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Through their Eyes: Stereotypes of Ableism within the Preschool Setting

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An abstract of
a thesis submitted to the Faculty of Emory College of Arts and Sciences
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Abstract

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Children in the United States are exposed to stereotypes of ableism from the moment they set foot in the preschool classroom, both through intentional and unintentional means. Through the toys they buy online, the novels they are read, the television shows they watch, and the playgrounds where they play, preschoolers are inundated with a narrative that appreciates "able bodies" and shuns "dis-abled bodies." This paper delves into the ways in which toys, books, television shows, and playgrounds have perpetuated stereotypes of ableism within the world of American preschoolers. To carry out this avenue of research, this thesis reviews scholarly publications and websites, as well as analyzes empirical observations. By combining the fields of Disability Studies, Visual Culture, and Sociology in this analysis of ableism within the preschool setting, this paper aims to do more than simply scrutinize how we are currently raising preschoolers. Ultimately, this paper attempts to propose new strategies through which preschoolers might learn to expel prior stereotypes of ableism in the hopes that every child may feel included within the classroom in future years.

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INTRODUCTION:

Through Our Eyes

Colorful blocks tumble to the ground as squeals of laughter burst forth from a huddle of children. The smell of fresh watermelon wafts from the kitchen as a teacher's assistant slices the afternoon snack, a few hungry preschoolers standing in eager wait at their side. Packed with picture books and puzzles, a mahogany bookshelf weighs down the corners of a rainbow carpet clearly worn down from the rubbings of little sneakers and hands. On this sunny Friday afternoon, the preschool classroom is packed. Children ranging from three to five years old are spread across the room – some playing with toys, some reading books, and some watching a movie at a low volume. Looking through the glass window to our right, we see a couple of children racing around a metal play structure, deep in the throes of a competitive game of tag. A perfectly routine afternoon of preschoolers enjoying their post-nap free time.

Upon closer inspection, however, there is something missing from this familiar scene. As we look at the toys strewn across the floor, we see astronauts, ballerinas, princesses, doctors, animals of all shapes and sizes. Flipping through the colorful paperbacks lining the shelves, we see book characters defeating dragons and conquering their first day of kindergarten. Watching the movie in the corner, a few watermelon-munching children sitting quietly at our side, we see characters who look just like the rest of the children scattered about the room. Gazing out the window, we see squealing children vying for any title other than "it!" Looking around, we see children without observable disabilities.

Overview of Thesis

From the moment the average three-year-old steps into an American preschool classroom, they are taught through conscious and subconscious means that "able bodies" should be appreciated and “dis-abled” bodies should be shunned and excluded. Caregivers and teachers likely do not teach this preference for “able bodies” explicitly, but by giving preschoolers toys that do not feature disability, showing them books and television shows with no disabled characters, and bringing them to playgrounds that are made specifically for non-disabled children, we have taught preschoolers that people with disabilities are not part of our community, and are therefore not important. The absence of disability within the preschool setting speaks volumes.

As our preschoolers grow and mature, they will continue perpetuating these stereotypes of ableism and eventually will bring these stigmatized beliefs into adulthood (Sigelman et al., 1986). Many preschoolers who are raised in this narrative of ableism will grow up to become a parent, a teacher, or a leader themselves. The consequences of this cycle are seen throughout the United States today, through the lack of public policy benefitting people with disabilities, the inequities within the special education system, and the discrimination that targets individuals with physical or intellectual disabilities in the general public sphere (Schur et al., 2013).

While there has been research on the fact that preschoolers do hold implicit and explicit biases against peers with disabilities (Huckstadt & Shutts, 2014), in this thesis, I am attempting to synthesize my findings on how we perpetuate these biases through the absence of disability representation in toys, books, television, and playground infrastructure. My choice to observe these four elements is influenced by my personal background in working with children of the preschool age; thus I understand through first-hand experience that these four elements are common, tangible, and observable categories with which preschoolers interact on a daily basis. By synthesizing reviews of peer-reviewed publications and conducting empirical observation through the lenses of Disability Studies, Visual Culture, and Sociology, I aim to analyze how prevalent the absence of disability representation is within an American preschooler's world.

Ultimately, however, this thesis aims to do more than simply scrutinize current arbitrary social and cultural norms. By synthesizing studies from multiple disciplines, this thesis will attempt to imagine a new narrative through which we may teach preschoolers lessons of inclusivity. By analyzing the current ableist settings in which we raise preschoolers, I hope to propose new methods, new practices, and new post-nap free-time activities that will ensure that children may learn the lesson of inclusion, whether they learn it by playing with a toy, reading a book, watching a show, or playing on a playground.

Defining Disability Within This Thesis

According to the Center for Parent Information and Resources, there are five developmental categories used to evaluate young children's development during their first five years of life. In order to evaluate development, professionals create a timetable of certain milestones that children generally reach at particular ages. Usually conducted by highly trained professionals, these developmental evaluations provide results that allow caregivers to create a profile of a child's strengths and weaknesses (*Developmental Delay | Center for Parent Information and Resources*, 2016).

The five categories of development are: physical development, cognitive development, communication development, social or emotional development, and adaptive development (*Developmental Delay | Center for Parent Information and Resources*, 2016). Evaluating physical development consists of surveying fine motor skills, such as holding a pair of scissors, and gross motor skills, such as jumping from one playground structure to another. Evaluating cognitive development involves assessing intellectual abilities, while communication development consists of surveying how well a child is developing their speech and language skills. Social or emotional development involves the strengthening of emotional control and social skills, such as when a child is able to communicate that they are sad rather than throwing a wordless tantrum. The last category – adaptive development – involves the emergence of self-care skills, such as the ability to feed oneself. When a child does not reach a certain milestone in social or emotional development, for example, by the time children typically do, pediatricians are not generally worried right away. Children develop at different rates, after all, and pediatricians are well aware of this. However, when enough time has passed and a child has still not met a certain milestone, they may undergo a developmental screening and later may be diagnosed with a "developmental delay," thus qualifying the child to receive services aiding in the prompting of their development. For children under three years old, these services will take form in early intervention services, while children over three will receive special education services (*Developmental Delay | Center for Parent Information and Resources*, 2016).

When preschoolers – whether they have a disability or not – are exposed to disability in their toys, books, and media, they are able to learn that disability is something to be normalized rather than excluded. However, if there is no disability in their preschool settings, children will subconsciously learn that disability is something that should not be discussed or represented; in other words, they will be taught ableist attitudes.

For the sake of this thesis, I will be focusing on whether or not there is representation of visually observable disabilities within the preschool setting. If there is not, then this absence of disability representation will be clear evidential proof that ableism exists within the preschool setting. I chose this avenue of observation because, at the preschool age, neurodiversity and developmental delays in cognition, communication, and social skills usually go unnoticed by preschoolers. A preschooler is generally less likely to be aware of the fact that a character on television is on the autism spectrum rather than the fact that they have a guide dog, for example. This is not to say that preschoolers are unaware of differences in neurodiversity; preschoolers pick up on more than we tend to give them credit for. However, for the sake of the visual culture aspects of this thesis as I analyze disability representation in toys, books, television shows, and the accessibility of playground infrastructure, I have decided to focus mainly on disabilities related to the category of physical development. Visual differences in this category are usually the most salient at this age, as preschoolers are very physically active (Diamond & Hestenes, 1996). A book character who is unable to climb up a play structure is likely going to be more obviously excluded from active play than one who is unable to effectively voice their feelings, as is challenging for some neurodiverse children. By analyzing representations that involve visual cues as to whether or not the toy or character in question has a disability, I aim to narrow my research to visually observable differences – a category that tends to lean towards disabilities that involve delays in physical development.

A Brief Note

I recognize that, as a non-disabled person, I will never be able to fully capture the complexity of discrimination people with disabilities face on a daily basis. The aim of this thesis is to shine light on the ableist structures that every non-disabled person – myself included – has perpetuated since preschool simply by living and interacting within an ableist society. Thus, I have carried out research to the best of my ability that acknowledges my unintentional involvement in ableist structures so that I might be more conscious of ways I can de-stigmatize disability within my own social circles. I have engaged in conversations with people with disabilities as well as worked within an inclusive preschool in order to gain some background knowledge in this field of disability studies. This is not to say that I am speaking for the disabled community; in fact, I am saying quite the opposite. By advocating for people with disabilities, I do not mean to replace their voices. This honors thesis is meant to begin a dialogue about ableist structures, allowing me to step off of the platform I have been given – albeit a rather small one – in hopes that I might encourage my readers to open their eyes to the ways in which they too consciously or subconsciously perpetuate ableist attitudes.

CHAPTER 1: Ableism

A Note on Language

Before I begin, I'd like to take a moment to acknowledge the changing rhetoric surrounding language. Throughout this thesis, I aimed to use language that reflected the current usage circulating disability communities. However, I realize that language is larger than the words on a page. While I may have used person-first language on some pages (eg. person with a disability), I may have also used identity-first language in some cases (eg. autistic child, rather than "child with autism").

In autism communities, the recent dialogue has been that person-first language separates an integral part of identity from the person being discussed. Rather than giving someone with autism dignity and individuality – as person-first language usually aims to do – this usage tends to separate a fundamental part of identity from these individuals. Jim Sinclair, an autism-rights activist, states, "It is not possible to separate the autism from the person—and if it were possible, the person you'd have left would not be the same person you started with" (Sinclair, 1993). However, this mode of thinking does not apply to every disability, as often person-first language does indeed empower and recognize the person behind the disability; it acknowledges that disability is simply another facet of identity rather than its totality.

Throughout this examination of the ways in which we perpetuate ableism, I have attempted to always acknowledge the totality of each individual identity discussed by using language of difference rather than language of deficit.

The History of the Word

The term "ableism" is one that did not come into widespread use until the 1980's. First coined in 1981, the term describes "the preferential treatment of a society toward able-bodied people and against persons with disabilities" (Armstrong et al., 2017, p. 36). The concept of normative ability, however, is one that has been circulating throughout society since the late 1300's, during which the term denoted "a quality in a person that makes an action possible" (Campbell, 2015, p. 12). The use of this term carried implications that, if an individual had this theoretical characteristic of "ability," they were capable and thus worthy of living a productive life.

The term continued to gain further implication in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, when it began to be used as an adjective describing someone who was "capable, vigorous, and thriving" (Campbell, 2015, p. 12). These words of association continued to add positive implications to the word "able," but the dichotomy between the term "able-bodied" and "dis-abled" had not yet come into common usage. That polarity began to manifest itself during the age of enlightenment, when any ambiguity in mental or bodily function began to be associated with anomaly and aberrance. The birth of these connotations led to negative feelings associated with disability; having a disability began to be correlated with feelings of "failure, hopelessness, necessity for surveillance, repair, and management" (Campbell, 2015, p. 12). The act of drifting from the normative processes of functioning carried negative connotations and differentiated those with disability from those who were "capable, vigorous, and thriving" within their productive lives.

The dichotomy between disability and ability continued to only grow during the age of enlightenment. In the *Oxford English Dictionary* of 1727, the term "able-bodiedness" referred to individuals who were "fit, and healthy, physically robust, free from physical disability" (Campbell, 2015, p. 12). According to this definition, being "able-bodied" equated with being fit for the army or employment; thus, being “able-bodied” meant being able to contribute productively to society.

This association with the innate capability to perform labor began to shift during World War I, during which many “able bodies” were destroyed or maimed. While “ability” had initially been associated with a certain threshold of fitness, it now began to lose its permanence. Men once defined by their ability to contribute productively to their surrounding communities were now finding themselves in lives that supposedly needed to be rebuilt. This need for disabled lives to be rebuilt and ultimately cured was magnified in the 1980’s, when “the term ‘abled’ was decisively coupled with disability in a negative relation.” In the 1980 version of *The Oxford English Dictionary,* “abled” now denoted a “full range of ordinary physical or mental abilities” (Campbell, 2015, p. 13). The term “ordinary” in this definition emphasizes how ability was valued as a normative characteristic; disability was the antithesis of this positive, ordinary, complete norm. Anyone who did not fall into this hypothetical model of the ideal citizen was cast away to the margins of society. Thus, in 1981, the term “ableism” was coined in an attempt to describe the stark contrast of treatment of the “abled” and the “disabled.”

