

BREAKING STEREOTYPES OF DISABLED CHARACTERS IN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

ÇOCUK EDEBİYATINDA ENGELLİ KARAKTER STEREOTİPİNİ YIKMAK

Meryem ODABAŞI

Atatürk Üniversitesi,

Yabancı Diller Yüksekokulu, Yabancı Diller Bölümü

meryemodabasi@atauni.edu.tr

ORCID: 0000-0002-3877-2319

ABSTRACT

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With the growing popularity of disability studies, the social model, which agrees that disability stems not from social barriers, has gained prominence. This perspective has made disability more visible in children's literature, challenging stereotypes by transforming disabled characters from victims, villains, or sidekicks with superpowers into main protagonists. This article aims to assess the negative representations of disabled characters in the past and then analyze how attitudes towards stereotypes have evolved by examining the portrayal of disabled characters in two picturebooks, *Amazing* and *My Three Best Friends and Me, Zulay*. In both books, the protagonists are ordinary children who do not possess superpowers but simply enjoy spending time with their friends. Rejecting discrimination against disabled individuals, these books embrace diversity in disability representation. By depicting their characters in realistic settings—highlighting both challenges, such as struggling to learn to read or swim, and strengths, such as overcoming obstacles—they actively dismantle the notion of negative stereotyping in disability representation.

ÖZ

Engellilik çalışmalarının artan popülaritesiyle birlikte, engelliliğin bireylerin yetersizliklerinden değil toplumsal engellerden kaynaklandığını iddia eden sosyal model önem kazanmıştır. Bu bakış açısı engelliliği çocuk edebiyatı alanında daha görünür kılmış ve engelli karakterlerin kurban, kötü, süper güçlere sahip ya da yan karakter tasvirlerini değiştirip onları ana karakter yaparak stereotipleri yıkmaya başlamıştır. Bu çalışma, geçmişte engelli karakterlerin olumsuz temsillerini değerlendirmeyi ve ardından stereotiplere yönelik değişen tutumlara odaklanarak *Amazing* ve *My Three Best Friends and Me, Zulay* adlı iki resimli kitapta engelli karakterlerin temsilini incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Her iki kitabın da baş kahramanı süper güçleri olmayan ancak arkadaşlarıyla vakit geçirmekten hoşlanan sıradan engelli çocuk karakterlerdir. Engellilere karşı ayrımcılık reddeden her iki kitap da engellilik açısından çeşitliliği kucaklamakta ve karakterleri okumayı ya da yüzmeyi öğrenmede zorluk yaşamaları gibi zayıf yönleri ve zorlukların üstesinden gelmek gibi güçlü yönleriyle gerçekçi ortamlarda tasvir ederek engelli karakterlerin olumsuz stereotipleştirilmesi fikrini yıkmaktadır.

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Introduction

Disability Studies and Literature

For centuries, disabled people have faced discrimination and segregation by the ableist community in nearly every part of the world. However, thanks to the efforts of disability rights movements, supported by families, educators, scholars, and activists, both the perception of disabled bodies as inferior and discriminatory practices have been challenged. These efforts also pave the way for disability studies to emerge and gain visibility in social sciences, including literature and art. Although disability studies initially “focused solely on the visibility of impairments” and overlooked neurodiverse conditions such as autism, which lacks visible symptoms (Tulgar, 2022, p. 637), over time, neurodiversity has also been acknowledged and celebrated in both disability studies and literature. Since literature reflects societal norms and cultural values, understanding how disability is perceived in a particular society is crucial.

The World Health Organization (n.d.) defines disability as a health issue and a complex phenomenon "reflecting the interaction between features of a person's body and features of the society ."As the organization asserts, disability is not solely about an individual's physical limitations but also about the barriers imposed by society. Based on this understanding, various models have been developed to address disability, with two particularly notable in literature: the medical and societal models. The medical model views disability as a deficiency or impairment within an individual's body (Brewer et al. 2012, p. 2) and defines it as an “effect on bodily function arising from an impairment” (Johnstone, 2001, p. 10).

This model focuses on impairments and their cures, viewing individuals with disabilities as "passive and dependent" beings who need to be fixed and cured. As a result, they are excluded from “a holistic consideration of their needs as unique individuals” (Ellis, 2019, p. 71). By reducing disabled people to merely biologically impaired individuals with deficits, this model fails to embrace them, adopting a reductionist perspective that overlooks their social life and rights. Arthur Shapiro (2000) argues that disabilities should primarily be understood through a social and minority group perspective, emphasizing inclusion and rights rather than medical treatment. He suggests that adopting this social paradigm is more effective in combating discrimination against people with disabilities, known as disablism or handicapism, than the traditional medical approach, which focuses on diagnosing and treating diseases. This shift in perspective is crucial for gaining a deeper understanding of the key issues surrounding disabilities (p. 84). Thus, understanding disabled individuals requires much more than medical treatment. With the rise of the social disability movement, attention has shifted toward the social, cultural, and environmental barriers that disabled individuals face in society. In this regard, disabled feminist activist Liz Crow distinguishes between *impairment and disability*, asserting that "impairment is the functional limitation(s) which affect a person's body." In contrast, disability refers to the reduced or restricted opportunities resulting from "direct and indirect discrimination" (2010, p.125). This distinction strongly reinforces the core idea of the social model, which shifts the focus from bodily impairments to societal barriers and advocates for social justice for disabled individuals.

