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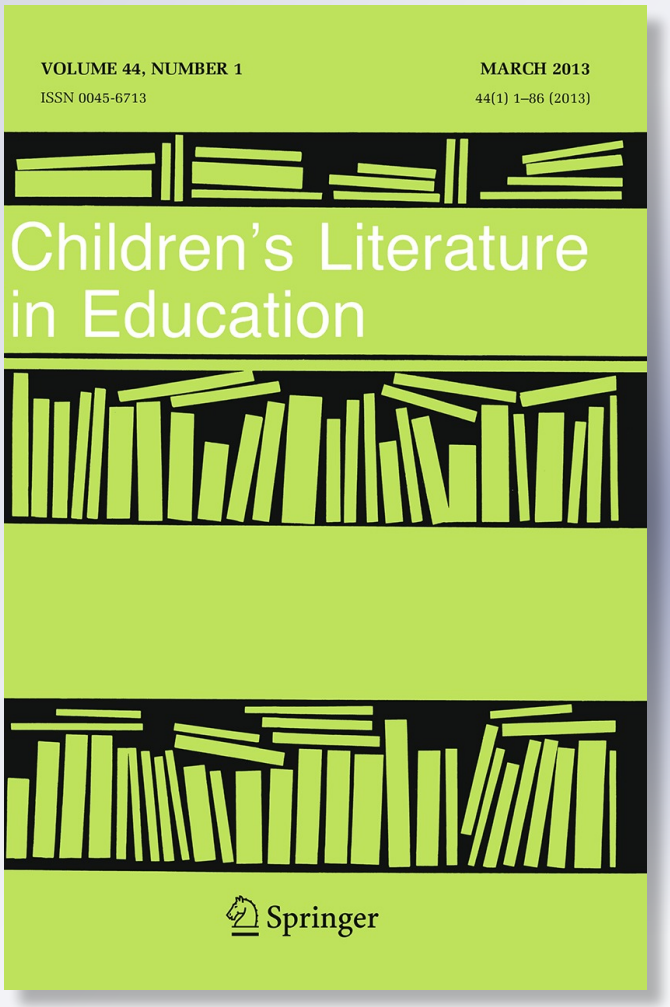

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ORIGINAL PAPER

Redefining Normal: A Critical Analysis of (Dis)ability in Young Adult Literature

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Abstract This literary analysis examines constructions of normalcy and disability within contemporary young adult literature, including *Jerk, California* (Friesen, 2008), *Marcelo in the Real World* (Stork, 2009), and *Five Flavors of Dumb* (John, 2010). As recent winners of the Schneider Family Book Award from the American Library Association, these novels offer complex and realistic portrayals of characters with disabilities. Drawing on critical discourse analysis, this paper explores how identity, agency, and power shape the novels' plots and themes. The growing prevalence of characters with disabilities in young adult literature offers an opportunity for students to consider how disability is constructed in society and represented in literary works. By taking a critical approach to literary analysis, teachers can emphasize social justice within the English curriculum.

Keywords Young adult literature · Disability · Critical literacy · Critical discourse analysis

Introduction

> My father is basically asking me to pretend that I am normal, according to his definition… This is an impossible task, as far as I can tell, especially since it is

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> very difficult for me to feel that I am *not* normal. Why can't others think and see the world the way I see it? (Stork, 2009, p. 23)

In *Marcelo in the Real World*, Marcelo struggles to reconcile the concepts of normalcy and disability. While Marcelo's autism does not define his identity, he must navigate the real world with all of its prejudices and injustices. Teaching that emphasizes social justice, draws attention to inequities, and works for change often involves classroom explorations of uncomfortable or even painful issues (Simon and Norton, 2011). Reading young adult literature can be a powerful way for students to develop critical literacy skills and reflect on their own experiences. When teachers and students take a critical stance toward literature, they actively engage in reflection, transformation, and action (Gomez et al., 2010; McLaughlin and DeVoogd, 2004). Since people with disabilities are frequently depicted as having "significant 'abnormalities'" (Barnes and Mercer, 2001, p. 517), teachers may need to reframe students' understandings of disability, identity, and equality. At its core, critical pedagogy provides a space to question, analyze, and transform cultural ideologies and social practices.

