in 2015 (“Newbery Medal and Honor Books”).

Overview of Selected Novels

Book	Author	Year of Publication	Character with Disability	Disability Represented in the Book	Grade Range
<i>Wonder</i>	R.J. Palacio	2012	August Pullman	Craniofacial Abnormality	3rd-7th
<i>Fish in a Tree</i>	Lynda Mullaly Hunt	2015	Ally Nickerson	Dyslexia	5th-9th
<i>Rules</i>	Cynthia Lord	2006	David and Jason	Autism and an Unidentified Physical Disability	4th-7th
<i>Out of My Mind</i>	Sharon Draper	2010	Melody Brooks	Cerebral Palsy	5th-6th
<i>El Deafo</i>	Cece Bell	2014	Cece Bell	Hearing Difficulties	3rd-7th

After selecting these five books, I first read each book and took general notes on what happened in the stories. Then, I looked at my notes from the books, as well as the research I did, in order to develop questions I would use to analyze my selected books.

When analyzing research about young adult novels that include characters with disabilities, I found an article by Curwood which analyzed three contemporary young adult novels that portrayed characters with disabilities. Curwood drew upon a critical sociocultural approach to develop eight questions she used to analyze her selected literature (21). The critical sociocultural approach, by Moje and Lewis, analyzes the importance of activity theory, cultural studies, and critical discourse theory on power in characters and readers alike (13). Curwood

tackles the concepts of normalcy, identity, power, and agency in her analysis questions (21). I also found an article by Pennell et al. in which researchers read literature featuring students with disabilities to look for picture books that accurately represented people with disabilities, rather than perpetuating harmful narratives of characters that are not able-bodied. These researchers developed search criteria that they used when reading books that involved text difficulty, accessibility, authenticity, and the use of respectful language (Pennell et. al 414-415).

I drew inspiration from Curwood and Pennell et al. to develop my own questions I would use in my literary study. The eight questions I developed were:

1. Who is the main character of this story?
2. Which character in this story has a disability?
3. How is the disability written about in the text?
4. How does the disability impact the character (personality and actions)?
5. How does the disability impact how other characters interact with this character?
6. How does the character with a disability demonstrate power or agency?
7. How is the reader made to feel about the character with a disability?
8. How is the author connected to the story?

I then reread each book and took specific notes that I used to answer my eight essential questions. Finally, I used the answers to these essential questions to analyze the main themes of the books and answer the question, “How are children with disabilities represented in young adult novels?”

Analysis

After analyzing each book with my eight essential questions, I divided my research into four main areas to use for comparison across the books: the disability, the impact of the disability, the power of the character with a disability, and how the author impacted each book.

The Disability

Across the five books I selected and analyzed, the disabilities featured fell in two categories: physical differences and mental differences. In four of the five books, characters with physical differences are represented, whereas in two of the five books, characters with mental differences are represented.

Physical Differences

In *Wonder*, *El Deafo*, *Rules*, and *Out of My Mind*, characters have disabilities that make them physically different from their able-bodied peers; however, they have no mental differences. In *Wonder*, by R.J. Palacio, the character Auggie Pullman has a genetic disease called mandibulofacial dysostosis (104, 129), which causes him to have a craniofacial abnormality (188). In addition to this, Auggie has difficulties hearing and needs to wear hearing aids (211). Auggie is the protagonist of *Wonder*; so his differences and their impact on him are explained continuously throughout the book.

Though Auggie himself is supported by his family and friends throughout the story and often is portrayed in a positive light, his disability is not. Throughout the whole book, Auggie's craniofacial abnormality is described in negative ways; sometimes Auggie even negatively describes his facial differences himself. Auggie expresses that if he had one wish, it would be to have "a normal face no one ever noticed at all" (3). Other characters, including Auggie's family

and friends, also describe Auggie's face negatively. He is called deformed on many occasions (91, 135, 139, 188, 237), and on others he is compared to E.T. (92), or even flat out called ugly (140). One character refers to "the catastrophe of his face" (89) when talking about Auggie, and another says that "the universe was not kind to Auggie Pullman" (201). In one of the most alarming moments of the book, Auggie's friend Jack tells other students "I really think...if I looked like him, seriously, I think that I'd kill myself" (77).

In addition to the negative comments about Auggie's craniofacial abnormality, disabilities as a whole are referred to negatively in the book as well. Multiple times, it is emphasized that Auggie does not have special needs or a disability. When emailing a concerned parent, the principal, Mr. Tushman, writes, "As for your other concerns regarding our new student August, please note that he does not have special needs. He is neither disabled, handicapped, nor developmentally delayed in any way" (163). Later on, Auggie's friend Jack says, "Auggie doesn't have special needs" (171). At one point, Auggie's sister even yells at Auggie by saying, "Unless you want to be treated like a baby the rest of your life, or like a kid with special needs, you just have to suck it up and go" (115). Auggie is impacted by his craniofacial abnormality, and the medical side effects that come along with it, on a daily basis. The statements these characters make diminish Auggie's daily struggles, and imply that having a disability is always a negative attribute.

In *El Deaf*, by Cece Bell, the character Cece also has hearing difficulties. Cece has hearing disabilities due to Meningitis she contracted when she was 4 years old (3, 12). Due to her hearing disabilities, Cece wears hearing aids and uses a device called "The Phonic Ear" (19, 39).

Similar to Auggie, Cece is also the protagonist of her story, so her differences and their impact on her are explained throughout the book.

Unlike Auggie, Cece's disabilities are not written about in an inherently negative way; in contrast, Cece's disabilities are presented as a challenge in her life that she is able to overcome. Throughout the book, Cece's hearing aids and Phonic Ear cause her to feel isolated and different from her peers. At school, she reflects, "First grade is really lonely at first. Wherever I am it feels like I'm always inside my bubble. Is everyone staring at my hearing aid? At me?" (47). She even questions if she would be able to pass herself off as a hearing person (103). Cece also regularly gets frustrated when people sign at her (104), and it is clear that she is greatly affected by her disabilities. However, Cece comes to realize her disabilities are something she should be empowered by. Cece begins to see her disabilities as a superpower, as she realizes with her Phonic Ear she is able to hear her teacher at all times throughout the day, even when they are not in the same room (44). She is inspired to name her superpower alter-ego "El Deafo" (84), based on a comment she heard on television made about a character with disabilities (82). Cece continually feels more empowered by her disabilities throughout the book, which reaches a climax when her hearing aid breaks (172). She is concerned by the fact that she'll be without her Phonic Ear for a while after it breaks, thinking to herself, "four to six weeks without my superpowers? I don't know what I'm gonna do" (173). By the end of the story, Cece embraces her superpowers fully by helping her class goof off by using her Phonic Ear to hear when the teacher is coming (218). Cece's hearing disabilities are not written about from a negative point of view, and are instead written about in the ways that challenge, and ultimately empower, her.

