THE INTERSECTION OF DYSCONSCIOUS ABLEISM AND NICENESS IN TEACHERS' CRITICAL READINGS OF CHARACTERS WITH DISABILITIES IN PICTUREBOOKS

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SCHOLARS HAVE PROPOSED that reading aloud children's literature representing individuals with disabilities may foster more inclusive classrooms. Until recently, few children's texts provided positive representations of individuals with disabilities. Consequently, there is a body of research on how children discuss social issues during read-alouds, including research on race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation (Jones, 2012; Kesler et al., 2020; Ryan et al., 2013), but little empirical research on how children discuss disability or how teachers prepare for those classroom discussions.

The research has explored what disability representation looks like in children's literature (e.g., Artman-Meeker et al., 2016). Pennell et al. (2017) extended these reviews by considering students with disabilities as the audience for these books in addition to their nondisabled peers. In addition, they also identified texts that were accessible to students with disabilities whose reading skills may "lag behind [those of] their same aged peers" (p. 414). They argued that access to complex, dynamic representations of characters with disabilities is not something that children with disabilities should have to wait for until they can read sophisticated texts. Other scholars have given suggestions for how to select texts that promote inclusive thinking (e.g., Nasatir & Horn 2003). Ostrosky et al. (2015) provided methods for how to engage students in discussions of disability representations in texts, including teaching about a disability, having conversations about assistive technology, and discussing similarities between characters and students.

While studies have shown that increased exposure to characters with disabilities can foster positive interactions between students with and without disabilities and promote self-confidence for students with disabilities (Adomat, 2014; Cameron & Rutland, 2006), other research has found that representing people with disabilities in classroom texts was not enough to shift student mindsets. When teachers focus their questions on teasing rather than explicitly discussing disability, students often provide educators with formulaic responses (Wilkins et al., 2016). These findings suggest that facilitating read-alouds with the explicit goal of discussing disability representation does not always result in critical discussions. More information is needed on how teachers approach these conversations and what challenges they face.

In this study, we explore K–5 educators' analysis of picturebooks that include characters with disabilities and how they plan to enact read-alouds with these texts. We asked the following research question: How do K–5 teachers describe their beliefs, concerns, and planning process for enacting read-alouds featuring characters with disabilities?

Theoretical Framework

To attend to social consciousness in the study of disabled individuals, we use Disability Critical Race Theory (DisCrit). DisCrit moves beyond a unidimensional conception of disability to explore identity as multidimensional (Annamma et al., 2016). DisCrit is a theoretical framework that explores the

"ways in which both race and ability are socially constructed and interdependent" (Annamma et al., 2016, p. 13). It emphasizes the normalized processes of racism and ableism so that educators may see how they are mutually reinforcing.

DisCrit builds on scholarship in Disability Studies in Education (DSE), which conceptualizes disability as socially situated (Baglieri et al., 2011). A medical model (typically adopted by mainstream special education) assumes that a disability is a natural impairment within the individual in need of remediation. DSE scholars advocate for a social model, wherein disability is understood as the product of the social, economic, cultural, and political context and disability is distinguished from an impairment or a physical limitation of the body (Baglieri, 2017; Shakespeare, 2013). In this line of thinking, the environment is composed of barriers that limit access for particular types of bodies and minds. Those barriers create disability categories. A social model has enabled individuals with disabilities, their allies, and scholars to conceptualize disability as a minority identity and, in turn, to expose discrimination arising from barriers to access to physical spaces, employment opportunities, and rigorous academic curriculum (Shakespeare, 2013). Once disability has been conceived of as a socially constructed identity, it is clearer to see the ways that both ableism and racism are mutually reinforcing tools to stigmatize, exclude, and oppress people. Our analysis utilizes the intersectional conception of identity central to DisCrit.

Conceptual Framework

DisCrit provides a theoretical orientation to disability within which we apply a conceptual framework of dysconsciousness. Specifically, we draw on dysconscious ableism and dysconscious niceness as factors that shape participants' socialization into dominant views about disability. Using this framework, we analyze how teachers describe their beliefs, concerns, and planning process for enacting read-alouds featuring characters with disabilities.

