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EXPLORING THE UNSPOKEN EMOTIONS IN CYNTHIA LORD'S NOVEL *RULES*

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ABSTRACT :

Disability Studies in literature explores diverse disability experiences, challenging stereotypes and promoting inclusive storytelling. Cynthia Lord's novel *Rules* (2006) presents a powerful narrative that transcends the boundaries of conventional children's literature by exploring the nuances of communication, silence, and emotional expression within the context of neurodiversity. This paper investigates the complex interaction between verbal and non-verbal modes of communication in the novel, particularly as experienced by Catherine, a twelve year old girl navigating her relationship with her autistic brother, David.

This study looks closely at speaking, staying silent, and using gestures can bring people together or push them apart, both in families and in social life. This study uses ideas from disability studies to understand how autism is shown in the text. It focuses on how society expects neurodivergent people to communicate, rather than accepting their natural ways of expressing themselves.

This paper focuses about the novel *Rules*, that does not simply portray disability, it disrupts and questions conventional expectations of communication. Catherine's creation of "rules" system to interpret her brother's behavior serves as both a coping mechanism and a critique of linguistic rigidity. She gradually moves from control to compassion, replacing presumption with presence, her growth is most evident in how she holds silence, particularly through her friendship with Jason, a non-verbal character who speaks through a communication book. Here, silence is not just emptiness, it is a way to resist, connect, and redefine.

This paper emphasizes that the legitimacy of unspoken emotions and alternative communicative methods must be acknowledged in literary and real-life contexts. Also, this study highlights how *Rules* enriches conversations around inclusive communication, emotional literacy, and the ethical portrayal of disability in children's literature. It also signifies the necessity of embracing silence as a valid and meaningful form of human connection.

Keywords: Communication in Children's Literature, Silence and Emotion, Disability Studies, Autism Representation, Cynthia Lord, *Rules*, Neurodiversity, Nonverbal Communication, Social Model of Disability, Inclusive Narratives, Emotional Literacy.

Introduction

Disability studies is an academic discipline that examines the meaning, nature, and consequences of disability. Initially, the field focused on the division between "impairment" and "disability", where impairment was an impairment of an individual's mind or body, while disability was considered a social construct. According to rhetoric scholars Tomlinson and Newman, the neurodiversity perspective "views autism as a naturally occurring human variation representing difference, not necessarily deficit" (Tomlinson and Newman 92).

Disability Studies in English literature explores disability and its representation in stories, diverse experiences and challenging outdated stereotypes. By focusing on disabled people's perspectives, it encourages more inclusive storytelling that values difference as a strength. Disability Studies pushes literature to reflect the real world more accurately, where disability is not a problem to fix but a meaningful part of life worth exploring with respect and creativity.

Few contemporary middle-grade novels explore disability, communication, and emotional expression with the depth and sensitive writing of Cynthia Lord's novel *Rules* (2006). The narrative foregrounds the relationship between twelve year old Catherine and her autistic brother David, particularly through Catherine's well-intentioned but rigid rule-making reflects both her protective instincts and society's limited understanding of neurodivergent communication. The novel *Rules* examines the nature of verbal and non-verbal communication as well as the emotional silences that regulate interpersonal interactions, even though it is frequently presented as a story about sibling dynamics.

Communication is traditionally understood as a straightforward verbal exchange, but within the context of neurodiversity, this assumption becomes problematic. For people on the autism spectrum, communication often varies from normative standards, leading to a societal perception of deficiency rather than difference. This novel complicates this perception by featuring characters who challenge conventional communicative norms particularly David and Jason, a nonverbal boy who uses a communication book. Through Catherine's relationships with both characters, the novel makes readers to rethink what it means to connect, to listen, and to be understood.

This paper explores the theme of communication and unspoken emotions in the novel *Rules*, placing it within the framework of Disability Studies. It argues that the novel does not simply portray the challenges of living with a disability but examines the social structures that enforce narrow definitions of communicative competence.

Silence in *Rules* is not merely a lack of speech it becomes a powerful medium for emotional depth, empathy, and resistance to normative expectations. By focusing the analysis on unspoken emotions and alternative modes of expression, this study aims to explain how Cynthia Lord's work contributes to inclusive literary discourse and enriches our understanding of human connection beyond communication barriers.

