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Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative content analysis is to study the portrayal of characters who have a mental illness in award-winning young adult books for teacher librarians to recommend for young adult readers and for teachers to use in teaching and curriculum for mental illness acceptance. The research questions asked the following: how does award-winning young adult literature that includes characters with mental illness portray interactions with peers and adults; This study used qualitative content analysis to examine 10 novels portraying multiple mental illnesses and that were published from 2013 to 2020. This research identified three themes: Theme 1 is supportive community helps characters with mental illness thrive; Theme 2 is characters with mental illness are complex; Theme 3 is characters with mental illness can lead full lives. The research concluded that while young adult novels that portrayed mental illness had stereotypes about mental illness, this was neither a determination of positive or negative portrayal. Stereotypes are common in society, so the portrayal in novels may convey realistic situations. Overall the novels still offered diverse representation of lived experiences of mental illness.

MENTAL ILLNESS REPRESENTATION IN YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE

A Graduate Research Paper

Submitted to the

Division of School Library Studies

Department of Curriculum and Instruction

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

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by

Ashley Aberle

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this qualitative content analysis is to study the portrayal of characters who have a mental illness in award-winning young adult books for teacher librarians to recommend for young adult readers and for teachers to use in teaching and curriculum for mental illness acceptance. The research questions asked the following: how does award-winning young adult literature that includes characters with mental illness portray interactions with peers and adults; This study used qualitative content analysis to examine 10 novels portraying multiple mental illnesses and that were published from 2013 to 2020. This research identified three themes: Theme 1 is supportive community helps characters with mental illness thrive; Theme 2 is characters with mental illness are complex; Theme 3 is characters with mental illness can lead full lives. The research concluded that while young adult novels that portrayed mental illness had stereotypes about mental illness, this was neither a determination of positive or negative portrayal. Stereotypes are common in society, so the portrayal in novels may convey realistic situations. Overall the novels still offered diverse representation of lived experiences of mental illness.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The American Psychiatric Association (2020) defines mental illness as a group of health conditions that involve changes in emotion, thinking, or behavior. Mental illness can take many forms, such as an eating disorder, a mood disorder, an anxiety disorder, or a personality disorder. The same organization states that mental illness is common. The National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI, 2020) states that 50% of all lifetime mental illnesses develop by age 14 and 75% by age 24.

Justification of Problem

The World Health Organization ([WHO], 2020) lists emotional disorders such as depression; childhood behavior disorders, like ADHD; eating disorders; psychosis; and suicide and self-harm as common mental health conditions that affect the lives of young adults. With mental illness on the rise in young adults, representation of mental illness in young adult literature is an important topic for educators and teacher librarians (Mental Health America, 2020). Scorfano (2015) notes that since the 1990s the number of young adult literature titles that focus on the portrayal of young adults and their experiences with mental illnesses has increased. With the availability of portrayals in literature becoming more prevalent, the question arises as to whether the portrayals of mental illness are accurate.

AASL Standards

In the Common Beliefs for the American Association of School Librarians ([AASL], 2017) Standards, it is stated that "reading is the core of personal and academic competency" and "intellectual freedom is every learner's right" (para. 4-5). AASL also notes that it is important for teacher librarians to participate in reader culture so that they can recommend literature to students and teachers. It is also important to allow students to choose freely and not have their freedom to choose or freedom to seek information hindered (ALA, 2020). This implies that students, as patrons of the school library, have the ability and freedom to access relevant, balanced, and diverse information on their topic of choice. Given that 13.01% of youth experienced at least one episode of a major depressive disorder in the year 2020, and 59% of those youth with at least one major depressive disorder did not seek treatment (Mental Health America, 2020); it is important for the school library, where students have daily unfettered access to information, to provide relevant, balanced, and diverse information about mental illness. This access could be the starting point for seeking treatment for the young adult or for seeking understanding about what a friend or loved one is going through.

The AASL standards feature six Shared Foundations. One is Include that has four Domains for example the domain of Share, which promotes experience with diverse ideas to promote "the use of high-quality and high-interest literature in formats that reflect the diverse developmental, cultural, social, and linguistic needs of all learners and their communities" (p. 77). This domain is important to include when analyzing literature

because as educators, it is expected that high-quality and high-interest literature in all formats are included in the library.

Importance of the Portrayal of Mental Illness in Young Adult Literature

Bishop (1990) states that young adults need literature to act as "mirrors," to accurately reflect their lives back to them as a way of affirmation. Novels can be used to validate a young adult reader's lived experience by relating a story that is authentically and realistically portraying a social issue they may be experiencing. Furthermore Wickham (2019) states that young adult (YA) literature often deals with social issues, so a rise in YA literature dealing with mental health is not surprising.

Furthering Past Research Regarding Portrayal of Mental Illness in Young Adult Literature

Researchers have previously studied the portrayal of mental illness in young adult literature. Ma (2017) studied media portrayal of mental illness and its effects. The author found that often people with mental illnesses were represented as "inadequate, unlikable, and dangerous" (p. 91). The study found that media representation is generally negative and contributes to mental illness stigmatization. This in turn leads consumers who have mental illness to avoid seeking treatment. The study suggests that future studies be used to guide public education and destigmatization efforts.