Lenses of Observation: Models of Disability

But how do these attitudes of ableism manifest within current American society? The evidence of discrimination is everywhere we look. To be able to identify these manifestations, however, we must observe our world through the lens of Disability Studies. Having emerged after the disability rights movement of the late 1900’s, the field of Disability Studies aims to explore the social, cultural, and political dimensions within the world of people with disabilities, not solely focusing on the medical components of disability (Mullaney, 2019). Scholars of this field have split the concept of disability into models through which society views disability – the three most prominent being the medical model, the social model, and the cultural model.

The first model, and unfortunately the lens through which much of society views disability, is medical. Through the medical lens, disability is viewed solely as a deficit and a problem to be solved. Any disruption in physical or mental functioning is the disabled individual's total identity, and thus is their responsibility. The inconveniences, hardships, and roadblocks people with disabilities encounter are fully because of their disability itself, not because of the way society is structured or policy is enacted. The consequences of disability reside in the individual at hand; it is no one else's fault that they are unable to progress through life with ease (Retief & Letšosa, 2018, p. 3).

The second model, social, has become the standard lens used in Disability Studies since the disability rights movement of the 1960's and 1970's. By using this lens, the observer aims to take the main focus off of the disabled individual and rather illuminate the significant consequences that societal structures and attitudes do indeed have (Retief & Letšosa, 2018, p. 4). By considering disability a disadvantage because of the confluence of both physical traits and surrounding environment, the social model aims to place much of the locus of disadvantage within the community rather than upon the individual themselves (Samaha, 2007). The viewpoint is that bodily differences are simply a misfit with an individual's environment, rather than the individual being a misfit themselves. Thus, the majority of inconveniences people with disabilities encounter are due to the societal structures they find themselves placed in. For example, if a person in a wheelchair were to try to get into a building without a ramp, the blame would be placed upon the building's infrastructure rather than the person's physical ability. This model, however, is not without its problems. From its conception, scholars have since observed that the social model does not fully capture the lived experience of disability as it presents disability as a subjective state.

An alternative lens lies in the third model that incorporates elements from both medical and social: the cultural model. The cultural model asserts that disability identity helps shape how disabled individuals perceive the world, and thus can lead to the formation of cultural groups and community (Retief & Letšosa, 2018, p. 6). While I acknowledge that the lenses of disability studies are constantly changing, I have chosen to view disability primarily through a social lens throughout this thesis as I observe how societal choices have ingrained discriminatory views within preschoolers, causing them to perpetuate stereotypes of ableism themselves.

The Deep Roots of Ableism

Able-bodiedness is prized by society. This tendency to prize the "normal" body over the "different" is something that has been made implicitly clear through practices as widespread as neglecting to include curb ramps within sidewalks and as intimate as prenatal screening for Down Syndrome. This is not to say that all prenatal screening is ableist in nature, rather that some prenatal screenings may stem from an obsessive focus on having a "normal, perfect" child (Sinclair, 1993).

The repercussions of ableism extend across American society in ways that many individuals rarely stop to notice. Discriminatory infrastructure, policy, law, cultural values, and social cues have allowed ableism to take root in our society, marginalizing anyone who does not conform to the ideologies of the perfect body (Schur et al., 2013). Upon meeting a new person, we tend to determine whether this new person is worthy of being considered "fully human" by asking ourselves the subconscious question: does this someone conform to the "concept of the normative?" Do they fit perfectly into my idea of an "ideal individual," or do they fit more into the body of the “aberrant, unthinkable, underdeveloped, and therefore not really human” individual? (Campbell, 2015, p. 13-14). If they fall into the latter, they are subsequently cast aside as “disabled.” Non-disabled individuals then cast judgment upon those who are disabled, excluding them from society and from society’s considerations of who belongs in “normal” human community. This is why it is rare to see disability representation in toys, books, and television, and why considerations for mobility differences in playground infrastructure are often cast aside in favor of convenience of construction. The act of excluding disability from the narratives we teach our children is an implicit act of ableism itself. Just how often disability is excluded within the preschool environment is the question I intend to answer in the following chapters.

CHAPTER 2: Children's Toys

Literature Review: A Reflection of our Current Values

In her book chapter "Our Moment in Time: The Transitory and Concrete Value of Disability Toys," Kate Ellis writes: "[Children's toys] mirror the values of the society that produce them; their shapes, colours and textures reflect what we value as important or socially acceptable at a particular moment in time," (Ellis & King, 2015, p. 15). She argues that children's toys both indicate the past, present, and future. Firstly, when parents buy toys for their children, they often choose ones that remind them of something they interacted with in the past. The abundance of Star Wars toys currently lining the walls of every local Target does enough to prove this.

Secondly, when parents choose a toy from these shelves at Target, they also choose one that speaks to the present societal values they wish to instill within their child. For example, a parent will likely buy a game that encourages teamwork if they are preparing their toddler for preschool, as the toddler will soon have to engage in teamwork with their preschool peers. Lastly, children's toys also give us a glimpse into the future parents wish to see. Preparing children for what we think will come, we tend to choose toys that we believe will aid in the development of present values as well as values we wish to see evolve in the future. For these reasons, children's toys give us a glimpse not only into what is currently favored by particular children, but also what is currently valued in society as a whole (Barton & Somerville, 2012).

Throughout her chapter discussing disability toys, Ellis splits social attitudes into two categories: those that stem from transitory beliefs and those that stem from concrete beliefs. She defines transitory beliefs as beliefs that "last only as long as the era itself and then fade from view" (Ellis & King, 2015, p. 18). Concrete beliefs, on the other hand, "transcend the specific time period and represent the fundamental character of the culture itself" (Ellis & King, 2015, p. 18). From a cultural studies perspective, we can look at every toy that is placed into the hands of a child as a reflection of either a transitory belief or a concrete belief. Some toys indicate a fleeting transitory belief, like when American parents wanted to teach their kids the importance of airport security after the 9/11 attacks (Bukszpan, 2011), while others like G.I. Joe and Barbie indicate the concrete beliefs of (toxic) masculinity and femininity (Schwartz, n.d.). What beliefs do disability toys, or the lack of disability toys, indicate?

Often applauded for their quality to inspire children, disability toys are usually seen as icons of medical culture rather than popular culture. Dolls with disabilities are usually hard to find; parents are forced to scavenge the Internet or – if they have the financial means – contact the company themselves to request a customized doll for their child with a disability (ABC News, 2016).

When thinking of a doll, few will imagine the Hest's original Down Syndrome dolls from the early 2000's, designed to realistically reflect the visual traits of Down Syndrome (*Home | Down Syndrome Dolls | By HEST of Europe*, n.d.). According to Ellis, these dolls "bridge[d] the medical and cultural approaches to disability toys." Many consumers, however, did not feel the same, as is made evident from this comment Ellis quotes, left on an article published in *Mail Online* (Fisher, 2008):

> "What a grim world we are living in. No longer are dollies for play…Now it is all about self image and psychological 'help.' We 'disabled' know we are 'disabled' – we don't need a doll to remind us of that! Stop making everything PC; let children be children and play and laugh once again!"

With comments such as this one, consumers implicitly conveyed that they held the concrete belief that features of Down Syndrome are undesirable and should be swept aside. Even this consumer – who seems to be disabled themselves as they included the word "we" – has internalized ableism to the extent that they equate creating disabled dolls as simply an attempt to be "politically correct."

These negative responses reflect society's concrete belief that, if given the chance, people with disabilities should suppress their differences and "focus instead on how they are really just like everybody else" (Ellis, 2012). This negative backlash is puzzling and subsequently telling. Why were people shocked and offended to see dolls with Down Syndrome? Was it because they were not modeled after the normative body? Or was it because society holds the transitory belief that any representation of Down Syndrome is intended to be mocked?

By raising these questions, Ellis urges readers to reflect on why they may feel offended when looking at a doll with an observable impairment. Ultimately, the extensive negative backlash of the doll led to its discontinuation – allowing us a glimpse into the cultural values held by the consumers of the early 2000's. In the next section, I will attempt to provide a glimpse into the cultural values held by consumers of 2020. Whether or not these values include disability inclusion will soon be revealed.

Mode of Measurement: A Survey of Amazon's Best-selling Preschool Toys

To measure the amount of disability representation existing amongst children's toys, I chose to focus on a qualitative observation of whether or not the toy in question had an observable disability. The question I intended to ask when I saw each toy was: does this toy have a visual disability? Once I decided this, my analysis became more quantitative as my question then became: how *many* of these toys have a visual disability?

In a pre-pandemic world, I may have conducted an in-person study surveying the disabled toys available in the local retail stores around Emory's campus; I may have surveyed Target and Wal-Mart, for example. However, as many parents and teachers have turned to online shopping in search of a safer way to purchase new toys for their children, I followed suit (*How COVID-19 Has Transformed Consumer Spending Habits*, 2020).

In a Google search to find which website was leading in online sales, Amazon's name appeared again and again throughout my results (Takefman, 2021). Since Amazon's profits have also increased by nearly 200% since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, I decided to take my sample of popular children's toys from their best-selling lists of 2020 (Takefman, 2021). The requirements for my survey of children's toys were that they must be intended for children ages 3-5 (preschool age), and that they must *feature* disability, rather than be simply intended for children with disabilities. This is not to say that specialized accessible toys are not important and necessary for inclusion; this is simply to say that, as I surveyed the best-selling lists available to me, I was looking for toys that were purchased for all children of all physical abilities. I will also note that, as these lists are constantly changing as purchases are made, I took all of my data from the lists shown on the afternoon of February 23, 2021.

"Best Sellers in Pre-Kindergarten Toys"

The first list I surveyed was "Best Sellers in Pre-Kindergarten Toys." As I scrolled through the first fifty best-selling toys, my screen was flooded with toys ranging from reversible octopus plushies to toy rocket launchers to Play-Doh. As I scrolled to the bottom of the first page, I realized that, due to the filtered age group, there were not many toys that resembled humans, thus allowing for a representation of disability. Upon this realization, I narrowed my search to simply surveying the "human" toys within these first fifty best sellers, only to find that

I was left with a mere five. Out of these five "human" toys – ranging from a bedtime doll that sings a song when it is time for bed to a diverse six-figure pack of character toys from a popular YouTube series, CoComelon – I found no toys that represented disability (*Amazon Best Sellers: Best Pre-Kindergarten Toys*, 2021). As they reflect the current transitory beliefs of parents, these results are telling. Perhaps the current generation of parents wishes to see creativity, art, or other modes of play reflected in their children's toys rather than human resemblance. Unfortunately, this also means that the current transitory beliefs do not seem to include disability inclusion in their agendas.


Amazon Best Sellers

Our most popular products based on sales. Updated hourly.

