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Deaf Characters in Young Adult Literature

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DEAF CHARACTERS IN YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE

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Abstract: The multicultural literature movement has its roots in civil rights and the desire to give voice and representation to marginalized cultures. Literature is a societal artifact that can inform and influence the development of cultural identity. Deaf culture is a unique culture that is underrepresented in young adult literature. This underrepresentation places more importance on accurate representations of Deaf culture since young adult fiction may be the only exposure to Deaf culture that both hearing and deaf teenagers may have. Accurate representation in literature is necessary for deaf to see themselves in what they read and for hearing to better understand this unique culture. This study analyzed 20 young adult novels published between 2000 and 2017. Each novel featured a deaf or hard of hearing teenager. A phenomenography approach with a qualitative content analysis method was utilized to inform a better understanding of the representation of deaf characters and Deaf culture within current young adult literature. Models of disability as established by Clogston (1990, 1991, 1993) and Haller (1995) were used to focus the coding analysis. Two research questions were addressed. What model of disability do these books represent? What aspects of Deaf culture, communication issues, and societal issues are represented in young adult fiction? Results of the study determined the most prevalent model of disability represented was the traditional medical model. The coding also revealed themes surrounding Deaf culture, the issues in communication that deaf face, and societal issues surrounding the deaf.

Stories have power. From the oral tradition of telling stories, through today's modern methods of storytelling, stories have passed on knowledge from generation to generation. Stories can document the history of a culture and can shape and impact an individual's cultural identity and understanding of self. Since adolescence is a time of discovery when young adults learn more about the world and their place in it, young adult literature can impact the cultural identity development of adolescents. Reading about cultures and characters can help adolescents form connections to and understandings of not only their cultural identity, but also that of others (Koss, 2015, Louie, 2005). The power of literature means that how a culture is portrayed in literature impacts how young adults learn about not only themselves, but society as well.

Because of the impact literary representations have on cultural identity, the representation of cultures needs to be authentic. Therefore, it is important to understand stereotypes in literature and how they impact the view of a culture; otherwise these representations can reinforce negative stereotypes and lead to misunderstandings concerning the culture (Gopalakrishnan, 2011, pg. 214). Without accurate representation of a culture in literature, a method of learning about cultures in an authentic way is lost.

It is also important that authentic cultural representation be easily accessible and available. The social power of cultural groups is also represented in literature and those who lack cultural power tend to be excluded from literature and other important forms of cultural representation (Taxel, 1994). The publication and selection of books assigns value to the book and its contents. If the literature is not published or cannot be found, then the opportunity for learning about the culture and its inherent value is missed. Deaf culture is found in few modern, young adult literary works. This makes access to Deaf culture in literature limited—and makes it even more important that the representation of Deaf culture in those young adult books be authentic.

Because of the impact of literature on the development of cultural identity, it is important to know if Deaf culture is not only represented in young adult literature, but represented accurately. The purpose of this study was to investigate how deaf characters were represented in young adult fiction published between 2000 and 2017. The study applied a phenomenography approach with a qualitative content analysis method to inform a better understanding of the representation of deaf characters and Deaf culture within current young adult literature.

What Defines Deaf Culture?

Deaf culture is not defined by a region or a shared ethnic background, but rather by a language and shared experience. Deaf culture is comprised of many variables and its members may encounter various obstacles and frustrations because of misunderstanding or lack of knowledge by those outside of Deaf culture (Padden & Humphries, 2005). While many people may believe Deaf culture is defined by a lack of hearing, it is not. Rather it is defined by a focus on the beliefs and practices among deaf and the visual nature of their language. Padden & Humphries (2005) stated:

As a community made up of some individuals who do not speak and some who do, some who do not hear at all and some who hear some, and all of whom draw the label of “disabled” by the larger community, Deaf people are seen as clearly not like anyone else. We often feel besieged, controlled, and patronized, even as our remarkable sign language is celebrated and admired in public (p. 7).

