

Understanding the Puzzle Behind the Pictures: A Content Analysis of Children’s Picture Books About Autism

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The growing visibility of autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and the trend toward inclusive classroom practices present teachers with the unique responsibility of providing an inclusive learning environment for all students. This study sought to explore how teachers may use children’s picture books about autism to provide nondisabled students with experiences aimed at increasing student understandings toward autism. Researchers compiled 35 children’s books for content analysis and identified significant themes presented as five assertions. Findings indicate children’s picture books about autism may (a) teach readers about the core characteristics of ASD, (b) illustrate how individuals with autism may be “at risk,” (c) expand on ways neurotypical children are similar and different to individuals with autism, (d) emphasize the importance of influential language, and (e) present insights about autism through the use of multiple perspectives. Findings with exemplar texts representative of each theme are presented, and practical classroom applications are discussed.

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WITHIN the past decade, presence of autism spectrum disorder (ASD) has risen to one in 68 children, and this number continues to grow (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2015). Autism is a neurological disorder, and a diagnosis encapsulates a range of mild to severe behaviors (National Institutes of Health, 2014). More recently, the definition of ASD has been redefined by the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (5th ed.) (DSM-5;* American Psychiatric Association, 2013), collapsing the original three core characteristic behaviors of the disorder into two core indicators, which include deficits in the ways individuals with ASD (a) socially interact and communicate with others (e.g., social anxieties, nonverbal or limited language skills, lack of eye contact) and (b) impairments that include atypical behaviors and repetition (e.g., repetitive language or movements; self-stimulatory behavior, or “stimming”; aversion to change; and observance of strict regimens).

In tandem with the rising numbers of children with ASD is the growing support for inclusive educational settings, resulting in two significant changes in elementary classrooms. First, general education teachers must have a deep understanding of autism and practical classroom strategies

for meeting the needs of their students with autism. And, second, there are now more opportunities for students with autism and their peers to be partnered or grouped for learning. In this study, we ask how children’s picture books about autism might respond to these needs.

Understanding Inclusion

The 1975 Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA; originally the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, Pub. L. 94-142) instructed that all students must receive “educational services in the least restrictive environment” (LRE; Vakil, Welton, O’Connor, & Cline, 2009, p. 322). This law led to inclusion, or the belief that the educational needs of all students can be met in the general education classroom, opposing previous self-contained and pullout methods of instruction.

Due to the increasing presence of inclusive classrooms, an increasing number of schools are relying on the general education classroom to provide the LRE for all students. Therefore, general educators are expected to differentiate instruction and classroom practices to meet the needs of diverse learners, including those with ASD. However, not all



teachers have the necessary training to meet the various needs of students with disabilities (Friedlander, 2009; Rogers, 2000), and researchers report that one of the main struggles for students with ASD is difficulty navigating social situations (Friedlander, 2009; Sansosti & Sansosti, 2012) both inside and outside of the classroom. This points to a need for teachers to educate nondisabled students about ASD in order to encourage an accepting learning environment for all students.

In her article, Friedlander (2009) aimed to increase teacher awareness and understanding of ASD by outlining one child named Sam's daily interactions at school. Typical stimming behaviors, such as chewing on his sleeve and fixation on the ceiling fan, are discussed at the beginning of the article, leading into more school-specific examples, including the difficulty of understanding the library check-out system, in which students must distinguish between magazines and books because the amount allowed to be checked out per week varies based on print type. Friedlander not only described interactions difficult for Sam but also offered tips for teachers in making their classroom more suitable for students with ASD.

Current studies have identified possible methods for helping students with ASD become more successful within the social structures of the general education classroom (Locke, Rotheram-Fuller, & Kasari, 2012). Locke et al. (2012) investigated the use of peer models as an intervention for helping children with ASD overcome struggles with social difficulties and peer relationships within the classroom context. By collecting data on 60 elementary-age children, they found peer models helped students develop more frequent and stable connections than nonpeer models. They also found that peer models promoted higher-quality friendships and helped students with ASD experience fewer feelings of loneliness while not adversely affecting the social status of neurotypical children participating as peer models.

Additionally, in studying the social networks of children with ASD in general education classrooms, Kasari, Locke, Gulsrud, and Rotheram-Fuller (2010) found "their social networks are smaller than typical classmates, the friendships they identify are less often reciprocated, and the quality of their friendships is poorer" (p. 541). These social difficulties are mentioned multiple times in research regarding ASD and further indicate a need for students in general education classrooms to become more informed about classmates with this disorder.

Children's Books as a Teaching Tool

However, inclusive classrooms do not guarantee that nondisabled students will form friendships with other students who have disabilities or that they will become accepting of them (Boutot, 2007). Therefore, "parents and teachers need to take steps to promote acceptance of children with ASD" (Boutot, 2007, p. 156). Books provide a readily available

resource that teachers can use to help students learn about individuals with disabilities (Dyches, Prater, & Jenson, 2006). Books allow students with disabilities to relate to characters that are like them and allow nondisabled students to identify similarities they have with others who have disabilities, which may provide valuable learning experiences for *all* students (Leininger, Dyches, Prater, & Heath, 2010). Similarly, Almerico (2014) stressed the need for character education to be addressed in classrooms, which can be done through using children's literature. He argued that "the characters children and young people meet in the pages of a book can have a profound influence on them, almost as strong of an impact as that of real people they know and meet" (Almerico, 2014, p. 3).