Best Sellers in Pre-Kindergarten Toys

#1 TeeTurtle | The Original Reversible Octopus Plushie | Patented Design | Black and Gray | Show your... 13,451 $15.00 - $29.99

#2 CoComelon Official Musical Bedtime JJ Doll, Soft Plush Body – Press Tummy and JJ sings clips... 4,050 $19.89 prime

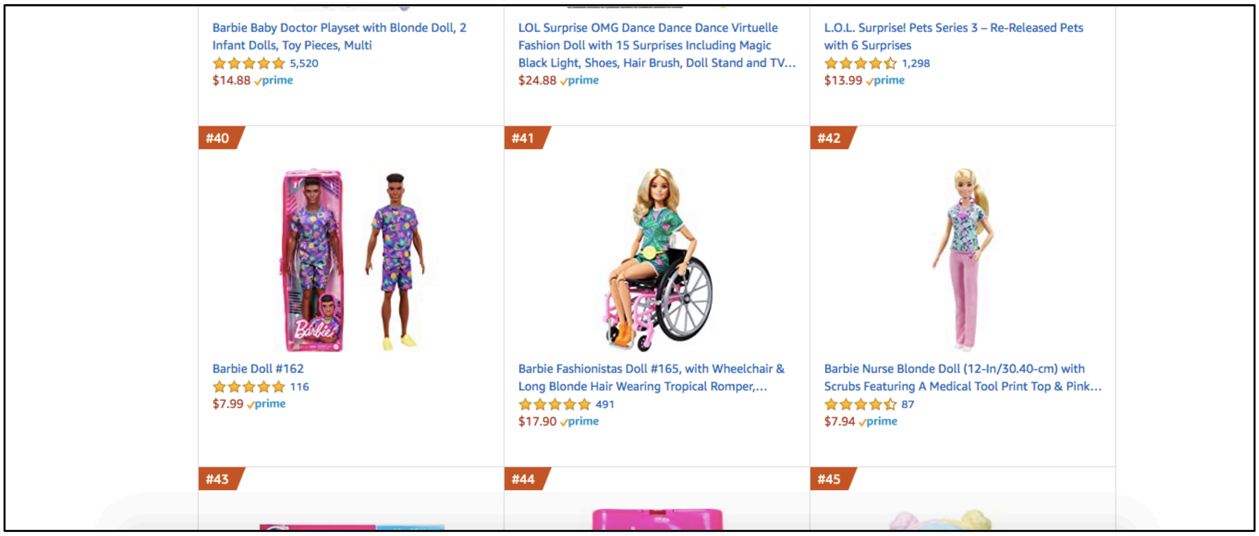
#3 Play-Doh Modeling Compound 10 Pack Case of Colors, Non-Toxic, Assorted Colors, 2 Oz Cans,... 26,482 $7.99 prime

Figure 1. *Amazon's Top 3 Pre-Kindergarten Best-selling Toys on 2/23/2021*

To broaden my results, I decided to expand my search from the age group of 3-5 so that I might observe more toys that were meant to resemble humans, hoping to learn more about parents' current transitory beliefs.

<u>"Best Sellers in Dolls"</u>

Scrolling through the first page of "Best Sellers in Dolls," I was met with a similar lack of representation. Out of the top fifty best sellers, only one doll was disabled: number 41, pictured in **Figure 2** below. To provide a point of comparison, out of all fifty best-selling dolls, only eight were of color. The vast majority of dolls – despite the fact that Amazon is a company with a consumer base of many races, ethnicities, and disabilities – most of the best-selling dolls were white and able-bodied (*Amazon Best Sellers: Best Dolls*, 2021).



Barbie Baby Doctor Playset with Blonde Doll, 2 Infant Dolls, Toy Pieces, Multi
★★★★★ 5,520
$14.88 ✓prime

LOL Surprise OMG Dance Dance Dance Virtuelle Fashion Doll with 15 Surprises Including Magic Black Light, Shoes, Hair Brush, Doll Stand and TV...
$24.88 ✓prime

L.O.L. Surprise! Pets Series 3 – Re-Released Pets with 6 Surprises
★★★★☆ 1,298
$13.99 ✓prime

#40
Barbie Doll #162
★★★★★ 116
$7.99 ✓prime

#41
Barbie Fashionistas Doll #165, with Wheelchair & Long Blonde Hair Wearing Tropical Romper,...
★★★★★ 491
$17.90 ✓prime

#42
Barbie Nurse Blonde Doll (12-In/30.40-cm) with Scrubs Featuring A Medical Tool Print Top & Pink...
★★★★☆ 87
$7.94 ✓prime

#43

#44

#45

Figure 2. *#41 Best-selling Toy from "Best Sellers in Dolls"*

Positive Examples: "Thank you for making a doll like me!"

While this lack of representation was significant, I was pleasantly surprised by the representation provided by the one disabled doll: toy #41. A "Barbie Fashionistas Doll #165, with Wheelchair & Long Blonde Hair," this toy featured a Barbie doll that came with a wheelchair with rolling, working wheels. The description of the doll is as follows:

> Barbie and Ken Fashionistas celebrate diversity with fashion dolls that encourage real-world storytelling and open-ended dreams! With a wide variety of skin tones, eye colors, hair colors and textures, body types and fashions, the dolls are designed to reflect the world kids see today. Barbie doll inspires new play possibilities with a manual wheelchair and ramp so she can easily get in and out of the Barbie Dreamhouse (sold separately, subject to availability).

The doll’s page on Amazon was flooded from reviews from doll-collectors, so I turned to the reviews available on Target’s website for the same doll to get feedback from a more generalized audience (*Amazon.Com: Barbie Fashionistas Doll #165, with Wheelchair & Long Blonde Hair Wearing Tropical Romper, Orange Shoes & Lemon Fanny Pack, Toy for Kids 3 to 8 Years Old: Toys & Games*, 2021).

One user, “MrsHal,” writes, “I gave this to my three year old, who has never been exposed to a wheelchair or any differently-abled person. It opened up a great dialogue about differences, and how special everyone is.” According to this review, it’s clear to see that Barbie has provided children, regardless of whether or not they have a disability, to learn more about diversity in ability.

User, “Cuppy2888” expresses a similar sentiment: “I wanted to start a conversation with my 4 year old about disabilities. I hoped to explain to her that although people may look different or may not be able to walk, there are still lots of things they can do, & we are alike in many ways too.” Through the lens of the disability studies’ social model, this toy has opened up conversations that focus less on the limitations of the doll’s disability and more on the similarities that exist between this Barbie and other Barbies. By featuring an observable physical disability, Barbie has taken components of the lives of those with disabilities and provided children an avenue in which they can interact with different types of ability in their everyday playtime (*Barbie Fashionistas Doll #132 Blonde with Rolling Wheelchair and Ramp*, 2021). Children without physical disabilities are able to interact with disability, learning to normalize it, while children with disabilities are gaining the invaluable experience of being able to see themselves in their toys. While I only found one disabled toy in my Amazon search, this one toy indicates the future some parents are beginning to wish for: one that allows children both with and without disabilities to see their communities more inclusively.

Figure 3. *Target's Barbie #165*

However, while Barbie has made great strides in their movement towards featuring disability, few companies have yet to follow suit. When you Google "toys that feature children with disabilities," pages upon pages listing adaptive toys made for disabled children fill the screen. From sensory tables to large building blocks built for children with disabilities, stores are moving forward in their aim to promote inclusivity in play. While this movement and these toys are essential, rarely does a result pop up featuring a toy *with* a disability, made to be played with by any child, regardless of their ability.

In order to deconstruct the concept of the "normative, perfect, healthy" child, we must begin to change the subcultural values present in American society, starting with what toys we gift our children. Just as the reviews of Barbie #165 convey, all children would benefit from playing with dolls and toys with disabilities, regardless of whether or not they have one themselves.

In the Target Barbie's review regarding learning about disability when the child does not have one themselves, we must first recognize that introducing children to disability early on in development will likely teach them to feel more positively towards people with disabilities later in their lives. According to a 2014 systematic review, "positive contact [with people with disabilities] can break down psychological group boundaries, reduce anxiety, and elicit emotions such as empathy directed towards outgroup members who are otherwise often inhibited in intergroup contexts" (MacMillan et al., 2014, p. 529). In this review, the authors conducted a study of 35 pieces of literature and found that 16 of the 35 "reported a significant positive association between the amount of contact children had with people with disabilities and their attitudes toward disability" (MacMillan et al., 2014, p. 532). The study ultimately reported that we must conduct more research on the relationship between the amount of contact children experience and their attitudes towards people with disabilities. This contact can begin in the toy boxes available at local preschools. From including Barbie dolls with prosthetic legs, dolls in wheelchairs, and blind plush toys accompanied by miniature guide dogs within the toy boxes at schools, children will gradually establish more contact with disability, thus normalizing the fact that many present or future individuals they encounter will have disabilities.

An example of an inclusive toy set that does just this is the collection of "Soft & Safe Children with Differing Abilities" toys sold by Lakeshore Learning, a teacher supply store. In regards to language, it is important to note, however, that the decision to say these toys have "Differing Abilities" rather than "Disabilities" is an aphorism that is not usually preferred by disability communities. When we are afraid to say the word "disability," it sends the message to children that the word should be excluded, when in fact it should be normalized.

The toys themselves, however, do promote inclusivity. As shown in **Figure 4,** these toys are made for infants and toddlers. They feature a deaf child with hearing aids, a blind child with a guide dog, a child in a wheelchair, and two other children with walkers and crutches. The toy description reads:

> Inspire discussions on diversity and acceptance – with figures representing differently abled children and their adaptive equipment! From a boy in a wheelchair to a girl with hearing aids, our set features 5 multi-ethnic play figures made from squeezably soft plastic that's perfect for toddlers (*Soft & Safe Children with Differing Abilities*, 2021).

By selling these toys, Lakeshore aims to allow children who may not have disabilities themselves to develop "skills in social awareness of diversity in the community," as well as learn about the types of assistive equipment children with disabilities use (*Soft & Safe Children with Differing Abilities*, 2021).

One appreciative reviewer writes: "These are great little figures that inspire casual, meaningful conversation about kindness and understanding for everyone." Here, the word "everyone" is key. These toys are not made only for children with disabilities; they are made for all children to play with. By producing toys such as these and purchasing them for preschool classrooms across the country, we can work towards normalizing the presence of disability as well as the presence of adaptive equipment in young communities. It need not be an "act of kindness" to engage children in conversations of inclusivity; it should be second nature.

Figure 4. *"Soft & Safe Children with Differing Abilities" from Lakeshore Learning*

While it is important for children without disabilities to interact with disabilities in their toys, it is also clear that children with disabilities need to see themselves in their toys just as much as any other child. This is not only true for children with physical disabilities; it is true for children with developmental disabilities as well.

Kelle Hampton, a mother of a child with Down Syndrome, writes in her blog post titled: "How I Changed My Mind About Dolls with Down Syndrome," that she initially was angered by the production of dolls with facial traits of Down Syndrome, as featured in **Figure 5**. The dolls "didn't highlight the sweet facial characteristics we loved about [my daughter] Nella; it exaggerated them, making the doll an easy target for jokes" (Hampton, 2019). She saw the suggestions that Nella "needed a special doll, different from the ones her friends were playing with" as an offensive and exclusive attempt that ultimately highlighted her differences rather than including them. Hampton states that the foundation of her family's special needs advocacy lies in the belief that Nella "was more alike than different," and the fact that she "needed" a separate doll to play with seemed to isolate her more than include her.

As time went on, however, Hampton's opinion slowly changed. Stores began to market dolls with Down Syndrome in a more inclusive and thoughtful way; instead of highlighting them on their main shopping page as "Dolls of Diversity," they curated the dolls to be "wedged in between all the other beautiful dolls that had dark hair and blond hair and brown skin and white skin and Asian eyes and almond eyes" (Hampton, 2019). The dolls with Down Syndrome were just another doll sold in the store for children to play with; they weren't meant to forward any agenda or meet any diversity quota. This marketing decision is a step towards genuine inclusivity. When toys with disabilities are simply sold alongside other toys rather than being signaled out as "inspiring," that is a sign that current beliefs reflect more of an inclusive mentality rather than one of "inspiration porn," a term used to describe the tendency of able-bodied people " congratulating themselves for remembering to include people with disabilities" (Christian, 2020).

Ultimately, Hampton decided to buy a doll with Down Syndrome for Nella for Christmas and her response was overwhelmingly positive. Nella held the doll all day long, repeatedly telling her sister, "She has Down syndrome, Lainey. Just like me." While she usually made up creative and silly names for the rest of her dolls, Nella proudly decided to name this particular doll after herself (Hampton, 2019). Nella's story is just one of the many that showcases just how important it is for children with disabilities to see themselves reflected in the toys with which they play.

Figure 5. *Dolls with Traits of Down Syndrome Sold at The Small Folk*

In a video that has since gone viral from its posting in 2016, this need is again exemplified. In the video, a little girl named Emma receives a customized doll with a prosthetic leg to match her own, the result of an amputation she received at nine months old due to a rare birth defect. As her mother sets the box in front of her, her little sister squeals, “You’re going to love it!” Emma begins to read the letter enclosed on top of the box, and as she realizes what is under the lid, she lifts it up to reveal that the doll has a prosthetic leg, just like her. In shock, she says, “You’ve got to be kidding me!” before bursting into tears and hugging the doll tight. Throughout the rest of the video, she keeps looking at the doll and, through tears, saying, “She’s got a leg like me!” The video ends as she looks at the camera and, per her father’s instructions, thanks the doll-makers: “Thank you for making a doll like me!” (ABC News, 2016).