Those who associate with Deaf culture may be deaf, hard-of-hearing, or hearing. They may have grown up in deaf or hearing households. They may have attended deaf or hearing schools. The culture is defined by a personal decision to become a part of the culture because of the shared values and beliefs. This study will utilize the common convention of the capitalized word, Deaf, in reference to the cultural group and its practices, and the lowercase word, deaf, in reference to the medical condition of hearing loss. For the purposes of this study, Deaf culture is defined by a focus on beliefs and practices among the Deaf, especially the primary role that sign language plays in their community (Padden & Humphries, 2005).

It is because of the many variances within Deaf culture, that learning about it and becoming a part of it may be difficult. For instance, a deaf person who grows up in a hearing household and attends a hearing school may not have the opportunity to learn about Deaf culture. In many cases, Deaf culture is learned through interaction with the Deaf. If that interaction is not available, a deaf person may not have the opportunity to learn about a culture that could have great impact on their life.

Mainstream society may view hearing loss as a disability, but Deaf culture rejects this concept and instead self-identifies as a unique cultural group brought about by the visual nature of their language (Bailes, 2002). Willard (1998) addressed the perception of disability as portrayed in the media. He stated:

If anyone has anything to overcome, I would say it's the people in the media.

They are the ones who keep feeding the misconception that people with disabilities are not happy or whole until they have overcome their disability. Instead, why not recognize that a disability is often a part of our lives, something that makes us who we are? Our ears may not work as well as we'd like, but we have nothing to be ashamed of and certainly nothing that needs to be overcome (p. 274).

In the United States, American Sign Language (ASL) is the primary language of the Deaf. This language is very visual in nature and is one of the core components of Deaf culture. Ariella Dramin, a current student at Gallaudet remarks, “We’re a community, we’re fine. We have a language” (Shah, 2017). The unique nature of ASL makes it a pathway towards bringing Deaf culture together and has become an avenue of pride for the community. Although many deaf individuals can read lips and voice, Deaf culture acknowledges that ASL is their language.

It is important to remember that being born deaf does not make a person automatically a member of Deaf culture. Since Lane, Hoffmeister and Bahan (1996) found that “Nine out of ten deaf people come from hearing homes where deaf language and culture are rarely to be found,” many deaf may not have the opportunity to interact with and learn about the larger Deaf culture. This can lead to a struggle during adolescence in the development of cultural identity with Deaf because many deaf children in these circumstances will not learn about Deaf cultural heritage from their hearing parents (Lane, Hoffmeister & Bahan, 1996, p. 160).

Lane, Hoffmeister and Bahan (1996) discussed the impact of having culturally different parents on deaf children. This situation can lead to a loss of connection with their Deaf identity. It can delay the acquisition of ASL. In many cases, deaf children born to hearing parents are faced with cochlear implants and speech drills in order to make them more acceptable in hearing society. But these choices can lead to lack of acceptance by Deaf culture. An anomaly exists in these situations though, because deaf children may seek out Deaf culture in order to identify with their language, find role models, and develop an understanding of the unique Deaf culture.

Media and Cultural Identity

Media, and for the focus of this study, literature in particular, as a societal artifact can impact not only view of self, but also influence how a culture is viewed by those outside of that culture. Fiction is a way of reflecting reality and can represent the concerns of that culture as well as how those concerns are addressed. It is a type of cultural artifact that reflects the perceptions and attitudes of society at the time, and as such it can inform and shape understanding about the values of a specific culture (Fairclough, 1989; Guella, 1983; Harris & Baskin, 1987; Taxel, 1994). According to Guella (1983), "Fiction is one way of presenting a picture of reality...literature represents a culture's ideas about the concerns of that culture and how people treat those concerns" (p. 25).

Literature can be a mirror of a culture and can help to facilitate young adults' understanding and acceptance not only of themselves, but of those of other cultures (Gavigan and Kurts, 2011; Hebert and Kent, 2000). Although this is important for all cultures, underrepresented cultures have an even greater need for representation in literature. Mainstream cultures have many avenues to help develop cultural identity. Those individuals who fall outside of the mainstream can lack the avenues to learn more about their culture and develop their self-identity. The lack of representation can also lead to misunderstandings by those in the mainstream about various subcultures. Virtually absent in discussions of multicultural children's books is the importance of including characters who are Deaf, that is, deaf people who consider themselves a member of a cultural minority (Bailes, 2002).