Prater, Dyches, and Johnstun (2006) suggest that teachers employ prereading strategies, such as directing students to pay attention to the actions and feelings of characters with learning disabilities. They suggested the teacher could first read the book while encouraging students to make interpretations without being interrupted. Then, they suggested the teacher could read the text again, stopping to discuss student interpretations and takeaways from the book, specifically focusing on the character with a learning disability. By utilizing books portraying characters with disabilities and encouraging emotional involvement, reflection, and discussion, students may become more accepting toward students with ASD (Prater et al., 2006).

Existing Children's Books About Disabilities

The first step is to identify appropriate books for teaching students about disability in the classroom. Although a content analysis of children's books specifically pertaining to ASD does not exist, some studies have examined the quality and quantity of books about disability across the years (Baskin & Harris, 1984; Harrill, Leung, McKeag, & Price, 1993). Researchers found that the number of available books describing disabilities increased with the implementation of the IDEA in 1975. They also found that books began to illustrate different types of disorders and represent characters with disabilities in more positive and realistic (although not always accurate) ways (Baskin & Harris, 1984; Harrill et al., 1993).

Mellon (1989) and Ayala (1999) similarly discovered that the number of books about disabilities increased over time but that the quality of these texts was inconsistent, with books often magnifying the differences associated with the disorders or inaccurately or stereotypically representing disabilities. Ayala (1999) also found that although books began to more realistically depict a greater number of disabilities, like autism, they were still far from reflecting the growing number of diverse students diagnosed with disabilities. Similarly, Dyches, Prater, and Cramer (2001) and Dyches and Prater (2005) noticed that books began to more positively depict characters with disabilities, although these changes were inconsistent across texts.

Additionally, award-winning books were examined to determine how many contained characters with disabilities. These studies revealed that only 4% (11 of 276) of the books recognized by Caldecott from 1938-2005 (Dyches et al., 2006) and only 24% (31 of 131) of the Newberry books recognized from 1975-2009 (Leininger et al., 2010) addressed disabilities. These findings suggest that even award-winning books may inaccurately portray disabilities and that available books high in literary quality are not reflective of the increasing prevalence of ASD.

Although these studies provide a basis for understanding how disabilities have been represented in children's literature over time, they also present a broad definition of disability and not one specifically as it related to ASD. The focus of this study then is to provide a more narrow analysis of children's books pertaining to ASD and to provide suggestions for how these books can be used to promote understanding of the disorder within the general education classroom.

Conceptual Framework

Because picture books are a staple in the elementary classroom for teaching content, social expectations, and the joy of reading, we set out to understand if and how children's picture books about ASD could be used in the inclusive classroom. We wanted to take a closer look at how ASD is portrayed in children's picture books in order to determine if available books can provide a positive, influential tool that teachers can use in order to help young students understand the disability. Prater et al. (2006) noted the importance of teachers identifying their teaching purpose when making literature decisions for their class, noting that children's literature can "promote awareness, understanding, and acceptance of those with disabilities" (p. 14). Similarly, Maich and Belcher (2012) provided suggestions for how to use picture books about autism as tools for raising student awareness of the disorder in order to cultivate more inclusive, accepting learning environments. Moreover, Sigmon, Tackett, and Azano (2016) provided advice for educators who wish to use picture books to help students learn about disabilities, like autism, within inclusive classrooms. If in fact teachers use children's picture books about autism as an instructional vehicle for students' understanding of individuals with ASD, we questioned, What, then, are the messages these books share with young learners, and how can we leverage those messages to teach acceptance in an inclusive classroom?

Method

We began this study with a search for *children's books about autism* using Google and retail search engines, namely, Amazon and Barnes and Noble. We discovered quickly that we needed specific criteria for inclusion based on these initial

findings, which resulted in a large number of nonfiction, informational texts written for parents that would likely not be used in an elementary classroom. We wanted to be deliberate in our choices and carefully considered how this study might best serve practitioners by taking an initial step in understanding this genre. In doing so, we wanted to focus our efforts on books about autism with more severe characteristics (i.e., those with intellectual or language impairments). Although general education teachers might have had students with ASD without intellectual and language impairments (formerly referred to as Asperger's), they will likely see more students in their classrooms with more severe characteristics as inclusion increases across the country. Once we finalized our inclusion criteria, we repeated the online search and then conducted on-site searches at local bookstores and multiple public libraries, checking stocked availability at various locations in order to determine the accessibility of ASD-related texts. Although there were a variety of books available online, we could not find a single text for purchase at big-box bookstores, and only six texts were available to borrow in our local public libraries. The lack of available texts suggests that indeed the number of children's picture books is disproportionate to the current, growing demographic of children diagnosed with disabilities (Ayala, 1999; Dyches et al., 2006; Leininger et al., 2010).

Criteria for Text Inclusion and Exclusion

After a preliminary review of the available texts relating to autism, we developed four selection criteria in order to narrow the focus of our inquiry.

The first criterion stipulated that the text had to be a picture book (excluding coloring books and young-adult fiction), because we were primarily interested in how pictures and text concomitantly portray constructs and messages regarding autism, both visually and contextually, specifically for the younger reader. For these reasons, we also excluded chapter books, because we wanted to focus on books that could be utilized in classroom contexts as read-alouds.

The second criterion focused only on texts that purposely addressed autism, explicitly mentioning the term either in the title or in the listed book description. The author's intent had to be specifically stated in the text, as we did not want to infer diagnosis onto characters. This specificity allowed for a more fine-grained analysis that examined autism only, without deviating into other disabilities. We faced a difficult choice and ultimately excluded books about Asperger's. Although the *DSM-5* (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) states that children with former diagnoses of Asperger's disorder would still qualify for an ASD diagnosis, we did not want to oversample books focusing on higher-functioning ASD (i.e., those without intellectual or language impairments, such as Asperger's). Rather, we chose to focus

on a subset of ASD but recommend that an important next step in the field would be to do a similar examination of ASD without intellectual and language impairments.