The social model emerged as a response to ableism and seeks to “reveal how people are disabled and impaired by barriers constructed in society, not by their impairment or difference” (Ellis, 2019, p. 71). In this view, disability is seen as a consequence of the obstacles imposed by society rather than an inherent condition. To enable disabled individuals to participate as citizens fully, this model considers their needs as social rather than individual (Shapiro, 2000, p. 84). The structures that contribute to the daily oppression of disabled individuals are shaped by societal factors such as the economy, governmental policy, state authorities, and institutions, including educational systems (Michailakis, 2003, p. 211). Overcoming social oppression requires abandoning the perception that disabled individuals are broken and in need of medical intervention. Instead, society must address and rectify the disabling effects of these barriers through legal reforms, education, economic policies, and inclusive architecture. According to Garland-Thomson (1997, p. 51), achieving equal living conditions for disabled individuals necessitates reconfiguring the social environment to accommodate physical diversity. This approach emphasizes removing legal and social restrictions rather than expecting disabled individuals to conform to institutional norms.

The social model has played an important role in accelerating the transformation in societal attitudes towards disabled individuals. This shift in the perception has also manifested in literature while portraying characters with a disability. The primary aim of this paper is to analyze this transformation in the depiction of disabled characters in the scope of children's literature. In order to emphasize the depiction of the evolving societal attitudes toward the perception of disability, a historical overview of the portrayal of disabled characters in children's literature will be the starting point of this study. Then, it aims to present how negative stereotypes of portraying disabled characters are broken in two picturebooks, *Amazing* and *My Three Best Friends and Me*, Zulay.

The Portrayal of Disabled Bodies in Children's Literature

Children's literature is a prominent element that can affect and shape early childhood development since it enables children to comprehend the world surrounding them. It is the gate for children to go through and discover norms and cultural values in their society and the world. As children begin their formal education, they bring many life experiences that significantly influence their outlook, beliefs, and behaviors. However, these formative experiences often lack a deliberate focus on fostering a better understanding of diverse groups of individuals (Leininger et al., 2010, p. 584). In this sense, children's literature is a great tool to help them increase this understanding because literary works that depict characters with disabilities realistically and positively "have the potential to increase awareness, understanding, and acceptance of students with disabilities" (p. 584). The importance of books is not only to help abled children raise awareness about disabled children but also to make them develop positive attitudes and behaviors. Suppose someone can look from the viewpoint of children with disabilities. In that case, books portraying disabled bodies are again of great importance because these children "need to see themselves reflected in the world around them, in pictures, in toys, in books, in role models" (Derman-Sparks, 1989, p. 39). In terms of representation of disabled bodies, some questions arise, such as 'Do the stories in the children's literature mirror the changing attitudes of society towards disabled bodies?', 'Has the portrayal of disabled characters in these stories been stereotyped?' or 'Do the stories or illustrations have negative message about disability?'. To give reasonable answers to these questions, one should consider the changes in society because stories constantly change the attitude of society. During the eighteenth, nineteenth, and early twentieth centuries, disabled characters were frequently depicted by characteristics such as fragility, illness, deformity, and weakness, and these attributes were often filled with religious or divine connotations, depicting disabled people as somehow closer to a higher power (Little, 1986, p. 181). Numerous children's literary works of that era portrayed disabled characters in a manner that degraded them to one-dimensional stereotypes or objects of sympathy. Moreover, disabled individuals of the time were frequently considered burdens to their families, and they were subjected to social isolation and faced severely constrained opportunities for education and self-sufficiency (Little, 1986, p. 182). However, in the late twentieth century, there was a noticeable shift in the portrayal of disabled characters. Authors began to deal with physical attributes less, focusing on highlighting the capabilities and strengths of these characters rather than solely defining them by their disabilities. This evolution in narrative representation marked a departure from the previous exclusive emphasis on the disability itself (Little, 1986, p. 182). This era saw a shift towards a greater societal trend to integrate disabled individuals rather than urging them to be isolated.

There are numerous studies analyzing disabled characters in children's literature, and most of them conclude that it is very common to use negatively stereotyped disabled characters in children's literature. In their study aimed to unveil concealed representations and stereotypes of disability within selected children's literature, Hodkinson and Park conclude that numerous works depict disabled characters as excluded and position them as "other," often symbolizing them as malevolent individuals. Additionally, their study reveals that these disabled characters are subjected to ridicule and are consistently portrayed as burdensome to both non-disabled individuals and society at large (2017, p. 61). This kind of discrimination can be seen in some fairy tales, in which disability is used to emphasize the otherness of the characters, placing them at the end of social order, "even below able-bodied animals" (Yenika-Agbaw, 2011, p. 92). Even when an abled character encounters a disability, they become lesser than what they are, as seen in Rapunzel. The prince in Rapunzel is blinded and no longer becomes a prince. He wanders around in the forest and leads a miserable life. Based on his story, one can conclude that a blind person cannot be a prince or cannot deserve to lead a life that a prince can lead, and also, to be able to get what they previously had, they need to get away with the disability in a miraculous way. So, the

story gives the message that it is not possible to lead the life they used to have before they were disabled and connotes the idea that it is not possible to accept characters with disabilities in these fairy tales and let them become kings, princes or princesses because they are discriminated excluded from society.