Since many deaf adolescents may not grow up in the Deaf culture, the portrayal of that culture through societal artifacts can have significant impact on their own identity development as Deaf, as well as their understanding of the culture as a whole. "Deaf characters in fiction act as role models for young adults. A positive portrayal of deaf characters benefits deaf adolescents whether or not they see themselves as biologically deaf or culturally deaf" (Pajka-West, 2010). Deaf adolescents need to be able to find deaf characters in the literature that they read, especially if that is one of the few sources they have to understand this unique culture. Fields, Kim and Spencer (2016) asked deaf students how they felt about deaf characters in classic literature that was written to evoke pity. The students did not identify with the characters written in this manner. "Our students believe that authentic deaf characters should resemble them: capable, communicative, social, and intelligent" (p. 94). Since the deaf characters they had read about weren't portrayed in this way, the students felt no connection with them.

Deaf in Literature

There have been few studies that focus on how deaf and the Deaf culture are portrayed in literature. The existing studies have focused on whether deaf characters were represented from a cultural or a pathological viewpoint. In other words, the researchers tried to determine whether the medical aspect of being deaf and the portrayal of deafness as a disability was more common than the representation of Deaf as a unique culture with its own language.

A study by Golos and Moses (2011) analyzed the portrayal of deaf characters in children's picture books. Out of the 20 picture books that were chosen for their study, only one was written by a deaf author. The results of their study found that deaf characters were more often presented from a medical or pathological model. Deafness was portrayed as a disability that needed fixing. The authors stated,

The results of the present study indicate that children's books continue to portray deaf characters more from a medical than a cultural perspective. This suggests that children who are reading the books will see deaf children portrayed as disabled and having a medical problem that can and should be fixed in order to make them hearing...and that without these interventions, deaf individuals will be angry, isolated, and/or unable to function in everyday life (Golos & Moses, 2011, p. 279).

Pajka-West (2010) also looked at whether deaf characters were portrayed from a cultural or pathological perspective, but in this study young adult fiction books by both deaf and hearing authors were used. The study found that deaf authors were more likely to utilize a pathological perspective than hearing authors. Pajka-West offers possible reasons for this result:

First, the deaf authors have grown up deaf and perhaps experienced more scenarios similar to those presented from the pathological perspective model. Even if the deaf authors live more culturally Deaf lifestyles today, authors include their experiences growing up in their writing. Second, there are less deaf characters in the books written by deaf authors and more characters and more character variety in the books written by the hearing authors. When there are fewer deaf characters interacting with other deaf characters, these characters tend to interact with more hearing characters who are less likely to be aware of the cultural perspective. And third, with decreased populations of culturally Deaf born to culturally Deaf individuals, it seems consistent that it may be more difficult to obtain a book from a Deaf of Deaf author (2010, p. 8). The study utilized three groups of readers: (a) adults who had attended a special program or residential school for the deaf, used ASL, and identified as deaf, (b) adults who were friends, family, co-workers connected with those who identified as deaf, and (c) hearing adults who were not aware of or a part of Deaf culture. The researcher found that the “Deaf participants, along with the participants as a whole, preferred the books written by the hearing authors as better describing their perceptions of realistic deaf people, for presenting deaf characters adequately and realistically, and for the hearing authors’ portrayals of deaf characters matching with their perceptions of deaf people” (Pajka-West, 2010, p. 8).

Guella (1983) conducted a literature review of short stories featuring deaf characters. The researcher proposed that fiction is one way of presenting reality and “the picture of deafness does not approximate the life of those in the deaf community” (p. 25). The literature review found that deaf characters were sometimes represented as grotesque and objects of laughter or pity. The lack of hearing by a character led others to think of him as a fool because of the lack of interaction and understanding of what is happening around him. Guella did find that stories written after the 1930s offered more insight into deafness. Guella posits that this was due to an increase in education of the deaf and of the general public about the deaf.