The third criterion eliminated informational texts, such as medically framed stories and “how-to” books, because our focus was on storybooks that include elements of character, story development, and plot, which allow students to view autism from a literary, not a medical, standpoint.

For our fourth criterion, books portraying animals or inanimate objects were excluded so that the sample could specifically focus on realistic texts depicting lifelike characters. We were particularly interested in how authentic behaviors were characterized so that we would have a more accurate representation of how the issue represents real-world experiences.

Incidentally, after we began our search, we found some titles available only through e-readers. We excluded those because they privileged teachers and students with the necessary technological devices or Internet needed for access. After a comparison of our searches, we arrived at a data set that included 41 viable texts that met our search criteria for analysis. After purchasing the books for analysis, we discovered that five did not meet the criteria and one was out of print and inaccessible, resulting in an analysis of 35 texts. It is important to note that the data represent texts consistent with criteria listed. While we recognize that, despite our best search efforts, other children’s books about autism meeting these criteria may exist, we suggest these books are a representative sample supporting the data analysis. We did not include or exclude texts based on the quality or accuracy of the messages therein. Although we address these issues in our analysis, they did not influence the data generation.

Content Analysis

For this study, a content analysis approach was used. Content analysis is a qualitative or quantitative literacy research method that allows researchers to extract, analyze, and interpret the covert or overt messages presented in a given text or texts by identifying the intersecting relationships between recurring words or themes (Hoffman, Wilson, Martinez, & Sailors, 2011). During a content analysis, recurring patterns provide the basis for interpretation and can “reveal the more subtle messages imbedded in a text read by a child in a classroom or by a classroom teacher consulting a manual in preparation for teaching a lesson” (Hoffman et al., 2011, p. 28). Because the purpose of this study was to examine children’s picture books about autism for recurring themes and messages, this methodology was particularly appropriate.

Data Analysis

Consistent with content analysis, our reading of the texts involved the “inspection of patterns in written text, often drawing on combinations of inductive, deductive, and

abductive analytical techniques” (Hoffman et al., 2011, p. 29). To that end, we first read deductively, then inductively applied codes to look for affirming/disconfirming evidence (Erickson, 1986), using abductive codes (Hoffman et al., 2011) or inferences throughout the coding process. In this sense, our methods represented content analysis as “the method of making inferences from texts and making sense of those interpretations in a context surrounding the text” (Hoffman et al., 2011, p. 30).

We each read the complete sample of 35 books (see appendix) multiple times. We began our reading and analysis by selecting a random sample of 10 books across publication dates to ensure a representative sample. We met to discuss how we would read the texts and used the constant comparative method to continually compare data during analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Independently, we each read the 10 texts holistically, first performing a picture walk in which only the illustrations were examined. We did this to understand if the individual with autism was easily identifiable in the text and also to determine if the overall message of the book could be gleaned from illustrations alone. Then, we read the book again, utilizing pictures and text concurrently and making descriptive notes and initial codes that captured (a) our general impressions about the text, (b) characteristics of children with autism, (c) how children with autism were treated by others, and (d) the role of the narrator. We each kept analytical memos documenting our impressions from each part of this process and used them as talking points when we met to discuss the books.

After the individual readings of the first set of 10, we met to compare our initial codes and engaged in an extensive discussion of our findings, collaboratively constructing focused codes and categories (Charmaz, 2006). We then returned to the initial data set and analyzed the remaining 25 texts using the focused codes generated in our initial analysis. Our goal was to gather further evidence from the books to support our emerging findings and to strengthen our understandings of the messages presented in the texts (Charmaz, 2006). During this time, we employed recursive analysis by reading and rereading the texts and refining our categories and themes. Whenever we found incongruence, we reread the text together and discussed discrepant findings to reach a resolution. This process occurred over a 6-month time period consisting of five 2-hour-long face-to-face meetings involving at least two of the researchers. These meetings were in addition to the numerous hours that each researcher spent individually reading and rereading texts and making individual notes at each phase of the analysis.

Findings

From our analysis, we identified five significant recurring themes presented as empirical assertions (Erickson, 1986) regarding how children’s books about autism can be

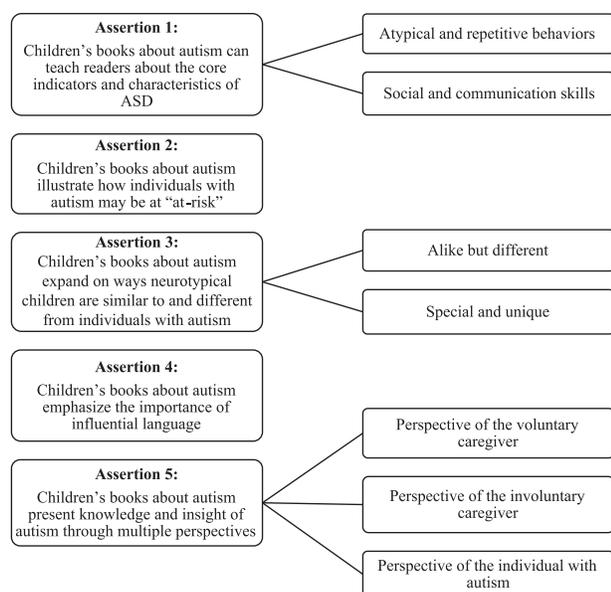


FIGURE 1. Diagram of the five assertions extracted from the content analysis.

applied to instruction in elementary classrooms. Assertions were tested and retested against the complete sample of texts and nuanced as we searched for disconfirming and confirming evidence (Erickson, 1986). In the following sections, we fully describe each assertion using exemplar texts that best represent each theme in an effort to illustrate the “subtle messages” (Hoffman et al., 2011, p. 28) from the texts. The five assertions are represented in Figure 1, and the following sections provide a close examination of the five assertions, accompanied by illustrative quotes and examples from representative texts taken from the overall study sample.

