Swimming for Inclusion

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Abstract
This paper attempts to demonstrate how disabilities are portrayed to children through Walt Disney's popular film Finding Nemo. Through this film, children are exposed to inclusiveness which can then transfer to their overall impressions of disability in society. This film ultimately spins the negative connotation associated with disability and portrays it positively as an exceptionality.

Keywords
Education, Disability, Inclusion, Children, Film, Ideology

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“When life gets you down, do you wanna know what you’ve got to do? Just keep swimming, just keep swimming, swimming, just keep swimming. What do we do? We swim, swim” (Stanton). This famous line was first uttered by friendly and bubbly blue tang fish named Dory in Walt Disney’s 2003 hit children’s movie, Finding Nemo. For over a decade, Finding Nemo has been a staple of children’s lives everywhere. It has become so popular that a sequel of this movie, entitled Finding Dory, is set to be released in June 2016. Most children are drawn to the compelling story of a clown fish, named Nemo, who ventures off from his dad, Marlin, while at school and quickly gets lost. Finding Nemo takes the audience on Marlin’s journey in search of his son. However, a critical viewer can analyze this movie as it displays Nemo and Dory’s exceptionalities. Nemo has a physical impairment of a “lucky fin”, and Dory has an intellectual impairment of short term memory loss. With the substantial integration of positive contributions to society, the 2003 Walt Disney Pixar film, Finding Nemo, exposes young children inclusiveness in the realms of society.

So, what is Finding Nemo actually about?

Finding Nemo tells the tale of a happy and curious clown fish named Nemo. Unlike all of the other fish in the ocean, Nemo had a physical disability of a small fin which Nemo calls his “lucky fin.” Occurring at birth, Nemo had to learn to adapt to his “lucky fin.” To the critical viewer, it is evident that Nemo’s father, Marlin, had a difficult time adapting to what he sees as Nemo’s deficit. Marlin was portrayed as an overprotective father who was apprehensive to let Nemo venture off on his own due to his “poor” swimming ability. Contributing to Nemo’s rebel-like behavior, Marlin’s expectations for Nemo are low and limiting. Despite his father’s wishes, Nemo ventures off into the depths of the sea and gets captured by a human scuba diver. Throughout the duration of the film, the viewer is allowed to follow Marlin on his journey to find Nemo. On this journey, Marlin teams up with Dory to bring Nemo back to the coral reef despite the many obstacles they encountered along the way.

Rhetorical Aspects of Finding Nemo

To much of society, Finding Nemo is a simple children’s movie which takes the audience on a journey to reunite a young fish with his father. However, upon deeper analysis, this film examines the commonplaces housed in a norming ideology. An ideology is “any body of beliefs, doctrines, values held by a group or a culture” (Crowley & Hawhee 352). A group of people who have similar views and beliefs concerning a specific ideology are bound together by a commonplace. By focusing on Dory and Nemo’s strengths in society, the creators of this film work against the commonplace that Nemo and Dory are “disabled.” Instead, they promote the belief that everyone has the ability to be an active member of society.

At the very beginning of the film, Nemo and Marlin discuss Nemo’s “lucky fin.” Marlin argues with Nemo that Nemo is not a strong swimmer because of his impairment. Marlin does not want Nemo venturing off
because of his lack of skill. However, Nemo tells Marlin that his “lucky fin” was something he was born with. He chooses to defy Marlin and ventures off regardless of Marlin’s wishes. In this scene, the creators of this film display Nemo’s strengths rather than limiting his exceptionality. Instead of viewing his physical impairment as a limitation, Nemo embraces his impairment as a part of who he is. Stating that his “lucky fin” was something he was born with due to a barracuda attack shows that he had no control over it. Nemo has two options. He could sulk over his impairment or he could use his impairment as a strength as a tiny swimmer. Nemo chooses the second option and defies all odds against his impairment.

The creators of Finding Nemo do an exceptional job of showing Nemo and Dory’s strengths throughout the progression of the film. The creators choose to focus on Dory’s strengths, such as her ability to read, rather than the characteristics that may be perceived as her weaknesses. Marlin relies solely on Dory to read the address written on the diver’s mask in order to find Nemo. This is a skill that Dory possesses and that all of the other fish lack. Dory’s reading ability becomes a significant contribution because it is the main reason Marlin is able to find Nemo. Coming from the belief of inclusion, the writers choose to portray to the audience that an individual, or in this case a fish, with an exceptionality can be just as valuable as an individual without an exceptionality. Every person has their own strengths and is able to be an active member of society; however, as a society, we must be sure we enable each individual’s strengths to shine.