Exclusion from society, as an outcome of discrimination, is a recurring theme embedded in children's literature with disabled characters. Characters with disability are considered inferior, so they are othered and excluded from society. Based on this exclusion, Bogdan and Biklen draw a parallel between "handicapism" and racism and sexism and define it as "a set of assumptions and practices that promote the differential and unequal treatment of people because of apparent or assumed physical, mental, or behavioural differences" (2013, p. 4). They claim that if anyone is not allowed any public facilities because of their race or gender, this will be called discrimination, and the same must be said for disabled people when they cannot use any public facilities. Similarly, Alan Gartner likens disability to racism and sexism. He claims that just like those racist and sexist people trying to impose their images on "others", abled people impose their images, which are "beautiful-and right," on disabled people who are considered "ugly-and evil" (qtd. in Margolis and Shapiro, 1987, p. 20). Considering disabled people as others who are ugly, evil, and different leads us to question "normalcy" since abled people are seen as 'normal.'

In disability studies, normalcy is considered as socially constructed standards and expectations that refer to "normal" behavior, appearance, or ability in society, and therefore, those who do not fit these specific criteria can be marginalized (Davis, 2013; Titchkosky, 2000). Linking it to beauty concept, it can be defined as having a perfect body, so if you have any deformity, you will be excluded from being normal. Based on her beliefs on Goffman's social structure of stigma, Titchkosky claims that "'normalcy' is the standpoint which does not obtrude but, rather, *allows* for the recognition of who or what is stigmatized" (2000, p.204). The representation of a perfect body and beauty is included in children's literature, which provides children with the belief that to be accepted and not to be stigmatized in society, one must be beautiful with a perfect body such as long blonde hair, colorful eyes, tall and thin body for beautiful females, and muscled and strong body for handsome males (Lieberman, 1972; Santiago, 2007; Hodkinson and Park, 2017). Beauty is of utmost importance in children's literature, especially in fairy tales, with the idea embedded that beauty symbolizes goodness while ugliness symbolizes evil. Children who encounter these stereotyped characters in children's literature are imposed the idea that "physical beauty symbolizes goodness and disability symbolizes evil" and "people with physical or mental differences are to be feared, pitied, trivialized, or ridiculed" (Shapiro, 2000, p. 3). Perfection of body and mind shows how societal dictates are imposed in society. In children's literature, to make up this so-called ugliness and deformity of the disabled characters, they are mostly uploaded with superhuman qualities. Although superhuman qualities in children's literature are used to provide excitement and adventure, it may become problematic when used to compensate for a 'deficit' of a character. These 'supercrip' characters are depicted as disabled individuals who deal with the "spiritual and physical challenges" of daily tasks, and this depiction highlights the low expectations of the society where they live (Fahn, 2020, p. 5-6). These stereotypical characters endowed with superpowers "represent a sort of overachieving, overdetermined self-enfreakment that distracts from the lived daily reality of most disabled people" (Alaniz, 2014, p.31). If the disabled character is not evil, they probably have the superpower to use to be accepted in society and reach happiness (Harnett, 2000, p. 22). Their disabilities are portrayed as something to be overcome, and they have these superpowers to compensate for their 'deficiencies.' These characters are defined by their superpower abilities, not by their disabilities.

Besides attributing superpowers to disabled characters, healing them with magic is another way for writers to compensate for their impairments and turn their lives into 'normal' in their stories. The use of magic to heal disabled characters reinforces the idea that these characters need to be healed because it is not 'normal' for them to stay disabled. With this idea, young readers can believe that disability is not tangible or profound and "can be magically fixed" (Hodkinson and Park, 2017, p. 53). Healing miraculously at the end of a story is a stereotype in children's literature. For example, the prince who gets his vision at the end of Rapunzel or Clara in Heidi, who is in a wheelchair, begins to walk miraculously. Similarly, Beckett et al. analyze magic in terms of bullying in children's books and claim that "magic reinforces the stereotype of the passive disabled person who in 'normal' non-magical situations is incapable of challenging bullies" (2010, p. 379). The idea that disabled people need something or someone to overcome challenges is reinforced by the inclusion of magic in the stories. Treating the disabled body as something to be cured miraculously may affect the disabled readers in a way that they can

have hope for something unrealistic, or they can see the impossibility of the magic in their lives and feel underrepresented all.

In addition to being other, evil, ugly, or 'super cripple', they are mostly portrayed as secondary characters in stories. Leininger et al. (2010, p. 594) conducted an assessment of Newbery Award-winning books spanning the years 1975 to 2009 to examine the portrayal of disabled characters, and their findings suggest that the majority of disabled characters in these works serve as secondary figures and primarily function to facilitate the emotional development of characters without disabilities. Additionally, only a limited number of narratives are presented from the perspective of characters with disabilities. The fact that characters without disabilities are portrayed as heroes or role models who can solve every problem and overcome every hardship of life ends up with the idea that disabled characters have a lower social status as they are placed in an obedient and marginal societal position. Disabled characters are primarily villains, or when they are protagonists, they get rid of their disability at the end and live happily ever after.