In the novel *Rules*, Cynthia Lord pictures the story of David, an autistic younger brother of Catherine a twelve year old girl. Because David's behavior often does not match what society considers "normal," Catherine writes for him a list of rules. These range from simple instructions like "Say thank you for presents" to more complex social advice like "Sometimes people laugh when they like you. but sometimes they laugh to hurt you" (rules.104). While she thinks she's helping David, the rules really show her own fears about fitting in and being accepted.

The novel shows how people often expect neurodivergent people to act like everyone else. Catherine's focus on making David seem "normal" has more to do with her worries about what others think than what is best for him. This becomes clear when she meets a new neighbor Kristi. She is terrified David might embarrass her and ruin her chance to make friends. Catherine's strict rules also hide her deeper feelings of being ignored at home. With her family's attention always on David, she uses the rules to feel some control in her life. The list of rules is her way of coping when she feels unseen and unheard.

Mom says, "He needs to speak his own words, but he won't if you keep encouraging him to echo." Unfairness punches me in the stomach. "It's always about him!" "He needs more from me. Stop overreacting." (rules.111)

As the novel progresses, Catherine starts to understand that communication is not about following strict rules. Through her friendship with Jason, a nonverbal boy who uses a communication book, she learns that people connect in different ways. By the end, she begins to accept David for who he is rather than trying to change him. Her journey shows how real communication requires listening and understanding, not control.

Cynthia Lord's novel *Rules* gently teaches an important lesson: true connection happens when people accept differences rather than force everyone to act the same. Catherine's growth reminds us that relationships work best when one let go of rigid expectations.

Jason, a non-verbal character in *Rules*, challenges few common assumptions about speech and communication through his unique experiences and interactions. Jason is a boy with a physical disability who uses a speech book with word cards to talk. He makes Catherine and the reader rethink what language and connection really mean. Through her evolving friendship with Jason, Catherine begins to recognize that communication does not require spoken words. It has many layers of meaning and strong emotions.

At first, Catherine doesn't know how to talk with Jason because he does not speak. But when she adds fun new words to his communication book like "awesome" and "stinks a big one", she starts to understand him better. These new words help Jason show his true feelings, when he's happy, mad, or joking. This shows that talking out loud isn't the only way to communicate.

The book expresses the distinct ways Jason and Catherine communicate and express themselves. Catherine often says what she thinks people want to hear, but Jason always says exactly what he means using his word cards. His way of communicating proves that being honest is more important than being polite. The big moment comes during the race. When Catherine worries that pushing Jason's wheelchair might embarrass him, he picks the word "stupid" to show he's annoyed.

This makes Catherine realize Jason doesn't want her pity, he wants to be treated like everyone else. From then, she sees him differently. Jason shows that true communication means really listening and understanding each other. By the end, Catherine learns that Jason "speaks" in many ways, through his word choices, his laughter, and even his silence. All of these are just as important as spoken words.

Catherine's love for her brother David but also loneliness and frustration when her parents focus on his needs. These quiet emotions are just as important as what's said aloud. Catherine rarely tells her parents how she feels. She understands David needs extra care, but still feels left out. She escapes into drawing or tries too hard to control David's behavior. Her silence hides deep hurt, she loves her family but wishes someone would notice her too. The book does not blame the parents but shows how unspoken feelings can cause pain. When Catherine tries to share her feelings, she is often interrupted.

This teaches her to stay quiet, creating distance in the family. She is torn between being a good sister and needing attention herself. Things begin to change through Catherine's friendship with Jason. With him, she learns to express her true feelings, sadness, humor, and care without fear. Making him a "together" word card shows her growing ability to share emotions simply but meaningfully.

Slowly, Catherine finds small ways to speak up at home too. She tells her dad she misses him and asks why David always comes first. These are not big speeches, but they start breaking the family's silence. The story shows real communication includes what we do not say, and how brave it is to finally share our true feelings. Catherine's journey teaches that healing begins when we gently break silences. It is not about blaming others, but creating space to be heard. The book reminds us that in families, especially those with neurodivergent members, we need to listen to both words and the feelings behind them.