Individuals who believe in inclusion believe all individuals, disabled or not, should be mainstreamed into everyday society. In her 2004 article entitled, “‘Other’ Fish in the Sea: ‘Finding Nemo’ as an Epic Representation of Disability,” author Ann Millett speaks to the inclusion portrayed in this film by stating, “Disability is presented as a socially constructed quality, rather than a state of the body to which value judgments are assigned” (Millet 3). To break this social construction, the creators of Finding Nemo portray this inclusion in two very different ways. They first characterize the main protagonists as having an exceptionality. In prior movies, there is very little light shone on individuals with exceptionalities. The light that is shone is often one of pity or hatred such as in The Hunchback of Notre Dame. However, the creators of Finding Nemo portray Nemo and Dory, through their actions, as able-bodied individuals. Ann Millett states, “Nemo is marked as visually and socially different, yet hardly inadequate. Disability becomes part of Nemo’s personal history and social identity, visually marking him as a survivor” (Millett 2). Through the depiction of Nemo and Dory’s positive contributions, the creators of this film embrace the values of inclusiveness. They enable Nemo and Dory to contribute to society despite the social constructions attached to their disability label which enhances the belief of inclusivity.

Enforcing inclusiveness, Marlin and Dory’s relationship throughout the entire film is one that the majority of viewers come to adore. Most writers tend to focus more on a relationship grounded in commonality than one that is not. Finding Nemo displays a different type of relationship through Marlin and Dory. Dory does have an intellectual impairment and Marlin does not. Despite their differences, Marlin and Dory have a very close relationship. Firm believers in inclusiveness would argue that Dory and Marlin’s relationship translates to the wider realms of society. Supporting their common belief, these believers would use this film as a positive artifact to argue that individuals
without exceptionalities can befriend those with exceptionalities. There is not one individual that is better than the other because they both contribute equally to a relationship. Firm believers of inclusiveness would hope that this notion of inclusivity would transfer to younger children as they begin to develop and form relationships with others.

Inclusiveness Ideology Portrayed by Nemo

Director and writer Andrew Stanton devotes the majority of his film to detailing inclusiveness as portrayed by the protagonist, Nemo. Once Nemo is trapped by the diver, the viewer is able to see how Nemo would handle surviving alone. When Nemo is trapped in the ocean, he is taken to live in a fish tank in a dentist’s office. In this tank, he meets other fish who are captured. Despite his physical impairment of his “lucky fin,” Nemo is instructed by another fish named Gill to save all of the captured fish. To do this, he has swim to the top of the tank and throw a rock into the filter. Blocked by the rock, the filter would stop running and the tank would fill with algae. The dentist would have to clean the tank himself by taking the fish out. The fish would then escape. Nemo is the only fish who could do this difficult task because he is the smallest. He is successful and ends up blocking the filter.

During the last scene of the film, Nemo is given another opportunity to shine. Nemo and many other fish are captured in a net by sailors on a boat. None of the other fish know how to escape; however, Nemo takes charge. He instructs the fish to swim downwards. This would place enough pressure on the net and the net would break. Nemo and his technique end up saving all of the fish from getting captured, and they all swim away safely and unharmed.

Despite Nemo’s physical impairment, the writers and directors enable Nemo to make these two significant contributions in the film. Both of these contributions speak the language of inclusiveness. The director allows the viewer to see through the eyes of an individual with a disability which they may not be accustomed to. Andrew Stanton clearly illustrates the belief of inclusivity through a fictional world when enabling Nemo to make significant contributions to society. Published in the Disability Studies Quarterly, the first journal in the field of disability studies, Millet writes that, “Finding Nemo paints disability as a flavorful ingredient in cultural diversity—both remarkable, yet necessarily every day, perhaps even disguised in the tides of life” (Millet 2). Nemo’s actions enrich inclusiveness in that Stanton allows the viewer to focus more on incorporating Nemo’s disability seamlessly into the plotline rather than enabling his disability to be an inhibitor in his life.