Figure 6. *A Moment from Emma’s Viral Video*

Experiences like Nella and Emma’s further prove the importance of disability representation. Not only should children with disabilities be able to see themselves in the toys with which they play, but children without disabilities should also have increased contact with disability so as to normalize its presence within our society and surrounding communities. By normalizing the presence of disability within our communities, we will move towards the cultural model of disability: recognizing that the physicality of disability may often limit individuals, but the manifestation of ableist attitudes emphasizes disability all the more. If we continue to expose children to disability through their toys – whether through their Barbies, their plush figures, or their dolls – we may begin to transform the transitory belief of inclusion into one that is concrete.

CHAPTER 3: Children's Books

Literature Review: "No Fat Friend of Mine"

When preschoolers flip through picture books during daily playtime, they are likely going to search for characters that look like themselves or their peers. If preschoolers never see book characters with disabilities, however, how will they learn that disability is something to be embraced and normalized? How will preschoolers with disabilities ever see themselves represented in the books that they are read?

In a recent study, "'No fat friend of mine: Young Children's Response to Overweight and Disability," Psychiatry academic Sarah Harrison and colleagues attempted to understand the perceptions surrounding obesity stereotypes and disability. Believing that children's obesity stereotyping is rooted in a long history of discriminatory perceptions surrounding disability, Harrison et al. aimed to understand just how early these stigmas emerge. Prior to conducting the study, they found that weight stigma emerges, at least for some children, during preschool age. By carrying out two different studies, they investigated how children would rate different book characters varying in weight and physical ability.

In the first study, they read a story – written and illustrated by the researchers – to preschool children ranging from four to six years old. Each child was presented with a story in which the main character, "Alfie," was either a healthy weight and non-disabled (as shown in **Figure 7**), significantly overweight, or in a wheelchair. It is important to note that none of the children involved in the study were in a wheelchair themselves; thus the use of disability representation in this case was allowing non-disabled children to see individuals different than themselves in the books they were read.

Figure 7. *Images of Healthy-Weight & Non-Disabled Alfie (Striped Blue Shirt)*

After listening to the story, they showed each child cards with questions and ratings, such as, “How likely do you think Alfie would win in a race?” Depending on which Alfie the children were shown, they would rate him on a level from 1-5 regarding his racing capabilities. The last question of the series was always: “Who would you choose to be friends with? Alfie or Thomas?” Thomas was always a healthy-weight, non-disabled child featured within the story.

The results of this first study showed that there were no differences in attribute questions (e.g. the “likelihood of winning a race” question) when children were shown an “Alfie” who was a healthy weight. This implies that when Alfie was a healthy weight and non-disabled, children ultimately viewed him as “normal” and rated his level of ability as such. The Alfie in a wheelchair, on the other hand, was always voted less likely to win a race, less likely to get invited to parties, and less likely to perform well in school. Likewise, Overweight Alfie was always rated lower than all other book characters. Overweight Alfie was consistently voted less likely to be happy with the way he looked, less likely to win a race, and more likely to have fewer friends. When asked to choose between Overweight or Wheelchair Alfie and Thomas, the child participants consistently chose Thomas, Alfie's healthy-weight friend. While all participants were preschool and early-kindergarten age, the researchers found that the older the child was, the more negatively their assessments were towards Overweight and Wheelchair Alfie (pictured in **Figure 8**). These results suggest that children are gradually taught prejudices against children who are overweight or disabled. As children grow and develop, prejudices of ableism become more deeply engrained in their thinking both through the lack of disability representation and the existence of negative disability representation available to them. As shown from the lack of disability representation in Amazon's best-selling preschool toys, children learn to perpetuate these biases of ableism beginning with their preschool years, as is also shown by the findings of Harrison and her colleagues.

Figure 8. *Images of Wheelchair Alfie & Overweight Alfie (Striped Blue Shirt)*

In their second study, Harrison et al. wanted to ensure that the stigma surrounding weight and disability was not simply courtesy stigma. Courtesy stigma is a phenomenon that occurs when someone who is overweight or disabled, for example, is more discriminated against when they are standing beside someone who is of a healthy weight or non-disabled. To test this, they split the children into two reading groups and replicated the first study but this time with a female main character to also ensure that gender bias was not at play. In the first reading group, the children were individually read a story in which Alfina (the female counterpart of Alfie, pictured in **Figure 9**) was a healthy weight while her peers were overweight. In the second reading group, the children were read a story in which both Alfina and her peers were all overweight. The children were then asked again to answer questions and ratings after the reading.

The results showed that Overweight Alfina was consistently rejected in favor of Holly, her healthy-weight friend, when the two were involved in the same story. However, the children rated Overweight Alfina as better at schoolwork when her surrounding peers were overweight as well. This implies that courtesy stigma may have been at play; children had less bias towards Overweight Alfina when she was in a community in which she was clearly of the ingroup rather than of the outgroup.

These results also indicate different weight biases in the preschoolers' perceptions: in general, children were more likely to respond negatively to Overweight and Wheelchair Alfina. However, while children did have differences in preferences for Overweight Alfina, they rarely responded to her with outright rejection. Again, the older children of the group were more prone to showing social disfavor to Overweight and Wheelchair Alfina, implying that social biases are learned and acquired over time.

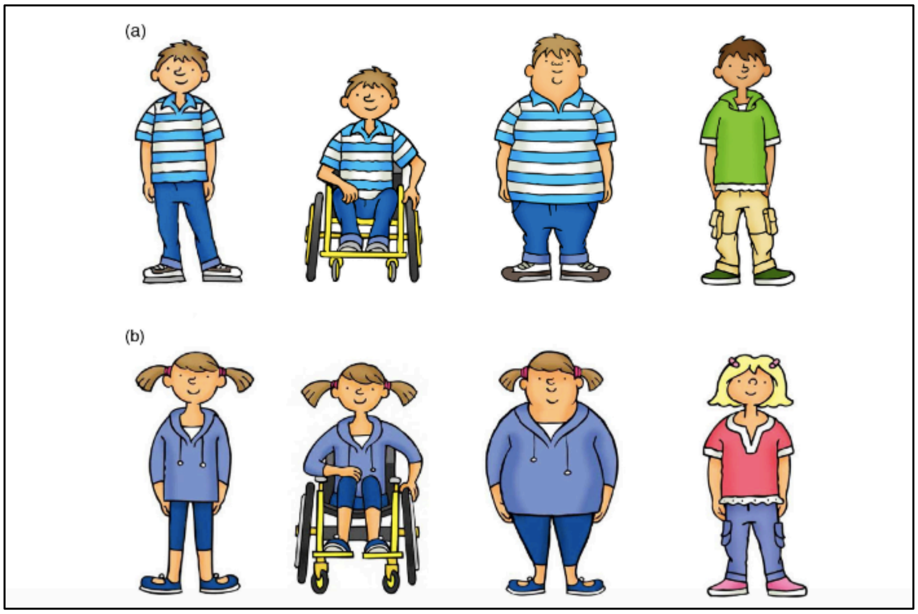


Figure 9. *Images of the Different Physical Forms of Characters "Alfie" and "Alfina"*

Ultimately, this study shows that, even at the early preschool age, children already have biases against peers who are overweight or have disabilities. The researchers write that, in the future, "positive story lines, such as used in the present study, may help mitigate anti-fat [and anti-disability] bias" (Harrison et al., 2016, p. 73). Exposing preschoolers to positive story lines within the books they flip through during play-time will allow them to establish more contact with individuals who may look different than themselves. The researchers also urge future studies to research the "basis of discrimination, sources and stages of acquisition of these attitudes, when these attitudes are translated into behavior, and their relationship to later episodes of victimization" (Harrison et al., 2016, p. 73).

While the children participating in the study usually showed more bias towards Overweight Alfie rather than Wheelchair Alfie, the fact that any discrimination occurred at such a young age is significant. As preschoolers are exposed to early literature in their classrooms, we must work towards including more children with disabilities within the storylines of the books they read and flip through. The more preschoolers are exposed to book characters with disabilities, the more normalized disability will become (MacMillan et al., 2014).

Mode of Measurement: "Earth is big enough for all kinds of people."

So what might that look like – books featuring characters with disabilities? In an attempt to answer this question, I did a Google search for "children's books featuring disability." Rather than scrolling online through the most popular books of 2020 like I did for children's toys, I chose a different strategy: I chose to narrow my search to analyzing three books I already knew featured disability. This seemed a more efficient use of time, as scrolling through a list of the most popular books of 2020 would still leave me unsure as to which books featured disability – unless I were to buy and read each and every one.

My Google search provided me with a link to an article called "Representation Matters: 10 Children's Books with Disabled Characters" (Kingsbury, 2019). It is important to note that this article was written for people who were intentionally searching for inclusive children's books, so it was likely not the most broadly-reaching suggestion list. However, this list serves to encourage readers, teachers, and parents alike that disability-inclusive books do exist, and in some circles, they are growing in popularity. Scrolling through these ten books, I researched each one so as to narrow down my analysis to books that were specifically written for children of the preschool age. I was left with three: *Joy, We're all Wonders,* and *King for a Day.* However, I realize that simply because a book features disability does not mean that it strays from the stereotypical method of viewing disability through the medical model (Husband, 2020). To analyze which disability studies model influenced these three books, I created three questions through which I aimed to analyze each disability depiction:

1. What is the centrality of the disabled character? Are they the main character or are they a supporting character?
2. Is the character's disability explained for children to understand? Or is it left implicit – featured as just another facet of the character's identity instead of its focal point?
3. Is the depiction of disability a positive portrayal, a negative portrayal, or a neutral portrayal?

With these three questions in mind, I began my analysis of the representations of disability depicted in these three children's books.

Joy

Written by Corinne Averiss and Isabelle Follath, *Joy* is full of vibrant color and illustrations. The book tells the story of a little girl named Fern and her attempts to bring her ill Nanna some joy. On the second page of the book, it is revealed that Nanna – who once made butterfly cakes, had mice figurines on her mantelpiece, and snuggled her cat Snowball – has fallen ill. She looks tired and weary, sitting in her chair – a wheelchair off to the corner of the page, as is illustrated in **Figure 11** (Averiss & Follath, 2018).

Worried about Nanna, Fern asks her mother what's wrong. "It's like the joy has gone out of her life," Mom replies. In response, Fern makes it her goal to find Nanna some joy so that she might smile once again. She goes to the park and tries to catch the giggles of a little girl on the swings, the sparkles of sunlight she sees in the duck pond, and the bounce of a little puppy bounding towards her. Nothing works. Discouraged, she returns home and tells her Nanna that she was unsuccessful in finding joy to give her. To Fern's surprise, Nanna smiles and says, "You don't need a can or a box or a net to bring me joy. You bring me all the joy in the world just by being you.” The next day, Fern pushes Nanna in her wheelchair back to the park and they experience joy together, despite Nanna’s disability and illness (Averiss & Follath, 2018).

Fern loved Nanna.
She loved her butterfly cakes,
her mantelpiece mice,
and her cat, Snowball.

Most of all, she loved her smile.

Figure 10. *Nanna Prior to her Disability*

But recently, Nanna had stopped
baking cakes, the mice were dusty,
and Snowball was more like a ball of fuzz.

Worst of all,
Nanna hardly ever smiled.

Figure 11. *Nanna after Experiencing Disability*

Nanna, the character with a disability, is a supporting character of the book. The specifics of her disability are implicit, however. This is clearly intentional, as the story is told from the point of view of Fern, a young child who likely does not understand Nanna’s disability herself. Since Fern doesn’t understand the specifics of Nanna’s disability, the young audience is not meant to understand it either. They are simply meant to understand that because Nanna looks weary and ill, her joy is subsequently lessened.