Dysconscious Ableism

Drawing on a DisCrit orientation, Broderick and Lalvani (2017) developed the concept of dysconscious ableism, which builds on King's (1991) notion of dysconscious racism. King (1991) defined dysconscious racism as "an uncritical habit of mind (including perceptions, attitudes, assumptions, and beliefs) that justifies inequity and exploitation by accepting the existing order of things as given" (p. 135). Dysconscious

racism and dysconscious ableism are interconnected because "constructions of race and ability are inextricably intertwined" (Hancock et al., 2021, p. 2). They are both characterized by limited and distorted understandings of social inequities and diversity; these "normative" ways of thinking and acting are learned and perpetuated through educational experiences (Broderick & Lalvani, 2017). When these problematic practices are uncritically accepted, educators allow racism, sexism, classism, and ableism to persist, thwarting inclusive and equitable educational opportunities.

King (1991) argued that it "is not the *absence* of consciousness but an *impaired* consciousness" that causes implicit acceptance and perpetuation of white and nondisabled cultural norms (p. 135). Broderick and Lalvani (2017) defined dysconscious ableism as "an impaired or distorted way of thinking about dis/ability…one that tacitly accepts dominant ableist norms and privileges" (p. 895). This way of thinking makes it difficult for teachers to identify the ways that ableism is embedded in schooling and their own practice and, further, to engage in liberatory pedagogies for all students that disrupt those ableist norms.

Dysconscious Niceness

While ableism and racism are reinforced by the norms of whiteness and able-bodiedness that dominate the teaching profession, understanding the gendered experiences of women in the field of education helps to further illuminate how and why dysconsciousness may persist. Given that teaching in the United States is female-dominated (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018) and feminized (Lagemann, 2000), gender is a particularly salient identity category when considering how educators' positionalities impact their beliefs about teaching and learning. Meiner (2002, as cited in Lensmire & Schick, 2017) articulated the narrative of the "White Lady Bountiful" teacher trope, "the picture of the perfect maternal yet virginal presence, beneficently overseeing her charges, with infinite patience and caring, yet somehow able to remain neutral and detached" (p. xix). To align with this expectation, teachers are socialized into niceness, a shared socioemotional disposition, particularly among white females, that is both ideological and enacted (Bissonnette, 2016; Castagno, 2019).

In education, niceness entails avoiding conflict, controversial topics (e.g., racism and ableism), and forms of imposition and instead being submissive to power hierarchies and people-pleasing (Castagno, 2019). The valuing of nice teach-

ing reinforces deficit perspectives and upholds patriarchal structures (Bissonnette, 2016; Castagno, 2019; Galman et al., 2010). Niceness serves as a sometimes tacit excuse that prevents (white, female, able-bodied) educators from doing the work of dismantling inequity. According to Baptiste (2008), unless an educator owns their expertise and uses that expertise to foster students' interrogation of socially constructed hierarchies, educators relinquish the impact of their teaching to those who aim to uphold the status quo. Moreover, for educators who do teach with a goal of disrupting ableism and racism, niceness is a disciplining agent (Castagno, 2019). In other words, when nasty educators are accused of not being nice or feel guilty about not being nice, they often retreat to ways of teaching that uphold dominant narratives or leave the profession (Galman, 2019).

Methods

For this study, design-based (Reinking & Bradley, 2008) qualitative methods were used, including document analysis (Richardson, 2000), one-on-one semi-structured interviews (Spradley, 1979), and a focus group (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). We follow van der Walt and Meskin (2020) in positioning our friendship as method. We met as members of the same doctoral cohort nine years ago; our time thinking and writing together has moved us beyond surface-level collaboration to draw upon each other's intellectual, experiential, and emotional resources (John-Steiner, 2000) and accomplish more collectively than we might individually (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Rogoff, 1990; Wenger, 1998). van der Walt and Meskin (2020) highlighted how personal friendship fosters criticality. Friendship as method is grounded in feminist theory and standpoint theory, which have in common with DSE an "epistemology of empowerment" (Collins, 1998) and a rejection of scientific neutrality, disrupting hierarchies of power in research. Instead, friendship as method works toward social justice by attending to relationships, emotion, and the humanity of all involved in the research process (Tillmann-Healy, 2003).

