

**THE PORTRAYALS OF INDIVIDUALS WITH PHYSICAL AND SENSORY IMPAIRMENTS  
IN PICTURE BOOKS**

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*Professionals agree that book characters can be excellent role models for young children. Therefore, analyzing children's literature portraying impairments provides valuable information for educators, parents, siblings, extended family members and librarians. In this study, forty-six picture books are analyzed in order to determine the relationships between the characters with and without physical and sensory impairments. The role of each character and the type of their relationship are analyzed in every occasion in which characters with and without physical and sensory impairments are involved in each story. The data analysis indicates eleven different relationship categories showing positive, neutral or negative portrayals. The results of the study imply that story characters change over time through their interactions in characters with impairments. The present study concludes that children's literature contains significant promise with respect to helping children develop friendships by learning about and accepting individual differences. Interpretations of the findings were discussed and implications for practice were presented.*

Professionals agree that the messages in children's literature can make a significant contribution in the early development of attitudes of children (Blaska & Lynch, 1998; Huck, 2001; Lamme, Krogh, & Yachmetz, 1992; Stoodt-Hill & Amsepaugh-Corson, 2001). Children's literature is a valuable tool to teach children pro-social behaviors, and to change their attitudes towards a variety of lifetime situations (Carlisle, 1998; Krogh & Lamme, 1985; Rominger & Kariuki, 1997; Sawyer & Comer, 1991). Lamme (1996, p. 416) states, *book characters can be excellent role models for children, especially if students are encouraged to think deeply about the reasons for the characters' behaviors and decisions.* Similarly, Stoodt-Hill and Amsepaugh-Corson (2001) propose that characters in children's books portraying impairments can serve as models for both children with and without impairments. While children with impairments may directly identify with the challenged characters, other children can also empathize, understand and appreciate people with impairments with the help of non-disabled characters. Also, several authors advocate the use of children's literature to teach young people about impairments (Andrews, 1998; Blaska, 1996; Blaska & Lynch, 1998; Cuddigan & Hanson, 1988; Gross & Ortiz, 1994; Hopkins, 1980; Prater, 2000). Many researchers have addressed the importance of this topic, critiqued the literature, provided guidelines to evaluate children's literature portraying characters with impairments, and offered recommended book lists about this subject (Blaska, 1996; Heim, 1994; Myles, Ormsbee, & Downing, 1992; Prater, 2000; Prater, 1998; Smith-D'Arezzo, 2003; Derman-Sparks & the ABC Task Force, 1989; Westberg, Mecca, & Davis, 1991).

Given the fact that the number of children's books characterizing people with physical and sensory impairments dominates children's literature (Ayala, 1999; Dyches & Prater, 2000), it becomes important to systematically investigate children's books including characters with physical and sensory impairments. In addition, about 2.3% of the US population 5 to 15 years of age is either physically or sensory impaired (US Census Bureau). Due to this considerably high representation of children with

physical and sensory impairments, it is imperative to study how these children are portrayed in children's literature. Yet, a recent review of the literature by Dyches and her colleagues (2006) indicates that there are not enough studies exploring picture books portraying physical and sensory impairments.

Analyzing the relationships between people with and without impairments is a worthwhile phenomenon in these days of promoting inclusion in US classrooms. In particular, in inclusive classrooms, teachers provide more opportunities for all children with and without impairments to interact with each other. In this sense, children's literature can be a window into the diversity of cultural and social representations of people with impairments; and therefore, the quality of the books becomes more important than ever. For example, if the books mostly portray characters with impairments as being victimized by or dependent upon individuals without impairments, the reader will most likely get the impression that individuals with impairments are not contributing or natural members of the society (Dyches & Prater, 2000; Saunders, 2000). Also, the book characters with impairments should not always be characterized as doing heroic acts or overcoming all odds (Dyches, Prater, & Cramer, 2001). Therefore, it is essential to portray the characters with impairments realistically to increase the quality of the books (Carroll & Rosenblum, 2000).

Studies by Prater and Dyches dominate the research on the characterization of impairments in children's and adolescent literature (Dyches et al, 2001; Dyches & Prater, 2005; Dyches, Prater, & Jensen, 2006; Prater, 1999; 2003). Although their research has unique contributions to the literature, they have only focused on the characterization of mental and developmental impairments, learning impairments and autism in children's and adolescent literature. They have not analyzed the portrayal of people with physical and sensory impairments in children's literature.

A major component of the research conducted by Dyches and Prater is the analysis of relationships among characters with and without impairments (Dyches, Prater, & Cramer, 2001; Dyches, & Prater, 2005; Prater, 1999). Their analysis was mainly the identification of how book authors depict people with impairments in their relationships with people without impairments. The types of relationships found in those studies were: (a) primary relationship (between characters with impairment and a friend or a family member), (b) victim, perpetrator, and/or protector, (c) dependent and caregiver, (d) friendship, (e) fear of association (the character with impairment does not want to be associated with others), (f) pupil and instructor, and (g) feelings of guilt. They reported that primary relationship and victim, perpetrator, and/or protector are the two major relationship categories noted in the stories (Dyches, Prater, & Cramer, 2001; Dyches & Prater, 2005; Prater, 1999). In another article, Prater (2003) investigated characterization of learning impairment in children's and adolescent literature. Her analysis yielded three relationship categories: (1) teasing, bullying, and name calling, (2) teaming with others with disability, and (3) siblings. Prater acknowledged that most characters with learning impairments suffer from the lack of self-esteem, and they are often represented as misbehaving, especially in school.

Earlier studies (Ayala 1999; Dyches, Prater, & Cramer, 2001; Prater 1998; 1999) investigating the roles of people with impairments in children's literature have analyzed the role of people with impairments and their relationships with people without impairments at the macro level. That is, they did not analyze all interactions in the stories; rather they presented an overall picture of the story. They evaluated an overall representation of people with impairments in children's books. On the other hand, a single story portraying impairments contains a variety of types of interaction. A story may portray a person with physical impairment having different roles throughout the story, rather than having one role connected to the main theme of the story. For example, as reported by Dyches et al., (2001), in *Emily in Love*, Emily, a young girl with mental impairment, was both a victim and a perpetrator in the story. Also, in the same book, there were *dependent and caregiver* and *friendship* relations among characters with and without impairments (Dyches et al., 2001). Hence, we believe that the portrayal of people with impairments in children's literature is a complex issue. This is very similar to how people with impairments are viewed within the society (Dyches et al., 2001). It cannot be reduced to a single isolated theme depicting the relationship.