Rationale

Teacher librarians and classroom teachers need quality literature for student individual reading needs and for curriculum. The accurate portrayal of mental illness in young adult literature is imperative to help combat the stigma surrounding mental illness

(Jensen, 2019; Richmond, 2014; Scorfano, 2015). Teacher librarians and teachers will benefit from additional study of the portrayal of mental illness in young adult books, as they need to build collections and provide timely recommendations of quality literature to students experiencing life with mental illness or seeking to understand what life may be like with a mental illness.

Summary of Problem Statement

As the diagnoses of mental illness continue to affect their lives, young adult students need quality literature to read that includes relatable characters and also dispels stigma around mental illness and its treatment.

Purpose

The purpose of this qualitative content analysis is to study the portrayal of characters who have a mental illness in award-winning young adult books for teacher librarians to recommend for young adult readers and for teachers to use in teaching and curriculum for mental illness acceptance.

Research Questions

1. How do award-winning young adult books that include characters with mental illness portray interactions with peers and adults?

Assumptions

This study assumes that there is a need by teachers and librarians to provide quality literature to students in regards to authentic mental illness portrayal. This study also

assumes that by using award-winning novels that representation will be diverse and

portrays authentic depictions of lived experiences with mental illnesses.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this qualitative content analysis is to study the portrayal of characters who have a mental illness in award-winning young adult books for teacher librarians to recommend for young adult readers and for teachers to use in teaching and curriculum for mental illness acceptance. Three areas of prior research that inform this literary analysis are the effects of stigma on young adults, representation of mental illness in books and media, and realistic characteristics of mental illnesses.

Effects of Stigma on Young Adults

Mental illness related issues are on the rise in the United States and stigma is a leading cause of young adults not seeking treatment for their mental illness. Dupont-Reyes, Villatoro, Phelan, Painter, and Link (2020) studied the views and effects of stigma in intersectional young adults. The researchers stated that mental health services are underutilized by young adults in the United States, especially by racial and ethnic minorities. Despite the underutilization of services, the rate of mental health problems has risen in the adolescent population and has negative effects on social, academic and economic aspects of life.. The purpose of the study was to analyze the views and effects of stigma in young adults of racial and ethnic minorities. The researchers used a baseline (pretest) assessment of the Texas Stigma Study, a longitudinal study of four years. Fourteen urban Texas school administrators agreed to the study. The study focused on each school's sixth grade class. Of the 751 students who agreed to participate in the study, the mean age was 11.5. The students that were represented were

49% Latino/a, 26% non-Latino/a White, and 25% non-Latino/a Black. Dupont-Reyes et al. found that there were racial/ethnic and gender differences in mental illness stigma. The study found that boys and those who identified with a non-white ethnicity were more likely to desire "greater social distance" (p. 205) from someone with a mental illness. With these findings, the study suggests that boys who are ethnic or racial minorities may struggle with mental illness stigma and struggle to find help for their mental illness and receive treatment.

While Dupont-Reyes et al. researched the intersectionality of mental illness stigma, Milin, Kutcher, Lewis, Walker, Wei, Ferrill, and Armstrong (2016) studied the effects that mental health education can bring to young adults' understanding of mental illness stigma. Milin et al. stated, if left unrecognized and untreated, mental illness in adolescence would lead to substantial negative personal, social, and community consequences, and that stigma related to mental illness kept adolescents from seeking treatment. The purpose of this study was to see if school-based mental health-based literacy had an impact on knowledge and stigma. The study had three hypotheses, which included: there would be an increase in mental health knowledge, there would be an increase in positive attitudes towards mental illness, and there would be a reduction in stigma. Milin et al. also thought they would be able to predict an increase in positive attitudes towards mental illness. The researchers studied 30 schools in the area of Ottawa, Ontario, Canada, and the population was narrowed down to eleventh and twelfth grade students. The 30 schools were divided randomly into three groups- teaching as usual (TAU), curriculum, and curriculum + follow-up e-learning modules. Delivery of mental

health content was at the discretion of the individual teacher. The course was open to all students. Students were not aware that they were receiving the specialized curriculum. This study used pre- and post- questionnaires after completing the designed curriculum. Statistical analysis was then used to analyze data. Milin et al. found that students who were given the mental health literacy curriculum showed significant improvements in mental health knowledge and reduction in stigma in comparison to students who did not receive the specially designed curriculum. The study suggests further research is needed to verify the results because the association between mental health knowledge and stigma is not well understood. These researchers (Dupont-Reyes et al., 2020; Milin et al., 2016) showed the value of education on mental illnesses and the effects it can have on young adults, as well as showing how stigma can be changed by education, exposure to information, and reflection.

Representation of Mental Illness in Books and Media

Scrofano (2019) performed a study on young adult novels that focused on mental illness. The purpose of the study was to analyze contemporary young adult novels and help librarians and teachers understand what types of novels are being published about mental illness and then recommend to young adults the type of story they need or want (p. 3-4). Scrofano based their research questions on another researcher's (Arthur Frank) narrative theory which describes three types of disability narratives: (1) restitution narrative: focus on getting abilities back before illness struck. Focus on a cure. (2) chaos narrative: focus on unpredictability of life with illness. (3) quest narrative: focus on living a meaningful life with illness and using knowledge of illness to help those that are only suffering from illness. Their research questions are: (1) are Frank's three types of illness

narratives represented within this sample of YA fiction of mental illness? (2) Is there a predominance of one of Frank's categories or another in the YA novels of mental illness studied in this sample? The process of finding the YA novels included narrowing the publication years to 1998 to 2017 due to the large numbers of published books with mental illness portrayal. Recommended book lists, blogs pertaining to mental illness and young adult literature, and popular retailers were also used to populate the list of 50 books analyzed in this study. Scrofano's study found that all three of Frank's disability narratives were present in the 50 novels. 26 novels fall into the chaos narrative. 13 novels fall into the restitution narrative. 11 novels fall into the quest narrative. Scrofano notes that there are more novels showing the chaotic side of mental illness and wonders how these portrayals show young adult readers how they can possibly see hope and a future for recovery. Scrofano recommends more Type 3 novels, or quest narrative novels, as they show young adult readers that they can live with mental illness and recovery can happen.

