



## Dispatch

# Moving Together Towards Collective Access

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*We Move Together (WMT)* (Fritsch et al., 2021) is a picture book that follows a mixed-ability group of children as they move around their city community. We see the children move in different ways – fast, slow, using their feet as well as wheelchairs, scooters, crutches, bikes, and canes. Along the way, the kids encounter a great many people and animals, as well as a number of obstacles – communication barriers, inaccessible infrastructure, political disagreements, etc. – that they work together to navigate. With regard to these obstacles, sometimes the work of moving together looks like building ramps, pivoting to a more inclusive game, or learning American Sign Language (ASL). Other times, this work looks like slowing down, sitting with disagreement, or taking a break. It is in part through navigating these challenges that the children encounter, relish in, and in turn grow disability community and culture. The children’s commitment to moving together – their desire for collective as opposed to individual forms of access – deliver them into new political and artistic spaces, justice-oriented cultural formations that center disabled life, celebrate disabled joy, and encourage the flourishing of the widest array of bodies, minds, and movements. In Figure 1 the children can be seen at the center of such a flourishing: an abundance of disabled life and politics. It is as much a celebration of how our individual bodies and minds are and move, as it is a fulcrum of social movements moving together in solidarity, dreaming of, and fighting for better futures for all of us.

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ISSN: 1911-4788





Figure 1. Spread from *WMT*.

**Image ID:** The image shows a racially and ethnically diverse, multi-generational, and many-gendered group of people in the city. Many of the people are visibly disabled. Some people are dancing with their wheelchairs and with their crutches. Some are blowing bubbles and playing drums. Two children hold a banner that reads “We’re in this TOGETHER.” A child using a walker and wearing a helmet has a blue sweater that says “BLACK LIVES MATTER.” Another child sits on the shoulders of an adult wearing a red shirt that says “DEAF GAIN” and holds up a cellphone to show the person on the phone the crowd around them. Another child with crutches holds a sign that says, “NOTHING ABOUT US WITHOUT US” while a kid with sound-cancelling headphones holds up a sign that says “ACCESS IS LOVE”. A person wearing a t-shirt that says “WATER IS LIFE” raises his fist in the air.

*We Move Together* is about sharing some of the gifts we have received by being lucky enough to be a part of disability culture and community, variously as disabled people, disability studies scholars, and disability activists. As an author-illustrator team, we came together through our shared belief in the power of storytelling as well as our shared frustration over the lack of picture books reflecting our own experiences of disability justice, culture, and community. While disability representation in children’s literature has become more common in recent decades, disability continues to be underrepresented in mainstream children’s publishing. This holds true in the Canadian context: according to a report published in the *Toronto Star*, only 3.8% of Canadian children’s books published in 2019 feature a character with a visible disability and only 1.7% feature a character with an invisible disability (Dundas, 2019). However, the problem of disability representation in children’s literature runs deeper than these numbers. As Liz Crow (1990) puts it, “disability is not simply under-represented in children’s literature, it is consistently *mis*-represented,” a misrepresentation that, she reminds us, routinely goes unquestioned. Aho and Alter (2018) note a longstanding Western literary tradition of oppressive disability stereotypes fueled by harmful assumptions about disabled bodies, minds and experiences. Children’s picture books, they write, have long cast

“disabled characters in supporting roles and as foils that reinforce ableist dichotomies central to Western understandings of human worth under patriarchal, racial capitalism” (Aho & Alter, 2018, p. 304). Even among the relatively few books that do center disabled characters or storylines, disability is almost always depicted as an individual condition of the body, mind, or senses – often as a deficit to be overcome but also, increasingly (and relatedly) as an exceptionality or superpower that functions to redeem and elevate disability’s always-presumed diminished state. These kinds of individualizing stories seldom raise critical questions about the social, political, historical, and environmental conditions that so often come to define and delimit disability experiences. They do not lend themselves to considerations of disability justice and injustice, for example, nor do they provoke readers to better understand the relationship between disability and the everyday ways we build and maintain our communities to exclude bodies and minds that move, think, or feel in ways that are outside of the norm. Missing from most children’s picture books is the idea of disability as a relation, the meaning of which is made and maintained in the spaces between people of all ages, non-human animals, technologies, and our shared environments. This latter relational understanding of disability is deeply powerful in that it pushes for a more nuanced recognition of and engagement with structural ableism, the multiplicity and intersectionality of disability experiences, as well as towards a more collective response to disability injustice.

We created *We Move Together* because this was the book we needed and wanted to share with the young people in our lives. It is, to borrow from Lydia Brown’s generous review of *WMT*, which appears on the back of the book, “a love letter to the next generation of disabled kids, and a provocation for their nondisabled peers to rethink an ableist society’s assumptions about how our bodies should move, what they should look like, and how our brains should work.” If *WMT* does indeed represent an offering of alternate depictions of disability for young people, it also is a product of our own relations with young people. Many of the vignettes featured throughout the book flow directly from conversations we’ve had with (disabled and non-disabled) children in our lives; their questions, stories, insights, and observations helped us understand what we needed to say and how. Our own young children were intimately involved in the book’s creative process: offering feedback on the book drafts, designing character outfits, helping to digitally colour some of the illustrations and co-creating some of the book’s educational resources and access tools.



*Figure 2.* Some of our young collaborators at work designing, testing, and creating different aspects of the book and its resources.