    Our individual identities also gave us unique perspectives on the data collection and analysis. While Laurie, as the instructor of the course, has an insider perspective, Amy, who joined the study as a researcher only, has an outsider perspective. Furthermore, we identify as white women teachers, alongside our participants. In addition, Amy identifies with an invisible disability, while Laurie was once labeled as a "delayed reader." Our collaboration, which brought each of our multiple identity positions together, enhanced the analysis process.

Participants

Data were collected from three mid-career educators who attend the same progressive graduate school of education located in a northeastern city. Prior to the data-collection process, participants completed a literacy graduate class taught by Laurie during the spring 2020 semester. During the course, students selected and critically read a text featuring a character with a reading disability, wrote a paper analyzing the text, and shared their analysis in small groups. Participants were recruited from members of the class after the course ended. Participants provided informed written consent prior to the commencement of data collection.

    Phoebe is a reading specialist in a progressive urban independent school and has taught for 11 years. She was previously a special educator at a charter school in a neighboring city. Melissa is a third-year special education teacher who teaches second grade at an independent school for students with autism spectrum disorder. She has also co-taught and worked as a special education service provider. Claire is an eighth-year teacher teaching fifth grade at a suburban independent school. She previously worked as a general education teacher in an integrated co-teaching classroom at a charter school in a neighboring city. Claire self-identified as dyslexic during her interview. All three participants identify as white women, two as Jewish.

Data Collection

Data collection spanned June to August of 2020. The study took place during the coronavirus pandemic, which began in the middle of the graduate course. Students completed the analysis paper and small-group discussions prior to the onset of the pandemic in the northeastern United States. A month later, the Northeast became the pandemic's epicenter; the graduate program moved to remote operation and all participants were teaching virtually. Interviews and the focus group were completed remotely. An additional factor was the ongoing uprising for racial justice in the wake of the murder of George Floyd. At the time of the interviews and focus group, daily protesting was taking place in the city where this graduate school is located.

    First, we conducted an artifact review of participants' papers analyzing a children's literature text. Then, each participant was interviewed digitally for approximately 90 minutes. Interviews were video recorded and transcribed. During the interview, teachers were asked to reflect on their paper and refer to specific examples. A 120-minute focus group was utilized for follow-up questions and discussion of themes. Participants also

worked together to analyze a picturebook and plan for its use in class. Other data sources included field notes and researcher memos for each interview and the focus group (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Maxwell, 2005).

Data Analysis

To analyze the ways that participants make sense of their experiences, we used Critical Narrative Analysis (CNA), which "calls for a joint and balanced focus on social issues as well as linguistic (textual) analysis, considering the complex ways in which language and the social world are intertwined" (Souto-Manning, 2014, p. 163). CNA allows us to unpack how disability is socially constructed and replicated through participants' everyday stories. Building upon narrative methodologies, CNA allows us to not only attend to the participants' immediate experiences and beliefs about the social issue of disability representation, but also situate them within the macro discourses that participants may be unconsciously drawing upon (Souto-Manning, 2014). Dysconscious ableism and niceness serve as theoretical tools for conceptualizing the unconscious discourses that participants may draw upon.

Data analysis was ongoing, using constant comparative techniques (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). We conducted two rounds of coding. In the first round, we open-coded to identify narrative units where participant beliefs and practices about disability representation surfaced (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Emerging themes from this ongoing analysis, artifact review, and individual interviews shaped the discussion in the focus group. In conducting our focus group, we drew on our analysis of institutional discourses about disability that were present during prior interviews and encouraged participants to reflect back on these narratives. Surfacing these social constructs about disability opens up the possibility for participants to question them and identify the socioideological influence of systemic discourses on their beliefs and practices. In this process, they can begin to challenge and disrupt the power that institutional discourses wield.