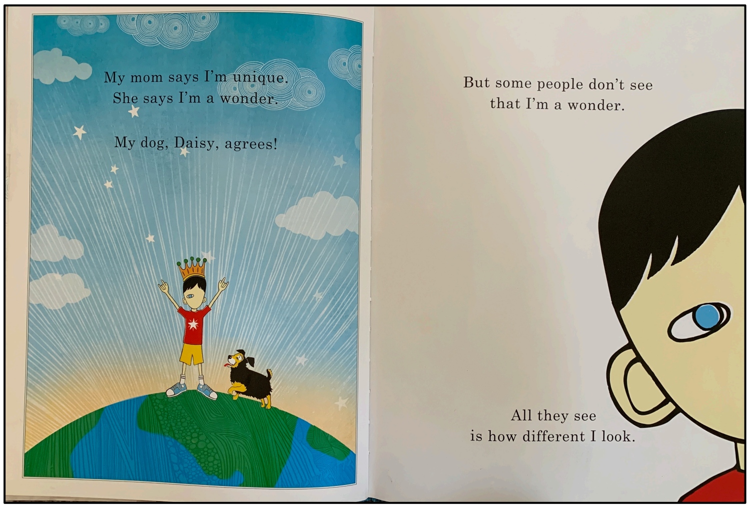
It is important to note that the disability depiction in this story is different from the examples I have previously addressed in this thesis; this disability is clearly something that Nanna did not always have. The depiction of disability in this book is one that comes with age, reminding me of a quote from one of my professors, Dr. Benjamin Reiss, in which he explained that "disability is one of the only minority groups – if not the only one – that every single one of us, should we reach old age, will experience in our lifetime." In this book, it is implied that as Nanna has aged, she has become disabled as her body has deteriorated over time. Nanna is shown to be sadder, more weary, and less like herself than she was before she needed to use a wheelchair. Thus, the depiction of disability is ultimately negative. Nanna's disability is viewed solely as a deficit; she must live and experience joy despite being disabled.

However, while her disability is viewed as a deficit, I would consider that *Joy* is not written through one of the three lenses I outlined in my first chapter. The responsibility of her disability has not been placed upon her; Averiss and Follath intentionally have written the narrative as if the disability has happened *to* her, thus placing Nanna's limitations more on the physicality of disability itself rather than Nanna as an individual. Even though "disability as a deficit" is a lens that is usually considered to be medical, the representation of Nanna's disability does not fit perfectly into any one of the three categories I have previously outlined, likely placing it within another disability studies model that I have not discussed within this thesis.

Thus, *Joy* proves important for two reasons. It proves that representations of disability cannot fit into a mere three-model-scheme, and it also presents an important lesson for preschoolers to learn and normalize: sometimes your loved ones will develop disabilities because disability is not always a fixed state; you may not have a disability as a child but may experience one later in life. But as *Joy* illustrates, developing a disability does not mean that life ceases to be worth living.

We're All Wonders

We're All Wonders, written by R.J. Palacio, opens with a simple statement, "I know I'm not an ordinary kid." The illustration beside this statement is one of a little boy named Auggie, who is pictured with one eye. As the book goes on, Auggie tells the reader that while he does ordinary things like riding his bike and eating ice cream, he doesn't look ordinary. His mom says he's unique and a wonder – as is shown in **Figure 12** – but most of his peers do not see him this way. When they see him, they stare, point, and laugh. When he feels hurt by his peers' discriminatory treatments, he turns to his imagination to cope. Putting on his astronaut helmet, he takes his trusty canine sidekick, Daisy, and blasts off to Pluto. On Pluto, he can't see anyone, yet he knows that they are there on Earth. According to Auggie, these people on Earth are "people of all different colors. People who walk and talk differently. People who look different. Like me!" As Auggie arrives back on Earth, we watch him befriend another child as they discover that, if they both change the way they see each other, they will recognize that they are both wonders. The book then ends with the message: Look with kindness and you will always find wonder (Palacio, 2017).



My mom says I'm unique.
She says I'm a wonder.

My dog, Daisy, agrees!

But some people don't see
that I'm a wonder.

All they see
is how different I look.

Figure 12. *Auggie Describes his Difference*

Auggie, the main character of the book, has a disability. Auggie's disability is not explained explicitly for children to understand; he is only described as "looking different." However, the depiction of disability throughout the book is positive. Taking a social model viewpoint of disability, Palacio connotes that it is the negative reaction of Auggie's peers that make him feel bad about himself. Otherwise, he is affirmed by his mother (and his dog, Daisy) that he is a wonder just as he is.

King for a Day

Written by Rukhsana Khan, *King for a Day* is more advanced in reading level and is likely meant to be read out loud to preschoolers. In it, Khan paints a story of triumph while depicting the vibrant culture and tradition of Basant, Pakistan's spring kite festival characterized by feasts, parties, and kite-flying battles. Malik, the main character, uses a wheelchair. At the beginning of the day, he takes his homemade kite, dubbed Falcon, to the roof of his family home. On the rooftop of a nearby apartment, a bully flies his kite, which Malik nicknames Goliath, as is illustrated in **Figure 13**. As the bully attacks Malik's kite with Goliath, Malik fights back and ultimately slices the bully's kite string with Falcon's. The story continues, describing how Malik continues to engage in kite-battles, using Falcon to, "pluck them from the sky as if it really is a bird of prey" (Khan, 2013, n.p.). Falcon slashes through kite after kite, making Malik the "king of Basant:" a title given to the champion of the kite-flying battles throughout the city.

As Malik sits back and basks in his triumph, he hears cries from down below on the street. Peering over the side of the roof, he sees the bully from before pushing a young girl to the ground and stealing her kite. As the girl sobs and starts to walk away, Malik takes Goliath, which one of his siblings retrieved for him after he sliced its string, and drops it off the side of the roof for the girl to retrieve. He ducks below before she is able to look up and see who gifted it to her. The book ends with Malik watching the Basant fireworks explode as the stars start to come out as he dreams about the new kite he will make for next year's Basant (Khan, 2013).

There's the bully next door. Ha! It's time to make him pay for hitting me and throwing stones at my sister. I'll get back at him with Falcon.

The bully shouts at us, calling my sister a bad name.

My sister yells right back, but when she turns around, I can see she is hurt inside.

Figure 13. *Malik Watches as the Bully Brings Out Goliath*

Like both *Joy* and *We're all Wonders,* this book does not explicitly explain Malik's disability. Contrary to the previous books, however, *King for a Day* does not acknowledge Malik's disability at all, implicitly or explicitly. The only insight we get into his disability is the fact that we see him in a wheelchair in the illustrations. This decision to forgo addressing

Malik's disability is an important one. By solely illustrating Malik in a wheelchair yet choosing not to address it, Khan has shone light on the other parts of Malik's identity. For example, he has shown light on the fact that he is a brother, a skilled kite-flyer, and an empathetic person. This depiction of disability normalizes wheelchair-use as children are able to simply sit back, relax, and listen to the story of how a young boy – who just so happens to be in a wheelchair – triumphs in a kite-flying festival in Pakistan.

All three of these children's books depict disability in a different light – showcasing just how broad the world of disability is. *Joy* depicts disability that occurs with age, *We're All Wonders* shines light on the effects of disability discrimination, and *King for a Day* shows that disability is not the main part of a disabled person's identity. While each of these three books represents disability, *King for a Day* is a clear example of what it looks like for children's books to be fully inclusive, as disability is not made the forefront of Malik's story, nor is it shown to be a deficit to his life. It is simply neutral: another facet of his complex, full identity.

CHAPTER 4: Children's Television

Literature Review: "Finding Difference: Nemo & Friends"

When recalling the beloved Disney film *Finding Nemo,* viewers might first picture a small clownfish's father journeying across the ocean to save his son; they may remember the humor behind learning what goes on within a dentist's fish tank; or they may remember Dory's famous quote, "Just Keep Swimming," still plastered across t-shirts and inspirational graphics today. Although *Finding Nemo* was released almost twenty years ago, it currently still holds the position of the most financially-successful Pixar film to date (Negroni, 2018). When young children watch the widely-popular film today, however, they likely do not realize that this was one of Disney's earliest positive depictions of disability.

In the journal article, "Finding Difference: Nemo & Friends Opening the Door to Disability Theory," Daniel L. Preston points out the most explicit depiction of physical disability in the film: Nemo's "lucky fin," a fin congenitally shorter than the other. By unpacking a specific scene in the film, Preston explains how Disney took strides towards disability inclusion in this 2003 film.

In the scene, Nemo arrives at school to converse with three other children. Upon meeting Nemo, one octopus asks, "What's wrong with his fin?" to which another fish replies, "He looks funny." Marlin, Nemo's father, comes to Nemo's defense and says, "[Nemo] was born with it, kids. We call it his lucky fin." The other children then begin describing how they are different as well; the octopus describes how she has a tentacle that is shorter than the others, while the seahorse explains that he is H20 intolerant. This empathetic conversation contrasts Marlin's tendency to focus on what Nemo cannot do – a tendency that is highlighted by one of his most poignant lines: "You think you can do these things but you just *can't*, Nemo!" This tendency to remind Nemo of his limitations is surely due to the fact that, as Nemo's father, he fears for his son's safety. Due to his overprotective nature, however, Marlin views Nemo's "lucky fin" as a deficit, thus viewing his son's disability through the lens of the medical model. But while Marlin is constantly depicting his son as "less able" than other fish, the children acknowledge Nemo's difference but take it in stride, "creating an atmosphere free (at least for the moment) of disability" (Preston, 2010). By sharing their differences with Nemo, such as the octopus' shorter tentacle and the seahorse's H20 intolerance, they establish that they are all different – and in that, they are the same.

Later in the film, Nemo is captured and subsequently kept in a fish tank at an Australian dentist's office. Among the diverse group of fish in this tank, Nemo's size and ability are actually seen as important and capable – as it is Nemo's small size that allows the fish to escape from the tank later in the movie. Directly contradicting Marlin's constant tendency to remind Nemo of the limitations of his disability, the fish in the tank – especially Gill – value Nemo and accept his difference. Both the children and Gill's reaction to Nemo's disability are a prime example of the social model: the limitations of Nemo's disability are lessened when the fish around him do not view it as a deficit. Preston ends his article with a call for teachers to ask their students questions when they view depictions of disability, thus getting their students thinking and analyzing "where different treatment occurs because of a disability…[leaving it up to the] students to determine the correctness and value of those behaviors" (Preston, 2010).

In the following section, I attempt to do just that. While analyzing three current children's television episodes that depict disability, I will ask questions determining the value and correctness of the behaviors aimed towards the disabled characters featured onscreen.

Mode of Measurement: "In so many ways, we are the same!"

For my analysis of media, I decided to use a mode of measurement similar to the method I implemented for my analysis of children's books: finding three children's television shows that featured characters with disabilities and analyzing the depiction of disability within each one. As I analyzed the portrayals of disability in this section, I acknowledged that – similar to children's books – disability representation does not guarantee inclusive representation.

To begin my observation, I did a Google search for "children's TV shows featuring disabled characters," and found an article listing eleven television shows that featured characters with disabilities. Again, it is important to note that this article was written for audiences searching for inclusive media, thus likely making it less broadly-reaching than an article titled, "Best Children's TV Shows of 2020," for example. I then researched each television show mentioned in the article and narrowed the list down to the shows that were made specifically for preschool-aged children; that is, children ages 3 to 5 (Metraux, 2020). This specification left me with three television episodes to analyze: one from Disney's *Goldie & Bear*, PBS' *Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood,* and a show named *Punky* based out of Dublin, Ireland. To carry out my observations, I applied the same three questions I used for observation in my previous children's books chapter:

1. What is the centrality of the disabled character? Are they the main character or are they a supporting character?
2. Is the character's disability explained for children to understand? Or is it left implicit – featured as just another facet of the character's identity instead of its focal point?
3. Is the depiction of disability a positive portrayal, a negative portrayal, or a neutral portrayal?