Inclusiveness Ideology Portrayed by Dory

Nemo is not the only character with an exceptionality that is shown making positive contributions to society. Despite Dory’s intellectual impairment, she makes one of the most significant contributions to the entire plotline. When Dory and Marlin search for Nemo, they come across a diver’s mask in the ocean. This mask is the same mask of the diver who captures Nemo. The mask has an address on it which Marlin thinks would be a helpful clue in finding Nemo. Marlin tells Dory to memorize the address written on the mask. This memorization may seem highly impractical because of Dory’s short term memory loss; however, Dory remembers the address for the entire film. In the end, she ends up finding Nemo and reuniting him with Marlin. Marlin states, “Dory, if it wasn’t for you, I wouldn’t have even made it here.
Thank you” (Walters & Stanton, 2003). It is not a coincidence that the only piece of information Dory remembers happens to be the most significant part of the plot line.

Despite being a children’s movie, including Dory into society can most closely align with the language of the American with Disabilities Act of 1990. This act mandates that individuals with disabilities are treated as equals in society. Chapter 126 of this act, entitled Equal Opportunity for Individuals with Disabilities, explicitly states that the purpose of this act “to provide a clear and comprehensive national mandate for the elimination of discrimination against individuals with disabilities.” Dory’s actions displayed in Finding Nemo support this act by eliminating discrimination in Dory’s society by enabling her to make significant contributions. The creators of Finding Nemo devote the majority of the plotline to detailing Dory’s contributions in society. The creators enforce inclusiveness through Dory’s actions in spite of her exceptionality. They enable her to make what can be called the most significant contribution to the entire film. Refuting the notion that Dory’s exceptionality is impairing her ability, the creators depict Dory as smart due to the fact that she is able to read the address on the mask. Due to the fact that she is included, Dory is able to remember the address for the entire movie. Even to the not so critical examiner, it is evident the creators of Finding Nemo clearly represent the inclusiveness ideology through Dory’s actions throughout the duration of the entire film.

**Resistance Portrayed in Finding Nemo**

Despite the strong portrayal of inclusiveness depicted in Finding Nemo, it is important to take into account any possible resistance that may arise. In this film, the major resistance comes from societal expectations concerning individuals with disabilities.

Starting from the very beginning of the film, Nemo and Dory’s exceptionalities are revealed. Nemo is born with a physical impairment which is known as Nemo’s “lucky fin” throughout the duration of the film. During the first scene, Nemo begins his first day of school. As soon as Marlin drops Nemo off, all of the other fish students begin to bombard Nemo with questions about his “lucky fin.” Surrounding Nemo as though he is a spectacle, they ask questions like “What is wrong with your fin?” and “How did your fin turn out like that?” The students mock and tease Nemo because his fin looks different than everyone else’s. Being a protective parent, Marlin informs the students that Nemo was born that way. The only character that seems to sympathize with Nemo is one squid. She compares Nemo’s fin to one of her shorter tentacles. She says that you cannot even tell that one of her tentacles is shorter than the rest.

In society, individuals with disabilities often are viewed by the rest of society as questionable. These questions can be medically related or not, but regardless, these individuals make a bigger spectacle out of the slightest difference. Daniel Preston views this bombardment as a positive scene in the film. He writes, “What is particularly nice about this exchange is that the kids share their differences with Nemo as well, establishing that they each have different attributes, but on some level that makes them the same, too” (Preston 57). However, most individuals who firmly align themselves with inclusiveness may beg to differ. They may view this scene as a sign of resistance due to the fact that the other fish are demanding an answer for Nemo’s exceptionality instead of just accepting it for what it is.
Although inclusiveness is portrayed fairly positively throughout *Finding Nemo*, there are also various scenes where disability is portrayed negatively. Marlin warns Nemo’s teacher of Nemo’s physical impairment before he enters school. He tells his teacher that Nemo has trouble swimming because of his fin, and he should allow Nemo to take breaks when needed. By underestimating his ability, Marlin tells Nemo to “be safe” while swimming. Being the protective parent, Marlin knows that Nemo struggles with swimming and doesn’t want Nemo to venture off; however, Nemo wants to be free to go and explore. Eventually, Marlin is able to switch his mindset regarding Nemo’s abilities. Millett states that, “Marlin learns to trust Nemo and his self-defined abilities, as prescriptive stereotypes of disability are tested and disproved and the protagonist’s triumph is enabled” (Millett 4). Although Marlin changes his mindset of inclusion in part because of Dory, Marlin’s initial underestimation is a main contributor to the resistance to inclusion. Marlin’s underestimation is what begins the entire plotline. By not thinking Nemo is capable of swimming, Marlin causes Nemo to venture off which is the premise to the entire film.