While Scorfano studied young adult novels for mental illness representation, Irwin and Moeller (2010) analyzed graphic novels for inclusivity of disability. Irwin and Moeller cited the 27th Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act and report that six million children aged 6 to 21 were served under the Individuals with Disabilities Act in 2003. This population represents 9.1% of the population in the American school system (p. 1). The authors have recognized the importance of visibility of disabilities in materials made available to children in schools and questioned what specifically graphic novels show of the

following: (1) what individuals with disabilities are included, (2) what disabilities are most present? (3) what gender and ethnicity are represented, and (4) how disability is portrayed. Graphic novels were chosen specifically because they appealed to lower level readers, appealed to otherwise disinterested readers, and created challenges for advanced students in the use of color and graphics to convey complex tones and thoughts. Thirty graphic novels were used in the study. Only the first book in a series was used, and no sequels to first books were used in the sample of books. Books were chosen from the Young Adult Library Services Association's Great Graphic Novels for Teens 2008 list. Irwin and Moeller analyzed the sample using a list created by researchers Biklen and Bogdan of 10 disability stereotypes most commonly found in the media: (1) pitiable and pathetic, (2) object of violence, (3) sinister or evil, (4) "atmosphere" (background characters), (5) "Super Crip," (6) laughable, (7) his or her own worst and only enemy, (8) burden, (9) nonsexual, (10) incapable of fully participating in everyday life (p. 3). These stereotypes were used to analyze the 30 graphic novels. In their results, Irwin and Moeller concluded that 12 graphic novels had at least one depiction of a character with a disability. Based on the Biklen and Bogdan list of stereotypes, the most common stereotype in the 12 graphic novels was the pitible stereotype. Another stereotype depicted was "own worst enemy." A positive depiction was "inclusive depiction in the community." (p. 8) Based on the results of the study, the researchers concluded that the graphic novels fit a negative and unrealistic representation of disabilities.

Realistic Characteristics of Mental Illness

A study of the accurate portrayal of mental illness in young adult literature needs references in regards to characteristics of mental illnesses. Tan, Chen, and Hu (2017) studied the predictors of suicidal ideation among children and adolescents. According to the World Health Organization (WHO 2009), suicide is the third leading cause of death for female adolescents and the fourth leading cause for male adolescents (p. 220). The researchers identified that it was imperative to identify the characteristics of suicidal ideation for better preventive measures. The researchers focused on what risk factors would be considered for leading causes and whether purpose in life had any consideration in suicidal ideation. The study was done by taking a sample of 6165 adolescents from eastern China. The participants were assessed for mental health, suicidal ideation, and meaning in life with clinical surveys. Correlation analysis was performed on all survey data. Results showed that approximately 33.7% of the participants reported suicidal ideation (p. 224). Tan et al. found that poorer mental health status correlated with higher suicidal ideation and a weaker sense of meaning in life.

While Tan et al. studied the factors associated with suicidal ideation, Kassis, Artz, and White (2017) studied risk and protective factors of depression in adolescents. Given that the World Health Organization cites that depression, if left untreated, can lead to suicide, and is the second leading cause of death for 15-29 year-olds in the world. (p. 722), Kassis et al. noted that certain risk factors make an adolescent more vulnerable to depression, such as low self-esteem, exposure to domestic violence, lack of positive relationships to teachers, or bullying. The purpose of this study was to re-visit risk factors

for adolescents with a specific focus on individual, family, and social contexts. The study used a randomly selected sample of 5149 middle school students from the European Union (EU). The researchers used a questionnaire that asked questions about depressive symptoms, exposure to family violence, parenting style, relationships with teachers and aggression to peers, self-esteem, parental support, and school-based factors. The researchers used variance analysis. The results found that for both male and female participants a broad range of factors influenced depressive symptoms.

These studies showed realistic characteristics of mental illness include that suicidal ideation correlated with poorer mental health status and a weaker sense of meaning of life (Tan et al., 2017) and that the varied characteristics of mental illness include at risk factors of low self esteem, exposure to domestic violence, lack of positive relationships to teachers, and bullying (Kassis et al.).

Summary

Several studies above found that the effects of mental illness stigma on young adults in and out of the school setting affected the likelihood that young adults ask for help and also found that students who were given the mental health literacy curriculum showed significant improvements in mental health knowledge and reduction in stigma in comparison to students who did not receive the curriculum (Dupont-Reyes, 2020; Milin et al., 2016). Another study found 10 stereotypes used by Irwin & Moeller (2010): (1) pitiable and pathetic, (2) object of violence, (3) sinister or evil, (4) "atmosphere" (background characters), (5) "Super Crip," (6) laughable, (7) his or her own worst and only enemy, (8) burden, (9) nonsexual, (10) incapable of fully participating in everyday

life. Finally, some studies provided insight into symptoms and treatments including that

poorer mental health status correlated with higher suicidal ideation and a weaker sense of

meaning in life (Tan et al., 2017) and that certain risk factors make an adolescent more

vulnerable to depression, such as low self-esteem, exposure to domestic violence, lack of

positive relationships to teachers, or bullying (Kassis et al., 2017).

