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(Un)Affirming Assimilation: Depictions of Dis/ability in Health Textbooks

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Abstract

Purpose

In light of the systemic and pervasive nature of ableism and how ableist ideology structures—or limits—educational opportunities, there is an ongoing conversation within the field of multicultural education regarding how to meaningfully include dis/ability in K-12 curricula.

Design/methodology/approach

This paper explores how elementary and middle school health textbooks from two prominent publishers in the United States portray dis/ability through quantitative and qualitative content analysis methods of 1,468 images across texts.

Findings

Findings indicate that the majority of the textbook portrayals of dis/ability tacitly forward assimilationist ideals. Specifically, the textbooks assume and speak to a normatively-abled reader, pointing out those with dis/abilities as different from the reader. Additionally, mainstream or normative markers are provided as evidence of success and those with dis/abilities who have been successful as such are positioned as overcoming their limitations.

Practical implications

Such portrayals stifle the possibility of social transformation by reinforcing and privileging dominant, ableist views. Therefore, teachers are recommended to take steps that might counter such messages in curricular materials and teacher educators are called on to support these efforts.

Originality/value

This paper extends the tradition of curricular analysis as one of the first studies to examine the portrayals of dis/ability in U.S. health textbooks and offers practical implications for educators.

Keywords: textbooks, ableism, critical multiculturalism, health education, critical disability studies

Article classification: Research paper

Introduction

An ongoing conversation in multicultural education regards meaningful inclusion of dis/ability in curricula, given the systemic and pervasive nature of ableism and how ableist ideology structures—or limits—educational opportunities (Bialka, 2017; Johnson and Nieto, 2007). Critical multicultural educators have argued that analyzing curricular materials for how they include and exclude groups, including how they portray dis/ability, can serve as a starting point for addressing injustice and bringing about transformation (see Compton-Lilly *et al.*, 2019). However, there is evidence that teachers minimally engage dis/ability explicitly in their practice, likely receive little pre-service support about ableism, and could benefit from further knowledge and information (Bialka, 2017).

Thus, this paper explores how recent U.S. elementary and middle school health textbooks portray dis/ability, drawing on Annamma, Connor, and Ferri's (2013) use of "dis/ability" as "the '/' in disability disrupts misleading understandings of disability, as it simultaneously conveys the mixture of ability and disability" (p. 24). Through quantitative and qualitative content analysis methods, analyzing 1,468 images across texts, findings suggest that while textbooks include images and content referring to dis/ability, these portrayals tacitly forward assimilationist ideals and qualified conceptions of inclusion. Specifically, the textbooks assume and speak to a

normatively-abled reader, pointing out those with dis/abilities as different. Additionally, mainstream or normative markers are provided as evidence of success and those with dis/abilities who have been successful are positioned as overcoming their limitations. This paper argues that such portrayals stifle the possibility of social transformation by reinforcing and privileging dominant, ableist views and suggests ways for educators and teacher educators alike to use this research as a starting point for addressing dis/ability and ableism in their work.

Understanding Dis/ability and Ableism

This study conceptualizes dis/ability as a “socially constructed categor[y] that actively re/make[s] oppression and inequality” (Gillborn, 2015, p. 280) in the form of ableism, and that “so-called ‘impairments’ only become disabling when confronted by socially constructed problems and assumptions” (p. 283).^[1] Social construction relies on markers that perpetuate the “masquerade” of dis/ability as “natural, fixed, and obvious” (Sensoy and DiAngelo, 2017, p. 283) through visuals such as wheelchairs or hearing aids, and textual excerpts that ascribe labels to individuals, like “learning disabled” (see ADA, 2009, §12102). Thus, consistent with existing research (e.g. Johnson and Nieto, 2007), this study focuses on these more stereotypical portrayals of dis/ability. Though dis/ability is not always visible, and it can be argued that such an approach further invisibilizes those with “invisible disabilities” (see <https://invisibleabilities.org/>), in initial cultural analyses of textbooks this approach is necessary to make issues of power, here ableism, visible (see Deckman *et al.*, 2018).