Additionally, researchers did not report the exact number of occurrences of each type of relationship in the stories (Prater, 2003). They just noted whether a relationship category was common or not. For example, Dyches and her colleagues (2001) found that the *victim, perpetrator, and/or protector* category was portrayed in most of the books. Yet, the percentages of the relationship types found were

not reported. It is essential to know the frequencies of the categories to understand how people with impairments are characterized in children's books. In this study, we report the frequencies of the relationship categories and the number of books containing each the categories. Moreover, the qualitative analysis technique employed in this study provides rich details about how people with and without physical impairments interact with each other in picture books. Thus, in this study, our purpose is to explore the relationships between characters with and without physical and sensory impairments in picture books.

### Method

In this study, three researchers investigated how picture books portray people with impairments. While two of the researchers selected and analyzed the picture books, all three of them contributed to the writing process. At the beginning of the study, the researchers attempted to locate the fiction picture books portraying characters with physical or sensory impairments. The list of potential books was drawn from the Subject Guide to Children's Books in Print 2003 (R.R. Bowker Publishing, 2003), which is used to track down children's books classified under about 10,000 subjects. The researchers selected the fiction picture books that fell under the following subjects: handicapped (this subject covers books portraying characters with physical disabilities), physically handicapped, sensory, and blind. This selection yielded 73 picture books. These four subjects were already listed in the Subject Guide to Children's Books in Print 2003. Then, the researchers searched for these books through the catalogs of four public libraries and a large university library in Midwestern United States. The purpose was to be able to reach the books accessible to the public. In addition, two Internet bookstores (www.amazon.com, and www.barnesandnoble.com) were searched. Finally, the researchers located 46 books, most of the original 73 picture books (Table 1). The sample contains the books that are currently available to readers, increasing the likelihood of analyzing the books that are frequently used by young readers, and their parents and teachers.

**Table 1.**  
**The picture books analyzed in this study**

Books	Type of the impairment
Alborghetti, M. (2000) <i>The miracle of the myrrh</i> . Illustrated by Blondon Herve. (New York, NY, Winslow Press).	Physical
Asare, M. (2002) <i>Sosu's call</i> (La Jolla, CA, Kane/Miller Book Publishers).	Physical
Baggette, S. K. (1998) <i>Jonathan goes to the grocery store</i> . Photos by William J. Moriarty. (Sterling, VA, The Brookfield Reader).	Physical
Best, C. (2002) <i>Goose's story</i> . Illustrated by Holly Meade. (Canada, Douglas and McIntyre).	Physical
Blatchford, C. (1998) <i>Going with the flow</i> . Illustrated by Janice Lee Porter. (Minneapolis, The Lerner Publishing Group).	Sensory (Hearing Impairment)
Booth, B. D. (1991) <i>Mandy</i> . Illustrated by Jim Lamarche. (New York, NY, Lothrop, Lee & Shepard Books).	Sensory (Hearing Impairment)
Brimmer, L. D. (2002) <i>The sidewalk patrol</i> . Illustrated by Christine Tripp. (New York, NY, Children's Press).	Physical
Brown, B. S. (1998) <i>Oliver's high five</i> . Illustrated by Margot J. Ott. (Santa Fe, New Mexico, Health Press).	Physical
Burnett, F. H. (2001) <i>The secret garden</i> . Retold by Janet A. Brown. Illustrated by Graham Rust. (New York, NY, Puffin).	Physical
Carlson, N. (1990) <i>Arnie and the new kid</i> . (New York: Penguin Books).	Physical
Dobkin, B. (1994) <i>Just a little different</i> . Illustrated by Keith Neely. (Chicago, Children's Press).	Physical
Dwight, L. (1997) <i>We can do it</i> . (New York, NY, Star Bright Books).	Physical & Sensory (Visual Impairment)
Emmons, C. (2002) <i>Sammy wakes his dad</i> . Illustrated by Shirley V. Anger. (New York, NY, Star Bright Books).	Physical
Fraustino, L. R. (2001) <i>The hickory chair</i> . Illustrated by Benny Andrews. (New York, Arthur Levin Books).	Sensory (Visual Impairment)
Harshman, M. (1995) <i>The storm</i> . Illustrated by Mark Mohr. (New York, Cobblegill Books).	Physical
Hodges, C. (1994) <i>When I grow up</i> . Illustrated by Dot Yoger. (Hollidaysburg, PA, Jason and Nordic Publishers).	Sensory (Hearing Impairment)
Hogan, R. (1994) <i>Double scoop</i> . (Minneapolis, MN, Cultural Exchange Corporation).	Physical
Holcomb, N. (1992) <i>Fair and square</i> . Illustrated by Dot Yoger. (Hollidaysburg, PA, Jason and Nordic Publishers).	Physical
Holcomb, N. (1992) <i>Patrick and Emma Lou</i> . Illustrated by Dot Yoger. (Hollidaysburg, PA, Jason and Nordic Publishers).	Physical