Assertion 1: Children’s Books About Autism Can Teach Readers About the Core Indicators and Characteristics of ASD

It is important for students to realize that “being autistic is not a career or anything like that. It’s not a skin color either, or nationality, or sickness where you get a fever or lose your hair” (Mueller, 2012, n.p.). The neurological nature of the disorder is iterated in nearly all of the texts. Specifically, we found these books provide a variety of examples to illustrate and explain the indicative characteristics of autism, including illustrative examples of (a) atypical and repetitive behaviors and varying degrees of (b) social and communication skills.

Atypical and repetitive behaviors. Stimming is a repetitive behavior, such as twirling or lining up toy cars. This characteristic behavior is illustrated in many of the books, most notably in *Squirmy Wormy: How I Learned to Help Myself*

(Wilson, 2009), in which an illustration of a ceiling fan is presented, accompanied by the text “Sometimes I watch the ceiling fan go around and around, or spin the wheels of my cars . . . SPIN, SPIN, SPIN, SPIN, SPIN” (n.p.). Stimming is also easily identified in *Andy and His Yellow Frisbee*, in which Andy, a little boy with autism “always stayed by himself, spinning the yellow Frisbee around and around and around” (Thompson, 1996, n.p.).

The books’ illustrations also portray children with autism often organizing their possessions by lining them up and becoming worried when organization and routines were disrupted. In *A Friend Like Simon* (Gaynor, 2009), the narrator notes, “Simon always liked to arrange the books and pencils on his desks in the same way every day. He didn’t like it when anything changed at all” (n.p.). A picture of Simon’s desk accompanies this sentence to show this stimming behavior. Similarly, in *Playing by the Rules* (Luchsinger, 2007) and *My Friend Has Autism* (Tourville, 2010), the boy with autism in these stories becomes distressed when others inadvertently disrupt his carefully lined toys or figurines.

Similarly, the senses of children with autism may be amplified, which can yield atypical behaviors. Heightened senses are often depicted through atypical behaviors, such as in *Ian’s Walk* (Lears, 1998), when Ian, a young boy with autism, stops to smell the brick walls during a walk, or in *Waiting for Benjamin* (Altman, 2008), when Benjamin prefers to repeatedly sift the sand through his fingers instead of building castles with his brother. One of the most obvious instances of heightened senses is depicted through a strong reaction to loud noises, such as when Simon is depicted covering his ears and squeezing his eyes shut in distress as the school bell loudly rings in *A Friend Like Simon* (Gaynor, 2009). In each of these three examples, an illustration accompanied by a description of the atypical behavior provides examples of overstimulation experienced by children with ASD.

Social and communication skills. Perhaps the most noticeable characteristic of autism portrayed in these books deal with social skills and communication. In a few of the books, like *Say Hello to Me* (Charisse, 2012), the little girl with autism is outgoing and chatty, liberally hugging strangers and craving attention and affection from everyone she meets. In the majority of the books, however, the child with autism is portrayed with communicative deficits. Characters are generally represented as having limited speech or occasionally repeating words or phrases of others (Ely, 2004; Lewis, 2007). Other characters with autism simply “twittered” (Day, 2004; Watson, 1996) or “babbled” (Mueller, 2012) in their own, unknown language. Additionally, characters with autism are usually illustrated with closed body language, including hands glued to their sides, suggesting resistance to physical touch.

Other books depict children on the severe end of the spectrum, who are completely nonverbal and communicate emotions through tantrums or screams. In *Russell's World: A Story for Kids About Autism* (Amenta, 2011), the narrator points out that “Russell screams when he is unhappy and when he’s excited” (n.p.) as a way of expressing himself. Likewise, in *Squirmy Wormy* (Wilson, 2009), the narrator who has autism explains, “sometimes I just get upset and confused and I don’t know what else to do but scream or cry . . . S-C-R-E-A-M” (n.p.). These examples provide an important discussion point for explaining how some children with autism do not have the ability to express themselves through words; thus they verbalize their feelings through emotional outbursts.

Whereas an emotional outburst or aversion to touch may seem peculiar to neurotypical children, in *David's World: A Picture Book About Living With Autism* (Mueller, 2012), the narrator points out that his brother David “speaks a different language,” one that he is trying to understand. He compares his exchanges with David using the metaphor of his father’s trip to France. When his father and the French were attempting to communicate, they simply did not have the language to do so, just like the narrator did not have the language to communicate with David; “but that’s how it is—Mom says—when you speak different languages. There are lots of misunderstandings” (n.p.). Similarly, in *Talking to Angels* (Watson, 1996), the narrator states, “Sometimes if I sit very still, I can hear Christa softly talking to angels. I don’t know what she is saying, but it sounds important” (n.p.).

Additionally, social anxiety is often depicted in illustrations showing the child with autism sitting away from the rest of the children on the playground or seeming to ignore other children when invited to play, like in *The Friendship Puzzle* (Coe, 2009). Such examples may help students understand that a lack of response from the child with autism is not because he or she is uninterested in playing and interacting with others. Children with autism might lack the social behaviors needed to engage in games, sports, and activities. As the sister in *My Brother Charlie* (Peete & Peete, 2010) points out, “I wish I could crawl inside Charlie’s world to move things around for him and me. I know Charlie wants to be in my world, fitting in, making friends, having fun, and laughing” (n.p.). These illustrations serve as a reminder that students should not be discouraged if their efforts for inclusion are met with silence.