Fields, Kim and Spencer (2016) later conducted a literature review which looked at the inauthentic portrayal of deaf in classical literature. Examples of literature taught in high school English classes included deaf characters portrayed in a negative or foolish manner. The Wife of Bath in Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*, Quasimodo in Hugo’s *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, Jim’s daughter, the King, and the Duke in Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Misses Tutti and Frutti in Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and finally, Holden Caulfield in Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye* all give inauthentic portrayals of deaf characters. If these are the only deaf characters adolescents are presented with, then their understanding of the Deaf culture will be misinformed.

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to investigate how deaf characters were represented in young adult fiction published between 2000 and 2017. Various resources, both print and online, were used to develop a list of titles that fit the criteria for this study. These resources were used to find young adult titles of fictional literature that included deaf characters and culture. For online research, the search terms of “deaf”, “fiction”, “disability”, and “young adult” were used in multiple combinations. Utilizing these various resources, a list of 20 young adult titles published between 2000 and 2017 (see Table 1) was curated for this study. These titles were fiction and had a deaf or hard-of-hearing character in either a primary or secondary role. Hard-of-hearing characters were included in the final list in order to include more titles in the study. All titles were published after 2000 in order to utilize books that were still in print and would be more likely to be of interest to current young adult readers. All books had a 12 to 18-year-old as a main character.

Table 1
Curated Book List by Publication Year

Title	Author	Publication Year	Primary/Secondary Character
Of Sound Mind	Jean Ferris	2001	Secondary
Hurt Go Happy	Ginny Rorby	2006	Primary
Read My Lips	Terry Brown	2008	Primary
The Orange Houses	Paul Griffin	2009	Primary
Five Flavors of Dumb	Anthony John	2010	Primary

The Dark Days of Hamburger Halpin	Josh Berk	2010	Primary
Whisper	Chrissie Keighery	2011	Primary
Portal Through the Pond	David Anderson	2012	Secondary
Strong Deaf	Lynn McElfresh	2012	Secondary
Sway	Jennifer Gibson	2012	Primary
Compass	Jennifer Gibson	2013	Primary
Invisible	Cecily Paterson	2013	Primary
My Haunting Love	J.S. Wilsoncroft	2013	Primary
Sounds of Silence	Phillip Tomasso	2013	Primary
Silence in Center	Jody Studdard	2014	Primary
Waiting for a Sign	Esty Schachter	2014	Primary
<hr/>			
Silence	Deborah Lytton	2015	Primary
Until I'm Safe	Jane Grace	2015	Primary
Tone Deaf	Olivia Rivers	2016	Primary
You're Welcome Universe	Whitney Gardner	2017	Primary

The study utilized a phenomenography framework and a qualitative content analysis method to view the selected young adult titles and their representations of deaf and Deaf culture. Phenomenography is a method of qualitative research which allows the researcher to determine the different ways in which people experience, conceptualize, perceive, and understand various aspects of, and phenomena in, the world around them (Marton, 1986). Phenomenography is not focused on statements about the world or culture itself, but instead is focused on how a person develops conceptions about the world. Phenomenography seeks to explain both people's conceptions of the world and their mistaken conceptions of reality. Using phenomenography as a framework means this study was not focused on what specifically defined deaf culture, but rather on how the representation of deaf characters in young adult literature could impact an adolescent's understanding of deaf culture.

There are various methods for conducting content analysis. For this study, the directed content analysis approach was used in conjunction with discourse analysis. Discourse analysis is a qualitative content analysis approach that examines text at a level beyond sentences and focuses on how phenomena are represented (Krippendorff, 2004, p. 16). Directed content analysis utilizes a more structured process than traditional content analysis. In this method, researchers use existing research or theories to help identify the key concepts of the text for developing the initial coding categories of analysis (Potter & Levine-Donnerstein, 1999). This previous research is used to develop operational definitions of the categories used in the analysis. It is important to note that these categories are the initial categories and that other categories may be developed as the process of analysis of text occurs.