In *Rules*, by Cynthia Lord, the character Jason has unidentified physical disabilities, which is unlike any other character in the books I analyzed. Though it is unknown what condition Jason has, it is known that his condition causes him to need assistance to move, as Catherine states, “Jason can’t go anywhere unless someone pushes his wheelchair” (16). Additionally, Jason requires a book with phrases and words in it to communicate with others, as Catherine explains, “Jason can’t speak, but he turns the pages and touches the cards to tell his mother if he wants a drink, or has to use the bathroom, or is mad about something” (20). Jason is not the main character of *Rules*, but he is featured heavily throughout the book as he becomes friends with Catherine, the main character.

Similarly to Auggie’s craniofacial abnormality in *Wonder*, Jason’s disability is not written about in the best light. Jason’s disabilities clearly make life very difficult for him, as Catherine observes, “I can see by the clench of Jason’s jaw how hard he’s struggling to control his movements” (99-100). Additionally, when commenting on Jason’s disability, Catherine says, “I don’t know what’s wrong with Jason...whatever it is, though, it’s something big” (19). Though not many comments are made from other characters about Jason’s condition, he does make negative comments about himself. When talking to Catherine at the clinic, Jason expresses his thoughts about his disability using his communication book, saying, “Sometimes. I. Wish. Die.” and “I. Am. Incomplete” (118). After making these comments, Jason does not describe his disability any further, and neither do other characters.

In *Out of My Mind*, by Sharon Draper, the character Melody has cerebral palsy (23). Melody’s conditions are comparable to the conditions Jason is described as having in *Rules*; Melody cannot speak, walk, or take care of herself on her own (3). Melody rarely describes her

emotions regarding cerebral palsy directly; instead, she describes how she feels about the effects her disabilities have on her life. Melody struggles to function in the way most able-bodied people can, and this often leaves her feeling frustrated, “Nobody gets it...Drives me crazy” (15) or causes her to be down on herself, “Humpty Dumpty had more control than I do” (3). This frustration causes Melody to lash out, as she wishes she could communicate the way other people do; “that made me cry because I’d never be able to tell anybody what I was really thinking” (54). Though Melody’s disabilities are not directly described as negative, like Auggie’s are in *Wonder*, they are also not described positively, as Cece’s are in *El Deafo*. Rather, Melody’s disabilities are described through the effect they have on Melody’s life, which unfortunately is often negative.

Mental Differences

In *Rules* and *Fish in a Tree*, characters have disabilities that make them mentally different from their able-bodied peers, though physically they have no differences. In *Rules*, by Cynthia Lord, the character David has autism (8). David is not the main character of *Rules*, but he is featured throughout the book as he is the protagonist’s brother. The book itself follows Catherine, the protagonist, as she copes with and accepts her brother’s and friend’s disabilities. Though David is a fun-loving character, he is often described negatively because of his autism. When David is referenced in the story, it is often due to his screaming (3, 12, 25, 37, 63, 83, 88, 179, 182), running (6, 28, 40, 72, 160), sensitivity to sound (29, 83, 95, 160), anxiety about time (3, 34, 35, 155), tendency to drop toys in the fish tank (55, 85, 199), and constant rocking back and forth (155, 179); all of which are described as negative attributes, not positive. Additionally, Catherine has unfavorable opinions about David’s autism. Catherine often describes David as a burden, and she feels better when he’s not around; “David is gone with Mom and I’m

free” (133). She also dislikes babysitting him, which she often has to do. When thinking about David, Catherine questions, “How can his outside look so normal and his inside be so broken?” (109-110). She also thinks, “Sometimes I wish someone would invent a pill so David’d wake up one morning without autism” (8), and that if she could have a wish granted it would be that all of David’s autism was “wiped clean” (140). These descriptions and comments shed a negative light on autism, and make it seem as though disabilities are inherently negative.

In *Fish in a Tree*, by Lynda Mullaly Hunt, the character Ally has dyslexia (164). Ally is the protagonist, and the book follows her journey from struggling in school to succeeding after getting specialized attention from her teacher. Ally’s dyslexia symptoms are described briefly, as she says when she reads, the letters on the page move, “the letters squiggle and dance” (17). The effects that dyslexia has on Ally’s life are present throughout the entire novel. Ally is constantly frustrated in school, and she makes comments to her friends such as, “my brain will never do what I want it to do” (138). Ally continues to feel discouraged in school, but slowly becomes inspired by her new teacher, Mr. Daniels. Mr. Daniels encourages students to accept their differences and unique thinking (52). Eventually, when Mr. Daniels tells Ally she has dyslexia, he does not frame it negatively. Mr. Daniels explains that dyslexia “makes learning to read difficult, but doesn’t mean you’re not bright” (165). Mr. Daniels goes on to explain that kids can be smart and have learning differences (165), which is surprising to Ally. She gains motivation to learn one on one with Mr. Daniels, and through using proper techniques, she is able to improve her reading and writing. When discussing her improvement with her brother, she says, “It’s getting easier. It can be like running up the side of a building sometimes. I get so tired. But I am doing better” (229). Additionally, toward the end of the story, Mr. Daniels teaches his class about

all of the incredible individuals in history with dyslexia (240). After this lesson, Ally does not hide her dyslexia anymore, as she feels “proud of it” thanks to her teacher (246). Mr. Daniels’ positive view of dyslexia contrasts the directly negative views about disabilities that characters portray in *Wonder* and *Rules*.

Overall, a variety of different disabilities are represented in the novels I chose, as well as different approaches to representing these disabilities. In *El Deafo* and *Fish in a Tree*, disabilities are represented as differences that may come with challenges, but are not inherently negative; however, in *Wonder*, *Rules*, and *Out of My Mind*, the disabilities are described in a more negative point of view.