In the second round of coding, we analyzed for institutional discourses about disability as well as moments when institutionalized discourses about disability were disrupted. In this second round, we drew upon the analytic lens of dysconscious ableism's Category I (conservative), Category II (liberal), and Category III (radical) thinking (Broderick & Lalvani, 2017; King, 1991; King & Ladson-Billings, 1990). Broderick and Lalvani (2017) explained that conservative beliefs about

disability are traditional orientations such as the medical model of disability that underpins many special education teacher preparation programs and school service delivery models. Conservative belief includes the idea that individuals with disabilities should be educated in segregated environments from their nondisabled peers because segregated environments offer specialized services that cannot be adequately provided for in a general education environment (Broderick & Lalvani, 2017). Liberal thinking, according to Broderick and Lalvani (2017), includes beliefs in inclusive education, the social construction of disability, and disability as a type of diversity. Those who ascribe to these views seek reform or change to traditional practices in special education in order to increase equity for students with disabilities. However, individuals who hold liberal views attribute school segregation for students with disabilities to the discriminatory actions of individual people such as teachers, school administrators, and school psychologists. Radical thinking includes the ability to reflect critically on ableism, which includes explaining inequities as "part of the framework of a society in which racism [ableism] and discrimination are normative" (King, 1991, p. 136).

Findings

The findings below highlight (a) teacher beliefs on how disability is socially constructed, (b) teacher concerns about enacting lessons that incorporate disability representation into their classrooms, and (c) insights into the ways in which teachers' beliefs, concerns, and teaching practices align (or do not align). Document analysis of their class papers indicated that participants entered the study with a range of liberal (Category II) and radical (Category III) beliefs about disability; none of the students indicated conservative (Category I) beliefs. For example, Melissa wrote the following Category III response in her paper:

> *The Junkyard Wonders* [Polacco, 2010] is worthy of critiquing because it includes clear examples in which the interest of services designed to support people with disabilities clearly contribute to maintaining inequities. *The Junkyard Wonders* illustrates what Connor and Bejoian (2006) describe as a "limited conceptualization of disability" (53), but when examined, illuminates the structural practices that have historically and actively disabled people.

Melissa went on to explain that the main character of this book attends a school that has what she termed an "institutional

problem," wherein "Trisha [not only] ha[d] to deal with… her individual perceptions of her own failure, but she bears the responsibility for the school's failure" as well. This thinking demonstrates Melissa's radical beliefs in that she is able to identify that the character in *The Junkyard Wonders* goes to school in a segregated class because disability-based segregation is a central organizing mechanism in U.S. schooling practices, one that discriminates against her based on her literacy.

Application to Teaching Practice

In the interviews, participants expressed that their graduate assignment was the only time they had done a critical reading of a children's book. A checklist and conversations with classmates helped them to see stereotypes present in texts. In her interview, Claire shared that it "kind of blows my mind that it took me to, like, the last semester of my master's in education to truly think about the pros and cons of a text and whether it's a good piece of literature to share with your kids." While they had developed the critical consciousness and radical beliefs about disability, participants were rarely, if ever, asked to enact those beliefs explicitly as a component of their lesson planning or in discussions with students. The course assignment, in which students shared their critical analyses with one another, and the focus group, in which participants were asked to analyze a picturebook together and discuss how they would use it in the classroom, provided an opportunity to practice applying these skills.

In the focus group, participants shared their initial thoughts on how they might utilize the focal text, *Hello Good-bye Dog* (Gianferrari, 2017), in their own teaching. Their conversation led them to make the distinction between a narrative picturebook, which tells a story, and a concept book, or a "picture book that explores or explains an idea or concept (e.g., opposites), an object (e.g., a train), or an activity (e.g., working) rather than telling a story" (Lynch-Brown et al., 2011, p. 98). Phoebe made a connection between a prior children's literature course she had taken and the participants' conversation to make this distinction:

> In my literature class that I just took, they talked a lot about the difference between a concept book and a fiction book. And so like a concept book is directly teaching towards what something is, like someone who is in a wheelchair, this is why, this is what it means. And like you said, *Hello Goodbye*

Dog isn't doing that. It's just a story, but it shows a character with a disability. And I think that if a book is a concept book about a disability, then I think you can read that to all ages in a certain way because it's teaching about that concept.