Cynthia Lord's *Rules* is more than just a story about growing up. It questions and challenges common ideas about how people should behave, communicate, and fit into society especially in children's books. This chapter looks at how the novel avoids the usual way disability is shown. Instead of making characters with disabilities seem like heroes or people to feel sorry for, *Rules* shows them as real people who do not have to change to be accepted. The book shows how unfair it is to expect disabled people to act like everyone else just to fit in. Children's books often show perfect families, clear right and wrong choices, and characters who eventually become "normal."

Rules is different. The characters do not fit neatly into these boxes. David, for example, is still autistic at the end of the story. He has not changed, he has been "fixed," or made to act "normal." Instead, Catherine changes. "Tomorrow I'm going to tell Mom she has a point about David needing his own

words, but other things matter, too.” (rules.199). The focus is not on making David different, but on helping others including the reader see him in a new, more understanding way. This shift away from “fixing” the disabled character is a clear move away from ableist (disability-unfriendly) stories.

Jason is another character who helps break these usual patterns. In *Rules*, Jason is given a good personality, the ability to make choices, and even a small love story. He is not helpless or simple. In fact, he helps Catherine grow emotionally. Their friendship turns the usual idea around Jason is not just learning from Catherine, she is also learning from him. He picks his words, shows emotions like anger, and decides things for himself like joining the race. This shows that you do not need to speak out loud to have deep feelings or relationships.

The book also questions the unspoken rules about how people are “supposed” to act in public and at home. Catherine is always trying to stop David from acting in ways that might embarrass her. This shows how society teaches kids to follow unfair expectations about what’s “normal.” But as Catherine grows, she starts to see that not all rules are right or needed. This is a big change in how she thinks. The story helps readers see that many of the rules we follow are not fair and encourages them to think about how they might also support these unfair standards without realizing it.

By showing neurodivergent characters who are not forced to act “normal,” *Rules* pushes the limits of what children’s books usually show. It connects with ideas from Disability Studies, which say that disability is not just about health or medical problems it is also shaped by how society treats people. Cynthia Lord’s story creates space for different ways of thinking, feeling, and communicating.

These differences are not just accepted, they are seen as important and valuable. In the end, *Rules* gives a new meaning to what it means to belong. It does not ask people to change to fit in. Instead, it encourages others to understand and accept people as they are. Through its deep look at how people communicate, stay silent, and feel emotions, the book invites us to think about inclusion in a new way. It teaches that true connection comes not from being the same, but from caring, respecting, and truly listening even when no words are spoken.

Conclusion

Cynthia Lord’s novel *Rules* is a powerful story that explores the themes of communication, silence, and emotions in a deep and thoughtful way. This novel tells the story through Catherine, a neurotypical girl, as she builds relationships with people who are neurodivergent. It shows that communication is not just about talking, it also involves emotions, body language, and how society expects people to act. As Catherine grows, the story shows how trying to control communication can create emotional tension, and how silence can be full of meaning, not emptiness.

This paper looked at how *Rules* questions common ideas about communication, especially the belief that being good at talking means someone is smart or valuable. At first, Catherine creates rules because she feels anxious and wants everything to be “normal.” But over time, she starts to understand that there are many different ways to communicate.

Her friendship with Jason helps her see that silence and nonverbal actions can be just as strong and meaningful as spoken words. Jason’s character shows that even without speaking out loud, a person can have deep emotions and make important choices. By giving Jason agency and emotional depth, Lord challenges ableist ideas about language and shows that real communication is about honesty, connection, and understanding, not how much someone talks.

The novel also shows the quiet emotional struggles in Catherine’s family, especially the feelings of guilt, frustration, and being unnoticed. These feelings are common for siblings of children with disabilities, even if they are not always said out loud. *Rules* does not turn these emotions into anger or self-pity. Instead, it shows that healing can start with small moments of honesty, care, and understanding. By questioning the usual expectations of how people should act or communicate, *Rules* supports the main ideas of Disability Studies.

The novel *Rules*, teaches that disability is not something wrong that needs to be fixed, but a natural part of human diversity that should be respected. J. Lennard Davis in his book *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body*, argues that “the problem is not the person with disabilities; the problem is the way that normalcy is constructed to create the ‘problem’ of the disabled person” (24). The book asks readers to pay attention not just to spoken words, but also to silence, body language, and hidden feelings. It encourages a kinder and more open way of thinking where everyone’s way of communicating is valued, and silence can be a powerful and meaningful part of connection.

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