The initial categories for this study were from those developed by Clogston (1990, 1991) and Haller (1995). Clogston (1990, 1991) developed five models of disability representation that contained both traditional and progressive categories. Haller (1995) added to these in light of the American with Disabilities Act and developed eight media models of disability that covered both the traditional and progressive models. The traditional model depicts a medical view of disability, whereas the progressive model focuses on the social aspects of disability (Kama, 2004). Three initial categories for coding were chosen to represent various points on the spectrum of representation of disability in media: traditional medical model, supercrip model, and progressive cultural pluralism.

Traditional models depict a person to be either defective or superhuman. They experience problems because of their disability that are derived from medical reasons. The role of society in these models is to cure the person or aid them medically. The traditional medical model focuses on the disability as an illness or a malfunction. For the purpose of this study, that means deafness is seen in young adult books as a medical malfunction that needs to be fixed. In this model, the character is seen from a medical point of view as having a deficiency. This model is a negative representation of an individual and a culture, taking away the individual's rights as a member of society and making them a problem in need of fixing. Individuals in this model are set apart from others by their disability and often face feelings of isolation and loneliness.

The supercrip model is also a traditional representation of disability. In this case the individual is "portrayed as deviant because of 'superhuman feats', or as 'special' because he or she lives a regular life 'in spite of their disability'" (Burns & Haller, 2015). A supercrip can perform day to day tasks, but that capability is represented

as a great accomplishment, something out of the ordinary. A supercrip can also be portrayed as an individual who can perform extraordinary feats—they are superhuman (Kama, 2004). In either instance, they are not portrayed as a mainstream member of society.

Another important model is the progressive cultural pluralism model. The progressive model of disability does not focus on the physical aspect, but rather the societal aspect of disability. In this case, it is society that has a problem with its views of disability and needs to be fixed, not the individual. In the progressive model, individuals do not need to be fixed and are not set apart because of their disability (Haller, 1995). Progressive models present people with disability in a more positive light. The cultural pluralism model portrays these individuals as multi-faceted, well-rounded people. They are seen first as people, not as disabled (Burns & Haller, 2015). In these representations, the disability is not a focus. The individual as a member of society is the focus and the disability is just a characteristic of that individual. They are seen as more than their disability.

Procedure

The curated books were read the first time to determine if they matched the criteria for the study. The next step of the study was to critically read the texts with the coding categories in mind, while also determining if other general categories existed. White and Marsh (2006) discuss methods in which to track the coding categories and concepts. For the purpose of this study, concept memos were used. These “logically focus on emerging concepts, the distinctive ways in which these are phrased, and his [researcher] own interpretation of the concepts” (White and Marsh, 2006, p. 37-38). The curated books were read with the three models of disability as the primary guide for concept memos, but other possible categories were added by the researcher as they arose.

Coding of the books was done at the sentence level. Sentences coded were selected based on information about the disability models of deafness, Deaf culture, communication issues, and societal interaction with the deaf. Sentences that were critically determined to be relevant to the study were entered into Dedoose, an online program for data analysis. The researcher then read through each sentence a third time in the program and coded them according to the selected criteria. Each read through allowed the researcher to more critically examine the sentence and its connotation in the context of representation of deaf characters.

Research Question 1

What model of disability do these books represent?

Coding of each book for the three models showed the primary model represented was the medical model of disability. In the 20 books, content supporting the medical model was found 566 times. The supercrip model was found 116 times and the cultural pluralism model was found 36 times (see Table 2).

The two traditional models of disability, medical and supercrip, occurred a total of 682 times. In contrast, the progressive model of cultural pluralism was only found 36 times in the 20 young adult novels. This wide disparity of representation between the traditional models—which are more negative in scope—and the more positive cultural pluralism model revealed that deaf characters in these young adult novels focused on a more negative representation of the deaf. Because of this, adolescents—both hearing and deaf—upon reading these books may see the deaf represented in a manner that highlights the disability, isolation and differences of being deaf.