Goldie & Bear

The first television show, Disney's *Goldie & Bear,* is written for children aged four and up. Each episode follows the fairytale character, Goldie Locks, and her friend Bear as they embark on adventures throughout Fairytale Forest (*Goldie & Bear - TV Review*, 2015). In the first episode of season two, we meet Marian Locks, Goldie's mother. Marian Locks enters the scene announcing that she has gifts for Goldie and Bear that she has collected from her recent adventures in Fairytale Forest, as is pictured in **Figure 14.** It is not until she greets Goldie with a warm hug that we see her wheelchair. Thus, the wheelchair is not made the focal point of this supporting character's identity.

Figure 14. *Marian Locks Arrives Home From her Adventure*

As we follow the episode, we also realize that Marian's wheelchair not only aids her mobility; it can also turn into a car and a flying contraption which she later uses to save Goldie from her impulsive trip to the moon, as **Figure 15** shows. This portrayal of Marian as "motherly hero" coming to Goldie's rescue is clearly positive, even if the show never explains why Marian uses a wheelchair.

Ultimately, there are two lenses through which to view this particular disability representation: one that labels the depiction of Marian as "supercrip," and one that labels her identity as "multi-faceted." Through the lens of the "supercrip," we must acknowledge that this overtly positive and heroic portrayal of Marian is an attempt to convey her as a "supercrip," or a person in a wheelchair who is glorified by doing more extraordinary deeds than surrounding individuals (Schalk, 2016). Her heroic deeds and futuristic wheelchair certainly dub her more "extraordinary" than the characters around her. Through the "multi-faceted" lens, however, we acknowledge that, by making this conscious choice to omit the explicit mention of Marian's disability, Disney intends to expose children to disability without making it the forefront of Marian's identity. While she does have a disability - she is also a mother, a collector, an adventurer, and a hero (*Disney+ | Video Player*, n.d.).

Figure 15. *Marian Locks Saves her Daughter*

Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood

Based on the beloved PBS show, *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood, Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood* features 4-year-old Daniel Tiger, son of Daniel Striped Tiger, Mister Rogers' puppet. Intended for children ages two to four, the show engages preschoolers with stories meant to teach them social and emotional skills necessary for life (Parents, 2021).

In episode thirty-one of season one, Daniel meets Chrissie, the niece of Queen Saturday and King Friday (*Chrissie*, n.d.). While Chrissie is a supporting character, her appearance is important. As she stands up to join Daniel Tiger and his friends, Daniel hears Queen Saturday ask her if she needs any help getting up. The fact that Queen Saturday asks Chrissie if she would like help rather than assuming she needs help signifies the autonomy PBS has given Chrissie's character. As Queen Saturday helps Chrissie gather her forearm crutches, Daniel stares at her leg braces, and eventually asks: "Chrissie, what's on your legs?"

The question likely lingering in every two-year-old's mind has finally been spoken. "Why do you wear them?" Daniel's friend asks, echoing the audience's next inquiry. In **Figure 16**, we see Chrissie proceeding to explain that she is just like Daniel and his friends, but that she "just walk[s] a little differently." She explains that she was born needing to use braces, and proceeds to tell Daniel when and how often she uses them. Queen Saturday then extinguishes the next question lingering in children's minds, explaining that, even if Daniel and his friends were to play close to Chrissie, they would not need to wear braces too. Thus, Chrissie's disability is explained in great detail to the audience at hand. This intentional explanation of disability is clearly PBS' attempt to not leave children with mere exposure to disability; the network wishes for young children to understand disability and encourages them to be curious and ask questions – an inclusive step towards normalizing disability within our communities.

Figure 16. *Daniel and his Friends Meet Chrissie*

As the episode continues, the positive portrayal of Chrissie and her disability is reinforced. Chrissie and Daniel soon learn that they both go to school: a similarity despite the fact that they look different. Queen Saturday then bursts into song, singing, “In some ways we are different – but in so many ways, we are the same!,” a tune that is likely to resound in the mind of every child watching (PBS KIDS, 2017).

Punky

My third show was one not known to many in the United States: *Punky*. *Punky* is an animated children’s show based in Dublin, Ireland, featuring stories from the life of Punky, a little girl with Down Syndrome. The show’s website describes Punky as a “happy little girl who loves music, dancing and hugs!...As a child with Down syndrome, Punky lives in the moment. If something isn’t right, if someone has a problem, Punky will set out to fix it” (*Punky - Animated TV Series Which Tells Stories from the Everyday Life of Punky, a Little Girl, Who Has Down Syndrome*, n.d.).

Because Punky has a depicted disability and is also the main character of the show, there were many analyzable clips to choose from. I settled upon one titled, “Everybody is Different,” from the show’s “Back to School” episode. In the episode, some peers are upset because Punky has an “extra teacher,” Miss Flynn. Miss Flynn soon explains that she is Punky’s support teacher, there to help Punky with areas such as reading and math. While the show does not entirely explain Down Syndrome in this particular episode, they encompass many aspects of the disability over the course of the show, thus explaining what Down Syndrome is like to the intended audience.

In response to Miss Flynn’s explanation, Owen, pictured in the right of **Figure 17** below, exclaims that Punky is different and tells her she has Down Syndrome. Instead of lashing back, Punky cheerfully says, “Yes, I do!” Owen then states that *he* is not different, to which Punky responds with multiple ways in which he is; for example, he is wearing different socks, sits on his chair differently than the other children, and does not like lettuce in his sandwiches.

Figure 17. *Punky (Center) with Friends and Owen (Right)*

As the episode continues, Punky proceeds to follow Owen throughout the school day, pointing out more ways in which he is different from the other children. It is not until Punky's friend tells her that she should stop this behavior that Punky ceases from calling him "different." Instead, Punky's friend points out that while she does not have Down Syndrome and Punky does, they still both enjoy playing on the swings and being friends. This conversation leads Punky to later approach Owen while they are painting in class and the two become fast friends despite the fact that they are both "different" (Wizz, 2018). Thus, Owen's initial reaction to Punky's Down Syndrome is an explicit example of the social model of disability. When Punky's friend and her are swinging and talking about their friendship, the limitations of Punky's disability are made less prominent. When she is working alongside Owen and is subject to his remarks, her disability is made more conspicuous by his perceptions of her.

This complex depiction of Punky is important. Punky is seen as both being in the right and being in the wrong: she is seen as right when she claims that Owen, too, is different, but she quickly oversteps boundaries when she follows Owen around the playground repeatedly telling him just how different he is. This intentional illustration of Punky as a complex character who can be both right and wrong speaks to the true inclusion of the Irish show. Her disability is simply another facet of her identity as a child; while she has Down Syndrome, this does not affect her ability to swing with her friends or annoy a boy in her class, just as many children do.

The three shows analyzed here have more complex representations than initially meet the eye. *Goldie & Bear* features disability representation, but the show's overly-positive illustration of disability may perhaps be overcompensating for the fact that Marian Locks is in a wheelchair, potentially dubbing this representation one of a "supercrip." *Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood* takes a different approach, intentionally explaining Chrissie's disability in detail so that children may be encouraged to ask questions about disability themselves. The third show, *Punky,* ends this section with an example that is truly inclusive. Punky is simply another child. She happens to have Down Syndrome, but she also happens to play at recess with her friends and annoy her classmates, as children do. This is the hope for future inclusive television episodes – that children with disabilities can be seen as complex characters, experiencing their disability but also experiencing life. When preschoolers are exposed to television episodes like these, they will gradually learn to normalize disability.

CHAPTER 5: Playground Infrastructure

Literature Review: Based on ADA Playground Guidelines

During my time working at an inclusive preschool, one of the most common questions I heard was: “Can I play on the playground?” To ensure that every preschooler who asks this question is able to hear the answer of a confident, “Yes!” the Americans with Disabilities Act (or ADA) has established a list of minimum accessibility guidelines required of all playgrounds and recreational facilities, except those that are owned by religious entities. All of these guidelines are intended to promote a “general level of usability for children with disabilities” (*ADA Guide*, 2001). Just as I have been mostly analyzing the representation of physical disabilities, these guidelines are intended to promote inclusive play environments for children with physical disabilities. In this section, I plan to address vocabulary used within the ADA’s established guidelines, as I have based my subsequent rating scale of playgrounds on these guidelines in the rest of this chapter.

An example of an accessible playground is pictured in **Figure 18**, a model provided by the ADA within their policy document. To be considered accessible, this playground must have an accessible route: “a continuous unobstructed path connecting all accessible elements and spaces of a building or facility” (*ADA Guide*, 2001, p. 4). Accessible playgrounds, like the one pictured below, will often have an elevated play component: a play component that children are able to access by climbing up a flight of stairs, traveling up a ramp, or climbing up some other structure. Also pictured in **Figure 18**, elevated components must have an accessible point of entry – oftentimes in the form of a ramp. While elevated play components are beneficial to physical development of children, ground-level play components are essential to creating an accessible play environment. If a child in a wheelchair is unable to leave their wheelchair and climb up to the elevated play component, they should be able to approach and exit the ground level component easily. Lastly, the use zone labeled in **Figure 18** is where children are expected to exit from a play structure. In this case, the use zone is where the children traveling down the slide will land on the ground. In the following section, I will explain how I created a rating scale based on ADA Playground Requirements, using the playground terms defined here, to compare the accessibility of ten playgrounds in the Atlanta area.

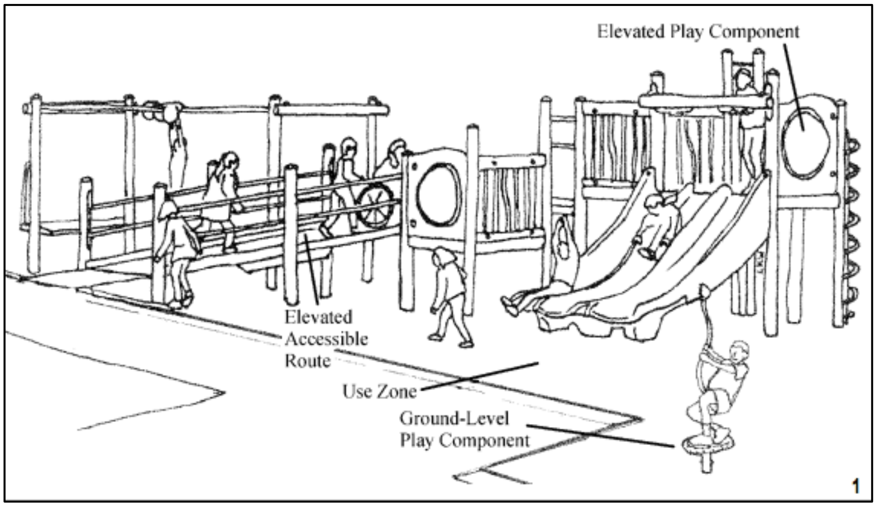


Figure 18. *Accessible Playground Depiction Provided by the ADA*

Mode of Measurement: Surveying Playgrounds in Decatur, Georgia

I have listed five components below – each based on ADA recommendations – that I considered in each of the playgrounds I observed, whether they were public playgrounds or private and belonging to a preschool:

1. Is there an accessible path from the parking lot to the edge of the play area?
2. Is the surface of the ground made of an accessible substance – such as concrete or rubber – that allows for easy travel if a child uses a wheelchair, has leg braces, has a prosthetic limb, etc.?
3. Does the playground have a ground-level play component?

4. Does the playground have an elevated play component?
5. If the playground does have an elevated play component, are its separate structures connected by an accessible route?

With this five-point rating scale in mind, I ventured out into the Atlanta area. Because of my proximity to Emory's campus and my knowledge of the many playgrounds in the Decatur area, I decided to narrow my initial search to a radius of 2.5 miles around Emory's campus. My findings involved three public playgrounds – one of which had two playgrounds on site – and two private, preschool-owned playgrounds. Below are my ratings of each playground, beginning with the first three available to the general public.

Public Playgrounds:

Figure 19. *Rutledge Park (1.0 miles from Emory)*

A small playground hidden within a crop of trees, Rutledge Park is located within a quaint residential neighborhood near Emory's campus. Walking from the street into the area designated for the park, I followed a long, winding path through a thick mess of bushes to reach the play area. While accessible in the sense that it did have a ramp down to the playground, the path was unkempt and hard to navigate. When I arrived at the playground, I saw that the surface of the ground was made of gravel and wood chips – inaccessible substances for a child with mobility impairments. There was one ground-level play component, however: a bee spring rider. A child in a wheelchair could potentially pull themselves into this spring rider as someone else pushed them. The playground did have an elevated play component: a slide and a swing set (with the swing seats removed due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic). However, these elements of elevated play were not connected by an accessible route. Overall, Rutledge Park only met 3 of my 5 ADA-based rating components.