Disability Representation Across Selected Books

Book	Disability Represented in the Book	Type of Disability	Description of the Disability
<i>Wonder</i>	Craniofacial Abnormality	Physical	Described negatively
<i>Fish in a Tree</i>	Dyslexia	Mental	Described as a challenge
<i>Rules</i>	Autism and an Unidentified Physical Disability	Mental and Physical	Described negatively
<i>Out of My Mind</i>	Cerebral Palsy	Physical	Described negatively
<i>El Deafo</i>	Hearing Difficulties	Physical	Described as a challenge

The Impact of the Disability

In all five books, it is clear that the characters with disabilities are impacted by their disability in their daily life. The positive and negative impacts the disability has on the characters

are evident through the ways in which the characters interact with others, as well as how they see themselves.

Negative Interactions with Others

In *Wonder*, *Fish in a Tree*, *Rules*, and *Out of My Mind*, the characters with disabilities experience negative interactions with others because of their disabilities, which is mainly shown through bullying from their peers.

In *Wonder*, by R.J. Palacio, the character Auggie struggles with the daily impact his disability has on him. People often stare at Auggie wherever he goes, and it happens even more when at school, “I noticed some kids were definitely staring at me now. I did my thing of pretending not to notice” (37). Both to his face, and behind his back, he is also called names; “Rat boy. Freak. Monster. Freddy Krueger. E.T. Gross-out. Lizard face. Mutant. I know the names they call me” (79). In addition to this, Auggie experiences explicit bullying from his peers. Early on in his time at school, Auggie starts to pick up on the fact that other characters avoid touching him (71, 72, 115). Eventually, Auggie learns this is because his peers had started referring to a touch from him as “The Plague,” so students would avoid getting physically close to him (120, 145, 168, 178, 209). Auggie is also consistently bullied by a student named Julian. Julian is one of the first people Auggie meets at his new school, and he frequently makes negative comments about Auggie, in front of him and behind his back, that are due to Auggie’s disability. On Halloween when talking about Auggie behind his back, Julian comments, “If I looked like that, I swear to God, I’d put a hood over my face every day” (77).

In *Fish in a Tree*, by Lynda Mullaly Hunt, the character Ally also faces bullying from her peers. Unlike Auggie, Ally does not face bullying from many students in her grade, instead, her

bullying is directly from two girls named Shay and Jessica. Ally is subjected to general bullying from Shay and Jessica (154, 215, 227, 252), in which the characters insult Ally by commenting on her socioeconomic status (112) and calling her names such as ‘freak’ (93, 117) or “dope” (132). They even go as far as saying, “Everyone agrees. You should go crawl into a hole and never come out” (215). Though these insults are harsh enough on their own, Shay and Jessica also bully Ally because of her academic abilities (186, 195, 246), which are a direct result of her disability, dyslexia. Shay and Jessica tease Ally about her trouble reading (21) and call her stupid because of her reading struggles, “You. Are. *So*. Stupid, Ally...Mr. Daniels is only nice to you because he feels sorry for you” (196). Though Ally is soon accepted by most of her peers, Shay continues to bully her until the very end.

In *Rules*, by Cynthia Lord, it is not revealed whether Catherine’s friend, Jason, experiences bullying or not. However, there are instances in the book when Catherine’s brother, David, experiences teasing and bullying from his peers because of his autism. Most of the negative interactions that David experiences occur with the character Ryan. Ryan teases David, and often tries to make him upset through jokes or comments (30, 109). In one instance, Ryan gives David an empty gum wrapper rather than a piece of gum, knowing it would cause David to get upset, which he does; “when David opens the wrapper, there’s nothing inside. He head-butts his face into my shirt. ‘It’s gone!’” (108). In response to David getting upset, Ryan says, “It was just a joke” (109), but does not apologize or show any remorse.

In *Out of My Mind*, by Sharon Draper, Melody faces negative interactions nearly every time she sees the characters Claire and Molly. The characters Claire and Molly in *Out of My Mind* are very similar to the characters Shay and Jessica in *Fish in a Tree*. Claire and Molly make

derogatory remarks to or about Melody almost every time they see with her; these characters commonly mock Melody's physical limitations (94, 191) and use the word "retard" (94, 177). When Melody receives her Medi-Talker, a device that allows her to speak her thoughts through a computer, she is joyful, saying, "Hi, Dad. Hi, Mom. I am so happy" (138). However, when Melody takes this device to school, Claire comments "That sure is a funny-looking computer! But I guess it's perfect for a kid like you" (142). Claire and Molly do not show remorse for their comments, and they never apologize to Melody for the way they treat her.

In addition to negative treatment from her peers, Melody faces direct disrespect from adults as well. Mrs. Billups, Melody's 3rd grade teacher in her learning community, treats Melody and the other students in her class like they are kindergarteners; she has them listen to music made for babies and repetitively teaches them the alphabet (53). This learning community is specifically for students with disabilities, and these students feel disrespected by Mrs. Billups and her inability to see their intelligence and value; Melody thinks, "I wondered if she would teach able-bodied third graders the same way. Probably not. The more I thought about it, the angrier I got" (54). Melody's fifth grade history teacher, Mr. Dimming, also doubts Melody's academic abilities because of her physical disabilities. After Melody receives the highest score on a practice test in preparation for quiz team tryouts, Mr. Dimming makes the comment, "If Melody Brooks can win the first round, then my questions must not be difficult enough" (155). Also, when Melody goes to the actual quiz team tryouts, Mr. Dimming makes more derogatory remarks, saying "I don't think it's appropriate for Melody to be here. This is not a recreational activity just for fun"(178-179).

In contrast to the other novels, *El Deafo*, by Cece Bell, does not feature bullying. In the

book, Cece does experience uncomfortable interactions with her peers, such as when a girl named Ginny speaks loudly every time she communicates with Cece (62, 64-68), and when a girl named Missy treats Cece like a baby (90, 94). Both interactions are due to the fact that Cece has hearing difficulties; however, Cece is able to navigate through these uncomfortable situations and never experiences direct bullying.

Positive Interactions with Others

Though in all five books characters are impacted by their disabilities through their negative interactions with others, these characters are able to experience positive interactions as well. In *Wonder*, *Fish in a Tree*, *Out of My Mind*, and *El Deafo*, characters form strong, positive relationships with adult figures in their lives; and in *Wonder*, *Fish in a Tree*, *Rules*, and *El Deafo*, the characters form strong relationships with peers as well.