Phoebe draws on her prior knowledge about both literacy content and child development to suggest that concept books about disability may be more accessible to younger learners. This indicates that background knowledge about genre and the structure of children's literature may play a role in a teacher's ability to analyze disability representation critically. What Phoebe highlights here is that her preparation to teach children using a book that includes disability representation would be different depending on the genre, and that she would use the children's age to help her select a genre and text. This also shows that Phoebe does not view criticality as separate from the rest of her literacy instruction; her ability to transfer and apply her literacy content knowledge to this discussion suggests that she believes that criticality can and should be incorporated into her everyday literacy teaching practices.

An additional institutional discourse that surfaced in our conversations with participants was the perception that discussing ability and disability was more challenging with younger children. Participants expressed that younger students might benefit from exposure to characters with disabilities, but might not be ready for discussions that addressed disability directly. For example, at the beginning of the focus group, Claire described the approach she would take to teaching *Hello Goodbye Dog*:

> I wouldn't even have a conversation about her being in a wheelchair. I would talk about…the theme and the message and whatnot…. This would be a book that I'd just read just to read as a book. I wouldn't go into her having a disability.

Claire proposed that exposure through the illustrations of the text would be sufficient for first or even fourth graders, and the rest of the teaching approach could focus on literacy skills such as theme. Claire's decision that she "wouldn't go into" disability reflects the societal messaging around the perceived "innocence" of children, and that the reality of disability might interrupt this innocence. For Claire, a concept book would necessitate a discussion of disability, while a narrative fiction text with disability representation, such as *Hello Goodbye Dog*, would not. Claire's interpretation suggests that text selection on its own does not necessarily lead to critical

discussion of the representation of disability, or even a generalized discussion of disability.

Impact of Positionality

While the three participants share several identity markers, such as being white women who are at the end of their graduate program in a progressive northeastern institution, the individual positionality and personal experiences of the participants also impacted their conceptualization of how to implement read-alouds that represent characters with disabilities in their classrooms. For example, Melissa completed her undergraduate education program in a DSE-informed inclusive education program. This likely informed the radical views she used to frame her paper. On the other hand, Claire drew on the anti-racist professional development experiences at her school along with her current graduate courses to express more critical consciousness around race and racism, naming that she felt comfortable discussing those topics with her class. Claire, who identifies as someone with dyslexia, acknowledged the ways in which she, as a middle-class white female, benefitted from the system of support attached to that identity (through family advocacy, her socioeconomic status, and race). She said, "Having the family support I had…[and] the income to fund [educational testing and tutoring]" differed from the experiences described in an article she read in class about being Black, male, and dyslexic. She explained, "He was of a different race and, like, I don't think we can ignore that." However, she did not elaborate on how her privilege differed from the experience of the individual in the article.

Phoebe had professional experiences teaching in different settings, including charter schools, urban public schools, and private schools. Rather than developing from an educational background (like Melissa) or a personal experience background (like Claire), Phoebe's radical beliefs and practices around disability were developed in practice. In discussing race, Phoebe described how she learned to think more radically from her colleagues of color in the following way:

> There started to be more of a conversation around what texts are we choosing? Then, how are kids reflected in that text and what message are we sending? I started to see colleagues…send emails because they started doing standardized curriculum across the schools and seeing colleagues…say, "I'm not comfortable with teaching this passage because

I don't like the message that it's sending about slavery.… I'm worried it's not celebrating our history, but more like being a deficit idea of it." So, I think that watching colleagues do that, it started to pop in my head, "Oh, this is something I need to be thinking about."

Here, Phoebe described the impact that her colleagues had on her own professional development, which had implications for her teaching practice. She highlighted an example connected to racial identity and connected that to the importance of text selection and its implication for students; she made clear that representation is not enough on its own because that representation can be negative and therefore have a negative impact on students. She has reflected on her own positionality in relation to her colleagues of color, acknowledging a gap in her knowledge and practice and how she has worked to address it. While Phoebe exhibits this Category III thinking with regard to race, it is important to note that this does not necessarily mean that her radical thinking about race transfers to ability/disability. In addition, this example highlights how Category III thinking can be cultivated through professional relationships.