In this literary study, I use critical discourse analysis to examine the construction of disability in three recent young adult novels. These include *Jerk, California* (Friesen, 2008), *Marcelo in the Real World* (Stork, 2009), and *Five Flavors of Dumb* (John, 2010). As winners of the Schneider Family Book Award from the American Library Association, these novels include complex, realistic portrayals of characters with physical, mental, and emotional disabilities. A recent study in the United States found that 25 % of young adult literature includes a character with a disability (Koss and Teale, 2009). Consequently, these novels offer secondary teachers a rich opportunity to engage students in thinking about the ways in which disability is represented in literature and society.

Young adult literature can be a way to both read the world and read the word. Drawing on Paulo Freire's (1970) critical pedagogy, Donaldo Macedo (2006) argues, "We must first read the world—the cultural, social, and political practices that constitute it—before we can make sense of the word-level description of reality" (p. 27). In other words, critical literacy involves more than just reading print text; it also involves considering our own lived experiences and our context. Consequently, learning about social justice in the world and engaging in literary study can be a powerful way for youth to critically consider disability. This paper considers the following questions:

- How can critical theories shed light on the representations of disability in contemporary young adult literature?
- By including young adult literature that features a character with a disability, how can teachers promote students' critical literacy skills within the secondary English curriculum?

(Dis)ability in Literature

Critical approaches within literary studies and disabilities studies began by theorizing negative images of disability within novels and films. Consider three

classic works that are taught in many secondary English classrooms: *Richard III*, *Moby Dick,* and *A Christmas Carol* that include the "murderous, hunchbacked king, Richard III… the obsessive, one-legged captain, Ahab… and the sentimental, hobbling urchin, Tiny Tim" (Mitchell and Snyder, 2000, p. 17). While most representations of disability in classic literature are negative or restrictive, others are intended to elicit the audience's sentimentality and pity. Historically, characters with disabilities are pivotal in the moral development of other characters or they serve as literary symbolism (Dyches and Prater, 2000).

In the past two decades, literacy scholars have focused on the importance of accurate portrayals of individuals with disabilities, whether these involve teachers' critical inquiry of classic works or the use of realistic portrayals (Heim, 1994; Matthew and Clow, 2007; Prater, 2003). Some works of children's literature and young adult literature examine disability in general (Blaska, 2003; Landrum, 1999; Smith-D'Arezzo, 2003; Ward, 2002) while others focus specifically on learning disabilities (Kaplan, 2003; Prater, 2003; Prater et al., 2006), mental disabilities (Mills, 2002), developmental disabilities (Dyches and Prater, 2000), dementia (Manthorpe, 2005), visual impairments (Carroll and Rosenblum, 2000), or communication disorders (Sotto and Ball, 2006). However, most of the emphasis to date has been on representations of disability within children's picture books rather than on fiction intended for adolescents.

Within the realm of young adult literature, increasing numbers of books contain characters with disabilities. In a recent analysis, Melanie Koss and William Teale (2009) compiled a database of 370 fiction and nonfiction books, published between 1999 and 2005. They explain:

> The database consisted of (a) books educators considered to be high quality (award winners) (b) books young adults chose as favorites, and (c) popular books (best sellers). By selecting books that were popular with adults, teens, and those recognized by literature scholars, librarians, and individuals in the book industry, we believed we obtained a representative sample…. Fifteen percent of the titles were randomly selected using a stratified set of criteria designed to provide an overall picture of the corpus of books. (p. 564)

In Koss and Teale's (2009) analysis, a quarter of the books within the representative sample included a character with a disability. They found that over half of the disabilities represented were mental illness, a quarter were physical disabilities, and a quarter portrayed various diseases that resulted in disabilities.

In previous analyses of the representation of disability in children's books, scholars have examined textual and visual elements, including theme, characterization, setting, plot, point of view, style, and illustrations (Dyches and Prater, 2000). Specifically, much of the focus has been on the characterization of individuals with disabilities (Andrews, 1998). In contrast to negative or restrictive characterizations of individuals with disabilities, positive portrayals are those that envision high expectations for the character with disabilities, include positive contributions to society, build on strengths, show the person acting on choices, depict expanding reciprocal relationships with others, and ensure that the character with disabilities is afforded the same citizenship rights as others (Turnbull et al., 1999).