Additionally, consistent with the definition of disability provided by the United States’ Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2004) that includes chronic illnesses as “other health impairments,” this analysis also incorporates references and markers of chronic illnesses. For example, images of people using inhalers and text related to asthma and images of people taking

insulin were part of the analysis. By including this population, this study is applicable to an even larger population of children with chronic illnesses who may be marginalized and face negative, exclusionary educational outcomes similar to children with other types of dis/abilities (Salko, 2017; Thies, 1999).

Representation Matters

Sleeter and Grant (1991) write, “Debates about curriculum content can be understood broadly as struggles for power to define the symbolic representation of the world and society, that will be transmitted to the young, for the purpose of either gaining or holding onto power” (p. 79). The last systematic study analyzing textbook imagery across content areas for depictions of power was conducted decades ago utilizing textbooks from the 1980’s. Educators and researchers today do not have a contemporary sense of *who* is included in K-12 textbooks, and *how* they are portrayed. At the time of the Sleeter and Grant study, people represented in texts were primarily White, male, and typically-abled, overwhelmingly perpetuating normativity of socially dominant groups.

Have textbook images changed since the 1980’s? This team’s research (Deckman *et al.*, 2018) on race, gender, and sexuality suggests that higher percentages of people from non-dominant backgrounds are included in recently published textbooks, though the ways in which they are portrayed still largely reifies dominant social power structures. For instance, women and girls in U.S. elementary and middle school health textbooks are depicted as needing to prioritize their physical attractiveness, while men and boys are valorized for their intellect; and people of color are portrayed more often than White people as likely to engage in risky behavior. Therefore, for this research, documenting both how often markers of dis/ability are included in the text and the *ways in which* different groups are represented through language and visual

images were of interest, as an increase in numbers alone is not necessarily a move towards justice in representation.

McIntosh (1983) offers a framework that clarifies moving beyond focusing on numeric representation to considering how representation works in curriculum. Focused on (White) feminism, McIntosh outlines five phases of curriculum “re-visioning,” ranging from no inclusion to token inclusion, which is more about numeric representation, to increasingly more authentic inclusion: 1) Womanless History, 2) Women in History, 3) Women as Problem, Anomaly, or Absence in History, 4) Women *as* History, and 5) History Redefined or Reconstructed to Include Us All (p. 22). Similarly, other scholars (e.g., Banks, 1995; Gorski, 1995-2014) identify stages of “multicultural curriculum transformation” emphasizing resisting facile notions of inclusion and representation, such as the “just add women [X group] and stir” view (Harding, 1995), which suggests that simply increasing the numbers of women, or X group, represented is equivalent to meaningful curricular inclusion. In sum, if images and written language communicate power and meaning (Hall, 2001), even though non-dominant groups are represented in textbooks, their inclusion may still constitute a move *away* from equity depending on how those groups are positioned.

Ableism and Assimilation

Of particular importance to representations of dis/ability in texts is the extent to which portrayals demonstrate authentic inclusion (McIntosh, 1983) or suggest a type of inclusion predicated on assimilation. An assimilationist stance makes conformity to dominant norms a prerequisite for inclusion, thus rendering the individual as the site of intervention, as opposed to “the social environment that affects a person’s capacities for participation” (Knight, 2015, p. 101). Attempts at assimilation of students with dis/abilities into “mainstream” learning environments has long

been an issue in U.S. education. As Lawrence-Brown (2014) explains, “Traditionally, supports and modifications have been provided on a pull-out basis [pulling students out of mainstream education for periods of time during the school day], using a deficit model that assumes that certain students should be ‘put right’ through a separate program as a condition for being assimilated back into the general education classroom” (p. 4). Such assimilationist practices can result in dehumanization and alienation of marginalized groups, particularly when they fail to assimilate (see Adams and Erevelles, 2016).