Assertion 2: Children’s Books About Autism Illustrate How Individuals With Autism May Be “at Risk”

Children with autism in children’s picture books are often presented as “at risk” or predisposed to bullying, isolation, exclusion, or possible endangerment due to lack of awareness concerning danger, which can lead to wandering and unnecessary risks. Because children with autism can have

erratic behaviors and characteristics that can be difficult for other children to understand, they are vulnerable to teasing and bullying from their neurotypical peers. In *In Jesse’s Shoes* (Lewis, 2007), Jesse is a young boy with autism who faces whispering and giggling from other children in the school, who refer to him as “the weirdo” when he is walked to the bus stop by his sister. This sense of isolation is clear in both the text and accompanying illustration of Jesse at the bus stop. Similarly, because many children with autism have social anxiety, they might prefer isolation, which can lead to exclusion, particularly in books written in a classroom or school setting in which the child with autism is often depicted sitting alone while the other children play sports at recess, like in *Looking After Louis* (Ely, 2004) and *A Friend Like Simon* (Gaynor, 2009).

Additionally, children with autism can be unaware of dangerous situations or not understand the risks associated with unpredictable behaviors. In *My Brother Charlie* (Peete & Peete, 2010), Callie states, “When Charlie wants something, nothing stops him. Even when it’s dangerous” (n.p.), and a smiling Charlie is shown dangling from the monkey bars as other children try to pull him down. In *Say Hello to Me* (Charisse, 2012), Darla, an exuberant, outgoing girl with autism acknowledges, “My friends know I will talk to anyone and everyone. Please help keep me safe and remind me to not talk to strangers” (n.p.), indicating that her trusting nature places her security at risk. Similarly, in *Ian’s Walk* (Lears, 1998), Ian easily wanders away from his sister to examine a bell in the park, even after his mother warns, “You’ll have to watch him the whole time” (n.p.).

Assertion 3: Children’s Books About Autism Expand on Ways neurotypical Children Are Similar to and Different From Individuals With Autism

Picture books about autism generally contain two distinct messages, focusing on ways children with autism are (a) alike but different from others or how they are (b) special and unique. Stories that emphasize the “alike-but-different” message tend to deemphasize the autism label as “silly,” focusing instead on how children with autism are the same as everyone else. Conversely, stories that emphasize the “special-and-unique” message tend to emphasize that autism contributes to a child’s uniqueness and that these differences should be accepted and celebrated.

Alike but different. Many times, the texts spend the majority of the narrative describing how “normal” the child is, focusing on his or her involvement in daily activities and interests and then only alluding to the fact that the child has autism later in the book. This allows the label to be downplayed, focusing the reader on the child’s similarities to nondisabled peers, like in *My Friend Has Autism* (Tourville, 2011), when the narrator defines his friendship with Matt by their mutual love for model

airplanes. Similarly, in *My Brother Charlie* (Peete & Peete, 2010), Callie, whose twin brother has autism, focuses on their similarities before ever mentioning that Charlie has autism: “We share lots of things: Curly hair and brown eyes. How much we love hot chocolate with marshmallows. Our dog, Harriett. Rolling in the grass. Music. Football. And names that start with the letter C—Callie and Charlie” (n.p.).

When autism is finally mentioned in these narratives, the narrator is quick to normalize the disorder, emphasizing that it is “okay” to have autism, such as in *My Brother Is Autistic* (Moore-Mallinos, 2008), when the narrator says, “I hope the other kids will remember that Billy has autism and that’s okay” (n.p.), or in *A Friend Like Simon* (Gaynor, 2009), when Matthew makes sense of Simon’s desire for isolation by saying, “Some days he would join in, but other days he just wanted to be on his own, was okay too” (n.p.). The overarching message of these narratives is that some students with autism can do many of the same things as their neurotypical peers, and “some will be able to do more things than others. And that’s okay because that’s what makes us all special” (Moore-Mallinos, 2008, n.p.).

Special and unique. Alternatively, many of the picture books focus on the differences and atypical behaviors of the child with autism. Many books emphasize the character’s exceptionalities and unique abilities, like the ability to play an instrument, understand animals, or memorize and remember facts about a particular subject. In *ASD and Me* (DeMars, 2011), the narrator with autism explains how much he loves math and how good he is with numbers. He emphasizes that many children with autism are particularly strong in certain subjects or have specific talents in which they excel: “Most kids with ASD have a favorite activity that they really LOVE to do. Some kids are super smart in subjects like art, math, reading, music or science” (n.p.).

Focusing on the positives of autism and celebrating the child’s strengths and unique abilities is often followed by the overarching message that characters are glad they have autism because that is the way they were intended to be. As such, several of the narratives that fit into this group contain religious themes. In *Ethan’s Story: My Life With Autism* (Rice, 2012), Ethan states, “Autism is so very, very fun. . . . I like having autism because . . . this is the way God made me!” Similarly, in *In Jesse’s Shoes* (Lewis, 2007), the narrator talks to God, stating, ““You love Jesse just the way he is, I should too.”” The illustrations associated with these examples show situations of acceptance and caring relationships as opposed to isolation.