Pamela Carroll and Penny Rosenblum (2000) argue that young adult literature should not only provide accurate portrayals of individuals with disabilities, but it must offer themes that are not "didactic, condescending, or pedantic" (p. 623). At the same time, Koss and Teale's (2009) analysis indicates that there has been a shift away from coming-of-age stories to a focus on themes of fitting in, finding oneself, and dealing with crisis. Consequently, "literature about disabilities and differences can be a powerful tool to heighten the achievement of all students by broadening attitudes and perceptions of self and others" (Ward, 2002, p. x). Since critical literacy encourages readers to consider a problem and its complexity (McLaughlin and DeVoogd, 2004), the prevalence of characters with disabilities in young adult literature offers teachers the powerful opportunity to build students' critical literacy skills.

Methods

Situating the Study

In this study, I consider how critical literacy can inform our approach to young adult literature and our understanding of concepts such as normalcy and disability. Critical literacy refers to the use of books, films, and other media to analyze, critique, and transform the norms, rules, and practices that govern our daily lives (Luke, 2004). Freire (1970) saw literacy as a means of emancipation from oppression. Building on his work, scholars have developed approaches to critical literacy using feminist, postcolonial, poststructural, and critical race theory as well as critical linguistics and cultural studies. According to Allan Luke (2012), "critical literacy is an overtly political orientation to teaching and learning and to the cultural, ideological, and sociolinguistic content of the curriculum. It is focused on the uses of literacy for social justice in marginalized and disenfranchised communities" (p. 5). Literacy, in this sense, is not neutral.

Poststructuralist models of discourse have influenced critical literacy. Michel Foucault (1972) and Jacques Derrida (1978) draw our attention to the ways in which binary oppositions obscure the complexity of discourse. In terms of disability, these binary oppositions are evident in paired concepts such as normal and abnormal as well as ability and disability. In order to challenge binary oppositions, teachers must interrogate the roles that power, agency, and identity play in young adult literature. If schools do not include novels with diverse characters and interrogate cultural and political ideologies, they may effectively condone prejudices and stereotypes (Curwood et al., 2009). The English curriculum can either work to reinforce or to interrogate dominant cultural models, social relations and political ideologies (Bean and Moni, 2003). Consequently, young adult literature can be used as a powerful tool for social justice.

Selecting Young Adult Literature

Each year, the American Library Association presents the Schneider Family Book Award to an author or illustrator whose work captures the disability experience.

This award includes recently published work at the elementary, middle, and high school levels. In addition, the Council for Exceptional Children's Division on Autism and Development Disabilities presents the Dolly Gray Children's Literature Award to a picture book, a children's chapter book, and a young adult book. These internationally recognized awards can aid teachers in choosing books that are age-appropriate, realistic, and authentic. However, teachers must also consider how the plot and characterization function to address issues related to a character's disability, self-advocacy, and equality. In this paper, I focus on three novels that won the Schneider Family Book Award between 2008 and 2010.

Jerk, California, *Marcelo in the Real World*, and *Five Flavors of Dumb* are all told using first person narration, which gives readers access to the main character's "inner faculties of thought and emotion" (Nussbaum, 2010, p. 6). Readers learn about "sameness and difference" (Nussbaum, 1997, p. 95) as they encounter characters with disabilities in young adult literature. Finding *sameness* helps readers understand others' lived experiences and it builds a sense of shared humanity. Uncovering *difference* allows readers to interrogate social constructions related to normalcy and disability. Young adult literature can support critical literacy by resisting the "othering" of people with disabilities and promoting students' knowledge of disability rights and sense of social justice.

Jerk, California

Jerk, California begins when six-year-old Sam is diagnosed with Tourette Syndrome. He recalls, "I mouthed the word, and my mother leaned forward and stroked my arms. Gentle at first, then harder and harder and mixed with tears. I knew she was trying to rub that bad word out of me" (p. 3). At home, Sam's stepfather makes him feel embarrassed and ashamed of his involuntary body movements and verbal outbursts. At school, Sam's teacher tells him that he's too distracting and asks him to leave the classroom. Throughout his childhood, Sam is called a freak, a monster, and socially maladaptive. Angry and alone, Sam seeks refuge in running. It is on a run that he meets Naomi.

After high school graduation, Sam and Naomi embark on a cross-country journey. From Minnesota to California, they learn more about Sam's family and their legacy. Sam learns that his step-father had lied to him, for years, about his father's life and death. He learns that, while his father also had Tourette's, he was a master craftsman, a doting husband, and a loving father. Author Jonathan Friesen has Tourette's, and he offers insight into Sam's struggle for self-acceptance. By the end of the novel, Sam comes to terms with his Tourette's. He realizes, "How many years I hid, hid that word—the word I hate most in this world that could have set me free" (p. 263).