In *Wonder*, by R.J. Palacio, Auggie forms good relationships with both his teacher, Mr. Browne, and his principal, Mr. Tushman. On the first day of school, Mr. Browne stresses the importance of being kind, which gets Auggie excited for the school year, “I suddenly realized I was going to like school. No matter what” (48). Mr. Browne continues to be a positive presence in Auggie’s life, specifically by teaching the students about different precepts every month and having them reflect on their meanings (65, 148, 288). Mr. Tushman, the school principal, also builds a positive relationship with Auggie throughout the book. When Mr. Tushman first meets Auggie, he greets him completely normally (15), which contrasts how most people stare at Auggie and hope he does not notice (17). Mr. Tushman continues to be kind to Auggie throughout the book, and supports Auggie’s friend, Jack, after he gets in trouble for punching a student who was bullying Auggie (161, 163). Mr. Tushman even defends Auggie from Julian’s

mom when she questions whether Auggie should be allowed to attend their school, Beecher Prep, saying “August is an extremely good student” (163). Additionally, Mr. Tushman meets with Auggie at the end of the school year to reflect on his experiences and present him an award at graduation, saying, “I am very proud to award the Henry Ward Beecher medal to the student whose quiet strength has carried up the most hearts...August Pullman...” (304).

Though Auggie has some struggles along the way, he is able to form meaningful relationships with his peers as well. One of Auggie’s closest friends is a girl named Summer. Summer becomes friends with Auggie after sitting by him at lunch, explaining, “I sat with him that first day because I felt bad for him” (119); however, Summer continues to spend time with Auggie because she feels as though she can tell Auggie anything (69) and he’s fun (120). Auggie’s other close friend is a boy named Jack. Jack is nice to Auggie and laughs with him in class (30, 63, 64). Their friendship hits a bump in the road when Auggie hears Jack making fun of him with other students by saying, “If I looked like him, seriously, I think that I’d kill myself” (77). Though this hurts Auggie’s feelings, Auggie and Jack are able to rekindle their friendship after Jack defends Auggie when another student makes fun of him (154). Jack apologizes to Auggie through email, writing, “Im sorry I didn’t mean the stuff I said. I was so stupid. I hope you can 4give me” (164). The two boys continue to hang out and grow closer throughout the rest of the book. Though at first Jack didn’t want to be close to Auggie because of his physical differences (135), by the end of the story it doesn’t bother him anymore (142).

In *Fish in a Tree*, by Lynda Mullaly Hunt, Ally also grows close with certain teachers and peers. At the beginning of the story, Ally has very little belief in her abilities and thinks all of her teachers dislike her. After a moment of frustration with a teacher, she thinks, “They already think

I'm a pain, so why add *dumb* to their list? It's not like they can help, anyway. How can you cure dumb?" (12-13). However, Ally's new teacher, Mr. Daniels, proves her thoughts wrong. Mr. Daniels talks to Ally one-on-one on his first day, and he explains that he wants to help her out in school (42). It's only once Ally has Mr. Daniels' support that she has the drive to try and succeed in school, thinking to herself, "I want to impress Mr. Daniels" (57). Not only does Mr. Daniels help Ally with her academic struggles, but he also points out the strengths that she has difficulties recognizing in herself (80). Mr. Daniels helps Ally accept her diagnosis of dyslexia, works with her one on one to help her learn to read, and continuously helps her build up her confidence. Mr. Daniels is the reason why Ally has the belief that she can follow her dreams and "set the world on fire" (265).

In addition to growing close to Mr. Daniels, Ally also grows close with her peers Keisha and Albert. Ally, Keisha, and Albert grow close after sitting by each other at lunch, and throughout the story they hang out with each other a lot. After finding out she has dyslexia, Ally hesitates to tell her friends about it, but when she does, they reassure her that it doesn't matter to them (182). Albert offers to help Ally with her reading and writing, and Keisha offers encouragement by saying, "Be yourself. Be who you are" (183). Ally opens up to the rest of her peers about her dyslexia with the help of her teacher, Mr. Daniels (244). She is met with some criticism from Shay, the girl who continuously bullies her, as she comments that her "brother is in kindergarten and he can see [letters] the right way" (246). However, everyone else in Ally's class is extremely accepting of Ally's dyslexia. One student in her class, Oliver, comments "That is *so. Cool!* You're so lucky" (245), and her friend Albert says he wishes he had dyslexia because "some of the greatest minds the human race has ever seen" had dyslexia too (258).

In *Rules*, by Cynthia Lord, neither Jason nor David form strong relationships with adults outside of their families; however, Jason does form strong relationships with his peer, Catherine. Catherine is intrigued by Jason after she sees him for the first time at the therapist's office, but she is hesitant to call him her friend, as she explains, "I think of us more as clinic friends than always friends" (70). However, Catherine continues to get to know Jason, and she even walks to the beach with him (145), buys him a guitar (164), and attends his birthday party (168). Jason asks Catherine to a community center dance, and she is initially hesitant to go with him because of his disabilities as she does not want to be judged or stared at (194). However, by the end of the book she decides to go to the dance with him and is pleased when he shows up, saying, "I'm glad you're here" (193). Though Catherine had her hesitations about being friends with Jason, because of the judgement she would receive being friends with someone who had disabilities, she decides to ignore what other people think and be his friend (197).

In *Out of My Mind*, by Sharon Draper, Melody does not form strong relationships with her peers, but she does form strong relationships with adults in her life. Some of Melody's peers seem accepting at times, such as Rose when she cheers Melody on during quiz team tryouts by yelling "you go, girl!" (179); however, by the end of the book all of the students Melody grew close to betray her when they attend the national quiz team competition and knowingly leave her behind (291). However, Melody's neighbor, Mrs. V, and her in-school aide, Catherine, both support Melody throughout the book. Mrs. V treats Melody just like any other kid (40), and she genuinely believes that Melody has the same capacity as any other person to learn and grow, saying, "Melody is a child who can learn and will learn if she sticks with me" (41). Mrs. V continues to watch and teach Melody throughout the book, and defends her in front of Melody's

judgemental peers (120). Additionally, Mrs. V is supportive of Melody as she gets her Medi-Talker (135), studies for the quiz team (160), and attends her first quiz team competition (213, 222). Mrs. V also comforts Melody after the school's quiz team leaves for the national competition without her (261) and when her sister Penny is run over by a car (278). No matter what Melody goes through, Mrs. V is there for her, treating her the same way she would treat anyone else. When Melody is sad about events at school, Mrs. V “completely ignores” Melody's attempts to get sympathy (159), and instead, she pushes her to work even harder.