As can be seen, disabled characters are predominantly portrayed with negative stereotypes, but this has been changing with social awareness in the last few decades. With the latest images of disabled bodies in children's literature, disability goes under a process in which a disabled individual can ignore "the tyranny of the normate" and redefine their identity by "embracing disability as a valid social identity." They do not consider disability "as a reason for self-disgust, or as something to be denied or hidden, but rather as an imposed oppressive social category to be challenged and broken down" (Samuels, 2014, p. 319). These representations challenge the perceptions of the so-called 'normal' and convey that no one is perfect, everyone has their abilities, and they are unique in their ways. To present this shift in portraying disabled characters, two contemporary picturebooks, *Amazing* and *My Three Best Friends and Me*, will be scrutinized in terms of disability studies.

Breaking Stereotypes of Disabled Characters in *Amazing* and *My Three Best Friends and Me*, *Zulay*

The negative stereotyping of disabled characters in children's literature has been broken with the changing societal attitudes towards disabled and disabled individuals. Thanks to the campaigns celebrating diversity in children's literature, an awareness of disability has been raised, and the need for representation of disabled characters in an authentic way has tried to be met by the writers of children's literature. In this sense, the number of picturebooks positively portraying disabled characters has been increasing. As an example of these books, *Amazing* and *My Three Best Friends and Me*, *Zulay* were chosen for this study.

Amazing was written and illustrated by award-winning author Steve Antony in 2019. The protagonist in the book is a little boy with a disability who uses a wheelchair. The little boy narrates the story, and it is about him and his extraordinary pet - a dragon- called Zibbo. The boy, whose name is not given, tells how he spends time with his pet and friends. The story begins with the sentence, "Some children have cats. Some children have dogs. I have a dragon. His name is Zibbo." (Antony, 2019). While trying to emphasize the different preferences of people, the author also normalizes having a dragon as a pet, which makes this part of the story unrealistic. Being a friend of a dragon, which is impossible in real life, brings us to the reality of stereotyping characters with disabilities as having superpowers. Having extraordinary pets like the dragon here refers to the superpower of the protagonist because no other child can have a dragon pet; therefore, it can be said that a superpower compensates for the disability of the protagonist. It is used to complement the protagonist's abilities since animals are mostly depicted as companions of disabled people. However, what is more, important about including an amazing different animal in the story is to celebrate diversity, which is very important in disability studies since it reinforces the idea that disabled people are also amazing in their ways. This fosters inclusivity and promotes the idea that disabled people are integrated into society and are not othered or segregated because of their differences. The boy does everything with his dragon pet: laughing, learning, singing, sailing, dancing, drawing, snacking, and snoozing. They also hang out with his friends, who love Zibbo, too. In the illustration, every kid rides a scooter, bike, or skateboard, and the boy in front of them rides his wheelchair. They also play hide-and-seek and basketball all together. He is not bothered or excluded; they can all play together. At the end of the story, the boy says, "Zibbo may be different but he is MY BEST FRIND" (Antony, 2019), and emphasizes that when they come together, everything is possible, referring to the differences among people.

Even though there is an illustration of the boy in his wheelchair in the book, throughout the story, there is no textual reference to his disability or his using a wheelchair. Anyone who does not see the illustrations cannot know he is a disabled character. Depicting a disabled character with no textual reference to his impairment has a positive aspect of the book since it promotes the idea that he is not an 'other' but a full member of society. Instead of focusing on his disability, the writer focuses on his social life as an equal member of society. By doing so, the writer uses the strength-based perspective, which focuses on the characters' capabilities, skills, and positive aspects instead of their weaknesses or deficiencies. Focusing on the strengths and potentials of disabled characters encourages social integration and acceptance. When their skills and contributions are emphasized instead of their disabilities, disabled individuals can take active roles in society, and this will pave the way for a more comprehensive social structure in which prejudice is reduced. This perspective focuses on "opportunities to grow, develop, and thrive in personal development, interpersonal relations, social inclusion, and emotional and physical well-being" (Hayden and Prince, 2020, p.3). In this perspective, the characters in the books are recognized as they are in their lives and focused on what they can do and be (Shogren et al., 2017, p. 22). Steven Antony portrays his character in this way and focuses on depicting what his character can do in his social life. This portrayal is important because it can raise awareness about the strength-based perspective among readers, which can help to create a more equal and inclusive society by ensuring the full participation of disabled people in society.