Figure 20. *Mason Mill Park (2.0 miles from Emory): Large Playground*

Near Emory's Clairmont campus, Mason Mill Park is well developed and well trafficked. Mason Mill had two playgrounds on site. While they were meant for children aged 5-12, both could also easily accommodate children aged 3-4. The first playground, pictured in **Figure 20**, was larger than the second and had an accessible route from the parking lot: a sidewalk leading into a ramp in the play area. The surface of the ground was made of mulch, except for rubber pads laid in front of each slide's use zone – not the most accessible material for children in wheelchairs, but not completely inaccessible either. The playground lacked a ground level component, as much of the play structure was elevated and required either climbing or stepping onto a raised platform. These elevated components were connected by a combination of ramps and stairs, resulting in this first large playground also meeting 3/5 of my playground components.

Figure 21. *Mason Mill Park (2.0 miles from Emory): Small Playground*

The second playground at Mason Mill, the smaller one pictured in **Figure 21**, was also meant for children aged 5-12. This playground also had an accessible path from the parking lot to the play area, but the ground was also made of inaccessible mulch, except for the rubber pads in front of each slide's use zone. This playground, however, did have a ground-level play component in the form of swings. While there was no ramp to enter into the elevated component, the play structures were connected by ramps, earning this playground a rating of 4/5.

Figure 22. *Glenlake Park (2.4 miles from Emory)*

Because there were many children playing at this playground, I was unable to get a close image of the structures. Located beside many walking trails and tennis courts, Glenlake Park was quite full this Saturday morning. The sidewalk from the parking lot to the playground was accessible and smooth, connecting to a dip in the border surrounding the playground. The ground, however, was made of inaccessible mulch. The features that stood out at this playground were the scattered ground level components – taking form in a bus spring rider (in the far left of **Figure 22**) and multiple swing sets. The playground also had an elevated play component, but this elevated play component was accessible only by climbing up stairs, and connected only by monkey bars and a rock wall, earning this playground a rating of 3/5.

Private Playgrounds

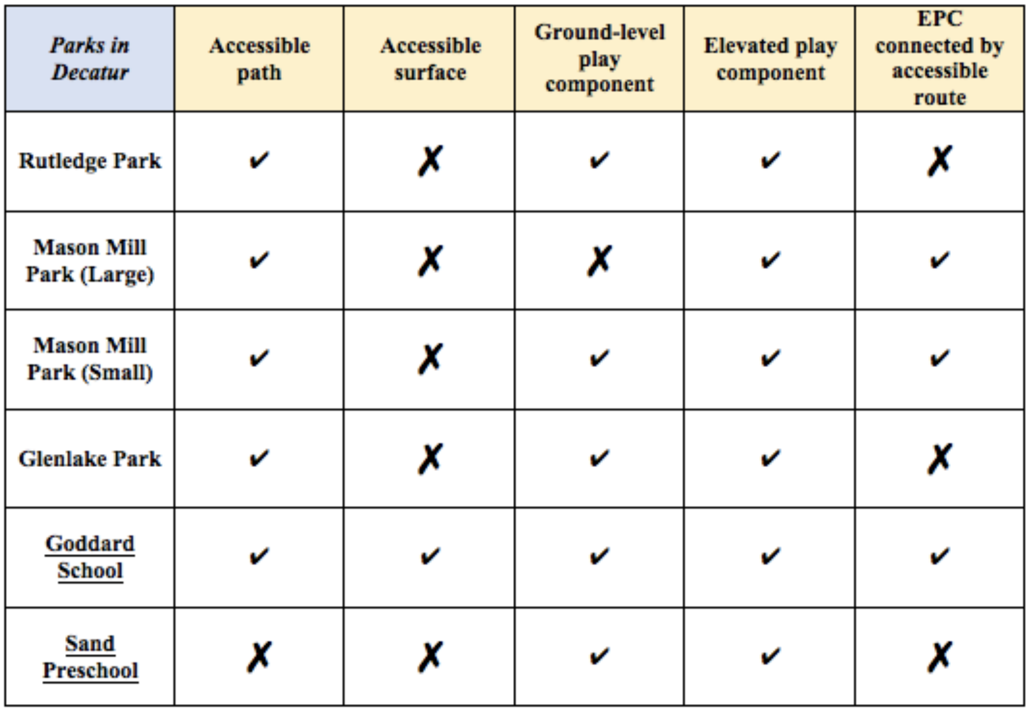
Figure 23. *The Goddard School of Decatur (1.7 miles from Emory)*

The Goddard School of Decatur, a quaint private preschool, is located across the street from Mason Mill Park. Because this playground belongs to a private preschool, there was not a public entrance from the parking lot into the play area, but I did view an accessible pathway from the building to the play structures. This playground was the first to have an accessible ground material: concrete, as pictured in **Figure 23**. There was a ground level component in the form of the tunnel below the slides, and the elevated component was accessible by stairs – the first step being low enough so that a child with mobility impairments might pull themselves up. The rest of the elevated component was connected by ramps, resulting in this private playground receiving a 5/5.

Figure 24. *Sand Preschool (2.5 miles from Emory): Ground Component*

Figure 25. *Sand Preschool (2.5 miles from Emory): Elevated Component*

To provide a point of contrast, I surveyed Sand Preschool: a private preschool owned by a religious entity, North Decatur United Methodist Church, thus exempting them from following ADA playground guidelines. Curious as to whether or not they would still choose to follow ADA guidelines, I ventured into North Decatur to observe. While the playground had an accessible path from the parking lot at the front of the school, there was no accessible pathway from the back parking lot. As pictured in **Figure 24** and **Figure 25**, the ground was made completely of wood chips – an inaccessible material for wheelchairs and leg braces. There were a few scattered ground level components, such as a panel where children could sit and slide a car along a pathway. The elevated component, however, was connected solely by steps, thus lacking any sort of accessible pathway between structures. Sand Preschool received a 2/5 on my rating scale, a reflection of the fact that they were exempt from following ADA playground guidelines.



Parks in Decatur	**Accessible path**	**Accessible surface**	**Ground-level play component**	**Elevated play component**	**EPC connected by accessible route**
Rutledge Park	✔	✗	✔	✔	✗
Mason Mill Park (Large)	✔	✗	✗	✔	✔
Mason Mill Park (Small)	✔	✗	✔	✔	✔
Glenlake Park	✔	✗	✔	✔	✗
Goddard School	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔
Sand Preschool	✗	✗	✔	✔	✗

Figure 26. *Data on Decatur Playgrounds. Private playgrounds are underlined.*

To find that only one of the Decatur playgrounds I observed fulfilled each of my five ADA-based rating components, as shown in **Figure 26**, was quite a shock. While understanding the exact demographics of Decatur and how this relates to its playgrounds is beyond my scope, I decided to take my research one step further and delve deeper into Atlanta's playgrounds. What better way to delve deeper into Atlanta's playgrounds than travel into the heart of the city itself?

Comparison Group: Surveying Playgrounds in Downtown Atlanta

I decided to create a comparison between Decatur and downtown Atlanta. By surveying the playgrounds within a 1.5 mile radius of the campus of Morehouse College, I hoped to learn more about what accessibility looks like in different demographic spheres. The decision for my 1.5 mile radius of Morehouse was twofold: the area is more densely populated, so I narrowed my search to a smaller radius as that still provided me with an adequate amount of data; and Morehouse, a historically black men's liberal arts college in downtown Atlanta, acts as a striking contrast to Emory in both demographic and location. As it is beyond the scope of this particular thesis, however, I will not be delving into the intersectionality between disability, race, and socioeconomic status. While it is important to note that these intersecting factors may be even more compounded to disabled individuals (Frederick & Shifrer, 2019), in this chapter, I am outlining solely objective observations rather than delving into the causation of differences between the two locations. This is not to say in the least that discussing causation and intersectionality is not important, but that it is simply an area of research I could discuss for many more pages than I have the ink and paper for here. Future studies should certainly delve into the relationship between demographics of the Decatur and Downtown Atlanta area and their relationship to whether or not playgrounds are accessible in each neighborhood.

Public Playgrounds:

Figure 27. *Howell Park (0.5 miles from Morehouse's Campus)*

With the same 5-point rating scale in mind, I traveled into the heart of Atlanta. The first playground I surveyed was nestled within a public park, Howell Park, pictured in **Figure 27**. Before I analyze its accessibility, however, I will note that there was a sign stating that the "playstructure [had] been assigned for children 5 to 12 years old and [required] users to have sufficient strength and coordination." This age assignment falls just outside the cusp of the preschool-range of 3 to 5 years old; but regardless of age, playground accessibility still needs to be met. I proceeded with my survey.

Howell did have an accessible sidewalk from the road to the playground, but the ground was made of inaccessible mulch – a trend I am observing in many playgrounds. The playground did have both a ground-level component and an elevated level component. The ground level contained a few scattered components: a tic-tac-toe board at a reachable height for any child – whether sitting or standing – and one spinning seat. The elevated play component was accessible in that a child could potentially hoist themselves up the steps and crawl up to the platform, but out of the three points of entrance, that was the only accessible one, earning this playground a 4/5.

Figure 28. *West End Park (0.6 miles from Morehouse's Campus): Ground Component*

Figure 29. *West End Park (0.6 miles from Morehouse's Campus): Elevated Component*

Located blocks away from Howell Park, West End Park is also nestled within a public recreational area – tennis courts and walking trails scattered throughout. Like Howell, West End also had an age assignment: "assigned for children 5 to 12 years old." Albeit long and set at an incline, there was a sidewalk from the road to the playground. The playground itself was set with rubber mulch: an inaccessible material. There were, however, multiple ground level components, such as the swings pictured in **Figure 28**. The elevated component, like Howell's elevated component, was only accessible by stairs but if a child were to lift themselves up said stairs, they would be able to travel across the play structure by ramp, as pictured in **Figure 29**. This playground earned a 4/5 on my rating scale.

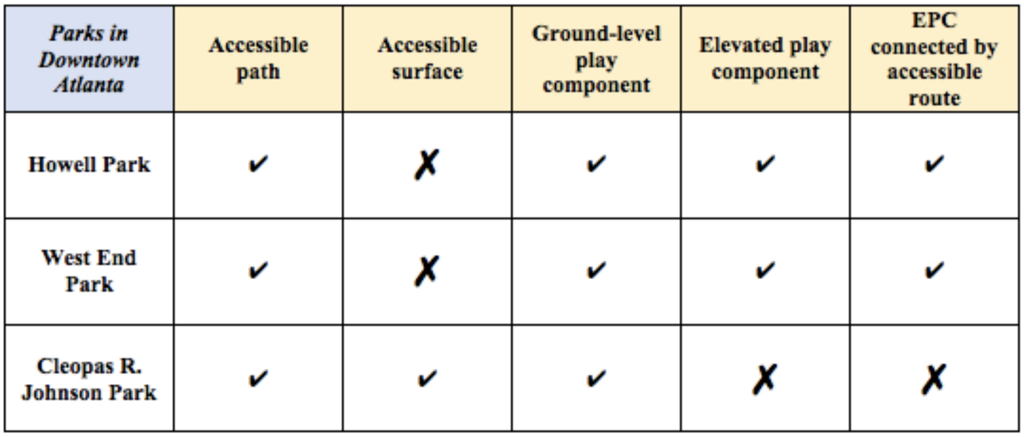
Figure 30. *Cleopas R. Johnson Park (1.1 miles from Morehouse's Campus): Ground Component*

Figure 31. *Cleopas R. Johnson Park (1.1 miles from Morehouse's Campus): Ground Component*

Cleopas was one of the more unique playgrounds I surveyed; many of the structures there were ones I had never seen before, such as the two ground-level components pictured in **Figure 30** and **Figure 31**. The playground had an accessible path from the parking lot to the structures, and the ground was made of a bonded rubber mulch: an accessible material for any child. Strikingly, Cleopas did not have an elevated component. Its scattered ground-level components made up the park: an inaccessible swingset, accessible spinning seats (**Figure 30**), and a dangerously inaccessible climbing "web" structure (**Figure 31**). While unique, Cleopas earned a mere 3/5 on my accessibility scale.