In addition to Mrs. V, Melody's in-school aide, Catherine, is also extremely helpful and inclusive to Melody. When Catherine introduces herself to Melody, she talks to Melody like she would talk to any other student, which Melody enjoys, thinking, “I tried not to kick, but it was hard to hold in my excitement” (104). Catherine is not afraid to joke around with Melody, and she even helps Melody research computers and learn about the Medi-Talker (128). Similarly to Mrs. V, Catherine not only supports and shows pride in Melody, she also defends her from rude peers and teachers. When Claire questions whether Catherine helps Melody cheat during quiz team tryouts, Catherine looks at Claire and replies, “I won't be in the room. Too bad, because *you* might need some help” (180). Catherine is an important, supportive presence in Melody's life, and she helps Melody feel accepted and normal.

In *El Deafo*, by Cece Bell, the character Cece does not struggle as much as the characters from my other selected books do when it comes to forming good relationships with others. Cece has positive interactions with most of the adults in her life, such as her sign language teacher (107) and her general classroom teacher (155). Though Cece's hearing disabilities cause some friction with her peers, such as when her friend Ginny repetitively speaks loudly around Cece

because she knows Cece has trouble hearing (62, 64-68), Cece is still able to make friends. After starting first grade, Cece meets a girl named Laura who wants to be her friend (48). Cece appreciates that Laura doesn't mind Cece's hearing aids (49) and the two are good friends for a while. Though their friendship ends, it is not due to Cece's disability. Cece also becomes good friends with a girl named Martha. Martha and Cece spend time together having sleepovers (129), jumping on a neighbor's trampoline (137), and talking about boys (141). Cece thinks their friendship is strong because Martha doesn't know about her hearing difficulties (123), but she quickly learns that Martha does know, she just doesn't care (128). The book ends with Cece telling Martha about her superhero alter-ego, El Deafo (232), which signifies the importance of this friendship.

Character's View of Themselves

In addition to disabilities undoubtedly having an impact on characters' relationships with others, they also have an impact on a character's view of themselves. In all five books, characters struggle with negative feelings they have about themselves because of their disabilities. Though characters have these negative feelings, in almost all of the books they are still able to pursue what they want and see positive attributes in themselves.

In *Wonder*, by R.J. Palacio, Auggie does not always see himself positively. When talking about himself, Auggie is often pessimistic. Auggie uses words such as "beast" (56), "ugly" (60), and "freak" (218) when describing himself, because of his craniofacial abnormality. When describing himself to the reader, he says, "I won't describe what I look like. Whatever you're thinking, it's probably worse" (3). Clearly, due to his craniofacial abnormality, Auggie is not comfortable with his appearance. Though Auggie has negative opinions about his physical

qualities, he does not extend these opinions to his personality or mental abilities. Auggie often describes himself as an ordinary kid (3, 306), and he does not let his physical differences stop him from acting like any other child. Auggie dresses up on Halloween (73), hangs out with friends (180), goes on class trips (257), and even makes jokes with his friends and family. At the end of the book, Auggie receives an award and takes pictures with his peers. Everyone gets close to Auggie, and he describes the event by saying, “I don’t mean to brag here, but it kind of felt like everyone wanted to get close to me” (308). Though Auggie doesn’t see himself positively when it comes to his physical traits, he does not have any negative feelings about himself in the other areas of his life. Auggie is able to pursue what he wants, and he ultimately feels confident around his peers, regardless of how he looks physically.

In *Fish in a Tree*, by Lynda Mullaly Hunt, Ally’s confidence in herself is greatly affected by her dyslexia. At first, Ally has a limited belief in her abilities and often thinks she is stupid or that everyone hates her (27). She openly and privately gets frustrated about her abilities, and her frustrations are amplified by her fear that people will figure out why she struggles so much. After Shay and Jessica tease Ally about her reading difficulties, Ally thinks, “I worry so much about them knowing my secret that my stomach feels like I’ve been kicked in the guts” (22). Once Ally learns what dyslexia is, she isn’t as affected by her struggles because she can finally accept why she learns differently than others (242). Through her diagnosis, and individual work with her teacher, Mr. Daniels, Ally is able to become more confident in her abilities. At the end of the book, Ally says, “Now I have dreams I know I’ll chase down. I’ll set the world on fire someday” (265). Ally becomes class president (208) and defends her friend from bullies (254); two things that require confidence in order to pursue. Though Ally initially thinks she is stupid

because of her disabilities, she is able to accept that they are simply a difference and not a hindrance. Ally is able to achieve great things with dyslexia, which helps her gain confidence in herself and her abilities.

In *Rules*, by Cynthia Lord, David does not express any feelings toward himself, positive or negative; however, Jason does express feelings about himself because of his disabilities. Jason is clearly insecure about himself due to his disabilities, as he expresses that he is incomplete and sometimes wishes he would die (118). Also, when Catherine hesitates to go to a dance with Jason, he asks, “Are? You. Embarrassed. About. Me. ” (176). Jason does not show evidence by the end of the book that he is able to see himself positively, but he does show that he is not held back by his disabilities. Not only does Jason have the confidence to ask Catherine to come to his birthday party (153), but he also asks her to a community dance (176) and dances with her in front of everyone (197). Jason does not express any improvement in his view of himself, but he does show that he does not let his disabilities get in the way of him feeling joy.