Methods

Data Sources

Three conglomerate companies have dominated the U.S. K-12 textbook market: Pearson, McGraw-Hill (now MacMillan/McGraw-Hill), and Houghton Mifflin Harcourt (Carmody, 2012). Of these companies, only McGraw-Hill and Harcourt appeared to publish elementary and middle school health textbooks at the time this research was initiated. Following precedent from other textbook analyses (e.g., Polikoff, 2015; Sleeter and Grant, 1991), a representative sample of texts was selected from a range of elementary and middle school grades from each publisher, which publishers provided based on the research team’s location in New York State. Publishers did not share specific information with us on the adoption of these textbooks across districts. As Loewen (2007) has documented, publishing companies are unlikely to be forthcoming with such information.

Harcourt Health and Fitness provided textbooks for grades 2, 4, 6, which are referred to in the findings as HAR2, HAR4, and HAR6. McGraw-Hill Health & Wellness provided textbooks for grades, 1, 3, 8, referred to as MAC1, MAC3, and MAC8 (see reference list for full citations). Note that though these texts are more than a decade old, they were the most recent

editions available from publishers at the time of this research and, nonetheless, provide valuable insights on the types of textbook content to which students might have access given that research shows that a 7- to 10-year adoption cycle for textbooks in K-12 U.S. schools is not uncommon (Rapp, 2008). The data from across the textbooks include 1,468 unique images depicting 3,008 individuals, as well as associated written portions of the texts that discuss dis/ability.

Content Analysis Procedures

Types of content analyses. Building on prior research (Grant and Sleeter, 2007; Sleeter and Grant, 1991) three types of analyses for each text were conducted: image, “people to study,” and language analysis. For the image analysis, guiding analytic questions included: How many pictures are included in a given text and how many times are individuals and groups of various backgrounds included in those pictures? How are groups or individuals visually portrayed vis-à-vis one another? Consequently, each image that appeared in the given textbooks was coded for the apparent dis/ability status of each person. When an image featured more than one individual, the presence or absence of diversity within the group was recorded, including how individuals were positioned in relationship to one another.

The “people to study” analysis focused on specific individuals who are noted as being important for making contributions to society (see Grant and Sleeter, 2007) and who are usually showcased in a sidebar of the texts. Guiding analytic questions included: Who (as in people from which backgrounds) are noted as worthy of study and how are they positioned? To illustrate, in HAR2 (see Table 1 for full titles of texts) German scientist Robert Koch’s research on bacteria is described, and, thus, Koch is positioned as a famous person to study (p. 162).

Finally, language analysis entailed noting the specific words used (see Osborn, 2016) to describe various people presented in the texts as well as their contributions to the field of health

and/or U.S. society. Guiding analytic questions included: What descriptors and associated characteristics are used to describe different groups in the written language of the text?

Content analysis categories and tensions. Content analysis employed both quantitative and qualitative approaches, counting textual elements and examining themes (Berg, 2004). Specifically, the research team was interested in documenting how dis/ability was portrayed or described. This posed difficulties and paradoxes for the team in aiming to categorize “types” of people, while maintaining the belief that human diversity is inherently complex and nuanced and understanding the indeterminacy of dis/ability, given that ability is often contextually bound and something that can change across time. The individual members of the research team fall on a spectrum of having what is characterized as a “dis/ability”: Author 2 identifies as a person with a chronic disease/dis/ability and as the mother of a child with a learning dis/ability; Author 3 identifies as a person with specified and unspecified learning dis/abilities; Authors 1, 4, and 5 do not identify as people with dis/abilities. Additionally, Author 5 was formerly a middle school special education teacher, teaching students labeled with various dis/abilities. As such, the research team brought complex understandings of dis/ability to this work. Yet, in order to conduct image analyses, the team relied on simple visual and textual cues to categorize images. Such an approach can be problematic for a number of reasons, including potentially reifying facile, ableist notions about identity that this team, as scholars and educators, hopes to challenge (see Pollock, 2004; Deckman *et al.*, 2018).

