

What Do Graphic Novels Tell Young Adults About Disabilities?

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Abstract

Data from the U.S. Department of Education (2007) indicates that approximately six million students aged six through 21 are served in schools under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), or 9.1 percent of the student population in the United States. Furthermore, these numbers have increased in real numbers and in proportion to the total U.S. school-age population almost every year since 1993, and this growing number of students with disabilities are being educated in regular education classrooms.

People with disabilities have often been present in the media; however, Riley (2005) posited that little has changed in the depictions since the 1920s. He found continued presentations of people with disabilities as “the supercrip, the medical miracle, the object of pity” in newspapers, movies, and other forms of media (p. X). He also stated that the negative portrayal

“translates into economic and political deprivation for people with disabilities, whose status is irreparably harmed by the images projected to the nondisabled world through print and electronic media ... [illustrated by] horrific unemployment figures for people with disabilities (hovering at a steady 80 percent even before the last recession) together with the dwindling ranks of disability-specific publications and programs. ... In other words, even as the situation of other minorities continues to improve, the material signs of acceptance of people with disabilities in the workplace and the mainstream are declining.” (p. 10).

The need to provide all students with literature that depicts a positive representation of people with disabilities has therefore never been greater. With the growth of popularity of graphic novels with youth, the researchers chose to analyze this format to inform youth services librarians for collection development and publishers as they make decisions about manuscript submissions.

The study sought to answer the following research questions: Do graphic novels include individuals with disabilities? If disabilities are present, what disabilities were most often featured? What is the gender and ethnicity of the individual(s) with disabilities? Is there a positive portrayal of the person with a disability?

Using the IDEA definitions of disability and a co-rater analysis, the researchers studied the visual and textual representation to determine whether a disability was present in their sample of books. If a disability was present, the portrayal was analyzed to determine the type of disability, gender and ethnicity of the person with a disability, and whether a positive or negative image is expressed. Biklen and Bogdan's (1977) ten major stereotypes of people with disabilities in the media were then used to assign value to the negative images.

The presentation will report on the outcomes of an initial study of 30 of the graphic novels that were listed on the *Great Graphic Novels for Teens 2008* compiled by the Young Adult Library Services Association of the American Library Association and a follow up comparison study of the 30 graphic novels that were listed as 2009 best sellers by *The New York Times*.

References

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