Dysconscious Ableism

Despite the critical consciousness participants displayed in their individual analyses of picturebooks and interviews, focus-group participation indicated that they benefited from additional practice with critically reading disability representation. While having practiced this process in class, their comprehension of *Hello Goodbye Dog* in the focus group was influenced by assumptions they made about the main character, an individual with a disability. During the discussion, participants surfaced how their own institutionalized narrative about disability was read into the story. Claire and Melissa had assumed that the titular dog was a service dog; they connected the illustrations, which show the main character in a wheelchair, with the institutionalized narrative that people with disabilities need support and are not independent. Consequently, they did not realize until well into the focus-group conversation that the dog in the story was a pet, not a service dog. Below is the transcript of the moment the participants came to this realization.

> **Melissa:** The dog was never a therapy dog…we thought he was. I'm realizing that. It was never a therapy dog…it's just a dog.

Claire: Wow, I never really thought about that!

Melissa: No, I just…I'm doing it as we're thinking.

Claire: So, she doesn't need a therapy dog. So not everybody with a disability needs…why didn't I think about that?

Melissa: No, but it's not you! I completely was assuming that the entire time, it's a therapy dog…

Claire: (*whispers*) I feel so dumb now.

Laurie: So talk about that…why did you think it was a therapy dog when you started reading the book?

Claire: Stereotypes? I don't know.

Melissa: …I didn't just think about that until the end, but I was trying to notice how that's represented, we think it's a therapy dog and that's… you could easily go through the story without even addressing that. It's not as if…

Claire: I totally didn't even think about that…

Melissa: We're analyzing it, right? An hour and a half later. I realize it's…

Claire: It's just her dog.

Melissa: Just her dog.

Prior to this part of the conversation, the participants' dysconscious ableism was preventing them from recognizing the story's message. As Claire commented, rather than using evidence from the text to support their understanding, they were relying on stereotypes about individuals who use wheelchairs to draw inferences about the protagonist's pet dog. To reread the story's message, they benefited from having an open mindset about reframing their own thinking as well as an interactional dynamic that allowed them to be comfortable with acknowledging misunderstanding. While Claire whispered, "I feel so dumb now," she was not alone in this feeling, which Melissa quickly pointed out. Her reaction suggests that disrupting dysconscious ableism requires a disequilibrium in one's way of thinking, which can spur an affective response. Further, Claire's use of the word "dumb" suggests that she was embarrassed because she had not realized the accurate interpretation of the text

previously, and it now seemed so obvious. Even Claire's language in the moment suggests that, while she is able to disrupt institutionalized discourses about disability in the plot line, she tacitly reinforces stereotypes about disabled individuals. In the using of the word "dumb" as a form of self-denigration, she associates "dumbness," which has been historically used as a category for people who cannot speak or those who have intellectual disabilities, with inferiority. In this excerpt, Claire and Melissa realized that there was a misalignment between their radical beliefs and the way they engaged with the children's book in practice, suggesting that one can be a radical thinker but not yet a radical practitioner.

The ability to be involved in a candid conversation allowed for this moment of rupture in the ableist discourse. We argue that Melissa and Claire's preexisting professional relationship from graduate school coursework and their preexisting academic relationship with Laurie supported their ability to dialogue authentically. Melissa and Claire are seen interrupting one another in this exchange, which under different conditions could have the potential to derail an individual's thinking or make someone uncomfortable. These interruptions indicate the group working together to come to a collective understanding. Ultimately, it took intentional facilitation to revisit certain moments in the text to encourage Melissa and Claire to come to this realization. This suggests that the facilitator of these types of conversations may need intimate knowledge of the text that is being critically read and be prepared to revisit key moments to ask critical questions, at least as teachers are learning this process.