Assertion 4: Children’s Books About Autism Emphasize the Importance of Influential Language

When reading picture books about children with autism, it is vital to pre-read the books for influential language and to

be prepared to discuss the labels and terms used in the narratives. Some authors use powerful words to convey a message and to help the reader feel empathy for a character. For example, in *Nathan Blows Out the Hanukkah Candles*, Jacob, the younger brother of Nathan, a boy with autism, is teased by a neighbor, who says, “You’re as weird as your brother” (Lehman-Wilzig & Katzman, 2011, n.p.). It is important for young readers to realize that this language should not necessarily be used to describe their peers with disabilities. In these books, the difference between a noun and an adjective can be a significant one. Children should not be defined by their disabilities, or as being “autistic,” but be recognized as being children first, who have a disability second, like in *My Brother Charlie*, when his sister states, “Charlie has autism. But autism doesn’t have Charlie” (Peete & Peete, 2010, n.p.). Such a discussion may encourage students to use “people-first language” when talking about other students with disabilities, like autism.

Additionally, these picture books sometimes depict other, neurotypical peers teasing or making fun of a child with autism, and the author purposely uses influential language, presumably to evoke an emotional response from the reader. In *Waiting for Benjamin* (Altman, 2008), Alexander, whose younger brother Benjamin has autism, states, “When my friend Zach said, ‘That kid is a wacko’ I wished I had no brother” (n.p.). In *David’s World: A Picture Book About Living With Autism* (Mueller, 2012), the narrator, whose brother David has autism, states, “My best friend, Josh, says that David’s an alien” (n.p.).

Similarly, Sigmon et al. (2016) point out that even traditionally positive terms, like “special,” can be used in a negative context, like in *My Brother Sammy Is Special* (Edwards, 1999), when the older brother becomes angry with Sammy and yells, “I don’t want a special brother!” before learning “sometimes I think I’m lucky to have a special brother because that makes me special too” (n.p.). Although some influential language may be necessary to evoke emotion in the reader, teachers are encouraged to emphasize the power of language while reading these books.

Assertion 5: Children’s Books About Autism Present Knowledge and Insight of Autism Through the Use of Multiple Perspectives

Children’s picture books about ASD provide multiple perspectives pertaining to autism, which can be separated into three types of narratives: (a) stories told from the first-person perspective of the child with autism; (b) stories told from the first-person perspective of a “caregiver,” such as a parent, sibling, friend, or classmate of the child with autism; and (c) stories told by an omniscient narrator who provides an objective, third-person account of the story. The most common type of books was those told from first-person point of view of the caregiver and often focused on the

character's belief that he or she had a voluntary or involuntary responsibility for the child with autism.

Perspective of the voluntary caregiver. Voluntary caregivers are characters who are getting to know the "new student" with ASD at school on their own volition or who choose to be friends with the child on their own accord because of similar interests. These books often emphasize the idea that the child with autism is "just like them," and the story focuses on the similarities between the characters rather than differences. These stories, like *A Friend Like Simon* (Gaynor, 2009), often end with the notion that although the child with autism is different, he or she is still inherently the same as everyone else: "The other boys and girls in school soon learned that even though sometimes Simon acted a little different from us or didn't have a lot to say, he was just the same as everyone else in our school" (n.p.).

Additionally, although the character with autism may be depicted as having erratic or confusing behaviors, voluntary caregivers are quick to use comparative statements, such as in *Since We're Friends* (Shally, 2012), when the narrator compares his friend Matt's autistic behaviors to his own feelings: Matt is furious that the pool is closed for repairs and has difficulty coping with a change of plans, and the narrator compares Max's meltdown to his own disappointment. Similarly, the narrator repeatedly makes allowances for Matt, prefacing his actions by stating, "Since we are friends . . ." Similarly, *A Kid's Guide to Autism* emphasizes the idea of acceptance and inclusion, stating, "There isn't a medical cure for autism. Showing acceptance is the only thing that will really help" (Davis, 2013, n.p.).

Perspective of the involuntary caregiver. In picture books, involuntary caregivers are often parents, but siblings of characters with autism narrate most of the stories. These books often follow a story arc that involves a brother or sister trying to understand the child with autism, then experiencing conflict, such as becoming upset or frustrated with the child's behaviors. In the end, these characters reach a resolution in which they realize the value in knowing the child with autism (Altman, 2008; Lears, 1998; Lewis, 1997). In *All About My Brother: An Eight-Year-Old Sister's Introduction to Her Brother Who Has Autism* (Peralta, 2002), Evan's sister states, "Evan is a very special brother, and I think I am a special sister for putting up with him sometimes" (n.p.).

Picture books centered around a caregiver often depict the narrator as being a protector or mediator for the child with autism who must help the child navigate the world around him or her and be his or her voice of understanding. In *Playing by the Rules* (Luchsinger, 2007), when Josh's aunt mistakenly moves one of his favorite animals, his sister is quick to come to his aid and explain, "You just don't know the rules to Josh's game yet" (n.p.). These

stories emphasize the responsibility of the caregiver to love and care for the children with autism because first and foremost, family ties and love connect them: "My sister Christa is autistic. And she is my best friend too" (Watson, 1996, n.p.).

The dynamic between involuntary caregiver and a child with ASD is important to understand. As is portrayed in the examples shared, many involuntary caregivers share feelings of added responsibility and the need to protect. Kelly, Garnett, Attwood, and Peterson (2008) analyzed data of 322 parents of children with ASD in clinics and found an increase in family conflict to be associated with increased ASD symptomatology due to threatened emotional security of the child with ASD. Because of this link, the insider's perspective portrayed through children's picture books could help others understand this role or provide a shared experience for readers with a family member with ASD.