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

While previous researchers (Dupont-Reyes, 2020; Milin et al., 2016) have studied the effects of mental illness stigma on young adults, and others have studied the symptoms and risk factors (Kassis et al., 2017; Tan et al., 2017), Irwin and Moeller (2010) studied representation of disability in graphic novels. Yet more research is needed on recent young adult literature. The purpose of this qualitative content analysis is to study the portrayal of characters who have a mental illness in award-winning young adult books for teacher librarians to recommend for young adult readers and for teachers to use in teaching and curriculum for mental illness acceptance.

Research Design

This study is a qualitative content analysis. Wildemuth and Zhang (2017) explained that qualitative content analysis "goes beyond merely counting words or extracting objective content from texts to extract meanings, themes, and patterns that may be manifest or latent in a particular text. It allows research to understand social reality in a subjective but scientific manner" (p. 318). This type of study is appropriate as text featuring mental illness presents a social reality that can be subjective in nature but needs to be studied in a scientific manner. Specifically, this study was a *directed* analysis of content, which Wildemuth clarifies as "initial coding starts with a theory or relevant research findings" (p. 319). This study relied on the following initial codes derived from past research that align with the research questions: (1) seven codes represent symptoms and at risk factors of mental illness by Tan et al. (2017 and Kassis et al. (2017); (2)10

codes represent stereotypes most commonly used in the media as noted in Irwin and

Moeller (2010); and (3) and one code is the importance of education to reduce the stigma

(Milin et al., 2016).

<div align="center">**Sample of Books**</div>

The sample of 10 books in this study (see Appendix A) were selected from

recommended lists including H.W. Wilson's *Middle and Junior High Core Collection* and

Senior High Core Collection. Only books published from 2013-2020 were used in this

sample selection. This was done because the latest DSM-5 was published in 2013 and it

is thought that any current literature publication would have used the latest DSM to write

their portrayal of mental illness. Sequels were not used in the sample to prevent overlap.

I used the search term "mental health or mental illness or mental disorder or

psychiatric disorder" in each core collection search. In Wilson's Core collection I attained

279 results. I limited myself to "books" which resulted in188 titles. I limited the

publication dates to 2013 to 2020 and got 66 results. I eliminated any book that only

mentioned "children of parents with mental illness" or in the description mentioned that

only the side character had a mental illness. I then eliminated any book labeled

"supplemental" in Wilson's Core Collection as it designates books that are good, but not

the top recommended titles. I chose books that were labeled "recommended" or

"essential" and had either awards or starred reviews. I also chose those that included

LGBTQIA+ and multicultural representation. From Wilson's Core collection I chose the

following five books: *Calvin* by Martine Leavitt, *Heartstopper: Volume One* by Alice

Oseman, *This Is My Brain in Love* by I. W. Gregorio, *Who Put This Song On?* By

Morgan Parker, and *Words on Bathroom Walls* by Julia Walton.

In specific, *Calvin* was chosen because the text was listed as an essential text. The

novel won the following awards: Governor General's Literary Award for

English-Language Children's Literature, 2016; YALSA Best Fiction for Young Adults,

2016; OLA Best Bets, 2015. The novel also received starred reviews from Booklist and

Kirkus. *Heartstopper: Volume One*, a graphic novel, was chosen because the text was

listed as a recommended text. The graphic novel received the following awards: YALSA

Quick Picks for Reluctant Young Adult Readers, 2021; YALSA Quick Picks for

Reluctant Young Adult Readers: Top Ten, 2021; YALSA Great Graphic Novels for

Teens, 2021. *This Is My Brain in Love* was chosen because it is listed as a recommended

text. This text won the following award: Schneider Family Book Award for Teens, 2021.

Who Put This Song On? Was chosen because it was listed as an essential text. It received

starred reviews from Booklist, Kirkus, and Publishers Weekly. *Words on Bathroom Walls*

was chosen because it was listed as a recommended text. The text won the following

awards: International Reading Association Children's Book Award for Young Adult

Fiction, 2018; YALSA Best Fiction for Young Adults, 2018. The text also received a

starred review from Publishers Weekly.

Next in EBSCO's Senior High Core Collection, I attained 328 initial results. I

limited my results to "books" and attained 193 results. I limited further by publication

year by going from 2013 to 2020 and attained 106 results. I eliminated any book that only

mentioned "children of parents with mental illness" or any book that mentioned in the

description that only the side character had a mental illness. I then eliminated any book labeled "supplemental." I identified 5 books that met the final criteria. They were labeled "recommended" or "essential" and had either awards or starred reviews. I also chose for LGBTQIA+ and multicultural representation. From the Senior High Core Collection I selected the following five novels: *All the Bright Places* by Jennifer Niven, *Challenger Deep* by Neal Shusterman, *Highly Illogical Behavior* by John Corey Whaley, *In Sight of Stars* by Gae Polisner, and *Turtles All the Way Down* by John Green.