Table 1 cont'd

Hugo, V. (1997) <i>The Hunchback of Notre Dame</i> . Retold by Tim Wynne-Jones. Illustrated by Bill Slavin. (New York, NY, Orchard Books).	Physical	
Hunter, A. (1998) <i>The handicapped squirrel</i> . (Orlando, FL, Alexander Group).	Physical	
Keets, E. J. (1986) <i>Apt. 3</i> . (New York, NY, Aladdin Books).	Sensory Impairment)	(Visual
Kneeland, L. (1999) <i>Cookie</i> . Illustrated by Todd Fargo. (Hollidaysburg, PA, Jason and Nordic Publishers).	Sensory Impairment)	(Hearing
Kooharian, D. (1997) <i>Sammy's story</i> . (New York, NY, DK Publishing).	Physical	
Lakin, P. (1994) <i>Dad and me in the morning</i> . Illustrated by Robert G. Steele. (Morton Grove, Illinois, Albert Whiteman and Company).	Sensory Impairment)	(Hearing
Lasker, J. (1980) <i>Nick joins in</i> . (Toronto, Canada, General Publishing Limited).	Physical	
Lee, J. M. (1991) <i>Silent lotus</i> . (New York, Farrar, Stratus & Giroux).	Sensory Impairment)	(Hearing
Lee, J. M. (2002) <i>Bitter dumplings</i> . (New York, Farrar, Stratus & Giroux).	Physical	
Litchfield, A. B. (1976) <i>A button in her ear</i> . Illustrated by Elenor Mill. (Toronto, Canada, General Publishing Limited).	Sensory Impairment)	(Hearing
Lowell, G. R. (2000) <i>Elana's ears</i> , Illustrated by Karen S. Brooks. (Washington, DC, Magination Press).	Sensory Impairment)	(Hearing
Maguire, A. (2000) <i>Special people, special ways</i> . Illustrated by Sheila Bailey. (Arlington, TX, Future Horizons).	Physical & Impairment)	Sensory (Visual and Hearing
Meyers, C. (1999) <i>Rolling along with Goldilocks and the three bears</i> . Illustrated by Carol Morgan. (Bethesda, MD, Woodbine House).	Physical	
Millman, I. (2000) <i>Moses goes to school</i> . (New York, Frances Foster Books).	Sensory Impairment)	(Hearing
Moss, M. (2002) <i>Amelia lends a hand</i> . (Middleton, Wisconsin, Pleasant Company Publications).	Sensory Impairment)	(Hearing
Munsch, R. (2003) <i>Zoom</i> . Illustrated by Michael Martchenko. (Canada, Scholastic Inc).	Physical	
Peckinpah, S. (1993) <i>Chester... the imperfect all-star</i> . Illustrated by Trisha Moore. (Agoura Hills, CA, Dasan Publishing).	Physical	
Peckinpah, S. (1991) <i>Rosey... the imperfect angel</i> . Illustrated by Trisha Moore. (Agoura Hills, CA, Dasan Publishing).	Physical	
Riggio, A. (1997) <i>Secret signs</i> . (Honasdale, Pennsylvania, Boyds, Mills Press).	Sensory Impairment)	(Hearing
Rodriguez, B. (2000) <i>Sarah's sleepover</i> . Illustrated by Mark Graham. (New York, Penguin Putnam Books).	Sensory Impairment)	(Visual
Rudner, B. (1990) <i>Handstand</i> . Illustrated by Peggy Trabalka. (Louisville, KY, ART-Print & Publishing).	Physical	
Stuve-Bodeen, S. (2003) <i>Babu's song</i> . Illustrated by Aaron Boyd. (New York, NY, Lee & Low Books).	Sensory Impairment)	(Speech
Van Nutt, J. A. (1998) <i>Cobtown Christmas</i> . Illustrated by Robert Van Nutt. (New York, Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group).	Sensory Impairment)	(Visual
Wahl, J. (1999) <i>Rosa's parrot</i> . Illustrated by Kim Howard. (Dallas, Texas, Whispering Coyote Press).	Sensory Impairment)	(Hearing
Watkins, D. L. (1993) <i>The spelling window</i> . Illustrated by John Roberts. (Greenville, SC, Bob Jones University).	Sensory Impairment)	(Hearing
Wolf, B. (1977) <i>Anna's silent world</i> . (New York, NY, J.P. Lippincott Company).	Sensory Impairment)	(Hearing
Yin (2002) <i>Dear Santa, please come to the 19<sup>th</sup> floor</i> . Illustrated by Chris Soentpiett. (New York, NY, Philomel Books).	Physical	

### Data Analysis

In each story, researchers looked for any occasion portraying or implying a relationship between people with and without physical and sensory impairments. These occasions are the main unit of analysis. The occasions that explicitly portray relationships between story characters either display conversations between people or describe the physical interaction between them. The occasions that imply a relationship between the characters do not contain the actual conversation or interaction. However, the social context still suggests a relationship between story characters with or without impairments. For example, a description of a child getting a letter from a friend suggests such a relation. The content of the letter or the child's described feelings in the story provided us with enough material to infer about the type of the relationship between them. While analyzing the roles of the characters with and without impairments, the researchers employed techniques of content analysis (Neuendorf, 2002).

For each unit of analysis, they identified and reported:

The occasion (in operational terms)

The role of the person with a physical or sensory impairment

The role of the person with no impairment

The first item in the analysis sheet, the occasion, is a description of what is given in the book. For the purposes of this study, the researchers defined each occasion in operational terms. Next, the researchers identified the roles of the story characters with and without impairment for each occasion. After coding all of the roles for characters with and without impairments, the researchers identified and grouped similar roles and defined the relationship categories. Thus, the relationship categories are named according to the roles of story characters. These categories became the basis of further analysis. It is important to note that the coding categories were not discrete; in other words, some units were coded more than once in different categories. Finally, identified categories were grouped into three subcategories: negative, positive, and neutral. In defining these three subcategories, the researchers made references to the roles of story character with impairment.

The two researchers who analyzed the books are educators trained in curriculum and instruction. They have had previous experiences in conducting content analysis and conversation analysis. While one of them used content analysis as the main data analysis method in previous works, the other researcher is specialized in early childhood special education. During the initial phases of data analysis, the researchers received feedback from two university professors specialized in early childhood education and special education.

In the present study, to ensure the stability of the measurement, a coder-agreement procedure was conducted. This procedure is widely known as the inter-coder reliability process (Neuendorf, 2002) which determines the extent to which independent raters code a characteristic of a message and reach the same conclusion. Neuendorf reports that an acceptable level of agreement between the coders should be at least 80% or greater. To check the inter-coder reliability, two of the researchers independently analyzed and coded 20% of the books. Next, they compared their coding results to explore the percent of agreement. The results showed that the percent of agreement between the coders was 80%, an acceptable level of inter-coder agreement (Neuendorf, 2002).

