Neurodiversity and Fiction Reading

Representation · Neurodivergence · Intersectionality

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Representation

- Research focusing on diversity representation in children's and YA literature has focused primarily on ethnic representation (CLPE, 2020; Ramadarshan, 2019).

- Research on diversity representation needs to become broader in scope, and intersectionality needs to be considered.

- This project focused on representation of neurodivergent young people in fiction books.

Neurodiversity and neurodivergence

- **Neurodiversity** is a term used to reflect the fact that we are all different in how we think, feel, and learn, because our brains process information differently.

- **Neurodivergent** is a collective term which emerged from the Autistic Self-Advocacy movement of the late 20th century (Singer, 2019), and includes Autistic, dyslexic, and dyspraxic individuals, and people with ADHD and DLD (Fletcher-Watson et al., 2021).

- It is estimated that ~15% of the school aged-population are neurodivergent (DfE, 2019).

Learning About Neurodiversity in Schools (LEANS)
Learn more here: https://salvesen-research.ed.ac.uk/leans

Background

- Fiction books often reflect the social world we live in, and can enrich our understanding of ourselves and others (Eekhof et al., 2022; Mar, 2018).

- Adolescence is a period of life characterised by exploration of identity and understanding of self (Becht et al., 2016); fiction books offer opportunities for young people to explore personally meaningful content during this time (Schachter & Galili-Schachter, 2012).

Aim

To understand neurodivergent young people's perspectives and experiences of representation in fiction books.

Method: Interviews

Method

- Development (with full team) and piloting (with 3 young people) of interview schedule.

- Interviews with 16 young people, aged 14 – 16 from two Scottish secondary schools.

- Interview questions focused on: representation (including intersectionality), benefits (to themselves and others) and potential harms associated with neurodivergent representation in fiction, and other relevant topics.

- Access the preregistration here: https://osf.io/b4cfh

Findings: Representation

- Representation should feature the diversity and complexity of neurodivergent experiences
- Representation should not problematize or present neurodivergence negatively
- Representation doesn't need to be identical to neurodivergent young people's own experiences, but some similarities are important
- Representation should be intersectional
- Representation should normalise rather than draw attention to neurodivergence

"Especially as a trans person, like, usually if you see Autistic representation it's, you know, a cisgender white child and it just doesn't feel very true to life, and my experiences as an Autistic trans person aren't going to be reflected by that."

Findings: Benefits of (good) representation

- Positive representation can help ND young people understand themselves, have others to relate to

- Positive representation can help peers understand ND young people and reduce stigma

- Encountering representation at an earlier age could have supported self-awareness, acceptance, and self-understanding sooner

"There are still lots of people I know, that don't really understand or not that they don't understand, but aren't really willing to listen...if maybe, they just, you know, read a book or they watched a video about it, maybe they would just understand that little bit more."

Findings: Potential harms of representation

- Getting representation wrong could increase stigma, reinforce stereotypes, and/or change the way others see you
- Could lead to pitying/drawing attention to ND young person

"[It might change] the way they act around you, or maybe the way they sort of-, I think maybe the way they perceive you would probably change if they're seeing all these negative things about a condition and then, you know, it can just sort of change how they might behave towards you."

Summary

- [Accurate] representation in [good] books matter
- Primarily benefits, but also some potential harms
- Books featuring neurodivergent characters need to be accessible to neurodivergent readers
- Books are one form of representation, but alone are insufficient

Thank you for listening

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