Though less than ideal, the effort to document portrayals of various groups of people in textbooks was important and barred other possible methodologies; if there are no attempts to document how and how frequently individuals from various backgrounds are portrayed in texts, educators will have little basis from which to challenge dominant paradigms. Most importantly,

the research team also imagines that when students pick up textbooks, without other training or direction, they likely make swift assumptions about the people portrayed in the texts based on cursory visual and textual suggestions. (For example, the process of making quick, often implicit judgments based on physical cues has been well documented by the researchers affiliated with Project Implicit; <https://www.projectimplicit.net/index.html>.) Lastly, to indicate researcher subjectivity in the coding process, the team often included words such as “appears” or “looks” in descriptions of people in the images we coded; these are clearly not the only interpretations, but may prove useful, nonetheless (see Francis and Paechter, 2015 for a discussion of the dilemmas of categorization in education research, focusing on gender).

Content analyzing textbooks. For this study, all text and images in the main part of the text and appendices in a given textbook were coded. Research team members began by tracking the presence of specific demographic categories in Microsoft Excel using a basic binary coding scheme. In the case of the analysis presented here, two variables were of interest: “dis/ability present” (1 = image of person with dis/abilities present in an image; 0 = not present), and “dis/ability active” (1 = image of person with dis/abilities who is active [e.g., playing a sport] as opposed to being passive [e.g., being pushed in a wheelchair by someone else] present in an image; 0 = not present). This binary coding scheme was ultimately used to run quantitative analysis in STATA statistical analysis software. Concurrently and subsequently, research team members wrote analytical and theoretical memos, engaging in repeated readings of text and viewing of images, posing questions and hypotheses about the way various groups and individuals were positioned visually and discursively (see Deckman, 2017). After independent analysis, research team members came back together to generate and determine patterns across the data.

Determining interrater reliability. As expected practice with content analyses (see Gabriel and Lester, 2013; Polikoff, 2015) and given the fraught nature of coding images based on visual cues, authors engaged in norming sessions, wherein members of the research team individually coded and debated the coding of various images, until agreement was reached. Subsequently, members of the research team all coded HAR2. The degree of agreement for coding ability status was acceptable ($\kappa = 0.6494$) (Landis and Koch, 1977), likely due to the dearth of representations—about 2 percent of individuals in coded images. Cohen’s Kappa coefficient was used to measure interrater reliability given that it takes into account agreement and disagreement for a more conservative and robust measure of rater agreement.

Findings

This section discusses three intertwined patterns for how the textbooks presented a complicated approach to inclusion of representations of dis/ability through: 1) appearing diverse; 2) assuming ableism; and 3) affirming assimilation. Findings begin by focusing on the seemingly positive, or at least benign, apparent inclusion of individuals with various dis/abilities in the texts. Then the apparent embracing of dis/ability-related diversity is augmented and complicated by discussing specific patterns in the way representations of dis/ability in the texts may subtly communicate ableist and assimilative messages (see Burrows and McCormack, 2014).

Appearing Diverse

Content analysis reveals that when considering sheer numbers, this textbook sample presented more depictions of topics related to and images of individuals with dis/abilities than past textbooks (see Sleeter and Grant, 1991). Sleeter and Grant found that just over a third of the textbooks they reviewed included (minimal) depictions and/or discussion of dis/ability, whereas all of the textbooks reviewed for this paper included such depictions and discussion. Though, it

must be noted that Sleeter and Grant's (1991) study included language arts, social studies, science, and mathematics textbooks, not health. Given the nature of topics addressed in health curricula, it might be expected that textbooks would include more depictions and discussion of dis/ability. Overall, in the six texts reviewed, individuals with dis/abilities represented just over 2% of the individuals portrayed (see Table 1).