Private Playgrounds:

The two preschools I planned to survey, Ashby Street Learning Academy and Magnolia Park Preschool, were both unavailable for observation as Ashby Street Learning Academy was boarded up and closed upon my arrival, and Magnolia Park Preschool was within a private apartment complex into which I was not granted access. Below in **Figure 32** are my observations of public playgrounds in downtown Atlanta.



Parks in Downtown Atlanta	Accessible path	Accessible surface	Ground-level play component	Elevated play component	EPC connected by accessible route
Howell Park	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓
West End Park	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓
Cleopas R. Johnson Park	✓	✓	✓	✗	✗

Figure 32. *Data on Playgrounds in Downtown Atlanta*

Positive Example: Designed for "All Children"

To find an example of an ADA-approved, accessible playground within Atlanta, I found an article online outlining several and ultimately chose to survey one that, during pre-pandemic times, was highly-populated and well-known: All Children's Playground at Centennial Olympic Park (*Best Accessible Playgrounds in Metro Atlanta*, 2020).

Figure 33. *All Children's Playground at Centennial Olympic Park (2.8 miles from Morehouse's Campus): Sway Fun*

Figure 34. *All Children's Playground at Centennial Olympic Park: Accessible Slides*

Figure 35. *All Children's Playground at Centennial Olympic Park: Accessible Swings*

While the playground was currently closed due to the ongoing pandemic, I observed its structures from afar. Accessible from the street by a smooth, short sidewalk, the play area is enclosed within a fence. From what I could see, the ground was made from either a bonded rubber mulch or concrete, complete with soft landing pads in use areas: accessible design choices. The playground contained both elevated and ground-level components. The slides, structures of the elevated component, were accessible by ramp and surrounded by rock to ensure that, regardless of a child's ability to hold themselves up, anyone would be able to slide down without fear of falling off of the side, as featured in **Figure 34**. As is shown in **Figure 33**, there was a "Sway Fun" component in which children would be able to play with peers regardless of whether or not they had mobility impairments.

Perhaps the most explicitly accessible play component, however, was the swing set. As is shown in the left-hand corner of **Figure 35**, the swings were not the usual backless swing found in playgrounds; they were seats that any child could be set in and pushed. By providing a back to the swing and allowing it to hang low enough for a safe transfer, the designers of this playground thought to include every child in the joy that comes from being pushed in a swing. This public playground earned a 5/5, clearly justifying its name: "All Children's Playground."

Regardless of whether or not the playground was private, public, in Decatur, or in downtown Atlanta, the majority of the playgrounds I surveyed were inaccessible, despite the regulations created by the ADA. Unfortunately, as my objective observations have shown, inaccessibility is not distinct to any certain area of Atlanta. It permeates most of the settings preschoolers find themselves in.

If every playground were accessible by ADA guidelines, disability would begin to be normalized as all children would be able to play together in common spaces, regardless of whether or not they had a disability. By intentionally making common preschool spaces accessible, such as playgrounds, we may work towards a cultural shift in the attitudes our children hold. In an inclusive future, parents should not have to Google, "most accessible playgrounds in Atlanta." They should be able to simply stop at any playground they come across, confident that it will meet their child’s needs for accessibility. Let these observations be a call to action: no longer should playgrounds be “accessible enough” when simply binding mulch or adding a back to a swing could make them a source of play for all children, regardless of their physical ability.

CONCLUSION

Future Studies: The Need for Neurodiversity Inclusion

Before I conclude, I'd like to acknowledge once again that the scope of my research here, while important, was limited to physically-observable disabilities. Disability is a broad experience; I do not mean to say that the representations outlined here, whether positive or negative or neutral, reflect the experiences of all physically disabled people. I also do not mean to say that discussions of able-mindedness are not important to the deconstruction of the ableist attitudes permeating our preschool spheres. Neurodiversity is prevalent in our society and should be normalized (den Houting, 2019), especially in preschool settings. The contrast currently existing between the expectations for able-mindedness versus neurotypicality is crucial to the conversation of deconstructing ableism; neurotypicality is simply harder to survey visually in toys and playground infrastructure. I propose that future studies of ableism in preschool settings include analyses of neurodiversity representation.

Ableism in Preschool Settings

Ableism permeates our world from the moment preschoolers enter their first classroom, as is shown by the results of this thesis. Starting from the lack of disability representation in their toys, preschoolers implicitly learn that only "normal" and "ideal" bodies should be reflected in their toy boxes. Oftentimes – as is shown by Amazon's best-selling preschool toys and dolls of 2020 – this means that toys that resemble humans are generally white and able-bodied, but this is clearly not the only human experience.

Preschoolers then reach for the paperbacks that line their bookshelves, only to find that very few feature disability representation. The few that do feature disability representation – such as *Joy, We're all Wonders,* and *King for a Day* – feature a broad range of disability experiences, leaving preschoolers with questions about what disability must mean. These questions likely arise once again when characters with disabilities appear on their television screens. Some characters, like Chrissie in *Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood,* encourage curiosity and normalize disability by answering questions children may have. Some characters, like Punky, normalize disability in a different sense: by allowing non-disabled children a peek into the world within which people with disabilities live – only to discover that this world may not be very different from their own. Other characters, like Marian Locks, may represent overcompensation for disability by over-glorifying other aspects of identity.

The quality of disability representation is clearly complicated. Just how often and just how inclusively disability representations occur in the preschool sphere is the question that needs to be constantly asked. We need not be only considering the amount of general contact non-disabled children experience with disability; we must be analyzing the quality of this contact as well (Consiglio et al., 2015).

The number of characters that are non-disabled consistently outweigh the number that are, leading preschoolers to believe that disability is an experience and identity that rarely exists in our communities. This belief is only reinforced when preschoolers play at their local playground on the weekend, only to find that the playground is full of non-disabled children because of a lack of accessible structures. As was shown by the surveys of playgrounds in Decatur and Downtown Atlanta, despite the guidelines set forth by the ADA, many playgrounds have yet to follow suit with accessibility. Thus, through the lens of the social model, we seem to have pushed disability far from the normative, often subjectively creating the limitations we so often say are "because of disability." In reality, these limitations are because of us – because of our lack of representation, policy, and infrastructure. How can we expect preschoolers to learn that disability is simply another part of the human experience if we rarely inclusively feature disability in their spheres?

Next Steps: Policies and Practices

To work towards inclusivity, we must not stop at general representation. Representation is the first step into a more equitable and inclusive world – one in which representation leads to empowerment. It is not enough to simply feature people with disabilities in the avenues of development we provide our children. Representation should not be a “favor” non-disabled people “give” to disabled people. Representation should be a given. As has been discussed in this thesis, disability representation should begin the moment a preschooler steps into their first classroom - if not earlier. Disability-inclusive toys, books, media, and playgrounds are just four areas in which this representation may take place, thus establishing more contact with disability in school settings (Consiglio et al., 2015).

Once representation has begun to be more widespread, empowerment will follow. No longer will it be the focal point of conversation when a TV show features a character with a disability; no longer will it be “inspiring,” or “brave.” It will simply be a given, as with increased representation, disability will begin to be normalized in our communities and social circles.

With this normalization, accessible practices will follow - such as making infrastructure more accessible through universal design. In the process of making infrastructure more accessible to disabled individuals, practices of universal design tend to benefit everyone. As disability rights leader Ed Roberts once said: “Anyone can join our group at any point in life…So those of us who are temporarily able-bodied and working for access and accommodation now get older, and the changes they make will benefit them as well” (Hamraie, 2017, p. 98). Curb cuts, handicap-accessible restrooms, automatic doors, and captioned videos are just a few examples of ways in which we might apply universal design to current infrastructure (Dartmouth, n.d.).

Universal design also applies to the field of education. In inclusive classrooms where both disabled and non-disabled individuals are educated in the same learning environment, universal design educational models may be used. According to the National Center on Universal Design for Learning, the UDL approach consists of three main principles: providing multiple means of representation, providing multiple means of action and expression, and providing multiple means of engagement (*UDL: The UDL Guidelines*, 2018). By ensuring that classrooms are utilizing a curriculum that incorporates hands-on, auditory, and visual learning opportunities, the UDL approach views education through the social model of disability: instead of placing the locus of disadvantage on the child, the curriculum changes to fit the child's needs.

As normalization materializes through universal design practices in infrastructure and education, more opportunities for power and influence for people with disabilities will occur. As the United States enters into a recession post-pandemic, the need for the employment of disabled individuals will be even greater. To increase employment opportunities for disabled people, employers may take strides such as having a budget to cover accommodation costs for disabled employees, hiring a hiring manager and senior executive with a disability, "provid[ing] disability inclusion training for company's HR recruiters," or "participat[ing] in job fairs for people with disabilities" (Chan et al., 2020). By hiring disabled individuals, perhaps inclusive examples such as Barbie #165 in **Figure 3** could move past general representation and normalization to empowerment. While Barbie has represented disability in their toys, the company now must empower and provide a space in which members of the disabled community can use their voices, perhaps by providing disability inclusion training to the company's HR recruiters, for example.

Inclusive practices should not only reach our spheres of infrastructure, education, and employment; they should also extend to our nation's politics. President Joe Biden has promised to amend the laws and policies that so often limit people with disabilities, starting by creating a senior position within the White House "dedicated to disability community engagement and policy coordination" (*Americans with Disabilities | Joe Biden*, n.d.). By implementing this position, Biden plans to ensure that the U.S. adheres to the Supreme Court's Olmstead decision, requiring government-issued programs that protect the rights of disabled individuals to "live, work, and receive services in integrated settings" (*Americans with Disabilities | Joe Biden*, n.d.).

While reaching inclusivity is a process, we will know that we are on the right track once changes have begun to be reflected in our buildings through handicap-accessible restrooms, in our classrooms through the utilization of the UDL approach, in our offices through funds to cover accommodations for disabled employees, and in our government through the adherence to the Olmstead decision. Once dolls with Down Syndrome are not pushed into discontinuation; once more children's books are like *King for a Day* and no longer have to explicitly address the fact that a character uses a wheelchair; once parents no longer have to search up, "children's TV shows with characters with disabilities;" and once parents will be able to give a resounding, "Yes!" to every child's request to play at a playground, then we will know we are on the right track. When we realize that disability is simply another part of human life, we will be able to see inclusion as less of a utopia, and more of a reality.

Through Their Eyes

Colorful blocks tumble to the ground as squeals of laughter burst forth from a huddle of children. Bowls of freshly-sliced watermelon sit on bright plastic tables in the middle of the room, awaiting the eager hands of hungry preschoolers. Two children sit on the rainbow carpet, reading a book together. As we glance over their shoulder, we see that the main character uses a wheelchair, but the children do not comment on this or point at the illustration. They simply read, mesmerized by the fact that this main character, the best baker in town, is preparing for the town's annual bake-off.

The Friday afternoon sun basks the room in a warm glow, bouncing off the bobbing heads of a group of four-year-olds playing with dolls in the corner. As we walk towards this group, we see that they are playing "house." One child strokes the dark brown hair of a doll in a green dress, while another pretends to feed a wooden slice of pizza to a doll with Down Syndrome. A squeal calls our attention to the glass window to our right, where we see a group of children scrambling up a metal play structure. One child with leg braces giggles as they count to twenty – recently dubbed "It!" in a competitive game of hide and seek.

As we bring our attention back into the classroom, we see that some children have discovered the fresh watermelon and brought slices to snack on in the television-viewing corner. As we walk to the corner to see what they are watching, a song begins to play onscreen – one that sounds familiar to us. One child exclaims, "I love this song!"

"In some ways we are different – but in so many ways, we are the same!" As we gaze about the classroom and view it through their eyes, we see that this is true.

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