In *Amazing*, the capacities and skills of the disabled protagonist are depicted in a social environment. The impairment of the boy is portrayed in illustrations realistically. However, the story is not about his disability or anything related to it, which breaks the stereotype and gives a positive and multidimensional portrait of the character. At this point, this book can be considered among the books portraying disabled characters without addressing the negative stereotypes attributed to disabled characters and without addressing the social barriers upon people with disabilities. Considering it in the social model of disability, we do not see societal barriers for the disabled character. He can do whatever his abled peers do, and he has the right environment and is welcomed, accepted, and accommodated by society. There are no physical obstacles, such as inaccessible environments, which can impair him, and no attitudinal barriers, such as prejudice or othering in his community. The absence of these social barriers enables him to fully participate in every aspect of society and equally engage in everything as his peers. Consequently, the absence of these barriers underpins the social model in disability studies since it claims that disability is socially constructed. When these barriers are removed, an inclusive and equal environment can be created for every individual in society.

At the end of the story, there is no magic cure or need to be cured. Everything is depicted in a realistic atmosphere, which gives the story an authentic setting, which is very important in children's literature since they cannot be acceptable unless they are realistic or accurate (Prater et al., 2006; Leininger et al., 2010; Wopperer, 2011). It is of great importance to depict children with disability in a realistic setting because to create an authentic portrayal, disabled characters should be represented with their weaknesses (what they cannot do) and strengths (what they can do). Suppose they are depicted authentically. In that case, they are presented to the readers as "individuals who are accepted rather than rejected, and people who are more similar than different from others" (Rieger and McGrail, 2015, p. 19). Rieger and McGrail, claiming disabled children are not appropriately portrayed in books and media, state that this situation has two negative consequences: "(a) Children with disabilities cannot "find" themselves or appropriate role models represented in books and other media, and (b) abled students remain unaware of this absence, which amplifies their unfamiliarity with their differently abled classmates" (2015, pp. 18-19). The absence of inappropriate representations of disabled children can prevent disability awareness and positive attitudes and behaviors toward children with disabilities. Authentic literature represents "characters with disabilities as well-rounded and multidimensional persons who belong to various communities and have friends rather than as flat, stereotyped outsiders or victims to be rescued" (2015, p. 19). In the picture book *Amazing*, the setting and the disabled character are depicted authentically; the boy is not a victim or 'other' in his environment but a round and multidimensional character with many friends, fully participates in everyday activities, and enjoys his life.

The second picturebook analyzed in this study is *My Three Best Friends and Me, Zulay* (2015), written by Cari Best and illustrated by Vanessa Brantley-Newton. The story is told by Zulay, the protagonist of the book. The book concerns Zulay, a confident and determined blind character, and her three best friends. They are all in the same

class and have different personal interests, but they have fun together and help each other when they are in need. Similar to the cover of *Amazing*, in which there is a boy in a wheelchair having fun with his friends, there is an illustration of a girl who has a cane in her hand and her friends, all smiling, on the cover of *My Three Best Friends and Me, Zulay*. Both books depict the disabled characters with their friends, promoting the idea that they are not alone, othered, or segregated but members of a happy society.

Unlike *Amazing*, in which the character's disability is never mentioned, in this picturebook, her disability is mentioned when she sits at her desk in her classroom and talks about her folded-up cane inside her desk, so her being blind is presented at the beginning of the book. This picturebook also reflects the absence of societal barriers in social disability model, which claims that people are disabled not because of their impairments but because of the barriers created by them. Zulay has no physical or attitudinal social barriers with which to cope. She is not portrayed as restricted or facing societal barriers in her environment, and she primarily participates in the same activities with her classmates with some adjustments. Her disability is not portrayed as something that limits her life; it is portrayed as a difference in a diverse classroom, and with inclusion and necessary support, it can be accommodated. In inclusive classrooms, materials can be adapted to meet the needs of disabled students, such as using visual aids to break tasks into smaller steps. Zulay is in such a class where, for example, she learns how to use her stick in her gym class to join a race in her school.

In inclusive classes, peer interaction is also important since it creates opportunities for students to enhance social skills and empathy while working together. During her classes, contrary to the disabled characters in the past who are othered, Zulay's friends do not consider her blindness as a weakness but as a difference. When they do shapes in class, for example, Zulay cannot draw the pyramids correctly and asks her friend how they look, and her friend says, "A teeny bit crooked" (Best, 2015). Her friend does not criticize or ridicule what she has drawn; instead, she gives her constructive feedback to help her make it right. Zulay also helps her friend with maths; when she gets confused, she explains it to her until she understands. It is mutual assistance, not one-way dependency, as it used to be portrayed in the past. She also lets her friends use her Braille machine; they type their names on it and enjoy it. Their relationship is reciprocal; they collaborate and support each other, an important issue in inclusive classes. These classes help students understand each other better, allowing them to interact with peers from different backgrounds and abilities and fostering awareness and acceptance. These classes allow students to improve not only academically but also socially.