In *Out of My Mind*, by Sharon Draper, Melody does not begin the story with a positive view of herself. Given that Melody grew up having to rely on others for assistance with tasks that are fairly simple for able-bodied people, she develops a somewhat pessimistic attitude about her abilities and views herself negatively. Melody expresses that whatever her neighbor, Mrs. V, was paid to take care of her when she was younger, “it couldn’t have been enough” (42). Also, while observing students after taking a practice test for quiz team tryouts, Melody tells her aide, “They think my brain is messed up like the rest of me” (153). By the end of the story, though Melody has accomplished a lot, she still views herself in a negative light. When talking to Mrs. V, Melody refers to herself as “broken” (280) and expresses that she wants “to be like other

kids” (281). However, though Melody still struggles to see herself positively, she does start to recognize that she isn’t so different from others after all, thinking, “Worrying about what I look like. Fitting in. Will a boy ever like me? Maybe I’m not so different from everyone else after all” (293). Additionally, Melody recognizes that she deserves better treatment from her peers. When her quiz team gives her a trophy out of pity, she throws it on the ground and laughs (292). Though Melody never directly expresses that she has positive attributes, she does begin to take actions that prove she sees value in herself.

In *El Deafo*, by Cece Bell, Cece does not directly describe herself negatively because of her hearing disabilities, but she does express insecurities. When Cece first gets her hearing aids, she explains “I don’t like the way my hearing aid looks...so I cover it up” (23). Additionally, when Cece moves to a new neighborhood, she discovers that the kids all like listening to the radio. Though they let her join in, she feels lonely because she can’t hear it the way they do (37). She is also insecure at her new school, as she describes feeling different in comparison to her peers; “Superheroes might be awesome, but they are also *different*. And being different feels a lot like being alone” (46). Though Cece has insecurities about her disabilities, she also demonstrates confidence in them. When Cece imagines herself as her superhero alter-ego “El Deafo,” she is full of confidence and determination. When Cece gets her new glasses, she sees them as an opportunity to impress her friend (163), and when she helps her classmates, she sees herself as a hero (218, 221). By the end of the story, Cece definitely sees her disabilities as a superpower, not a negative quality about herself. Though Cece deals with moments of insecurity, she is able to find confidence in herself.

In all five books I analyzed, characters are greatly impacted by their disabilities. Often,

like in *Wonder*, *Fish in a Tree*, and *Out of My Mind*, characters are subjected to continuous bullying directly because of their disabilities. However, though characters experience negative situations because of their disabilities, they often also experience positive situations, such as Catherine receiving help from her teacher in *Fish in a Tree* and Cece helping out her classmates in *El Deafo*. Additionally, the disabilities represented in these books also impact the way characters view themselves. Though in all five books characters with disabilities experience negative feelings toward themselves, in most of the books the characters are able to transform their negative thinking into positivity and confidence. Undeniably, disabilities have a major impact on the lives of the characters that have them, but this impact is not always bad, and in some cases, it is empowering.

The Disability's Impact on Characters in Selected Books

	<i>Wonder</i>	<i>Fish in a Tree</i>	<i>Rules</i>	<i>Out of My Mind</i>	<i>El Deafo</i>
Character Experiences Bullying from Peers	X	X	X	X	
Character Experiences Disrespect from Adults				X	
Character Forms Positive Relationships with Peers	X	X	X		X

Character Forms Positive Relationships with Adults	X	X		X	X
Character Describes Themselves Negatively	X	X	X	X	
Character Sees Positive Attributes in Themselves	X	X			X

The Power of the Character with a Disability

As highlighted by Curwood (21), it is important for characters with disabilities to demonstrate power and express their identity in order to challenge the harmful narratives often used in literature featuring characters with disabilities (Wopperer 28). In *Wonder*, *Fish in a Tree*, *Rules*, *Out of My Mind*, and *El Deafo*, characters with disabilities challenge the status quo and show their power by demonstrating agency in different situations. Across the five books, characters leave situations they are uncomfortable in, joke about their disabilities despite the difficulties they go through, and take initiative to go after what they want to in life. Though not every novel features a character who exhibits all of the above examples of power, in all five novels, characters do represent their power in some way.

In *Wonder*, by R.J. Palacio, Auggie struggles to demonstrate his agency, but he does show it at a few points in the book. Typically, Auggie's actions are in response to the situations he is in, rather than actions he takes entirely on his own. Though Auggie mainly demonstrates his agency

through reactions to other events, this is still a way for him to show his power. One main way in which Auggie takes control of his life is by leaving situations that make him uncomfortable. After hearing his friend Jack bully him behind his back (77), Auggie decides to leave school to take care of himself (79, 114). Also, when facing bullies in the woods on a class field trip, Auggie grabs Jack's arm and says they should leave (266). Eventually, Auggie confronts the bullies he sees in the woods by standing in front of them and saying, "Look. We're a lot smaller than you guys..." (266). Auggie's friends acknowledge the courage it took for him to do this, saying, "It was cool how you stood your ground" and "You're one brave little dude" (270). Auggie also demonstrates power by taking control of his disability rather than letting it control him. Auggie enjoys making jokes about his condition and being sarcastic with others. When Auggie sees a classmate using Uglydoll stationary, he says, "Did you know the guy who created Uglydolls based them on me?" (209). Though this shows Auggie is still uncomfortable with his appearance, as he is joking about how ugly he thinks he is, it also shows he is able to acknowledge the way others perceive him and laugh about it rather than get upset. Auggie struggles to take action based solely on what he wants, rather than as a reaction to what others do around him, but through his reactions and jokes Auggie is able to demonstrate his agency.

In contrast, in *Fish in a Tree*, by Lynda Mullaly Hunt, Ally continuously demonstrates her agency throughout the book. In the story, the first time Ally really makes a decision for herself is before her school's holiday concert. Each student is given flowers, but her friend Keisha's are taken away when the teacher thinks she is goofing off with them. Ally thinks this is unfair, so she rips her own bouquet apart and gives half of her flowers to Keisha (74). This event is the catalyst for Keisha and Ally's friendship, as well as the start of Ally using her power to make decisions

for herself. Shortly after the holiday concert incident, Ally starts to stand up for herself when two girls, Shay and Jessica, pick on her. After seeing Ally with her brother Travis, Shay confronts Ally at school and insults her brother and his car. Ally initially decides to ignore Shay and Jessica, but she changes her mind and stands up for her brother and herself by saying “You’re the losers. *You*. Not *him*” (112). She also decides to leave situations in which she is being bullied, such as on a class field trip (155) and during a class project (196).