## Results

**Table 2.**  
**The categories portraying the relationships between the story characters.**

The relationship categories (Type of relationship)	Category	Description
The successful one and proud others	Positive	The character with impairment has achieved a goal and the others are proud of or admire him/her.
An equal body	Positive	The characters with and without impairment are friends and having fun together.
The helper, adviser and the appreciated friends	Positive	The character with impairment helps others and the help has been appreciated.
The supportive and worried parent of a child with impairment	Positive	The parents of children with impairments are worried, supportive and friendly
Parent and child sharing the time	Positive	The child with impairment and his/her parent are friends or having fun together in some cases the parent may be the impaired one
The different one and the curious observers	Neutral	The character with impairment is represented as a different person and others are curious observers
Child and the therapist	Neutral	The character with impairment is receiving therapy and engaging in a relationship with the therapist
Other portrayals	Neutral	The characters with and without impairment are having a conversation that does not indicate a positive or negative portrayal
The lonely or unhappy child and the ignoring, or teasing one	Negative	The character with impairment is lonely and unhappy, the character without impairment is ignoring or teasing
The disadvantaged one and the protector, helper	Negative	The character with impairment is disadvantaged and disappointed, the character without impairment is protector, helper
The rejected person and the distrustful, very cautious one	Negative	The character with impairment is rejected, the character without impairment is distrustful because of impairment

In this study, forty-six picture books were selected and qualitatively analyzed as described in the above paragraphs. The analysis of the books revealed eleven different categories portraying the relationships between story characters with and without physical and sensory impairments (See Table 2 above).

The analysis of the books indicates three types of relationship categories regarding the portrayal of the story character with impairment; positive, negative and neutral. A positive portrayal refers to a relationship between story characters with and without impairment where the one with the impairment is having equal, pleasant or happy interactions with family members, peers and others. A negative portrayal refers to relationships where the character with impairment is having unhappy, frustrating, or depressing interactions with characters without impairments. The neutral portrayals reflect neither positive nor negative relationships. While five out of the eleven relationship categories are positive portrayals, three of them are negative portrayals. There are also three neutral portrayals. Table 2 represents the list of categories. The following sections present brief descriptions of all eleven-relationship categories that emerged in this study by referring to sample cases in the picture books.

#### *Positive relationship categories*

##### *The successful one and proud others*

Most stories include occasions portraying characters with physical and sensory impairments who reach an achievement at some point in the story. People with impairments gain more self-confidence, prove them, and feel as an active participant of the community. While coding this category, we noted whether a person with impairment achieved a goal, and the characters without impairment recognize his/her contribution.

It should be noted that some achievements are realistic and genuine, while the professionals can consider some others as unrealistic and stereotypical. For instance, in *Going with the Flow*, the author draws a realistic picture of a young boy, who has hearing impairment as the author describes how he overcame the difficulties he had when he started his new school and how he became a part of the school's basketball team. Similarly, Kevin, in *Fair and Square*, learns how to play with the cars after practicing for a while and beats everybody but his dad. In contrast, some authors portray characters that have special talents or abilities that can be considered as stereotypical or unrealistic. For example at the end of the story of *A Cobtown Christmas*, Mr. Klingle, the lost, visually impaired man, plays the Cobtown hymn with his bells, and everyone becomes impressed by the beauty of the bells and his wonderful performance. In *Hickory Chair*, Lois, another character that is visually impaired, has *blind sight* that enables him to find hidden objects easily.

##### *An equal body*

The occasions coded under this category are very similar to the ones coded as *friendship* by Prater and her colleagues (Dyches et al., 2001; 2005; Prater, 1999). Considering the fact that friendship may not be necessarily an equal relationship every time, the authors use the name *an equal body* to emphasize the equal nature of the relationship between characters with and without impairments coded here. In these occasions, the characters with physical and sensory impairments have positive experiences with the non-disabled characters. They play, do many activities together and have friendly conversations on a variety of topics.

*An equal body* is the most common type of relationship between people with and without impairments. Many of the books portray characters gaining greater appreciation, affection or empathy for the characters with physical and sensory impairments. There are many stories representing characters with and without impairments interacting in a reciprocal manner, and characters with impairments having relationship with their able-bodied peers.

Thirty-five of the stories we examined have persons with and without physical impairments playing, having fun, or participating in an activity together. In *Amelia Lends a Hand*, Amelia and her friend, Enzo, (who has hearing impairment) plays with rockets together. Amelia learns much from him and she thinks he is really expressive. In another story, *The Hickory Chair*, Louis plays hide and seek with his grandmother and his cousins. He doesn't have sight, but he always finds the best places to hide, and they have great fun together.

In another story, *Sarah's Sleepover*, while Sarah and her cousins having a sleepover, the power goes out and the cousins enter Sarah's world for a while. Sarah reassures her frightened cousins and guides them

to find their ways in the dark. The six little ladies find out how much fun they could have even when it is dark.

*The Spelling Window* displays examples of other occasions categorized here. Seth who has hearing impairment and his neighbor, Kathy signs to each other from their windows. They also spend time during their field trip to the State Capitol, try different hats on in a shop and enjoy being together.

*The helper, adviser and the appreciated friends*

Seventeen of the stories have occasions in which the children with physical or sensory impairments help their non-disabled friends and the help has been appreciated. For example, Loretta in *Zoom*, takes her brother to the hospital in her wheelchair when the car did not start. In a historical story, Mendel, the protagonist of *the Miracle of Myrrh*, offers people in need the very special gifts Mary gave him. In those occasions, we sometimes see the theme *helping others* overlap the *friendship* as in *Sarah's Sleepover*. While Sarah helps her cousins in dark, they all enjoy a great friendship.

In another story, *Secret Signs*, Luke saves the lives of many slaves during the American Civil War. He has hearing impairment and cannot talk much, but he passes the secret message through his beautiful paintings, and becomes a hero.