Perspective of the individual with autism. In contrast, narratives told from the perspective of the child with autism are often written for the purpose of educating the reader about the characteristics of autism. These stories often conclude with a charge to the reader to extend friendship and acceptance to those with autism. Similar to the involuntary caregiver, this narrative also emphasizes the similarities and "normal" aspects of the child with autism. In *ASD and Me* (DeMars, 2011), the narrator consistently begins sentences with "Just like other kids . . ." This statement is followed with everyday activities and interests the child with autism, like neurotypical peers, enjoys, such as swinging, jumping on a trampoline, playing baseball, and painting pictures. With this example, both the story and illustrations focus on portraying the character with autism as being the same as neurotypical peers. These stories often end with an overt message that implores the reader to accept and include him or her, like in *Say Hello to Me* (Charisse, 2012), when Darla, a young girl with autism, pleads, "When you pass me, please say hello to me" (n.p.). Similarly, in *Ethan's Story: My Life With Autism* (Rice, 2012), the author, Ethan Rice, concludes his story with the lingering question: "Now that you know what autism is—who wants to be my friend?" (n.p.). Such appeals make these books particularly salient for teachers to use in the classroom, as they conclude by allowing the reader to decide how to use the knowledge they have been given about autism and provide a catalyst for promoting understanding and acceptance.

Discussion

Children's picture books may provide students with learning experiences that may help them understand ASD and its "spectrum" of behaviors (National Institutes of Health, 2014). Consequently, students should learn that children with autism are individuals first and that readers should never leap

to stereotyping or making inaccurate generalizations about the disability. As such, a wide assortment of different picture books about autism should be used when introducing this topic so that students recognize the individuality of children with autism. We similarly caution against choosing “just one” book about autism to incorporate into conversations about diversity in the classroom, as it may give students a narrow view of what autism looks like and how it should be approached in a real-life context.

Autism is unique because, unlike other disabilities with more visible physical indicators, children with autism often outwardly look like everyone else. Because there are usually no external clues that a student has a disability, it is important for students to understand that autism is neurological and that the characteristic traits of autism are not behavior problems. Seemingly defiant behaviors, such as screaming or throwing tantrums, may be the only way for a child with autism to communicate. These books emphasize a need to step into the shoes of a child with a disability:

I wish I could take a peek inside David’s world at least once and feel what David feels. I wish David could be just like us for one day and tell us everything and show us everything he wants to, and what he thinks, and what he’s capable of—everything that we unfortunately don’t see. (Mueller, 2012, n.p.)

These books convey the important message that while we may not understand all of the behaviors, emotions, and languages of children with autism, we should be open-minded and accepting of those who are different.

The five assertions that emerged from the study are generalized messages portrayed from the picture books analyzed. These assertions related back to current research related to ASD in many ways. Typical peers in Locke et al.’s (2012) study regarding peer models as an intervention for assisting children with ASD to overcome social difficulties could benefit from the generalized characteristics of ASD explained in Assertion 1. Based on the higher-quality friendships highlighted as a result of peer modeling, the typical peers in their study may be able to relate to the insider’s perspective shared in some of the books of this study and explained in Assertion 5.

These texts, especially those falling under Assertion 5, convey the implicit message that we all have a responsibility to understand and accept individuals with autism. These books ultimately convey the message that accepting children with autism may not always be easy, such as when one narrator confides, “Sometimes I don’t like David [the character with ASD]. He is so different” (Mueller, 2012, n.p.). However, although some siblings or friends may initially feel uncomfortable having a brother, sister, or friend with autism, these characters feel it is their responsibility to love and care for others with autism because of their relationship: “But usually, I like David. Because David is my brother” (Mueller, 2012, n.p.). Additionally, many of the books point

out that accepting responsibility and care for a child with autism gives one a feeling of inner satisfaction:

I have learned from Charlie that love doesn’t always come from what you say. It can also come from what you *do*. And so we do right by Charlie. We love Charlie strong. We watch over him with the might of angels. We have to. (Peete & Peete, 2010, n.p.)

Additionally, teachers should carefully select books about autism, examining texts for covert ideologies that may promote misconceptions if taught in isolation. For example, several of the books involve what we previously (see Sigmon et al., 2016) referred to as a “turning point,” in which characters who accept and care for the child with autism then receive reciprocity or validation for their actions, which is usually depicted by the child with autism engaging socially, producing words or phrases, or exhibiting love and affection. In *My Brother Charlie* (Peete & Peete, 2010), Charlie is a nonverbal child with autism who shows his love for his sister by touching or smiling, but the story takes an unexpected turn when Charlie says, “I love you,” when his sister is in distress. Similarly, in *Lucy’s Amazing Friend* (Workman, 2014), after Daniel, a student with autism, repeatedly “ignores” the protagonist, Lucy, he is persuaded to go on the large waterslide at a pool party, leading the other children to conclude, “He wasn’t so weird after all” (n.p.). These “typical” behaviors may mislead students into thinking that the child with autism will give them validation or will acknowledge their acceptance. The main point is for students to embrace students with autism and to learn how to accept and respect them as individuals without expecting anything in return (Sigmon et al., 2016). As such, teachers can emphasize, “You can learn a lot from a kid who has ASD. All you have to do is be their friend” (DeMars, 2011, n.p.).

Additionally, we acknowledge that the exclusion of books spanning the full range of symptoms and characteristics of ASD presents, perhaps, a more classic view of autism. We wanted to focus on books that might best serve teachers and students with more severe characteristics of autism. It is important to note, however, that many students with ASD do not have intellectual or language impairments, have average or above-average cognitive skills, and will continue to access general education classrooms, but may still need support regulating their behavior or transitioning between tasks. This supports our discussion in not having a narrow or heterogeneous view of autism, and teachers are encouraged to search for books most relevant to the students in their classrooms.