A turning point in the story for Ally occurs when she is hanging out with her friends Albert and Keisha. For most of the story, Ally is discouraged by her learning differences and wishes they could go away. However, when she is hanging out with her friends, she tells them about her struggles and diagnosis of dyslexia (182). Though she still seems insecure, as she thinks her dyslexia will hold her back in the future, “It..it makes me feel like I’ll grow up to be a nobody” (183), this action shows she is starting to acknowledge her differences without feeling the need to hide them anymore. Ally shows her power by telling her friends about her dyslexia all on her own, without pressure from anyone else. Not only did Ally’s friends accept her, but this was the start of Ally accepting herself. Throughout the rest of the story, Ally continues to make good choices and use her voice. She chooses to be nice to Shay even though Shay continuously bullied her (251), stands up to a group of boys who were bullying her friend Albert (254), and asks Mr. Daniels if he can help her brother out the way he helps her (264). Ally even thinks to herself, “I’ll set the world on fire someday” (265), which shows she knows she has the capabilities to make decisions and choices for herself that are going to change the world.

Though Ally does not joke about her disability the way some characters in other novels do, she embraces her disability in other ways and demonstrates her power through her actions

throughout the book. Ally stands up to bullies, reveals her diagnosis to her friends, and leaves situations in which she is uncomfortable. Ally shows that though she has a learning disability, she is an independent person capable of doing what she wants.

In *Rules*, by Cynthia Lord, though David and Jason experience difficulties being autonomous due to their disabilities, they both find ways to demonstrate agency. David is often controlled by his sister Catherine (108, 177). This is shown by Catherine dragging David to and from situations (4, 6, 85, 177), covering his mouth when he is too loud (37) and forcing him to stop jumping (108). David does not like being controlled, so he often runs away from Catherine, or others, when he wants to get out of situations (7, 190). This occurs when he is at his occupational therapy appointment, and he runs to the exit door while yelling, “Sorry! Gotta go!” (28). With the exception of these moments, David does not demonstrate his agency in any other way in the book.

Jason, on the other hand, demonstrates agency many times throughout the book. Though Jason cannot physically speak, he does not hesitate to use his communication book to express his emotions or needs. After leaving an occupational therapy appointment, Jason’s mom comes back inside to tell Catherine, “Jason insisted I come back, and tell you he likes the picture you’re drawing” (27). Jason also takes initiative with Catherine multiple times, such as by asking her to push him around the parking lot so he can experience what it feels like to run (120), taking her on a walk (145), complimenting her (152), inviting her to his birthday party (153), and asking her to the dance (175). Jason also leaves his kitchen after getting into an argument with Catherine (177), which is similar to how David leaves situations he is uncomfortable in as well. When Jason receives his new wheelchair, which he can operate without any assistance, his mom

explains, “He never wanted a motorized chair before. But lately he wants to do lots of things for himself” (145, 146). This is a significant part of the story for Jason, as it shows he wants to do things for himself and he is embracing his autonomy. Though Jason physically struggles to do things on his own, he does not hesitate to take actions to do what he wants. By communicating his feelings, taking initiative with Catherine, and using a new wheelchair, Jason is able to demonstrate his power and independence.

In *Out of My Mind*, by Sharon Draper, Melody struggles in a similar way to how Jason does in *Rules*; she wants to be independent but she requires the use of a machine to move and communicate. Though Melody sometimes struggles with communicating and moving all on her own, she does not let these setbacks stop her from demonstrating her agency. Throughout the book, Melody often uses her disabilities to her advantage. She knows people do not expect a lot from her, so if she is bored or feels disrespected, she will either sit with a blank stare or cause a commotion to get out of the current situation she is in. At an appointment, Melody is convinced a doctor cannot do anything to help her, so she ignores them, explaining, “I paste on a blank look, focus on one wall, and pretend their questions are too hard for me to understand. It’s sort of what they expect anyway” (18). Melody also uses her assistive technology to demonstrate her agency. When Melody enters fifth grade, it is the first year in school she has an electric wheelchair rather than a manual one (90). Melody describes her pleasant experiences with the chair, saying, “For me, it’s all about the freedom. Now I don’t have to wait for somebody to move me across the room. I can just go there. Nice” (91). With an electric chair, Melody can move between classes freely and leave situations when she feels uncomfortable (91, 146). After quiz team tryouts,

Melody leaves and thinks to herself, “I want to leave on my own power. I turn on my chair and wheel around to face the door” (183).

Melody also uses her Medi-Talker to demonstrate her power. With her new ability to speak, thanks to this device, Melody is able to order food for herself (233), speak up in class (141) and participate in interviews (226). Additionally, Melody uses her Medi-Talker to joke around with her classmates, especially those who make fun of her because of her disabilities. When Claire makes a rude comment about Melody’s Medi-Talker, Melody sarcastically says, “I talk to everybody now - Claire too!” (142). Also, when getting ready for the TV quiz show competition, Claire makes the comment that Melody will look “odd on TV” (195). Instead of getting upset, Melody says, “TV makes lots of people look funny. Maybe even you, Claire” (195). By using her assistive technology to defend herself, Melody takes control of her situation and uses her power. Without a doubt, Melody is physically hindered by her disabilities, but she does not let them stop her from demonstrating her agency and doing what she wants to do.

In *El Deafo*, by Cece Bell, Cece initially has trouble expressing her power and agency. As Cece is a child, she is not able to control much in her life; however, she does start to realize the power she has within herself as she begins to see her disability as a superpower (44). Cece truly demonstrates her agency for the first time when interacting with her friend Ginny. Ginny talks to Cece in a loud voice because Cece wears hearing aids. This makes Cece mad, and she ends up screaming at Ginny because of it, saying, “You don’t have to talk to me so loud and so slow! I can’t stand it” (70). Though Cece feels guilty about yelling, it is important she does because it is the first time she speaks up about how she feels. Cece enhances her superpowers by giving her

superhero alter-ego a name, “El Deafo” (84). She uses her newfound confidence brought upon by her superpowers to leave situations where she feels uncomfortable, such as by choosing to leave a sleepover when she can’t understand what her friends are saying (97). Cece also imagines herself as El Deafo when she attends a sign language class with her mom. Cece ends up kicking her mom at the class because she wants to leave, and then uses this as a catalyst to explain to her mom that she hates the class (114-115). Throughout the rest of the book, Cece continues to use her power to achieve what she wants. Cece goes to her friend Mike’s house to jump on his trampoline (141), talks to Martha to ask her to be friends again (209), and uses her Phonic Ear to help her class goof off (214). Cece’s experience is unique, as her confidence and power actually come from her disability, not in spite of it.