*The supportive and worried parent of a child with impairment*

The occasions categorized here include very supportive parents. Parents in these occasions are trustworthy, friendly, and confident in their children with physical or sensory impairments. They have friendly conversations with the children, and they sometimes encourage them to be braver and take further steps in their success stories.

In *Oliver's High Five*, Oliver talks to his father about his decision to see the world above the sea. His father seems confident in him. He supports his son, but he also warns him that it is different up there. In another story, *Going with the Flow*, we meet a father who is very understanding and supportive when his son, Mark, a child with hearing impairment, has difficulties in the first days of his new school. He helps Mark adjust to his new environment.

However, many of the stories do not illustrate the details of the relationship between parents and children with physical impairments. They are usually at the background of the story. Sometimes readers see only a mother waving her son with a smiling face while he gets on the school bus (*Moses Goes to School*), or parents taking their child to a doctor when the child needs (*A Button in Her Ear*). Those scenes do not provide detailed information about the relationship between parents and their children with physical impairments. Yet, we still can say that they are supportive, loving, and caring parents.

*The parent and child sharing the time*

The occasions classified under this category show parents and their children enjoying time together or sharing something not related to impairment. With the exception of *Sammy Wakes His Dad*, which is about a non-impaired boy and his father who is in a wheelchair, all other stories containing occasions categorized in this study tell the story of children with physical or sensory impairments and their parents. In *Dad and Me in the Morning*, Jacob and his father enjoy sunset in the early morning. The readers witness their close relationship and the special ways they interact with each other. Jacob is an outgoing and confident boy who is very close to his father. He doesn't let his hearing impairment stop him from enjoying things that others get to enjoy. In another story, *Zoom*, Loretta loves speeding with her wheelchair and gets a \$100 ticket for speeding. When she tells her mother about it, she is mortified. Although this story is about Loretta's wheelchair, it never tells us the disadvantages of using a wheelchair. It is a funny story about a little girl who loves speeding. Using a wheelchair is a part of her life and Loretta even takes advantage of it as she takes her brother to the hospital with her speedy wheelchair.

*Neutral relationship categories*

*The different one and the curious observers*

Sometimes the authors provide their audiences with information about a particular impairment in the stories. The most common occasion is the one in which the characters with impairments answer curious questions about their impairments. Nine of the stories examined in this study include occasions that are coded under this category. For example, in *A button in her Ear*, Angela talks to her classmates about

her new hearing aid. The teacher compares it to glasses. Similarly, Nick, in *Nick joins in*, answers questions from classmates about himself including his wheelchair and why he has to use it. Yet, not all the characters welcome these questions. In *Double Scoop*, Carrie cherry leaves without saying a word, when people around her ask questions such as *Why are you in that wheelchair?* (Hogan, 1994, p.12). In fact, curiosity sometimes brings about discomfort in people with impairments; but we should note that, with this exception, the story characters in our study that have impairments seem to be comfortable with these questions.

#### *The child and the therapist*

Seven out of forty-six stories contain scenes in which characters with physical or sensory impairments are taking therapy and learn a variety of skills with assist from the therapist or teacher. For example in *We can do it*, the physical therapist helps Jewel, who has cerebral palsy, learn to use a walker. In another story, *Cookie*, Susan (the therapist) teaches Molly how to say cookie and some other words in sign language. The interaction between the character with impairment and the therapist is usually supportive and friendly. In some cases, it includes plain instructions and responses.

#### *Other portrayals*

The scenes categorized under this title include the characters with physical impairments having other portrayals with salespersons, doctors or officers. These scenes do not have emotional content and both sides usually feel comfortable with each other. For example in *A button in her ear*, Angela's conversation with her doctor during examination is a good example of it. In another story, *Zoom*, Loretta cannot decide which wheelchair to pick; then, the lady in the store tells her that she can try one out for a day.

#### *Negative relationship categories*

##### *The lonely or unhappy child and the ignoring, or teasing one*

Sixteen of the forty-six stories analyzed in this study display occasions in which the character with physical impairment feels uncomfortable in social environments because he/she is alone. For example, in *The storm*, Jonathan feels nervous when his classmates assume that he hates storms because he is in a wheelchair. In four of the stories, the character with impairment is teased or made fun of his impairment. For example in *Arnie and the New Kid*, the main character, Arnie, teases Philip because he eats too slowly due to his impairment. In another occasion in the same story, the author says the able bodied kids want to play with the character with physical impairment but they still ignore him because they don't know how to approach him. In *Chester... the Imperfect All-Star*, Chester's teammates call him *Sticky* because of his short leg.

Some of the stories display the character with physical impairment feeling lonely, sad or angry, observing other kids playing and doing some activities. In *Silent Lotus*, the main character, her peers ostracize Lotus, because she has hearing impairment. When Lotus tries to be a friend with other children, they either ignore or run away from her. These occasions are mostly displayed at the beginning of the stories. As the story develops the characters with and without impairments usually become closer and build friendships or the character with physical impairment reaches an achievement.

##### *The disadvantaged one and the protector, helper*

Fifteen of the stories include occasions in which the person with impairment is in need, upset or disappointed due to a variety of reasons and the non-disabled characters support the ones with impairments. In *A Coptown Christmas*, Mr. Klinge, a lost, visually impaired man, is incapable of doing many things by himself, and he cannot speak English. The protagonist, Lucky, and her family and friends in Coptown help him find his dog and return to his home.

In another occasion, the Boss angel always protects Rosey, in *Rosey, the Imperfect Angel*, when the other angels make fun of her because of her misshapen mouth. Also, she is given the domain of the garden of January, which is a huge honor, without any reason.

Similarly, in *Dear Santa please come to 19<sup>th</sup> floor*, when Carlos, who has had a spinal-cord injury and is in a wheelchair, is disappointed that he meets Jose, a neighbor, in Santa's outfit while expecting real Santa Clause. His overall mood is depressed and unhappy due to disadvantaged condition and Jose and Willy try to cheer him up.