All the Bright Places was chosen because it was listed as an essential text. It was also listed as a YALSA Best Fiction for Young Adults, 2016. It also received starred reviews from Kirkus, Publishers Weekly, and School Library Journal. *Challenger Deep* was chosen because it was listed as a recommended text. It also received the following awards: Booklist Editors' Choice: Books for Youth, 2015; Golden Kite Award for Fiction, 2016; James Cook Book Award (Ohio), 2017; National Book Award for Young People's Literature, 2015; School Library Journal Best Books, 2015; YALSA Best Fiction for Young Adults, 2016; and YALSA Best Fiction for Young Adults: Top Ten, 2015. It also received starred reviews from Booklist, Publishers Weekly, School Library Journal, and Kirkus. *Highly Illogical Behavior* was chosen because it was listed as a recommended text. It also received the following awards: School Library Journal Best Books, 2016; YALSA Best Fiction for Young Adults, 2017; YALSA Quick Picks for Reluctant Young Adult Readers, 2017; Rainbow List, 2017. The text also received starred reviews from Krikus and School Library Journal. *In Sight of Stars* was chosen because it was listed as a recommended text. It also received a starred review from Booklist. *Turtles*

All the Way Down was chosen because it was listed as an essential text. The text also received the following awards: Booklist Editors' Choice: Books for Youth, 2017; Westchester Fiction Award, 2018; School Library Journal Best Books, 2017; YALSA Best Fiction for Young Adults, 2018. The text also received starred reviews from Booklist and Publishers Weekly.

Procedures

Data Collection

Data collection followed the steps provided by Wildemuth (2017) in *Applications of Social Research Methods to Questions in Information and Library Science.* I used a book evaluation form (see Appendix B) with the eight stereotypes adapted from Irwin and Moeller's (2010) research study. I read the 10 texts listed in Appendix A and took notes on themes and patterns utilizing the evaluation form found in Appendix B. The texts were analyzed for the presence of stereotypes of mental illness. The texts were also analyzed for the portrayal of relationships between characters with mental illnesses and peers and adults.

Data Analysis

This study used qualitative study analysis, which Wildemuth (2017) describes in 8 steps. I **(1) prepared the data** by selecting texts for the study. A list of selected texts can be found in Appendix A. I then **(2) defined the unit of analysis**, which was the 10 novels purposefully selected from Wilson's core collections. The text of the novel as a whole and in smaller units was subject for analysis. Next **(3) I developed categories and a coding scheme** by applying a previous list of 8 criteria from Irwin & Moeller's (2010)

research study described in Chapter 2. I then **(4) tested my coding schemes on a sample of text** by using the text *Little & Lion* by Brandy Colbert. Alterations were made to Irwin and Moeller (2010) list of stereotypes of disability portrayal in the media in order to determine final codes The final codes include (1) pitiable and pathetic, (2) object of violence, (3) sinister or evil, (4) laughable, (5) his or her own worst and only enemy, (6) burden, (7) nonsexual, (8) incapable of fully participating in everyday life. After testing my coding scheme I then **(5) coded all the texts** by taking notes analyzing the texts for what mental illness is present, noted and analyzed what stereotypes of mental illness were present (or absent), and noted and analyzed how relationships were portrayed between the character with mental illness and peers and adults, (6) I assessed my coding consistency and eliminated the criteria "atmosphere" (background characters) and "Super Crip" due to my research focusing on main characters and narrators and not background characters and also because "Super Crip" more aligns with physical disability and not mental illness. **(7) I drew conclusions from the coded data,** and finally **(8) I reported my methods and findings** in Chapter 4**.**

Limitations

The sample of books in this study comes from the Wilson's core collection lists for middle and high school. This study only included novels listed in the Appendix A of the study that were purposely selected for analysis as award-winning titles that portray mental illness. There is only one researcher analyzing and coding these books. I, the researcher, recognize that I may have my own biases due to my own experiences with mental illness and my professional experiences as a teacher.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

The purpose of this qualitative content analysis is to study the portrayal of characters who have a mental illness in award-winning young adult books for teacher librarians to recommend for young adult readers and for teachers to use in teaching and curriculum for mental illness acceptance. As the researcher, I applied the process for qualitative analysis of content from Wildemuth (2017) using coding categories and themes that I inferred directly from the 10 books. I extracted data from 10 books in the form of notes using the evaluation form in Appendix B. The 8 stereotypes were analyzed and data was used to answer the following research question:

1. How does award-winning young adult literature which includes characters with mental illness portray interactions with peers and adults?

I then organized the findings by grouping together similar stereotypes and providing examples from texts that portrayed the stereotypes and how relationships between peers, adults, and characters with mental illness were portrayed. An overview of the findings can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1. Book Evaluation Tool

	Are the characters pitiable and pathetic?	Are they laughable?	Are the characters sinister or evil?	Are the characters objects of violence?	Are they their own worst enemy?	Are they incapable of living full lives?	Are they a burden?	Are they nonsexual?
Turtles All the Way Down					X		X	X
Highly Illogical Behavior	X				X		X	X
Calvin					X	X		X
Challenger Deep					X			
Who Put This Song On?	X			X	X	X	X	
All the Bright Places	X	X		X	X		X	
Heartstopper: Volume 1				X				
In Sight of Stars	X			X	X			
This is My Brain in Love					X			
Words on Bathroom Walls				X				
Total:	4	1	0	5	8	2	4	3

Before discussing the three themes that emerged, it should be noted the mental

illnesses each book portrays. *Calvin*, *Words on Bathroom Walls*, and *Challenger Deep*

portray schizophrenia. *In Sight of Stars* portrays psychosis. *This is My Brain in Love* and

Heartstopper: Volume 1 portray depression and anxiety. *Who Put This Song On?* portrays

depression not otherwise specified. *Turtles All the Way Down* portrays obsessive

compulsive disorder. *All the Bright Places* portrays bipolar disorder. *Highly Illogical*

Behavior portrays agoraphobia and panic disorder. It should also be noted that examples

for each theme discussed may have spoilers for each text. Comparisons of texts are

examined at the end of each theme, and recommendations are made in Chapter 5.