Though all of the characters with disabilities in these books experience moments of frustration and struggle, they also all have moments where they are able to demonstrate their agency and use their power. By using their power, characters show they have autonomy and they are not afraid to do what they want. This is powerful for any character to do, but especially characters with disabilities, as they are often depicted as passive and one-dimensional (Wopperer 28).

Depictions of Power in Selected Novels

	<i>Wonder</i>	<i>Fish in a Tree</i>	<i>Rules</i>	<i>Out of My Mind</i>	<i>El Deafo</i>
Character Leaves Uncomfortable Situations	X	X	X	X	X
Character Makes Jokes About Themselves	X			X	

Character Stands Up for Themselves	X	X	X	X	X
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The Author's Impact

The final aspect of these books I explored was each author's impact on their writing. It can be helpful to have an author who has first hand experience with the topic they are writing about, which is especially true in the case of literature that represents a certain population. For most of the books I selected, the authors have a connection to the disabilities represented in their books; the authors of *Rules* and *Out of My Mind* both have children with the disabilities that are written about in their respective novels, and the authors of *Fish in a Tree* and *El Deafo* were both inspired by their own experiences to write their books. However, the author of *Wonder* has not stated that they have any personal connection to the disability represented in the book.

R.J. Palacio, the author of *Wonder*, based the character Auggie Pullman off of a girl she saw one day in an ice cream shop (315). Palacio has no known personal connection to people with disabilities and/or craniofacial abnormalities.

Lynda Mullaly Hunt, the author of *Fish in a Tree*, describes her connection to the story in a letter at the end of her book titled "Dear Readers." Hunt describes her struggles in school as a child and remembers feeling like she just wasn't as good as other kids (273). Only once Hunt had a teacher in her life that had confidence in her did she feel as though she could have confidence in herself and truly excel in school (274). She further writes about the importance of standing back up after being knocked down, and developing the belief that failure is not a bad thing. Hunt

does not have dyslexia, like the character Ally does in her book, but she does resonate with having feelings of failure in school based on academic struggles.

Cynthia Lord, the author of *Rules*, has a son with autism (203). Lord's daughter pointed out that families represented in books and on television did not resemble their own. Lord sought out children's literature featuring characters with disabilities, but discovered most of this literature depicted sad experiences. After noticing this, Lord decided to write her own book, *Rules*, which was loosely inspired by her family's experiences (203). Additionally, Lord was inspired to write Jason's character after reflecting on a boy she saw in the waiting room at one of her son's occupational and speech therapy appointments (204-205). She writes, in response to what she wishes readers will take away from the book, "I hope that meeting David and Jason in *Rules* will help readers to have less fear and more understanding toward the people with disabilities in their own communities and schools" (207).

Sharon Draper, the author of *Out of My Mind*, has a daughter with disabilities that are similar to Melody's in the book. Draper's daughter, Wendy Michelle Draper, struggles with communicating, so Draper created Melody to show what goes on inside a person's head when they have difficulty communicating. Additionally, in preparation for writing the book, Draper did extensive research on different disabilities, worked one on one with numerous children like Melody, and taught children with disabilities at a summer camp (Draper). Draper has extensive first-hand knowledge on the world of disabilities, and has daily experience with the disabilities represented in her literature.

Cece Bell, the author of *El Deafo*, writes about her personal experiences with hearing disabilities in "A Note from the Author" in the back of her book. In this note, Bell reveals that

she is “severely to profoundly deaf” (236). The book represents the real feelings she felt growing up deaf, and the struggles she had with knowing she was different from the other children she knew. Bell felt less ashamed of her disability as she got older, and she grew up to realize “our differences are our superpowers” (237).

The authors of the books I selected have a variety of different connections to the disabilities they represent in their novels. When selecting books to read to students, it is important to acknowledge the influence an author’s personal experiences can have on a novel. In most cases, it is helpful if an author has first hand experiences with the topic they are writing about, so they can provide authentic representations.

Author’s Connection to the Novel

	<i>Wonder</i>	<i>Fish in a Tree</i>	<i>Rules</i>	<i>Out of My Mind</i>	<i>El Deafo</i>
Family Member has a Disability			X	X	
Author has a Disability Themselves					X
Inspired by their Own Experiences		X			X
No Connection	X				

Conclusion

Teachers must carefully consider what books they use in their classrooms, as they can be powerful teaching tools for students. By using books that include characters with disabilities in the classroom, teachers can positively impact all of their students. Students with disabilities will feel represented, and students without disabilities will develop their understanding of people with

disabilities (Curwood 26). Though it is important to use diverse literature in classrooms, it is also important to critically analyze this literature to make sure it is offering authentic representations of diverse characters, rather than perpetuating harmful stereotypes. The purpose of this research was to critically analyze five popular young adult novels to see how these books represented characters with disabilities. Ultimately, the analyses of these five books demonstrates how differently characters with disabilities are represented across literature. This is evident in regards to the disability being written about, the impact the disability has on the characters, and the way the character with disabilities shows their agency. We can further consider how authentic the representations of characters with disabilities are by analyzing the author's connections to the stories they write.

In *Wonder*, *Rules* and *Out of My Mind*, the disabilities represented are written about negatively in regards to how the characters with disabilities feel and how others treat them; however, in these three books the characters all take steps to demonstrate their power even though they are not fully confident in themselves. In *Fish in a Tree* and *El Deafo*, the characters with disabilities do have insecurities, but their disabilities are not represented in an inherently negative way; the characters are able to find power and confidence in themselves to do what they want, as well as recognize that their differences make them stronger. All five books I analyzed could be beneficial for teachers to use in classrooms to offer insight to students on how children with disabilities feel, navigate through their lives, and are treated by others. *Rules*, *Out of My Mind* and *El Deafo* may offer the most authentic representations of children with disabilities, as the authors of these books have personal, firsthand experiences to connect them with the content of their books; however, the author of *Fish in a Tree* was inspired by her own academic struggles

to write her book, so it could be argued that this book offers authentic representation as well.

When selecting books to use in their classrooms, teachers could use this research to select one of these books, as well as apply the methods used in this paper to analyze new literature selections.

It is essential that teachers critically analyze the books they present to their students, and make sure that diverse populations are written about and accurately represented.

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