Additionally, more than a third of the images of a person with dis/abilities (~37%, 26 images) depict those persons as active and agentic, which is in contrast with prior research that showed people with dis/abilities often portrayed as passive (Sleeter and Grant, 1991). For example, in HAR6 in a section on aerobic exercise, a woman with two prosthetic legs runs in a race, and in MAC8, in a section on "Health-Related Fitness," a boy in wheelchair is pushing himself along a running track, with a number pinned to his chest, suggesting he is in a race. Images like these counter ableist conceptions of people with dis/abilities as "helpless" (Slesaransky-Poe and García, 2014, p.76). Though, at the same time, images did appear in the data positioning people with dis/abilities as in need of help that could be provided by the normatively-abled, as in HAR 4 in a subsection, "How You Learn from Your Family." This subsection explores values with an illustration of the value of "Caring," showing a boy (presumably sighted) helping a person with blindness crossing an intersection. The person being "helped" has a walking stick in one hand and the other hand on the arm of the boy. The caption reads, "A caring person understands other people and offers to help them whenever possible."

Table 1.
Depictions of Dis/ability in
Textbook Sample

	All Textbook s		Harcourt Health and Fitness						McGraw-Hill Health & Wellness					
			Grade 2		Grade 4		Grade 6		Grade 1		Grade 3		Grade 8	
	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%
Ability-status Identification														
No	2,938	97.67	437	98.42	615	97.93	605	97.74	96.30	390	96.53	865	97.63	
Yes	70	2.33	78	1.57	137	2.07	146	2.26	3.70	147	3.47	217	2.37	
Dis/ability Active														
No	2,982	99.14	443	99.77	625	99.52	612	98.87	96.30	397	98.26	879	99.21	
Yes	26	0.86	13	0.23	33	0.48	73	1.13	3.70	73	1.73	77	0.79	
Total Images	1,468		213		289		291		10	209		456		
Total Individuals	3,008		444		628		619		27	404		886		

Across the textbooks a pattern emerged in which the first images in the texts—as early as the table of contents—were highly likely to include at least one individual with a visible dis/ability. Looking solely at the first 15 images in all the textbooks (excluding MAC1 because it has no table of contents and only contains 10 images total), 8.5% of the people depicted appear to have a dis/ability. Individuals with dis/abilities appear in the first 15 images at a rate three times higher than across all of the individuals in the images coded, but still lower than the occurrence in the general population—about 12% of Americans overall are characterized as having a dis/ability, with the majority of those being persons over the age of 65—5.3% of people ages 5-17 are characterized as having a dis/ability (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). Additionally,

wheelchairs represent very obvious disabilities and frequently appeared in the images in texts, overtly drawing attention to ways in which people are differently abled.

Assuming Ableism

The second pattern evident in the data was that dis/ability was often presented from an assumed ableist perspective. That is, when dis/ability was explicitly discussed in the text, depictions were often addressed to an assumed normatively-abled reader. This is well-demonstrated in a textbook section on “Making Friends” (HAR3, p. A66), in which students with dis/abilities are explicitly introduced as a particular group of people—apart from the dominant, normatively-abled.

In the first image in this section, a teacher is introducing a typically-abled-looking boy, who is waving hello, to two other students, a typically-abled-looking girl and another boy sitting in a wheelchair, who are seated at a table involved in an art project with construction paper. The caption reads: “You can make friends with a new student. Make him or her feel welcome.” The top heading on the very next page reads, “Friends with Special Needs,” (p. A67) and introduces the concept of “disability” as “something that changes a person’s ability to do certain tasks.” The text gives the example of a friend in a wheelchair and includes an accompanying image of two boys playing basketball. One guarding the hoop appears typically-abled and one trying to make a basket is seated in a wheelchair. The caption reads, “Students with a disability may enjoy many of the same activities as you.” This caption normalizes ableism by assuming the reader is typically abled. Thus, while the initial image could be inferred as prioritizing the view of the child who is depicted as having a dis/ability—as he is one of those welcoming the new normatively-abled student—the text is explicit when taking a dominant perspective as with the

second image. Continuing to address an assumed normatively-abled reader, a sidebar appears on this same page, titled: “What is a disability?” The body text reads:

You may make friends with someone who has special needs. He or she may have a disability. A disability [bold and highlight] is something that changes a person’s ability to do certain tasks. // Suppose that your new friend uses a wheelchair. Having to use a wheelchair causes your friend to have special needs...Your friend might need someone to hold open a door. Be a good friend to someone who has special needs...Know that most of your friend’s needs are the same as yours.