Marcelo in the Real World

Marcelo has attended Paterson all of his life, and he looks forward to his final year of high school. At Paterson, Marcelo says, "I can learn at my own pace… I am learning to make decisions and become responsible and independent" (p. 11). He is

eager to train the ponies and teach them to be comfortable around kids with disabilities. But then his father, Arturo, drops a bombshell. If he wants to go to Paterson in the autumn, Marcelo must spend the summer working at his father's law firm and learn the rules of the real world. Marcelo is on the autism spectrum, and dreads participating in small talk, looking people in the eye, and walking the streets of Boston alone.

At the law firm, Marcelo encounters people that are sometimes cruel or dishonest. But he also meets Jasmine, who works in the mail room, and they slowly develop a friendship. Over the course of the summer, Marcelo learns about the real world, including who he can and cannot trust. He realizes that his father's law firm has defended a manufacturing client who is responsible for a young girl's disfigurement. Marcelo must make a decision: Does he seek justice for the girl, and in doing so, hurt his father? In the novel, author Francisco X. Stork develops Marcelo into a complex and dynamic character who is capable of making his own way in the world.

Five Flavors of Dumb

In *Five Flavors of Dumb*, Piper suddenly finds herself as the manager of Dumb, the hottest band at her Seattle high school. Piper is an unlikely manager for a rock band. Not only is she a high achieving student and member of the chess club, she is also profoundly hearing impaired. But Piper is determined that she will make Dumb a success. In large part, this is a personal quest. After her parents spent the majority of her college fund to pay for her baby sister's cochlear implants, Piper needs to earn money to fulfil her dream of attending Gallaudet University. There, she will fit in as a deaf student and she will have a reprieve from "society's bias toward oral communication" (p. 16).

As a band manager, Piper learns about the music of Jimi Hendrix and Kurt Cobain as well as how to negotiate with temperamental musicians. While she can lip read readily, Piper uses American Sign Language and recruits her brother as an interpreter to give herself more time and power in certain situations. However, Piper's father never learned to sign. At one point, she realizes, "My father wasn't indifferent to my deafness; he was mortified by it" (p. 16). Over the course of the novel, Piper's father comes to see her in a new light and he works to repair their relationship. Author Antony John narrates Piper's story and shows how she changes into a bold young woman who is anything but dumb.

Critically Analyzing Young Adult Literature

In this literary study, I drew on critical discourse analysis in order to explore the discursive constructions of normalcy and disability in young adult literature. As Rebecca Rogers (2004) explains, "Critical discourse analysis is different from other discourse analysis methods because it includes not only a description and interpretation of discourse in context, but also offers an explanation of why and how discourses work" (p. 2). Following Wendy Glenn's (2008) process of using

critical discourse analysis to study young adult literature, I read each novel three times. During the first reading, I focused on gaining a broad understanding of the plot, characters, and themes. Then, in the second reading, I critically analyzed the text and coded for key themes. During the third reading, I noted specific textual evidence that supported the themes and verified that the themes were present within and across the three novels.

This analysis focuses specifically on how normalcy and disability are constructed, contested, and re-envisioned within *Jerk*, *California*, *Marcelo in the Real World*, and *Five Flavors of Dumb*. According to Lennard Davis (1995), "the term 'disability,' as it is commonly and professionally used, is an absolute category without level or threshold. One is either disabled or not" (p. 1). Moreover, "normalcy and disability are part of the same system" (p. 2).

Mitchell and Snyder (2000) draw our attention to the *normalcy narratives* present in screen and print media that result in restrictive or oppressive representations of disability. In such narratives, the disabled character must either be normalized or removed (Davis, 2002). In contrast, *disability counternarratives* expand options for depicting disability. They question dominant assumptions about what it means to be able-bodied and they offer resistance to the dominant normalcy narratives that may otherwise marginalize or exploit certain people.

Critical discourse analysis highlights the ways in which identity, agency, and power shape normalcy narratives and disability counternarratives in these three novels. I drew on a critical sociocultural approach to literacy research (Moje and Lewis, 2007) and asked:

- Which character embodies or expresses a normalcy narrative?
- Which character challenges a normalcy narrative? What are the personal or political implications of this challenge?
- (How) does the author integrate a disability counternarrative into the storyline? Is it evident in the character's thoughts, words, or actions?
- How does disability shape the character's identity? What other factors come into play as the character makes (and remakes) his or her identity?
- How does the character's disability impact the way other characters perceive or respond to him or her?
- Who has power? How does that change as the plot develops?
- How does the setting of the novel influence characters' identities?
- For a character with a disability, where are the moments for agency within the story?