Theme 1: Supportive Community Helps Characters with Mental Illness Thrive

The first theme that emerged through this analysis was that a supportive community

helps characters with mental illness thrive. The stereotypes analyzed were *pitiable and*

pathetic and *laughable*. Four texts presented the stereotype pitiable and pathetic: *Highly*

Illogical Behavior, *Who Put This Song On?*, *All the Bright Places*, and *In Sight of Stars*.

One of those texts (*All the Bright Places*) presented the stereotypes of laughable as well

as pitiable and pathetic.

In *Highly Illogical Behavior*, Solomon, who lives with agoraphobia and panic

disorder, is portrayed as a pitiable and pathetic character through the interactions with his

peers. Solomon has a panic attack at school and afterward he is seen as "the crazy kid

who jumped into the fountain" (Whaley, 2017, p. 9). He meets Lisa, who initially views

him as someone to be fixed and used as her subject for her entrance essay to the nation's

second-best psychiatry program. As the text concludes, Lisa becomes friends with Solomon and no longer sees him as pitiable and pathetic.

Another character viewed as pitiable or pathetic is Morgan from *Who Put This Song On?* She writes in her journal: "Summer is gone. I've spent it fighting with everyone around me and crying in bed all day. I'm so pathetic" (Parker, p. 8). Morgan identifies herself as pathetic, and it makes her pitiable because her family does not understand her mental illness and she has isolated herself from peers from school because she fears they will not understand her either. Morgan becomes friends with a small group of people, and when she does reveal her diagnosis, they are understanding and accepting.

Theodore Finch (known as Finch or Freak) in *All the Bright Places* represents the "laughable" stereotype. He is the school prankster and is constantly in trouble for his actions. One character describes their relationship with Finch as such: "I've known him since, like, kindergarten, and he's only gotten weirder" (Niven, 2016, p. 47). Classmates view him as a freak and view his actions as weird or troublesome. When Finch's girlfriend confronts him about seeking treatment for his bipolar disorder, he runs away and dies by suicide.

Overall two texts in this section, *Highly Illogical Behavior* and *Who Put This Song On?,* confronted stereotypes by creating complex, round and dynamic relationships between characters with mental illness and peers and adults. Solomon's parents attempt to seek treatment for his agoraphobia and panic disorder but ultimately give up when Solomon refuses to participate in treatments. But they are otherwise supportive of him in other ways, such as encouraging his friendship with Lisa and building a pool for him to

begin swimming, a favored pastime before his seclusion. Likewise, Morgan's family may not have understood how she was feeling, but sought help for her through therapy and medical treatment and spent time speaking with her about her diagnosis. On the other hand, one of the books did not have the same level of complex character development. *All the Bright Places* does not confront stereotypes. Finch is seen as a freak by peers and adults and he reacts with physical and verbal aggression. Finch's family did not seek treatment or understanding of his bipolar disorder, which may have contributed to his decision to run away when confronted by his girlfriend to seek treatment. Finch's perspective ends before the confrontation so it is unknown why he runs away and why his life ends. Suicide is a complex issue, and the text does not address the issue by the end of the text.

Theme 2: Characters with Mental Illness are Complex

The second theme that emerged from this analysis was that characters with mental illness are complex. The stereotypes analyzed for this theme were *sinister or evil, objects of violence*, and *their own worst enemy*. None of the texts presented the sinister or evil stereotype. Five texts presented the objects of violence stereotype. Eight texts presented the stereotype of their own worst enemy (see Table 1 above).

None of the texts analyzed for this study presented the stereotype sinister or evil. However, 5 texts presented the objects of violence stereotype. The objects of violence stereotype can be seen in *In Sight of Stars*. Aspiring artist Klee tries to cut his ear off, like Van Gogh, in a reaction to the culminating trauma of finding his father's body after he dies by suicide and by finding his on-and-off girlfriend with another peer. Readers can

also see the stereotype with Nick's experience of being a victim of dating violence in *Heartstopper: Volume 1*, a graphic novel. Adam's experience with bullying after someone releases his psychiatric history to his school also fits with the object of violence stereotype.

Eight texts presented the stereotype of their own worst enemy. This stereotype was presented the most often in the 10 texts. Caden in *Challenger Deep* shows symptoms of schizophrenia over an extended period, ultimately being hospitalized for his safety and treatment. Caden's symptoms put a wedge between himself and his peers and family. This stereotype was also seen in *This is My Brain in Love* through the portrayal of Jocelyn's depression and Will's anxiety. Jocelyn struggles to perform daily tasks such as getting up in the morning and performing school tasks. Will also struggles to perform duties for his internship and his extracurricular activity with the newspaper. Calvin in *Calvin* is portrayed as his own worst enemy because he initially refuses treatment for his schizophrenia and partakes in his delusion that the creator of *Calvin & Hobbes* can create a comic to fix his life. Klee from *In Sight of Stars* portrays the own worst enemy stereotype because he isolates from his new community and his mother after moving to a new town, grieving the loss of his father.