While most characters with impairments happily accept the help from others, only one character is displayed as purely unhappy because he is in need of others' help. The protagonist of *Going with the Flow*, Mark, has a hearing impairment. He does not want to have an interpreter in the classroom because he feels embarrassed when somebody signs him everything that happens in the class.

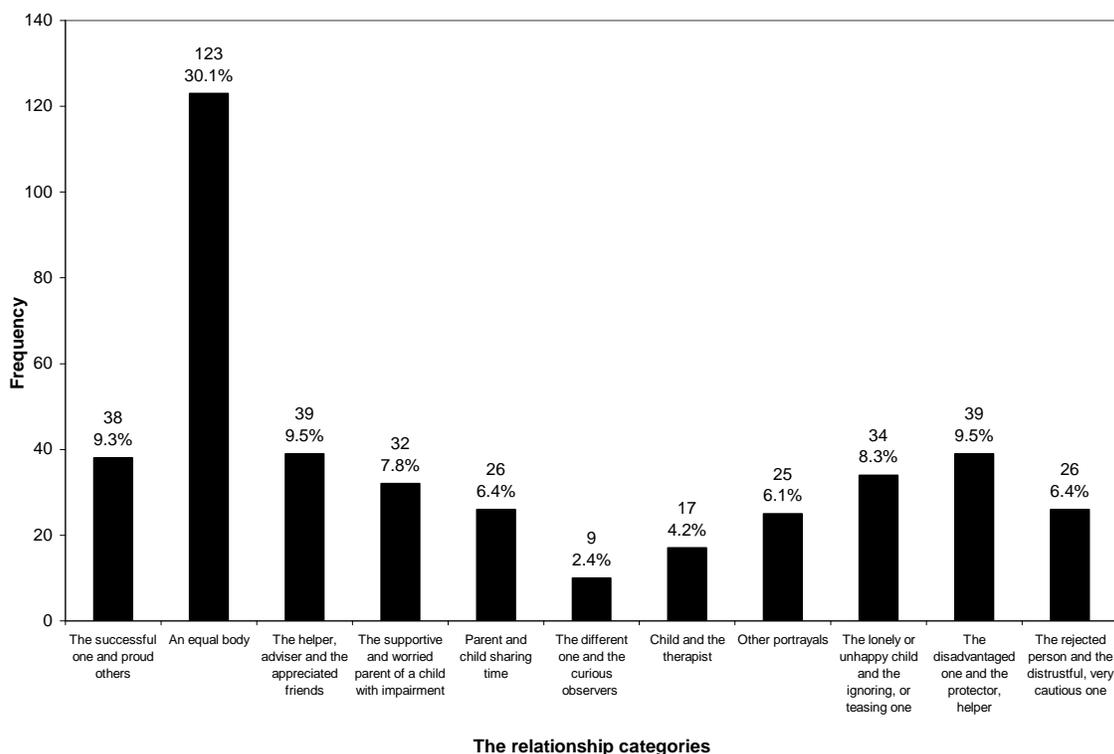
*The rejected person and the distrustful, very cautious one*

This category exemplifies some of the situations in which people with physical or sensory impairments are rejected due to their impairments. Seven of the stories display occasions in which the non-disabled characters are distrustful of the capabilities of the characters with physical impairments. In *Chester... the Imperfect All-Star*, Chester's teammates do not want to have him in the team because they think he is not as good player as a non-disabled person is.

Another story, *Amelia Lends a Hand*, portrays a difficult situation that a person with impairment is likely to face. Enzo, cannot communicate with his brothers' friends due to his hearing impairment, the friends lose their patience, get frustrated, and Enzo leaves with a broken heart. These instances are usually displayed at the beginning of the stories. As the stories develop, characters with physical impairments solve their problems, find friends, achieve their goals, and prove themselves.

*The frequencies of the relationship categories*

The data analysis indicates that there are eleven different relationship categories between characters with and without physical and sensory impairments. The number of categories varies among the picture books analyzed in this study. The Figure 1 presents the frequency and the percentage of these eleven relationship categories. A quick overview of Figure 1 indicates that *an equal body*, a positive characterization of the people with impairments, is the largest category with a frequency of 123 representing 29.9% of all the relationships coded.



**Figure 1.**  
Distribution of the frequency of the categories portraying the relationships.

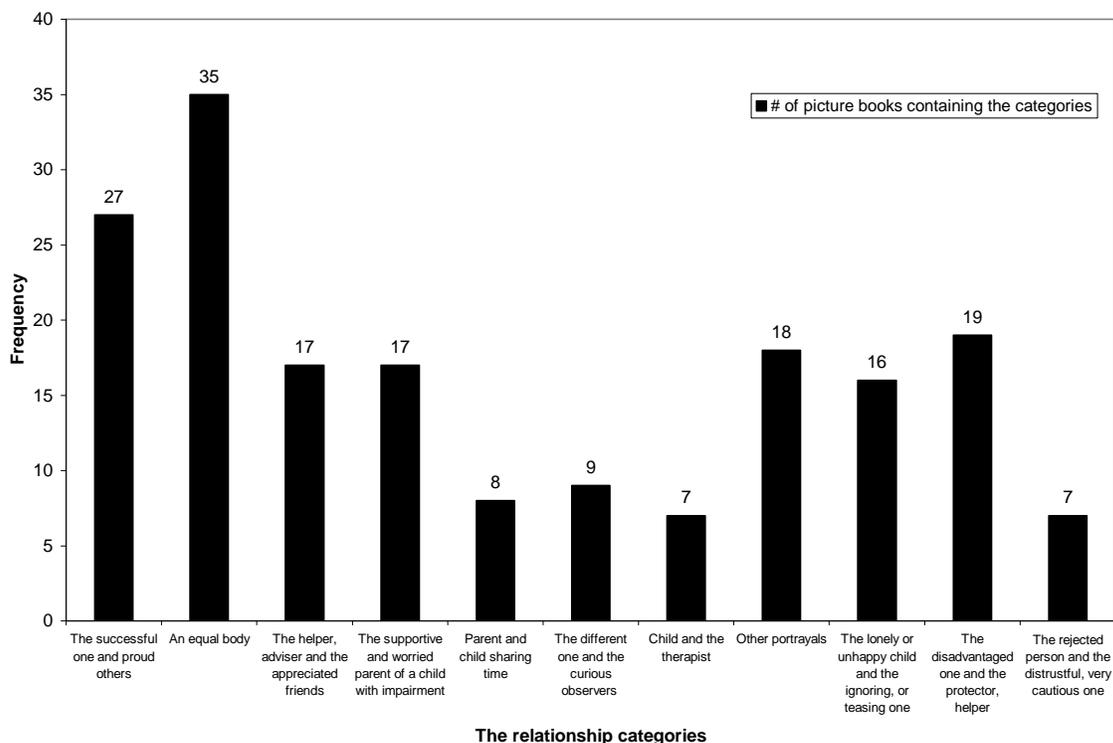
Other major categories positively characterizing the story characters with impairments are *the helper, adviser and the appreciated friends* (9.5%) and *the successful one and proud others* (9.3%). The researchers also discovered that about 10% of all relationships were between characters with impairments and their parents. Those relationships are either coded as *the supportive and worried*