Nemo is not the only character in the film who is significantly impacted by the resistance to inclusiveness. Dory’s short term memory loss is portrayed negatively as well. On their journey to find Nemo, Marlin gets aggravated with Dory when she tries to remember small details but can’t. He states, “Dory, you are just a fish that causes delays. I don’t want to be with you anymore” (Stanton). Instead of looking at Dory’s strengths, Marlin looks at her weaknesses by criticizing her lack of memory. Marlin’s resistance to including Dory on his journey due to her exceptionality is the drive behind the overall resistance portrayed in the film. This can translate to the rest of society because many individuals tend to resist inclusion and view it as negative; however, one must examine the bigger picture and focus on abilities not disabilities.

Enforcing the resistance to inclusivity, Dory is portrayed throughout the majority of the film as dumb because she cannot remember as many things as other fish because of her disability. Dory fails to remember names, specific places, and specific facts. Even though she and Marlin travel together for the entire movie, Dory repeatedly confuses his name. Marlin thinks that her memory loss is a joke and laughs it off. However, Dory feels the need to defend herself by telling Marlin that her inability to remember things instantly runs in the family. Much of the resistance to inclusivity stems from the social construction as viewing all individuals with disabilities as “dumb.” This “dumb” notion enforces this resistance because one fails to see that individuals with disabilities are intelligent. Despite the multiple scenarios of resistance to inclusiveness portrayed in *Finding Nemo*, the resistance ultimately does not prevail. The countless scenes exemplifying inclusiveness outweigh the few scenarios of resistance.

**Writers’ Approach**

Advocates for inclusiveness would hope that the creators of *Finding Nemo* intend that it would promote inclusiveness. Since this movie would be a movie a majority of young children would watch, it seems fitting that the writers would display inclusiveness within the realms of their film. In today’s society, inclusiveness sells and it sells with large margins. In a recent interview, Jill Bazos discusses the marketing views of film production. Bazos is the Vice President of Marketing at Sababa Toys as well as the creator of the widely popular company, Kid Pro Co. Bazos also has worked in management for companies such as Hasbro,
Milton Bradley, Fisher Price, and Playskool. She states:

Filmmakers [of children’s films] acknowledge the potential capital market the adaptations can generate. As with any successful film trend, there are always the production of merchandise including t-shirts, posters, toys, and even dolls immediately following the film’s release. These filmmakers must examine the story line of the preexisting book and determine if it would be able to make a successful movie. If the story line is strong enough, society would most likely be willing to spend a mass amount of money on the “promotional products” following their viewing of the film. Most of the time, the creation of a film doesn’t stop once production is wrapped. The production of “fan merchandise” will quickly follow as these products steadily fly off the shelves. These products will bring in yet another source of revenue for the filmmakers; therefore, it is crucial for filmmakers to address a film that can be a giant flop or a huge monetary success.

The writers of Finding Nemo understand the potential market they could be tapping into with the production of this film. In modern day society, many individuals align themselves with inclusiveness. If these individuals can clearly see the integration of this belief in the realms of Finding Nemo, they would most likely be persuaded to buy the promotional merchandise following the viewing of the film.

Upon further examination of the widely popular children’s film, Finding Nemo, one can clearly see inclusiveness is portrayed throughout the entire film. Film, especially film geared towards children, can be viewed to inform society about particular social constructions. Regarding disability, the way the writers and directors portray disability in this film can either help promote or demote inclusion in society by cultivating a greater understanding of exceptionality. Generally speaking, the younger generations tend not see flaw in a person’s disability. It is the older generations who feel as though disability is something that needs to be fixed. The way the writers and directors portray disability in this film can help promote inclusion in society by cultivating a greater understanding of exceptionality. With the substantial integration of positive contributions to society, Finding Nemo exposes young children to inclusiveness in the realms of society. Although there may be resistance encountered along the way, this film clearly portrays inclusiveness for the entire duration of the film.

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