Findings

Jerk, California

At the beginning of the novel, Sam's identity is profoundly shaped by his disability, and he believes, "Every problem I got is because of Tourette's" (p. 123). His classmates call him a freak and say that he has a brain disease. Even when his

homeroom teacher sets the chairs in a "circle of humanity" (p. 15), Sam feels mocked. He believes that his teacher "loves giving the other kids a chance to be human; to watch me jump and twitch while they shower me with kind words" (p. 15). At home, Sam lives with his mother, stepfather Bill, and baby half-brother. His stepfather continually berates him and positions Sam as inhuman. Bill calls him a "mangy dog" (p. 124) and "a nothing" (p. 270), just like his deceased father. The cumulative effect of the verbal, emotional, and physical abuse that Sam has experienced makes him feel incredibly embarrassed and ashamed about his Tourette's. More than that, Sam feels profound anger and isolation from the world.

Sam's identity begins to shift when he meets several people who see him as someone who is smart, capable, and worthy of love. Sam's neighbour George is the catalyst in *Jerk*, and he sets Sam's journey of self-discovery in motion. After high school graduation, George offers Sam a job with his landscaping company. Sam has always considered George to be the town outcast, so he initially refuses to work for him. As their relationship develops, George tells Sam the truth about his biological father, a kind-hearted man who built windmills. With George's granddaughter, Naomi, Sam sets off across the country to visit his father's windmills. At the end of their journey, Sam meets his paternal grandmother in Jerk, California. It is here that Sam realizes that his stepfather had lied to him all of his life—about his family, his disease, and even his given name. Now reclaiming the name Jack, he realizes that his identity is not defined by his disability.

For Jack, this is a powerful moment. For all of his life, he had internalized the negative words and actions that had been directed at him. His stepfather and classmates, in particular, reinforced a normalcy narrative that privileged those who could control their bodies. While Jack's Tourette Syndrome meant that he couldn't control his body, it also made him feel powerless to control how others viewed him. When Jack realizes that his identity is not defined by his disability, he stops buying into the normalcy narrative. Instead, he knows that he can write his own disability counternarrative, and he can push back against the repeated verbal and emotional abuse directed at him.

In order for Sam to gain power in his family, he travels back to the Midwest to confront his stepfather. After his stepfather orders him to leave the house, Jack resists and proclaims:

> "Jack. The name is Jack Keegan. My father was James Keegan. My grandma is Francine Keegan." I push up from the table.
> "Get out!" he roars.
> "My father built windmills. He was smart, he was kind, he was strong."
> "Out!" (p. 320).

This time, Jack leaves on his own terms. By discarding the identity of Sam and establishing himself as Jack, he comes to accept his family and his legacy. This change in the power dynamic doesn't just affect Jack. His mother, who had also suffered abuse at Bill's hands, leaves with him. For Jack, power comes from within. He has to accept himself as someone who deserves love and respect in order to demand others' respect. Instead of directing his anger at himself or his father, this newfound power allows him to express a disability counternarrative. Rather than

internalizing the narrative that others had crafted for him, Jack's counternarrative allows him to retell his father's story and begin truly writing his own.

Marcelo in the Real World

In *Marcelo in the Real World*, Arturo repeatedly tells his son Marcelo that "there's nothing wrong" (p. 20) with him and that he's "not disabled" (p. 40). However, the way that Arturo positions Marcelo is not empowering: it's condescending. Rather than seeing Marcelo's autism as a part of his identity, Arturo is convinced that Marcelo just needs to be immersed in a "normal environment" (p. 20), such as his law firm. In the novel, Arturo embodies a normalcy narrative. In his eyes, normalcy means being successful, outgoing, and athletic. Arturo views Marcelo's interest in training ponies, his penchant for schedules, and his passion about world religion as unnecessary, if not outright embarrassing. Marcelo, for his part, doesn't feel abnormal. In fact, he expresses his frustration that other people can't see the world as he sees it.