Examples abound across the textbooks of assumed normatively-abled readers. For example in HAR2 there is an image of five cheerleaders cheering on a grassy field with pom-poms. One of the cheerleaders is a little girl in a wheelchair. The accompanying text is starred as being about “Building Good Character” and reads “Respect,” “Showing Respect by Including Everyone,” “You can show respect [bold, highlight] by including everyone in a game or an activity. Sometimes a person may not be able to do an activity the way you usually do it. If you adapt, or change, the activity, everyone can join in...” (p. 207). In MAC3, a photo of a boy and girl communicating in sign language is captioned: “A person who is hearing impaired may use sign language.” An accompanying sidebar reads: “How should you treat a person with a disability?” The section is on “People with Special Needs.” The body text reads: “Some people have illnesses that result in a disability...A disability [italics] is a physical or mental condition that causes a person to have special needs...You can show care and respect for a person with a disability. Treat him or her the way you would want to be treated.” Here dis/ability is linked to illness. Overall, these data show that the authors have presumed readers to be typically-abled persons.

While not once in the data is the reader explicitly addressed in a way that assumes the person might identify as dis/abled, some images and text imply a non-normatively-abled reader. For example, in HAR6 on a section about caring, a girl in a wheelchair visits a girl in the hospital. The girl in the wheelchair is accompanied by a dog and the caption is about volunteer teams of people and dogs who visit patients. In another section of this same text on “Coping with Grief,” three young people seem to be making baskets with school supplies and water. One of the boys is seated in a wheelchair. The caption reads, “Volunteering your time to assist others can help you cope with your own feelings.” Even in these counter-examples, though, it is evident that non-normatively-abled readers are not presumed in the same way that normatively-abled readers are in numerous sections.

Affirming Assimilation

The final pattern evident in the data was that dis/abilities were presented as limitations that needed to be overcome. To this end, the research team documented that mainstream or normative markers were provided as evidence of success in overcoming such limitations. This was demonstrated in two “people to study” sections.

In one example, former Miss America pageant winner Heather Whitestone is highlighted as a person to study (MAC8). Under the heading “Understand Hearing Loss,” the reason Whitestone is offered as worthy of note in the text is due to her deafness: “As Miss America, she became a role model for young people who are physically challenged” (p. C16). Whitestone is described as having kept “a positive attitude throughout her life and work[ing] to succeed despite her lack of hearing.” Moreover, the text highlights that she now wears a cochlear implant. It is important to note that many people in the Deaf community believe that deafness is not a dis/ability, and therefore not something to be overcome (see Solomon, 1994). Also, while

students are directed to, “Do research to learn about this kind of hearing aid,” there is no mention in the text of the substantial controversy surrounding the use of cochlear implants (Sparrow, 2010).

Similarly, in the MAC8 section on learning disabilities, Thomas Edison is featured. The following caption accompanies a picture of Edison: “Inventor Thomas Edison had dyslexia” (p. B57). While the example of Edison does not include a description of him “overcoming” his dis/ability in order to achieve normative success, this is the implied message. The accompanying text, for instance, reads, “Dyslexia [*italics*] is an inability of the brain to translate writing into understandable language. People with dyslexia have trouble reading even though they may have *normal* or even *above normal* intelligence... People with learning disabilities need others to be sensitive to their condition and treat them with patience and understanding” (emphasis added). The use of “normal” and “above normal” to describe the “intelligence” of people with dyslexia further reveals ableist assumptions.

Positioning people with dis/abilities as heroes evidences what some refer to as “inspiration porn”—when societally marginalized groups, for whom members of the dominant group might feel pity, are put on display as “inspirations,” in an act that further marginalizes the group and sets them as farther apart from other members of society (Martin, 2019; Young, 2014). Young explains that inspiration porn is about “objectifying one group of people for the benefit of another group of people,” so that the dominant group can be “inspire[d]” and “motivate[d]” by the marginalized group, thinking, “Well, however bad my life is, it could be worse. I could be that person.” In the case of Edison, the message might be akin to admiring what even someone with a learning dis/ability can go on to achieve.