What makes this story authentic is that both Zulay's weaknesses and strengths are portrayed in the book. When she cannot do something in class, her friends help her by telling her what to do, which is realistic. Her feelings are presented to readers, too. When her teacher announces that Zulay will work with Ms Turner while the rest of the class goes to the gym, she feels unhappy and thinks, "I do not like when I hear my name sticking out there by itself, if no one else has to have Ms Turner, then why do I?" (Best, 2015). However, she does not express her thoughts because she does not want to be stuck out, more like a car alarm at night waking everybody up" (Best, 2015). She feels discomfort with standing out in class but does not verbalize it and chooses to remain silent because she does not want to draw attention to her difference, which is the emotional effect of ableism. What makes Zulay feel discomfort here is not that she needs assistance, but instead, her name is "sticking out" and making her visible among her friends, which reinforces her being different from her peers in a negative way. However, this discomfort with "sticking out" does not stop her from joining the race on Field Day. Her decision to participate in the school activity breaks the stereotype of dependent and passive disabled characters. She shows determination and independence by deciding on her activity, just like her sighted peers. Her disability is not portrayed as something that can restrict her capabilities. Ultimately, with her self-determination and lots of practice, she learns to navigate her cane and joins the race.

Zulay's feelings about using her cane are another realistic presentation. She associates everything with her cane; when she tries to draw pyramids, she thinks that drawing it "straight like her cane" is waiting for her at her desk. Likening drawing straight lines on her cane shows that she is in the process of accepting using a cane, which is different from the activities she does with her friends. Navigating with her cane is something new for her, and since she needs to be separated from her friends to be able to learn how to use it, she feels discomfort. However, it is not only about being separated from her friends since disabled people sometimes do not want to accept using assistive tools (McMillen and Söderberg, 2002; Häggblom-Kronlöf, G. and Sonn, 1999), which will make them 'visible' and stand out in their community. In Zulay's reaction against her cane, we can see this reluctance:

Reading used to be hard before my hands learned the way. So I was climbing a tree and swimming. Because in the beginning, all I did was fall. And sink. And not want to do it like I do not want to do that cane.

Her emotional response to accepting using an assistive tool is clearly stated in her words. She struggles to accept her cane to navigate around as a blind person. She sees her cane as a tool connected to her disability, which emphasizes her difference. She believes that using an assistive tool, which is emotionally challenging, makes her disability visible, which will lead to social stigma. When using her cane, her feeling like a "car alarm" clearly showcases her concern about being seen differently and the possibility of facing adverse reactions from people around her, and this inevitably affects her self-esteem and her willingness to use her cane. She also feels anxious about learning how to use it because she feels frustrated and sometimes discouraged in the learning process, although she tries hard to learn. Accepting using it is a gradual process for her both physically and emotionally since "[b]eing a user or becoming a user of assistive devices not only entails pragmatic adaptation but also has emotional and symbolic significance" (Hägglom-Kronlöf, G. and Sonn, 1999, p. 168). Therefore, while she struggles to master a new skill and overcome its difficulties, she is trying to accept it and keep her resilience and self-determination until she feels comfortable with it. At first, she defines her cane as "fold-ing hold-ing cold-ing cane" (Best, 2015), and tries to imagine how she will look with it and wants to shout "No" because she feels no one else will look like her when using it. Alternatively, she does let her friends try out her cane, although she lets them use her Braille machine. It reinforces the idea that disabled people need time to get used to and accept the assistive tools in their lives, and they believe that these tools make them independent, although they seem the opposite at first. In their study, which elucidates the dependency of disabled people on assistive devices, McMillen and Söderberg conclude that disabled people may look dependent on their devices. However, their devices make them more independent daily and help them achieve a better life (2002, p. 178). When her instructor explains to Zulay that she will be an expert at finding her way around, she knows she will achieve a better life and will not depend on anyone who navigates her. Although it takes time, like other activities that she struggled to learn, such as reading and climbing, she learns how to use it and even joins a race and wins it.

Considering the stereotypes of having superpowers, we can see the opposite here. Zulay does not have the superpower to achieve what she wants, to join and win a race, or to compensate for her 'deficiency.' It is realistically presented in the story that she has to try hard to master a new skill in classes such as drawing shapes or doing math, sometimes as complicated as her peers and sometimes much more challenging than theirs. While practicing for the activities on the field day, her friends get as tired as she is; they all put great effort into achieving what they want. When she talks about her effort to master new skills, such as learning to read and climb, her failures are also mentioned; readers can understand how hard she tries to get what she wants, unlike the unrealistic portrayal of disabled characters who use magic or superpowers. She does not need a superpower to earn her place and to be accepted in her society. Moreover, Zulay is not depicted as someone who needs to be cured to lead a 'normal' life, as suggested in the medical model of disability studies.

Conclusion

The field of disability studies has played an important role in triggering the transformation in societal attitudes towards disabled bodies. This evolution in perspective can be seen in the portrayal of disabled characters within the realm of literature, particularly in children's literature. In the past, there were almost no disabled protagonists since they were mostly depicted as supporting characters, and they were rarely used as first-person narrators (Leininger et al., 2010; Price, 2016). There has been an increase in the number of disabled protagonists, which is none or rare in the past. In parallel with this development, first-person narratives by disabled protagonists have become common in disability narratives, which gives voice to marginalized ones in society. (Price, 2016; Some, 2020). These literary representations mirror the evolving societal understanding of disability and assist to shed light on presenting disabled individuals from different perspectives. In contemporary literature, there is a rise in depicting disabled characters as complex individuals by portraying their unique strengths, challenges, and distinctive perspectives. These portrayals arouse empathy, promoting a better understanding of disability among young readers.