At the beginning of the novel, Marcelo often struggles to understand others' facial expressions, figures of speech, and emotions. In this way, Marcelo's autism sometimes impedes his ability to exert agency in social situations. In the law firm, this is especially pronounced. His co-workers call him a dummy and an idiot, and he's expected to answer to the name Gump. While his father believes that Marcelo can become normal by changing his identity, there are other characters in the novel who do not define Marcelo by his disability. His mother, for instance, tells him, "You are who you are" (p. 32). Although he's Catholic, he regularly visits a rabbi who engages him in complex discussions about life and scripture. At the law firm, he meets Jasmine.

On their first day working together in the mailroom, Jasmine is less than happy about his presence and his inefficient work. But when Marcelo comes back from lunch, Jasmine hands him an afternoon schedule.

12:30 p.m.: Copying, collating, binding
1:30 p.m.: Walk over to federal courthouse to file documents
2:30 p.m.: Scanning
3:30 p.m.: Mail sorting

Marcelo never cried as a baby or shed a tear at his grandmother's funeral. He says, "Maybe I don't feel what others feel. I have no way of knowing. It's just that what I feel does not elicit tears…. So it is very strange to feel my eyes well with tears as I read Jasmine's list" (p. 73). In this moment, Marcelo is equally as surprised by Jasmine's actions as he is by his own reaction.

In *Marcelo in the Real World*, Jasmine serves as a catalyst for Marcelo. They share an interest in music, she validates his feelings, and most importantly, she treats him as normal. Through his work at the law firm, Marcelo realizes that his father has helped to defend one of his clients, a windshield manufacturer, in a lawsuit where a young immigrant girl named Ixtel was disfigured in a car accident. When Marcelo discovers the young girl's photo, he learns that his father's law firm has suppressed crucial evidence related to the defective windshield. He tells

Jasmine, "I felt something I have never felt before. It was like fire…. It was like I wanted to fight the people who hurt her. But then I realized that might include my father" (p. 165). Jasmine supports Marcelo as he tries to get justice for Ixtel. Through this process, Marcelo feels a shift in his identity. Not only can he interpret others' words and actions with increased accuracy, he also begins making decisions based on feelings rather than logic.

Unlike Jack, Marcelo never internalized a normalcy narrative that positioned him as other. Throughout *Marcelo in the Real World*, Marcelo becomes more conscious of how his colleagues situate him as abnormal within social situations. At the same time, he learns how to read their facial expressions and interpret their turns of phrase. As a result, Marcelo's disability counternarrative allows him to trust his instincts and gives him power in social relationships. Not only does he stand up for himself, he also chooses to stand up for others, such as Ixtel. As a young, poor, and orphaned immigrant, Ixtel only had a pro bono lawyer who could assert her legal rights. When Marcelo chooses to provide Ixtel's lawyer with crucial evidence—and risk his father's case as the lawyer for the defendant—it's clear that he has become an activist for disability rights. In that respect, Marcelo's disability counternarrative extends to others, and he is willing to fight for justice.

Five Flavors of Dumb

Compared to Jack and Marcelo, Piper's disability doesn't make her a regular target of cruel words or blatant discrimination. But she notices how her classmates ignore her or whisper about her, and she feels hurt by her father's patronizing attitude. After Piper announces to her family that she has joined Dumb, her father replies, "No offense, but shouldn't the manager of a rock band have perfect hearing?" After Piper's and her mother's protests, her father adds, "It's not about being disabled. It's about knowing your limitations" (p. 34). While Piper's father doesn't explicitly label her as disabled, he does position her as not normal. For Piper, this is incredibly hurtful. Her baby sister was born profoundly hearing impaired, and her parents take enormous pride in the success of her cochlear implants. Piper slowly lost her hearing as a young child, and she can use hearing aids in certain situations. As a result, she prefers to use sign language—something that her father has never bothered to learn.

In *Five Flavors of Dumb*, Piper initially situates her classmate Kallie as defining normalcy. She says, "Beside me, Kallie Sims, supermodel wannabe, was a vision of flawless dark skin and meticulously flat-ironed hair" (p. 3). Piper is envious of Kallie's beauty, popularity, and fashion sense. After Kallie joins Dumb and they get to know each other better, Piper is surprised to learn that Kallie isn't as perfect as she appears to be. This is an important moment, since it results in Piper questioning her initial assumptions. Instead of being jealous of Kallie and othering her, Piper begins to see Kallie as a more complex person who has faced her own obstacles in life. Piper's disability influences her developing friendship with the Dumb band members, including Kallie and Tash. For example, Piper notices when they sit across from her in a restaurant, so that she can lip read more easily. This small

gesture means the world to Piper, since it allows her to be an equal part of their social interactions.