**Image ID:** A multi-racial group of children digitally coloring some of the book’s illustrations, testing activities for our website and designing character outfits.

The process of sharing early versions of our book with people of all ages and stages helped us to attend more critically to the normative limits of the picture book. As it is both an object and a genre, the children’s picture book anticipates particular kinds of readers and not others. *WMT*’s illustrations are, for example, rich with detail, and a big part of the story is told through the illustrations. This was a deliberate move to increase the book’s accessibility by making room for multiple readings and levels of engagement, as well as other-than-text-based ways of reading. And yet, as we read and talked about the book with our interlocutors, we could see that while the illustrations increased access for some, their strong presence limited the access of others, particularly for those who could not visually access the illustrations. We also came to better appreciate how the form of the picture book anticipates the oral read aloud (i.e., storytime in classrooms or at the library). This practice also creates its own set of exclusions, for example, for people who are Deaf or hard-of-hearing. In response to such conflicts of access, we developed a constellation of access tools to accompany the print and digital versions of our book. Together with AK Press, we supported the development of a screen reader accessible e-book, which has a read-aloud function and allows for the reader to zoom-in and move around on an image. Working across a number of D/deaf and disability communities, we also created a series of open-source access resources (e.g., YouTube videos of the book being read aloud with accompanying ASL translation, captions, and audio description) that aim to make the book more accessible to a wide range of readers and modes of reading.

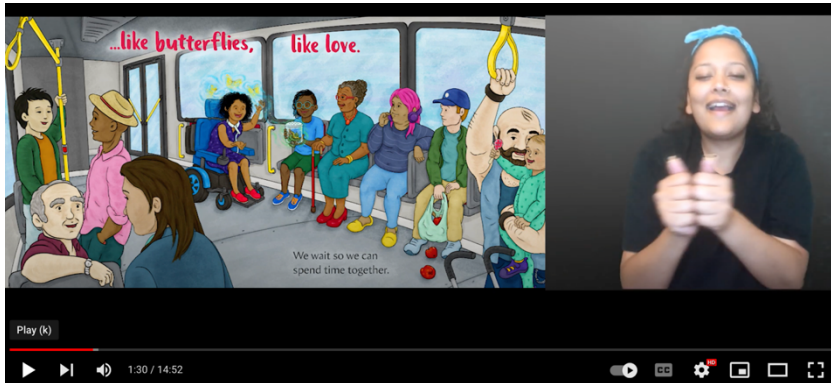


Figure 3. Still image from the ASL translation of *WMT*.

**Image ID:** Screenshot of a YouTube video. On the left is an illustration from the book showing the inside of a city bus. The bus is filled with people of many ages, abilities, genders, ethnicities and races. A child using a power wheelchair and her grandmother who uses a cane are seated in the accessible seating area. The child waves her arms excitedly at the sight of her friend's caterpillar and three yellow butterflies float magically overhead. On the right, Deaf interpreter Gaitrie Persaud provides an ASL translation of the text.

The creation of these access resources represents for us both an offering and a yearning. Certainly, we want to ensure that readers who happened upon our book can easily and immediately read it. However, we also hope that these access resources are calling out to D/deaf and disabled people of all ages and stages, who may not have otherwise engaged with the book due to inaccessibility, making space for further discussion, debate, disruption, and connection. In short, we hope the book's multiple digital and print formats will nurture and grow disability community in new and as-of-yet unrealized ways. And, in the years since the book was first released, we have seen evidence of this. One of the joys of social media has been to be able to witness the places the book has travelled and learn about how it has been put to use. We've heard stories from classrooms and libraries, for example, about how *WMT* is supporting discussions around community building, school access audits and STEAM activities focused on building accessible infrastructure.<sup>1</sup> It's being used in educator workshops and book clubs supporting professional development and parent education, by arts groups doing mixed-ability dance and movement classes, and more. It has been translated into braille to further access.

<sup>1</sup> STEAM = Science, Technology, Engineering, the Arts and Mathematics.



Figure 4. Images circulated on Twitter showing some of the ways the book has been used in classrooms, libraries and other community settings.

**Image ID:** Three twitter posts showing pictures of elementary-aged students designing and building accessible infrastructure. One post shows a picture of *WMT* translated into Braille.

As the book circulates in and is engaged with by diverse communities – by, for example, different generations of disabled people, by non-disabled parents and their disabled kids (or vice-versa), by disabled and non-disabled people of diverse races, ethnicities, ages, genders, social class and so on – and as it generates discussion in and between these communities, frictions will inevitably arise. We will not all agree about the nature of the problems we face or the outcomes we seek, nor will we always agree on how best to proceed in the face of these problems or to achieve our desired outcomes. As one of us (Kelly Fritsch) discussed in an interview with the Disability/Visibility Project:

The “moving together” part of *We Move Together* isn’t about avoiding our differences or turning away from our conflicts but quite the opposite: that we must

find ways to move together even when it is very difficult. I hope the book inspires people to fight a bit more, a bit harder, a bit longer because there is so much that needs to change. (Linton & Fritsch, 2021)

As explicitly and unambiguously inter-dependent beings, children in general and disabled children in particular have much to teach us about how change can and should happen. *WMT* challenges the pervasive myth that growing up means becoming autonomous, independent, and dominant, instead foregrounding that, as with our younger counterparts, we grown-ups are never doing it alone. The kind of change we invite can only happen by acknowledging our interdependence, embracing mutual aid and nurturing our solidarities. In short, by moving together.

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