Conclusion

Picture books about ASD provide a viable tool for helping teachers and students understand the behaviors of children with autism and provide a rich context for discussion so

that when students encounter children with ASD in the classroom, they can more readily accept and understand them. However, if teachers intend to utilize these texts in the classroom to teach students about ASD, it is particularly important that they discuss the texts and their possible uses with the parents of individual students with autism in order to ensure that they support the family's personal preferences and philosophies (Maich & Belcher, 2012; Sigmon et al., 2016). Like the books discussed above, some parents may maintain the philosophy that their child has the same capabilities and interests as neurotypical peers and should be included as much as possible, whereas others may wish to emphasize the differences and special strengths and abilities that make that child special.

Children's picture books provide insight into the lives of children with ASD and present information on the

characteristics of the disorder in a nonthreatening way that may help promote awareness. One of the potential uses for these stories may be to educate others who have not been afforded firsthand experiences with ASD (Prater et al., 2006), just as one character states, "Now you know more about Russell's world. When you see other children with autism, you won't be so surprised by their different behaviors, and you can love them too" (Amenta, 2011, n.p.). These books may enable students to familiarize themselves with the characteristics and behaviors of the disability so that they can positively and appropriately react when interacting with a child with ASD in authentic classroom contexts. As one book points out, "It is important to be aware of autism and know what it is because you want to be able to treat people with autism like your friend. Will you?" (Davis, 2013, n.p.).

Appendix

Children's Picture Books About Autism

| Book Title | Author | Publication Year |
|--|---|------------------|
| <i>The Adventures of Suther Joshua From Planet Yethican</i> | Jacqueline Williams-Hines | 2008 |
| <i>All About My Brother: An Eight-Year-Old Sister's Introduction to Her Brother Who Has Autism</i> | Sarah Peralta | 2002 |
| <i>Andy and His Yellow Frisbee</i> | Mary Thompson | 1996 |
| <i>Apples for Cheyenne: A Story About Autism, Horses, and Friendship</i> | Elizabeth K. Gerlach | 2010 |
| <i>ASD and Me: Learning About High Functioning Autism Spectrum Disorder</i> | Teresa DeMars | 2011 |
| <i>Augi Has Autism</i> | Gaylord | 2014 |
| <i>Autism Is . . . ?</i> | Ymkje Wideman-var der Laan | 2012 |
| <i>Autistic? How Silly Is That? I Don't Need Any Labels at All!</i> | Lynda Farrington Wilson | 2012 |
| <i>David's World: A Story About Living With Autism</i> | Dagmar H. Mueller | 2012 |
| <i>Ethan's Story: My Life With Autism</i> | Ethan Rice | 2012 |
| <i>The Flight of the Dove</i> | Alexandra Day | 2004 |
| <i>A FRIEND LIKE SIMON</i> | Kate Gaynor | 2009 |
| <i>The Friendship Puzzle: Helping Kids Learn About Accepting and Including Kids With Autism</i> | Julie L. Coe | 2009 |
| <i>I See Things Differently: A First Look at Autism</i> | Pat Thomas | 2014 |
| <i>Ian's Walk: A Story About Autism</i> | Laurie Lears | 1998 |
| <i>In Jesse's Shoes: Appreciating Kids With Special Needs</i> | Beverly Lewis | 2007 |
| <i>In My Mind</i> | Adonya Wong | 2008 |
| <i>A Kid's Guide to Autism</i> | Cameron Davis | 2013 |
| <i>Little Rainman: Autism Through the Eyes of a Child</i> | Karen L. Simmons | 1996 |
| <i>Looking After Louis</i> | Lesley Ely | 2004 |
| <i>Lucy's Amazing Friend: A Story of Autism and Friendship</i> | Stephanie Workman | 2014 |
| <i>My BROTHER CHARLIE</i> | Holly Robinson Peete & Ryan Elizabeth Peete | 2010 |
| <i>My Brother Is Autistic</i> | Jennifer Moore-Malinos | 2008 |
| <i>My Brother Sammy Is Special</i> | Becky Edwards | 1999 |
| <i>My Friend Has Autism</i> | Amanda Doering Tourville | 2010 |
| <i>My Sister Katie: My 6 Year Old's View on Her Sister's Autism</i> | Mary Cassette | 2006 |

(continued)

Appendix (continued)

| Book Title | Author | Publication Year |
|--|-------------------------------------|------------------|
| <i>Nathan Blows Out the Hanukkah Candles</i> | Tami Lehman-Wilzig & Nicole Katzman | 2011 |
| <i>Playing by the Rules: A Story About Autism</i> | Dena Fox Luchsinger | 2007 |
| <i>Russell's World: A Story for Kids About Autism</i> | Charles A. Amenta | 2011 |
| <i>Say Hello to Me: A Story About a Little Girl on the Autism Spectrum</i> | April Charisse | 2012 |
| <i>Since We're Friends: An Autism Picture Book</i> | Celeste Shally | 2012 |
| <i>Squirmy Wormy: How I Learned to Help Myself</i> | Lynda Farrington Wilson | 2009 |
| <i>Sundays With Matthew: A Young Boy With Autism and an Artist Share Their Sketchbooks</i> | Matthew Lancelle & Jeanette Lesada | 2006 |
| <i>Talking to Angels</i> | Esther Watson | 1996 |
| <i>Waiting for Benjamin: A Story About Autism</i> | Alexandra Jessup Altman | 2008 |

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