Dysconsciousness, Fear, and Niceness

Participants' stories also surfaced their fears of disrupting particular institutional discourses of disability. Specifically, they discussed their fears of being unable to answer students' questions or reactions, as well as potential pushback from families or administrators if they were to discuss disability identities directly; in discussing disability critically, they might be seen as "bad" teachers. For example, Melissa described her concern when answering student questions about disability: "I don't know if I'd be able to explain or answer the questions that the student was having. Like, can I explain what the author means by that?" Fear of appearing uninformed seems to prevent Melissa from engaging in an important conversation with students.

Additionally, participants' fears of not being seen as "nice" prevented them from disrupting dominant ideologies about

disability or even directly addressing certain aspects of disability and disability identities. For example, Phoebe explained parent pushback at her school about anti-racist curriculum:

> I wanted to talk about this in the right way and I don't know how to. There's also been parents who have said, "I don't want my child participating in this. I feel like they're too young. I don't understand why they have to be talking about race when they're 6 years old."

Phoebe's explanation suggests that in order to engage students in critical reading, whether it is about race, disability, or another social identity category, teachers may have to negotiate challenging conversations with families. Rather than shying away from these conversations, however, this suggests a need to be prepared in navigating them. She continued by sharing that at her school, the administration supports efforts to engage in anti-racist teaching, which helps her feel confident doing this work, even if there is pushback from families. Having a coalition between educators and administration may provide a foundation for criticality in the classroom.

Participants also expressed fear that discussions of disability in a heterogeneous classroom might embarrass or tokenize students with disabilities. Participants explained that they did not want to single out students with a disability inadvertently or exacerbate the experience of a disability by opening it up for discussion. Even though Claire provided an example of a student in her class who demonstrated pride in being dyslexic, and Claire identified herself as dyslexic, she still feared that discussions of disability might make students with disabilities upset.

> You're not going to tell me not to use something to teach my kids about racism. I will defend that all day, every day…. But, I could see how the topic of anxiety could be something that maybe families would want to discuss with their children. Maybe if their child has anxiety…. I don't know what children in my class have anxiety or not. So it could be an issue if I brought it up and then it could make the child maybe feel anxious as I'm doing the read-aloud.

The fear that Claire articulated here made clear that she was associating a disability identity with shame. She assumed that talking about a disability would be something that both students and families would want to hide.

Discussion

Our analysis, as outlined above, suggests that even if one has developed radical thinking about disability, other factors may prevent one from enacting teaching practices that are aligned with those beliefs. We found that positionality, dysconscious ableism (Broderick & Lalvani, 2017), niceness (Castagno, 2019), and fear of being considered a "not nice" teacher may prevent educators from identifying the institutionalized discourses about disability that they may be perpetuating or that may be present in the literature children are exposed to. Further, educators need to develop the skills to apply their radical thinking (Broderick & Lalvani, 2017) about disability to their teaching practices. Without explicit practice in applying radical thinking to teaching practices, teachers may enact strategies more aligned with conservative thinking.

Critical Analysis as Collaborative Work

Our findings suggest that educators cannot support students in doing critical reading of children's literature for disability representation until they are able to identify the potential stereotypes that they themselves hold. While participants benefited from using exemplar critical questions to support their critical reading of a piece of children's literature, the questions did not provide enough support for educators to develop a critical understanding of disability representation. They were not able to uncover their own hidden bias about the text they were reading without the support of the facilitated conversation with colleagues. The focus group allowed participants to access the group's "social capital," or the talent of a group of teachers rather than the skills and knowledge of individuals (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012; Leana, 2011). Social capital increased their individual human capital because the interactions and relationships fostered confidence, feedback, and deeper analysis.

While there have been recommendations to use children's literature in social justice courses and to infuse social justice into children's literature courses, disability identity is often overlooked or discussed uncritically in these contexts. In fact, disabled individuals are one of the most underrepresented and inadequately portrayed identity groups in children's literature (Pennell et al., 2017). Disability is often positioned as a problem for characters to fix or a concept to be explained to non-disabled youth. In the latter type of texts, authors use "you/them" language, implying that individuals with disabilities are not members of the audience.