Overall these texts confronted the stereotypes again with depth of character development by depicting authentic everyday life and relationships for characters with mental illness. Young adults such as Will and Jocelyn in *This is My Brain in Love* struggle to perform daily tasks because of their mental illness. Young adults also refuse treatment, like Calvin from *Calvin,* who initially refuses treatment; he later accepts it

after almost dying after pursuing a delusion. Klee from *In Sight of Stars* is also initially against treatment, but he accepts help from his therapist and works through his trauma and relationship troubles with his mother.

Theme 3: Characters with Mental Illness Can Lead Full Lives

The third theme identified was that characters with mental illness can lead full lives. The stereotypes analyzed were *incapable of living full lives*, *a burden*, and *nonsexual*. Two texts presented the stereotype incapable of living full lives. Four texts presented the stereotype as a burden. Three texts presented the stereotype of nonsexuality (see Table 1 above).

An example of being incapable of living a full life comes from the portrayal of Morgan from *Who Put This Song On?* Morgan is unable to attend family social functions or large parties with friends without having a panic attack. Going to school and interacting with immediate family are also difficult for her. She does find a small group of friends and lives out her social life through them.

The burden stereotype can be seen in *Turtles All the Way Down*. Aza, a young adult with obsessive compulsive disorder, confronts her best friend about using her as the basis of a character in the friend's fanfiction. The depiction is not kind and depicts Aza as a burden because of her mental illness.

The nonsexual stereotype can be seen in *Highly Illogical Behavior*. Solomon comes out to Lisa, but downplays the importance of the moment because he says he will never have a chance to pursue a relationship.

Overall these texts portray complex and fully developed characters leading full lives with the help of social connections, whether it is with peers or adults. Aza has one best friend and eventually a boyfriend, and she also has a strong relationship with her mother. While Aza is able to go to school, drive around the community, and interact with peers, she still deals with symptoms of her OCD. Her symptoms are manageable due the social connections she makes with her best friend, who checks in with her daily, and her mother, who does the same thing. Solomon has a close relationship with his parents and develops a close friendship with Lisa. Solomon ultimately decides to stay in his home, but is willing to make new friends because he made the initial connection with Lisa. Morgan becomes close to her family over the course of the text and finds a close knit group of friends. She also makes friends with another teen boy in her art class. Morgan is able to attend more social functions and venture outside of her safe space (her bedroom) because of her social connections with her friends and family.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this qualitative content analysis is to study the portrayal of characters who have a mental illness in award-winning young adult books for teacher librarians to recommend for young adult readers and for teachers to use in teaching and curriculum for mental illness acceptance. The research questions sought to ask the following: how does award-winning young adult literature which includes characters with mental illness portray interactions with peers and adults; This study utilized qualitative content analysis to examine 10 novels on multiple mental illnesses published from 2013 to 2020. This research identified three themes: Theme 1 is supportive community helps characters with mental illness thrive; Theme 2 is characters with mental illness are complex; Theme 3 is characters with mental illness can lead full lives. The research concluded that while young adult novels that portrayed mental illness had stereotypes about mental illness, they still offered diverse representation of lived experiences of mental illness.

Conclusions

Various conclusions were derived from the findings. Although a text is considered award-winning and may have starred reviews, this study showed that stereotypes are still present in current high-quality young adult literature. Most notably, the three themes identified in the findings of this study show that the stereotypes woven into the texts are usually portrayed as a realistic part of the characters' lives and that the texts use the characters' encounters with these stereotypes that are part of society to show depth of character development. Through their relationships with other peers and adults, the

characters' development helps to combat the stigma often associated with these stereotypes about mental illnesses. While stereotypes were present in all 10 texts, 9 of the 10 texts used them to build character depth and offered diverse portrayals of a variety of mental illnesses. While it is surprising to find stereotypes of mental illness in award-winning young adult novels, 9 of the 10 novels use the stereotypes to develop the characters into rich and realistic characters. Thus these 9 of the 10 texts are recommended to teacher librarians and classroom teachers, and the remaining 1 book is not recommended because of its simplistic portrayal of a complicated issue.

Short et al. (2018) defined literature as "not written to teach something, but to illuminate what it means to be human and to make the most fundamental experiences of life accessible--love, hope, loneliness, despair, fear, and belonging" (p. 4). Literature's purpose is not to teach but to reveal what it means to be human. This means literature discusses sensitive topics such as mental illness. As Richmond (2014) states in her article, studying literature with mental illness representation will help teachers and students alike become aware of the power of language and become empowered to confront stigma associated with mental illnesses.

First, I used 8 stereotypes (based upon Irwin and Moeller's 2010 research) to determine what stereotypes were present in each of the 10 texts. All 10 texts exhibited at least one stereotype of mental illness. The most represented stereotype (in 8 texts) was their own worst enemy. The least represented stereotype (in 1 text) was laughable. All 10 texts had at least 2 or more stereotypes present.

Second, while stereotypes were present in all 10 texts, 9 of the 10 texts still offered diverse portrayals of a variety of mental illnesses. It is important for readers to see themselves or loved ones in the literature they are consuming. Teacher librarians and classroom teachers must collect a wide variety of texts in order to meet the needs of a diverse population.