*parent of a child with impairment* (6.4%) or *parent and child sharing time* (6.4%). In brief, the overall percentage of the categories positively characterizing people with impairments is about 63.1%. On the other hand, the analysis of the data shows that the characters with physical and sensory impairments are also negatively portrayed in the picture books. The analysis indicates that *the disadvantaged one and the protector, helper* (9.5%) and *the lonely or unhappy child and the ignoring, or teasing one* (8.3%) are two of the largest negative relationship categories. *The rejected person and the distrustful, very cautious one* was coded relatively less than the other negative relationship categories (6.4%). Overall the three negative relationship categories constitute about 24% of all codes.

Figure 1 indicates that the percentages of the negative portrayals (24%) are less than half of the percentages of the positive portrayals (63%). Characters with impairments are mostly positively portrayed in their relations with characters without impairment. These positive characterizations are consistent with the recent research reports about positive portrayals of people with impairments in children's literature (Dyches & Prater, 2000; Dyches, Prater, & Cramer, 2001; Turnbull, Turnbull, Shank, & Leal, 1999). There were high expectations of the characters with impairments in the books. It should also be noted that about half of the positive portrayals are coded as *an equal body*. In other words, both are equal in their mutual interaction. Additionally, the data analysis of the picture books shows that in plenty of cases, intellectual, the authors acknowledge creative and independent characteristics of people with impairments.

Three of the relationship categories, *the child and the therapist, the different one and the curious observers*, and *other portrayals*, indicate relatively neutral characterizations of the people with physical and sensory impairments in their relationships without people without impairments. Seventeen cases (4.1%) are coded as *the child and the therapist*, 10 relationships (2.4%) are *the different one and the curious observers*, and 25 occasions (6.1%) are *other portrayals*. In other words, about 13% of all occasions involving characters with and without impairments did not represent a negative or positive portrayal. We believe that these neutral portrayals can still be regarded as a positive feature of the recent picture books since there are still cases of stereotypes in the society.

The comparison of the number of the relationship categories across books provides us with valuable information (See Figure 2).



**Figure 2.**  
The number of books that contain the relationship categories.

In particular, *an equal body* is the most common category across all 46 picture books. It was coded in 35 books, about 76% of all books. *The successful one and proud others and proud others*, another positive characterization of people with impairments, is the second most common category, which is coded in more than 50% of the books (27 books). As seen in Figure 2, none of the negative characterizations are coded in as many books. *The lonely or unhappy child and the ignoring, or teasing one* (16 books) and *the disadvantaged one and the protector, helper* (19 books) are found to be the most common categories among all three negative characterizations. The neutral characterizations, *the child and the therapist, the different one and the curious observers*, and *other portrayals*, are coded in less than ten books.

In general, the picture books analyzed in this study mainly present positive characterizations of people with impairments. Based on these findings, it can be claimed that the readers and users of children's books portraying people with impairments will more likely see positive portrayals of those people. Yet, the data analysis also shows that people with impairments are negatively characterized in a number of books. Additionally, some negative and positive categories were coded in the same book. These books seem to reflect society's perception about people with impairments. There are individuals with positive perceptions, and there are also others who have developed negative opinions. But, with the introduction of inclusion of people with impairments into schools, there is a trend including both positive and negative opinions. Similarly, the neutral portrayals are also evidences of the transition as they are in the middle of positive and negative portrayals. It is also important to note that a number of positive characterizations is considerably higher than the negative characterizations, which again reflects the transition trend in the society.

### Discussion

Literature suggests that many of the books published in 1990s, 1980s and earlier contain stereotypical and inappropriate presentation of people with impairments (Heim, 1994; Myles, Ormsbee, & Downing, 1992; Prater, 1998; 2000). A recent study by Dyches, Prater and Cramer (2001) found out that there are more stories printed in 1997 and 1998, depicting more positive portrayals of people with intellectual impairments and autism compared to the characters in books in an earlier study by Prater (1999) who worked with a sample of books printed in earlier years. However, the authors still reported that 10 out of 12 books they used in the study portrayed characters with intellectual impairments and autism as victims and other characters acting as either perpetrators or protectors. The present study shows that, unlike the characters in Dyches et al (2001), the characters with physical and sensory impairments have been portrayed as being more independent and more social.