Our findings suggest that it is essential for teachers to seek out representations of characters with a wide range of ability and disability and where characters with disabilities have rich and engaging lives that extend beyond and intersect with disability. For educators to effectively identify these texts, they need to be able to recognize problematic or oversimplified representations of disability. Teacher preparation programs and professional development should make space for engagement in collaborative critical readings. Because there are so few nuanced representations of disability in children's literature, educators benefit from repeated practice of this skill. They have been inundated with singular stories about disability in texts, media, and society, so it takes time and practice to identify what is problematic about these narratives.

In addition, educators would benefit from increased attention to newly published children's literature that represents characters with disabilities. Teachers might refer to the Schneider Family Book Award or the Dolly Gray Children's Literature Award, both of which honor authors and illustrators that represent disability for youth. Recent recipients of these awards include *My City Speaks* (2021) by Darren Lebeuf, *Dancing With Daddy* (2021) by Anitra Rowe Schulte, *The Girl Who Thought in Pictures: The Story of Dr. Temple Grandin* (2018) by Julia Finley Mosca, and *A Walk in the Words* (2021) by Hudson Talbott. Other texts we have used in our work with teachers include *Intersection-Allies* (2022) by Chelsea Johnson, LaToya Council, and Carolyn Choi and *We Move Together* (2021) by Kelly Fritsch and Anne McGuire.

Educators, specifically white women like the participants in this study, need support in developing awareness of the shared socioemotional disposition of "niceness," how it reinforces the status quo for students with disabilities and prevents teaching students toward critical consciousness.

Disrupting Dysconscious Niceness

Scholars of niceness suggest that educators avoid raising conversations about identities such as race and ability in order to maintain their status as nice teachers. For those who do disrupt racism, ableism, and how racism and ableism mutually reinforce one another, niceness serves as a disciplining agent to police those educators back into the status quo (Castagno, 2019). In our study, participants did not need to experience actual external disciplining agents for niceness to discipline them. They demonstrated fear of *hypothetical* disciplining agents, including being unable to manage or respond effectively to students' questions about disability and possible negative feedback from families or administrators. This was enough to keep them silent. In this way, the internal forces they imagined served as a form of self-discipline.

Participants' privileging of the hypothetical pushback reinscribed institutional discourses that position individuals with disabilities as shameful, problematic, or needing to be segregated. Their concession to these discourses "tacitly accepts dominant ableist norms and privileges" (Broderick & Lalvani, 2017, p. 895). Despite having exhibited radical thinking (the ability to reflect critically on ableism as part of the normative framework of society) in their graduate coursework and interviews, they did not apply that radical thinking to their read-aloud planning. The hypothetical disciplining narratives that the participants had internalized suggested that they assumed those around them held conservative beliefs about disability, and that avoiding disagreement about those views was more important than enacting their own radical beliefs in the interest of students with disabilities. In this way, our participants were both radical thinkers and dysconsciously reinforcing ableism. The conceptual framework of niceness helps us to understand that in schools, avoiding conflict is privileged over advocacy; deference to niceness leads educators to believe that maintaining the status quo protects students, when in fact it is disruption of the status quo that benefits students, specifically students with disabilities.

While participants' fears of being considered a "mean" teacher were hypothetical, they were not necessarily unfounded. Their fears highlight the need to prepare classroom teachers to manage and facilitate discussions about disability with students and to prepare them to communicate effectively and respond to challenges from families and colleagues. Teacher education and professional development should build teachers' comfort discussing disability identities in addition to and in intersection with race and support educators in answering student questions, responding to family concerns, justifying

instructional decisions to administrators, and identifying the institutional ableist discourses they themselves hold.

Furthermore, educators, specifically white women like the participants in this study, need support in developing awareness of the shared socioemotional disposition of "niceness," how it reinforces the status quo for students with disabilities and prevents teaching students toward critical consciousness. Teachers may receive conflicting messages, such as encouragement to develop and enact critical consciousness through their graduate coursework or professional development, while the disciplining force of niceness positions that critical consciousness as deviant or disruptive. Further research might utilize DisCrit and dysconscious niceness as a paired set of lenses for exploring how teachers receive conflicting messages and navigate these opposing expectations. •

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