Table 2
Disability Model Code Occurrence

Book Title	Medical Model	Supercrip Model	Cultural Pluralism Model
Compass	20	3	0
The Dark Days of Hamburger Halpin	38	15	0
Five Flavors of Dumb	57	13	0
Hurt Go Happy	64	2	4
Invisible	14	3	2
My Haunting Love	6	1	1
Of Sound Mind	10	0	0
The Orange Houses	29	2	0

Portal Through the Pond	2	0	1
Read My Lips	29	8	2
Silence	22	13	1
Silence in Center	18	5	5
Sounds of Silence	35	0	5
Strong Deaf	14	3	0
Sway	18	3	0
Tone Deaf	34	8	5
Until I'm Safe	8	8	0
Waiting For A Sign	8	0	0
Whisper	77	3	6
You're Welcome, Universe	63	26	4
Totals	566	116	36

Note. The medical model is a traditional model that focuses on the disability as an illness or malfunction to be fixed. These characters may feel isolated and do not participate in normal activities. The supercrip model is also a traditional model. In this model, the disability still receives attention but the individuals are considered special or super because they live in spite of their disability. The progressive model of cultural pluralism portrays these individuals as multifaceted and well-rounded. The person is the primary focus, not the disability (Clogston, 1990, 1991, 1993; Haller, 1995).

Research Question 2

The analysis of the 20 books in the study led to the development of a second research question: What aspects of Deaf culture, communication issues, and societal issues are represented in young adult fiction?

Coding of the 20 books found representation of different aspects of Deaf culture. Communication issues were found 252 times. Information about Deaf culture was found 95 times. Issues surrounding Deaf culture were represented 162 times in the books (see Table 3). Examples of the representation of Deaf culture and issues that impact that culture were found 509 times in the 20 young adult novels. This number does show that even though there is a focus on traditional models of disability, there is also a focus on educating readers about Deaf culture, communication and societal issues faced by the deaf.

Societal issues surrounding the deaf and Deaf culture were also addressed in the novels. Issues of discrimination were found throughout the novels. In *Whisper* (Keighery, 2011), Stella stated, "This is audism!" she continues. "It's a perfect example of discrimination from the hearing world. They think we are..." (p. 173). Another example found in *Whisper* was when Demi's friend lost her job. "The new restaurant owner has taken all that away from her. Not because she's no good at her job, but because she's deaf" (p. 229). In *Five Flavors of Dumb* (John, 2010), Piper stated about her younger sister who was also deaf, "I'd be there for her, help her, allow her to express herself in her own way, not demand that she conform to society's bias toward oral communication" (p. 16).

Table 3
Representation of Deaf Culture, Communication Issues, Societal Issues

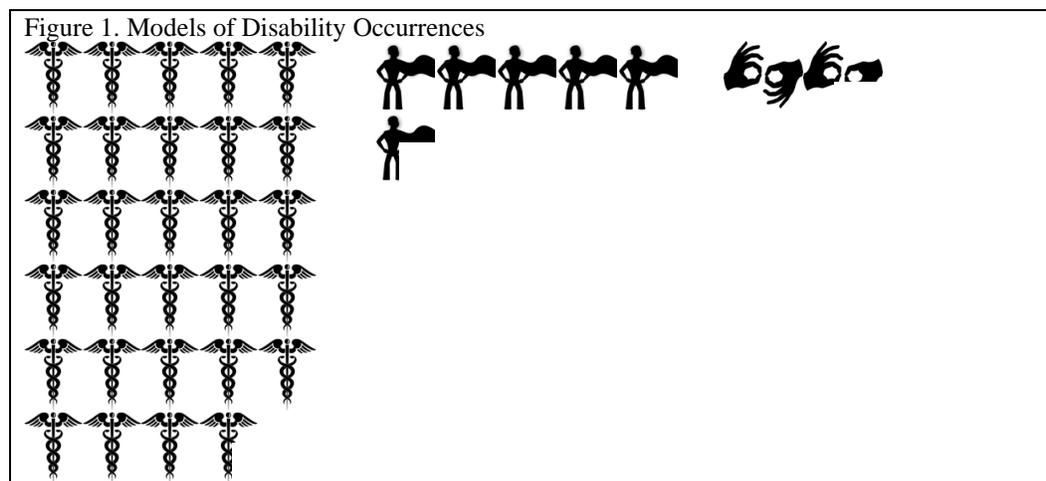
Book Title	Communication Issues	Deaf Culture	Societal Issues
Compass	4	1	3
The Dark Days of Hamburger Halpin	30	18	18
Five Flavors of Dumb	20	5	14
Hurt Go Happy	37	6	31
Invisible	1	0	1