In the selected picturebooks in this study, the protagonists are independent disabled characters who are not discriminated against, othered, pitied, or ridiculed in their society. Unlike the underrepresentation of disabled

characters in the past when they were portrayed as one-dimensional and stereotypical characters, the boy in *Amazing* and Zulay in *My Three Best Friends and I* are depicted as multidimensional. They both are protagonists and accommodated in society without any limitations. They both are the narrators of the story, empowering their voices. They are portrayed in authentic settings, and they have the strengths and weaknesses that an abled character can have. They are not defined by their disabilities but by their personalities and interests. They do not face social barriers in their lives. They are round characters who can show their feelings and fully participate in everyday activities, fostering the trend that aims to achieve “more balanced and varied emotional portrayals in disability narratives, moving beyond uniformly tragic or inspirational narratives” (Some, 2020, p. 578). They do not have superpowers to prove themselves and do not struggle to change themselves; they are the same at the beginning and end of the story. They do not need to be cured to have the perfect body or to be accepted in society. Instead of being 'cripples' that should be pitied or ridiculed, they are portrayed as problem solvers and helpers. They have an inclusive environment where they can develop stronger social skills and have the chance to interact with different peers from different backgrounds.

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Statements of Publication Ethics

We hereby declare that the study has not unethical issues and that research and publication ethics have been observed carefully.

Ethics Committee Approval Information

I declare that I did not collect data from participants using any survey, interview, focus group study, observation, experiment, or other interview techniques within the scope of the study whose information is given below, that I did not conduct any experiments on humans or animals, etc., and that I did not violate the personal data protection law; I declare as the responsible author that this study is one of the studies that does not require ethics committee approval.

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GENİŞLETİLMİŞ ÖZET

Engelli bireyler yüz yıllar boyunca dünyanın hemen her kesiminde ayrımcılığa maruz kalmış, dışlanmış ve ötekileştirilmiştir. Ancak, ailelerin, eğitimcilerin, araştırmacıların ve aktivistlerin de yer aldığı engelli hakları savunucularının çabaları sayesinde engelli bireylere karşı yapılan bu haksız muameleye meydan okunmuş ve engellilik çalışmaları edebiyat ve sanat gibi birçok sosyal bilim alanında da görünür hale gelmiştir. Toplumsal gelişmelerin bir aynası olan edebiyatta engelli bireylerin nasıl ele alındığı incelenmeye başlamıştır. Bu çalışma, engellilik çalışmaları bağlamında çocuk edebiyatında engelli karakterlerin geçmişten günümüze nasıl tasvir edildiği üzerine ışık tutmayı amaçlamaktadır. Özellikle erken çocukluk döneminde çocukların gelişimini etkileme ve şekillendirmede oldukça büyük bir etkiye sahip olan çocuk edebiyatı, sadece kendi kültürlerini değil tüm dünyayı keşfetmesini sağlamaktadır. Aynı zamanda çocukların farklılıkları tanımasını ve anlamasını sağladığı düşünüldüğünde engellilik çalışmalarındaki önemi daha çok ortaya çıkmaktadır çünkü engelli karakterlerin gerçekçi ve pozitif bir şekilde aktarılması çocukların engellilik konusunda farkındalıklarını arttırmakta ve engelli bireyleri kabul etmelerini sağlamaktadır (Leininger vd., 2010).