In many ways, Piper's disability counternarrative begins when she changes her physical appearance. With Kallie and Tash's encouragement, she dyes her hair Atomic Pink to match her hearing aids and bids "farewell to the old Piper Vaughan" (p. 229). But the change is more than superficial. Piper now sees herself as normal—and powerful. While she had previously tried to blend into the crowd and acquiesce to the needs of others, she now asserts her own identity as a pink-haired, lip-reading, forward-thinking band manager.

Piper's newfound identity helps her father see her in a different light. After her sister signs for the first time, she learns that her father is taking sign language classes, with the baby in tow. Her father says, "I feel like I'm only just getting to know you, for the first time" (p. 241). Even though Piper's father loves her, he didn't know how to forge a relationship with her. By learning sign language, her father signals that he wants to communicate with Piper and that he sees her as a bright and capable young woman.

Piper's increased self-confidence gives her agency in social situations and allows her to advocate for herself. This is evident when the lead singer, Josh, publicly mocks her hearing loss. As she fingers the ends of her pink hair that represents the new Piper, she asks herself, "What would *that* Piper do?" That Piper would show her strength. She confronts Josh, "Everyone knows I'm deaf… Stop trying to humiliate me. I'm not disabled, Josh, and trying to make out that I am just makes you look like an even bigger jerk than usual" (p. 298). Here, Piper refuses to see her deafness as a disability. On one hand, this could be interpreted as Piper embracing her deafness and challenging the assumptions of normalcy. On the other, she may be defining disability in a way that would effectively include other people—but not her. Piper's disability counternarrative questions both her own and others' assumptions about what it means to be able-bodied. By taking a critical stance, readers are able to question the construction of normalcy and disability within young adult literature.

Conclusion

Critical literacy draws our attention to the ways in which identity, agency, and power operate in young adult literature. By using critical questions to guide in-depth literary analysis, students can gain insight into how authors craft normalcy narratives and disability counternarratives. This process encourages students to question binary oppositions evident in both literature and society, such as normal/abnormal as well as rich/poor, straight/gay, and male/female. In *Jerk, California, Marcelo in the Real World*, and *Five Flavors of Dumb*, the authors offer realistic first-person stories of young adults with a disability. At first, others define the protagonists solely by their disability and position them as incomplete, incapable, or even inhuman. The narrative arc takes the reader through the process of self-discovery and self-empowerment within which Jack, Marcelo, and Piper must make a choice: Do they express their identity, exert agency, and reclaim power?

While teachers can readily draw on critical literacy to guide students' analysis of young adult literature, it is important to consider how to effectively select books that feature characters with disabilities. Some work, such as the graphic novel *Blankets* (Thompson, 2003), includes the portrayal of characters with disabilities, but these characters are not central to the plot. In other work, the main character has a disability but it is not an essential element of the story. For example, in the Schneider Family Award-winning book *Waiting for Normal* (Connor, 2008), the protagonist has dyslexia, but her disability is not a central theme. While it is important that students read young adult literature where disabilities are not sensationalized or over-emphasized, these works do not generally lend themselves as well to critical discourse analysis. In contrast, recently published works such as *Wonderstruck* (Selznick, 2011), *The Running Dream* (Van Draanen and Wendelin 2012), *Accidents of Nature* (Johnson, 2006), *The London Eye Mystery* (Dowd, 2009), *Anything But Typical* (Baskin, 2009), *Out of My Mind* (Draper, 2010), and *Rules* (Lord, 2006) present complex and compelling insight into multiple disabilities.

By using a critical lens to examine representations of disability in contemporary young adult literature, it is possible to trace the roles that identity and power have in shaping the novel's plot, characterization, and theme. For secondary English teachers, the prevalence of disability in contemporary young adult literature offers many opportunities. Not only can students with disabilities see their experiences represented, all students can develop a richer understanding of what constitutes a disability and how it is often positioned in relation to the able-bodied norm. The integration of critical analysis and disability counternarratives in the classroom can also offer students a space to consider how their own lives are shaped by normalcy narratives. In order to explore these issues in their personal lives, students can compose their own counternarratives through poems, plays, and digital stories (Curwood and Gibbons, 2009; Curwood and Cowell, 2011). When counternarratives are composed and shared within schools, they can promote social justice in a powerful way. In many ways, critical pedagogy can only be radically realized within and through such stories.

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