My Haunting Love	2	1	3
Of Sound Mind	7	9	8
The Orange Houses	3	0	1
Portal Through the Pond	7	0	0
Read My Lips	17	1	8
Silence	14	0	7
Silence in Center	9	2	5
Sounds of Silence	13	5	12
Strong Deaf	7	8	3
Sway	3	0	6
Tone Deaf	24	8	4
Until I'm Safe	6	0	2
Waiting For A Sign	7	11	2
Whisper	20	7	30
You're Welcome, Universe	21	13	4
Totals	252	95	162

Note. For the purpose of this study, communication issues focus on the concepts of ASL, voicing, and lip-reading and the issues surrounding the use of each. Deaf culture refers to examples that demonstrate the difference between hearing loss and development of and participation in a unique culture. Societal issues address the issues that deaf face from hearing society in the way that they are treated.

Summary

Based on the coding analysis, the models of disability that were present most often were those on the traditional end of the spectrum. The medical and supercrip model were found 682 times throughout the 20 selected books. These models focus on deafness as a disability and highlight the isolation that deaf adolescents may experience as well as the need for medical specialists and technology to live and succeed in the hearing world. The progressive model of cultural pluralism was found only 36 times in the 20 books.



 = 20 Occurrences	 = 20 Occurrences	 = 20 Occurrences
* Icons courtesy of Pixabay and the Creative Commons		
Total Medical Occurrences: 566	Total Supercrip Occurrences: 116	Total Cultural Pluralism Occurrences: 36

Based strictly on coding, this would mean that relatively little focus was put on deaf characters as multifaceted characters with deafness being only one aspect of a well-developed character. This disparity in representation of the more positive progressive model in comparison to the traditional models of disability mean that adolescents reading these books would find the negative aspects of deafness highlighted more strongly than the positive aspects. This can lead to a misunderstanding of deaf and Deaf culture by both deaf and hearing adolescents. These misunderstandings can lead to development of a viewpoint that deaf are broken individuals who need to be fixed or who are not as capable as hearing individuals. If these representations are the only experience adolescents—both deaf and hearing—have with deafness and Deaf culture, their overall viewpoint will be negatively skewed.

Themes of communication, culture, and societal issues were present in the books. The different communication choices of ASL use, voicing, and lip-reading provided an insight into the limitations and benefits of each communication type. Aspects of Deaf culture were presented and provided examples of the difference between hearing loss and Deaf culture. Societal issues were also found that provided examples of discrimination against the deaf and lack of acceptance by the hearing. Overall, coding showed that the authors wanted to show both the positive and negative aspects of these areas. Even though these were fictional young adult novels, in many cases non-fictional technology, culture, and education issues were highlighted. These examples may enable both a deaf and hearing person to learn more about the deaf world and its culture.

Literature as a societal artifact can frame society's view of social issues and individuals. As young adults begin to establish their own identity, it is paramount that they have access to accurate information. Deaf teenagers may not have access to Deaf culture because they live in a hearing household or they attend a hearing school. For some deaf teenagers, they may have little to no interaction with other deaf people. If what they read is their only source of information about the many aspects of Deaf culture, how deaf characters are developed and portrayed in young adult fiction is important. For many hearing teenagers, literature may be their only interaction and source of knowledge about Deaf culture as well. Well-developed characters who accurately represent Deaf culture and issues are necessary for both hearing and deaf adolescents. Accurate representation of Deaf culture will enlighten readers about the unique aspects that make up this culture and why acknowledgement of this culture is important. Young adult novels must portray deaf characters as well-rounded individuals and move beyond the traditional disability aspects found in these 20 books. The development of well-rounded, culturally progressive characters will support a positive portrayal of deaf individuals as contributing members of society who are not disabled, but unique in language and culture.

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