Çocuk edebiyatında engelli karakterleri inceleyen çok sayıda çalışma vardır ve bunların çoğu, çocuk edebiyatında olumsuz stereotipleştirilmiş engelli karakterlerin kullanımının çok yaygın olduğu sonucuna varmıştır. Engelli bireylerin tarih boyunca edebiyattaki tasviri incelendiğinde 18., 19., 20. yüzyılın başlarında karakterlerin sıklıkla hastalık, zayıflık, çirkinlik, kötülük gibi durumlarla bağdaştırıldığı ve dini ve ilahi çağrışımlara (Little, 1986) ya da doğa üstü güçlere sahip olarak tasvir edildikleri gözlenmiştir. Benzer şekilde, Hodgkinson ve Park (2017), seçilmiş çocuk edebiyatında engelliliğin gizli temsillerini ve stereotiplerini ortaya çıkarmayı amaçladıkları çalışmalarında, çok sayıda eserin engelli karakterleri dışlanmış olarak tasvir ettiği ve onları “öteki” olarak konumlandığı, çoğu zaman da kötü niyetli bireyler olarak sembolize ettiği sonucuna varmışlardır. Ayrımcılığın bir sonucu olarak toplumdan dışlanma, engelli karakterlerin yer aldığı çocuk edebiyatında yinelenen bir temadır. Engelli karakterler aşağı görülür, bu nedenle de ötekileştirilir ve toplumdan dışlanırlar. Engelliliği ırkçılık ve cinsiyetçiliğe benzeten Alan Gartner, tıpkı ırkçı ve cinsiyetçi insanların kendi imajlarını “ötekilere” dayatmaya çalışması gibi, engelli insanların da “güzel ve doğru” olan imajlarını “çirkin ve kötü” olarak görülen engellilere dayattığını iddia etmektedir (akt. Margolis ve Shapiro, 1987). Engellilerin çirkin, kötü ve farklı olan ötekiler olarak görülmesi, engelli olmayanların ‘normal’ olarak görülmesi nedeniyle ‘normallik’ sorgulamamıza yol açmaktadır. Normallik mükemmel bir vücuda sahip olmak olarak kabul edilir, bu nedenle bir vücutta herhangi bir deformasyon varsa bu vücut normal kabul edilmez. Kusursuz beden ve güzellik temsili çocuk edebiyatında yer almakta, bu da çocuklara toplumda kabul görmek için mükemmel bir bedenle güzel olunması gerektiği inancını vermektedir. Çocuk edebiyatında bu basmakalıp karakterlerle karşılaşan çocuklara “fiziksel güzelliğin iyiliği, engelliliğin kötülüğü simgelediği” ve “fiziksel veya zihinsel farklılıkları olan insanlardan korkulması, onlara acınması, önemsizleştirilmesi veya alay edilmesi gerektiği” fikri empoze edilmektedir (Shapiro, 2000, s.3). Beden ve zihin mükemmelliği, toplumsal diktelerin toplumda nasıl dayatıldığını gösterir. Çocuk edebiyatında, engelli karakterlerin bu sözde çirkinliklerini ve deformasyonlarını telafi etmek için onlara çoğunlukla insanüstü nitelikler yüklenir. Eğer engelli karakter kötü değilse, büyük olasılıkla toplumda kabul görmek ve mutluluğa ulaşmak için kullanabileceği süper güçleri vardır (Harnett, 2000, s. 22). Eksikliklerini telafi etmek için bu süper güçlere sahiptirler. Bu karakterler engelleri ile değil süper güç yetenekleri ile tanımlanırlar. Engelli karakterlere süper güçler atfetmenin yanı sıra, onları büyü ile iyileştirmek, yazarların hikayelerinde onların engellerini telafi etmenin ve hayatlarını ‘normal’ hale getirmenin bir başka yoludur. Engeli karakterler, öteki, kötü, çirkin veya ‘süper sakat’ olmalarının yanı sıra, hikayelerde çoğunlukla ikincil karakterler olarak tasvir edilirler. Bu karakterlerin öncelikli amacı engeli olmayan karakterlerin duygusal gelişimini kolaylaştırma işlevi görmektedir (Leininger vd., 2010). Görüldüğü üzere, o dönemlerde engelli karakterler ağırlıklı olarak olumsuz stereotiplerle resmedilmektedir ancak bu durum gittikçe artmakta olan toplumsal farkındalıkla birlikte değişmektedir. Özellikle 20. yüzyılın sonlarına doğru toplumda engelli bireylere karşı gösterilen tutumların değişmesiyle birlikte engelli karakterleri küçümseyen, alay eden, etrafındaki insanlara bir yük olarak gösteren ya da ötekileştiren ve dışlayan bu temsiller değişmeye başlamıştır. Artık yazarlar engelliliklerini görünür kılan fiziksel özelliklerden ziyade bu karakterlerin yeteneklerine ve güçlü yönlerine odaklanmıştır. Bu temsiller, ‘normal’ olarak adlandırılan algılara meydan okumakta ve kimsenin mükemmel olmadığı, herkesin kendi yetenekleri olduğu ve herkesin kendi yolunda özel olduğu mesajını vermektedir.

Bu çalışmada engelli karakterin temsilini incelemek ve negatif stereotiplerin yıkımını göstermek amacıyla Steve Antony tarafından yazılan ve resimlenen *Amazing* adlı resimli kitap ve Cari Best tarafından yazılan ve Vanessa Brantley-Newton tarafından resimlenen *My Three Best Friends and Me*, Zulay resimli kitap seçilmiştir. Her iki kitapta da engelli karakterler, toplumda ayrımcılığa uğramayan, ötekileştirilmeyen, acınmayan ya da alay edilmeyen bağımsız karakterler olarak tasvir edilmiştir. Geçmişte engelli karakterlerin yeterince temsil edilmemesinin aksine, bu karakterler başkahramandır ve hikayelerde toplumda herhangi bir sınırlamaya maruz kalmaksızın yer almaktadırlar. Her ikisi de otantik ortamlarda, engelli bir karakterin sahip olabileceği güçlü ve zayıf yönleriyle tasvir edilmektedir. Engelleriyle değil, kendi kişilikleri ve ilgi alanlarıyla tanımlanmışlardır. Duygularını gösterebilen ve günlük aktivitelere tam olarak katılabilen çok yönlü karakterlerdir. Kendilerini kanıtlamak için süper güçlere sahip değildirler ve kendilerini değiştirmek, engellerinden kurtulmak için mücadele etmezler, hikayenin başında ve sonunda aynıdırlar. Mükemmel bir vücuda sahip olmak ya da toplumda kabul görmek için tedavi edilmeleri gerekmemekte ya da geçmişte tasvir edildikleri gibi büyü ya da mucizeyle iyileştirilmemişlerdir. Her iki kitapta da acınması ya da alay edilmesi gereken 'sakatlar' olmak yerine, sorun çözücüler ve yardımcıları olarak tasvir edilmişlerdir.