Recommendations for Practice

Two recommendations for teacher librarians and classroom teachers were derived from this research analysis of award-winning young adult literature for mental illness representation. Recommendations include: teacher librarians and classroom teachers should maintain a diverse collection of recent award-winning books, and classroom teachers should use the texts recommended in pairs or in groups for diverse representation.

This research showed that even though a book is award-winning, further analysis is needed to assure the teacher librarian or classroom teacher that mental illness representation is authentic and realistic. This can be seen through the use of the book evaluation form in this study, which analyzed 10 books for the presence of 8 stereotypes. The analysis concluded that even if a book wins multiple awards and has starred reviews, they may still portray stereotypes of mental illness. While they may still portray stereotypes, it is how the character with mental illness handles the stereotype that is important. Nine of the 10 books that were studied portrayed characters with mental illnesses that were able to manage their mental illness and live their daily life, showing

readers that recovery is possible. One book did not, and it is not recommended because the main character is unwilling to work for recovery and seek help from others.

In my research I was faced with the question "What is a realistic portrayal of mental illness? Is it positive or negative?" In the analysis of the 10 texts I have found that the symptoms are neither positive or negative, but simply exist. The 10 texts offer a diverse portrayal of several mental illnesses. These 10 texts portray both negative and positive relationships between peers and adults and the person who has a mental illness, which is realistic. In life, students and staff will experience negative and positive relationships which may affect their mental illness, if they have one. One person's lived experience will differ from another's lived experience. Because of the diverse lived experiences in the student population in schools, it is important to cultivate a diverse collection that includes several different portrayals of mental illness. As noted by Richmond (2014), books that tackle complex and difficult issues promote empathy for others, which is a goal of any educator. Richmond also states that exposure to novels and other media with mental health representation helps dissolve stigma and lead to better understanding of other peers and adult lived experiences.

For teacher librarians I would recommend nine of the 10 novels. *All the Bright Places* is not recommended due to is portrayal of suicide and outdated portrayal of bipolar disorder. This novel is still well-written and an award-winning book, and may certainly be put on library shelves as it does offer insight into managing grief. I highly recommend the remaining 9 novels because of their diverse representation of mental illness and diverse lived experiences of the characters with mental illness. *Who Put This*

Song On? is especially recommended because of its combined representation of racial issues and mental illness representation.

For classroom teachers I would recommend nine of the 10 novels. *All the Bright Places* is not recommended due to is simplistic portrayal of suicide, which is a complicated issue. If using these novels for curriculum, I would recommend using these novels in pairs or as a group. Using just one novel would not offer the diversity of perspectives that a pair or group of novels on mental illness representation would. It is important to remember that students come from many different backgrounds and having multiple perspectives on one topic would be a benefit for teaching empathy.

Recommendations for Future Research

Ideas for future studies include narrowing the topic to specific mental illnesses and their representation. I found several novels on schizophrenia or anxiety and depression, and could replicate the study with regard to one of those mental illnesses. Other ideas include researching the accuracy of the portrayal of medical treatments of mental illness and their symptoms in young adult books.

Further research could be done by expanding the years of publication to the current year to include new book releases. Novels with side characters with mental illnesses could be included to broaden the field of research. Further research could also be done by looking into other awards lists to see if mental illness is represented in the lists.

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APPENDIX A

LIST OF BOOK TITLES

Green, J. (2019). *Turtles all the way down* (Reprint ed.). Penguin Books.

Gregorio, I. W. (2020). *This is my brain in love*. Little, Brown Books for Young Readers.

Leavitt, M. (2017). *Calvin: A novel* (Reprint ed.). Square Fish.

Niven, J. (2016). *All the bright places* (Reprint ed.). Ember.

Oseman, A. (2020). *Heartstopper: Volume 1* (Illustrated ed.). Graphix.

Parker, M. (2019). *Who put this song on?* Delacorte Press.

Polisner, G. (2018). *In sight of stars: A novel*. Wednesday Books.

Shusterman, N., & Shusterman, B. (2016). *Challenger deep* (Illustrated ed.). Quill Tree Books.

Walton, J. (2018). *Words on Bathroom Walls* (Reprint ed.). Ember.

Whaley, J. C. (2017). *Highly Illogical Behavior* (Reprint ed.). Speak.

APPENDIX B

BOOK EVALUATION FORM

This evaluation form was adapted from Irwin and Moeller's (2010) research study.

	Are the characters pitiable and pathetic?	Are they laughable?	Are the characters sinister or evil?	Are the characters objects of violence?	Are they their own worst enemy?	Are they incapable of living full lives?	Are they a burden?	Are they nonsexual?
Book Title								
Total								

APPENDIX C

COMPLETED BOOK EVALUATION FORM

A completed book analysis tool was created to summarize findings from all books in the same chart and to find patterns when determining what stereotypes (Irwin & Moeller, 2010) are present in the 10 texts studied.

	Are the characters pitiable and pathetic?	Are they laughable?	Are the characters sinister or evil?	Are the characters objects of violence?	Are they their own worst enemy?	Are they incapable of living full lives?	Are they a burden?	Are they nonsexual?
Turtles All the Way Down					X		X	X
Highly Illogical Behavior	X				X		X	X
Calvin					X	X		X
Challenger Deep					X			
Who Put This Song On?	X			X	X	X	X	
All the Bright Places	X	X	X	X	X		X	
Heartstopper: Volume 1				X				
In Sight of Stars	X		X	X	X			
This is My Brain in Love					X			
Words on Bathroom Walls				X				
Total:	4	1	2	5	8	2	4	3