There was one notable counterexample to this pattern, also with a “person to study.” In this instance, a boy from Lubbock Texas, Amit Bushan, is presented as a role model for starting a campaign against secondhand smoke (MAC3, p. D47). Bushan is presented without qualification, simply as a boy with asthma, who has worked for societal change. Otherwise, the data demonstrate a consistent pattern of promoting assimilation in terms of commending ways that people with dis/abilities can overcome said dis/ability to fit into and achieve in dominant society, using normative measures of success.

Discussion and Implications

These data demonstrate a complicated relationship between textbooks and inclusion of dis/ability. On the one hand, many images appeared of individuals with dis/abilities engaged in activities in the same ways as normatively-abled individuals are depicted in the texts, without making a spectacle of dis/ability in the way token inclusion might. For example, there are a couple of images of groups of young people just hanging out or eating together, in which one member of the group uses a wheelchair, and in other images, young people with various dis/abilities are shown engaging in other quotidian tasks such as self-grooming and going to the library. At the same time, when people with dis/abilities are highlighted as a specific group or as individual people to study, they are consistently presented in ways that perpetuate ableism and promote assimilation. Altogether, these findings are similar to what Sleeter and Grant (1991) found decades ago, that, “Students reading these textbooks would gain virtually no understanding of the current issues that people with disabilities face, nor of the struggles for rights that people have waged” (p. 98). This research team calls on teachers and teacher educators to address these omissions and characterizations of dis/ability.

Considering textbook depictions may be a way for teacher educators to support preservice teachers in developing their competence with addressing dis/ability and ableism in order to incorporate more just practices into their work. The goal would be towards supporting teachers to support the young people with whom they work as research shows that, many typically-abled students are unwilling to engage with classmates who have a visible dis/ability due to feelings of discomfort, fear of being offensive, or a perceived lack of experience interacting with someone with a disability (Shah *et al.*, 2015). This is experienced by students with dis/abilities in feelings of exclusion in schools (Stiefel *et al.*, 2017).

Further, as other multicultural education and educational foundations scholars have urged (e.g. Blair and Deckman, 2019), engaging issues of equity and social justice should be incorporated across the preservice educator curriculum and ability should not be treated as an “add-on” (Bialka, 2017). This could entail including a critical exploration of dis/ability and ableism beyond the required course or two on “special learners,” but, for example, in content area methods classes, where textbook depictions might be explored as presented in this paper. In this way, teacher education can provide an opportunity for preservice teachers to build their knowledge around the issues of access and equity perpetuated by ableist society so that they can, in turn, engage their students in this same type of learning (see Bialka, 2017).

Conclusion

Educational publishers are increasingly invested in “diversity” (Deckman, personal communication, 2018). Indeed, a researcher at a prominent educational publisher—neither of those from which textbooks were reviewed for this paper—offered a possible reason for the findings presented. Though her publishing house is concerned with diversity, there is no set definition of what that means. In meetings, the researcher has asked for clarification and has

found two definitions that have conflicting results: diversity as representation (about the numbers) and diversity as infused in the content (about getting at the critical aspect of *how* people are included in the text). While this publishing house focuses on representation, there is no agreement about what diversity and inclusion means and entails. Also of importance is that publishers themselves may not have expertise in identifying the ways issues of power and oppression play out in texts. Therefore, educators and teacher educators are called on to (re)invest in the important work of naming and challenging ableist representations in instructional materials.

Note

1. Those with means sometimes deploy dis/ability markers in a way to bolster their privilege. This was evident in the recent U.S. college admissions scandal in which some wealthy parents helped secure unwarranted learning disability designations for their children to guarantee extended time for standardized testing (Lovett, 2020).

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This is the accepted manuscript of an article published in:

Journal for Multicultural Education Vol. 14 No. 3/4, 2020 pp. 269-280 © Emerald Publishing Limited 2053-535X DOI10.1108/JME-04-2020-0037