In this study, the analysis of the books yields eleven different types of relationship categories. A review of the literature indicates that other researchers have found very similar categories as well. For instance, we found that a large percentage of all relationships, about 30%, are coded as an *equal body*, a category portraying instances where characters with and without physical and sensory impairments are friends and enjoying each other's company equally. This relationship category is found in 35 out of 46 books analyzed (over 75%). Similarly, scholars reported in a number of studies that friendship is one of the most common relationship categories appeared in books portraying characters with impairments (Dyches, Prater, & Cramer, 2001; Dyches, Prater, & Jenson, 2005; Prater, 1999; 2003). An examination of their definitions of *friendship* and our definition of an *equal body* indicates that both themes refer to very same relationships between individuals with and without impairments. Only, we emphasize the equality of the relationship between both parties by naming the relationship as an *equal body*. While Prater and others have analyzed books including characters with mental retardation, autism, and developmental impairments and learning impairments, we analyzed children books portraying characters with physical and sensory impairments. Hence, friendship or equality seems to be one of the major messages of the authors using all kinds of impairments in their books. These positive portrayals may be the reflections of what happens in real life. Society might have developed positive values toward people with impairments. With the increasing inclusion of children with impairments in regular classrooms, society is now beginning to acknowledge disability rights. It is likely that recent educational programs might have led to a broader understanding of stereotypes used in children's literature and promoted sensitivity to the non-discriminative efforts.

The books that we analyzed in this study seem to reflect the society's perception about people with impairments. There are individuals with positive perceptions, and there are also others who have developed negative opinions. But, with the introduction of inclusion of people with impairments into

schools, there is a transition trend including both positive and negative opinions. Similarly, the neutral portrayals are also evidences of the transition as they are in the middle of positive and negative portrayals. The number of positive characterizations is considerably higher than the negative characterizations, which again reflects the transition trend in the society.

Our analysis of the picture books shows that the characters with impairments are in deep relationships with their parents, siblings and some friends in many of the books. These cases are positive relationships where the characters without impairments cared, supported and are proud of the characters with impairments. Likewise, Dyches, Prater, and Cramer (2001) have found similar relationships between story characters with and without impairments and called them *primary relationships*. In their more recent analysis of children's books Dyches and Prater (2005), found the *primary relationship* category as one of the main themes. In this respect, our findings are consistent with that of earlier studies in a way that close relationships exist between characters with and without impairments. Unlike Dyches and Prater (2005), we categorize such relationships in distinct themes, including an *equal body, the successful one and proud parents, the helper, adviser and the appreciated friends, the supportive parent of a child with impairment, and parent and child sharing time*. Rather than using an umbrella term, *primary relationship*, we used more than one coding category to enrich our understanding of the portrayals of individuals with impairments in picture books.

This study indicates that picture books portraying physical and sensory impairments contain negative as well as positive relationships between characters with and without the impairments. The three negative relationship categories are: (a) *the lonely or unhappy child and the ignoring, or teasing one*, (b) *the disadvantaged one and the protector, helper* and (c) *the rejected person and the distrustful, very cautious one*. As shown in figure 2, the first two are found in relatively more books than the third one. Briefly, these two relationship types portray individuals with impairments as unhappy, lonely or disadvantaged. While in the first category the character with impairment is being ignored or teased by another character without impairment, in the second category, *the disadvantaged one and the protector, helper*, a character without impairment protects, cares or helps a character with impairment. These two kinds of instances are seems to be combined in the *victim, perpetrator, and/or protector* category that was introduced by Prater (1999) and found in more recent studies (Dyches et al., 2001; Dyches & Prater, 2005). In particular, they are portrayed as victims of their siblings, peers or others. They are teased, bullied or treated badly in picture books. In some instances, they are protected by another character without impairments. Thus, in children's books, characters with impairments are having complex interactions with others. While they are treated inappropriately in some instances, they are protected in other cases. We think that this complex nature of the relationships is a reflection of what happens in real life.

This study did find that negative portrayals reflect some stereotypes that are still alive in society. The readers may feel sorry for them when reading the scenes about characters with impairments being alone, rejected or needy. The way that the people with impairments are presented in the children's literature gives important information about our conceptions on impairment. According to Roth (1983), if negative meanings are associated with people with impairments, then behaviors, objects, and language associated with people with impairments will be negative. Thus, the present study suggests that it is critical for educators having an awareness of how children's literature organize and reproduce disability as a category.

On the other hand, some stories portray positive and realistic relationships between characters with and without impairments. Such stories help children develop awareness and empathy by providing a genuine connection to the lives of people with impairments. For example in *Dad and Me in the Morning*, Jacob and his father communicate in different ways and share special moments together. *Sarah's Sleepover* is another good example of positive relationship between characters with and without impairments. Sarah and her cousins enjoy their sleepover and have great fun together.

Interpreting the results from the analysis of the stories portraying characters with and without impairments is a challenging work due to its complexity. Most stories analyzed in this study contain both positive and negative portrayals of characters with physical and sensory impairments. For example, in *Sosu's Call*, Sosu, a physically disabled child, is rejected by his community members due to his impairment; yet, this negative relationship between the child and others changes positively after Sosu calls the people in the farms to let them know that a terrible storm is approaching. This shift from negative to positive portrayals of the relationships between people with and without impairments was

found to be a common characteristic coded in several of the picture books. Specifically, the researchers' analysis indicate that in 18 of the 46 stories the authors initially depicted negative relationships; yet, as the story develops, the nature of the relationship changes to from negative to positive. It was also found that in 16 of these 18 stories the negative relationships occurred due to the impairment of the character. Hence, the stories give the message that when people with and without impairments meet, they may interact negatively due to the impairment. They may not be able to know or understand each other's perspectives, needs and behaviors at first. For example, in *Amelia Lends a Hand*, Amelia tries to talk to Enzo, her new neighbor with hearing impairment; yet, Enzo does not answer her. Amelia thinks that he is rude and snobbish for not responding to her since she does not know that he cannot hear. Later on, as Amelia knows more about him, they develop a very special friendship. Our findings indicate that the characters without impairments show a change through their interactions with characters with impairments.

The author's message to the readers with and without impairments is that it is possible to improve the negative relationships when individuals know more about each other. The change from negative to positive encourages the young readers with and without impairments to interact with each other although they may have some problems at the beginning. On the other hand, in some of the books, there are several overly negative relationships that should be critically reflected upon together by the teacher and children. For example, in *Oliver's High Five*, many employers reject Oliver, an octopus with physical impairment, just because he has fewer arms than a regular octopus has. He is rejected even though he is working hard and doing well. When the employers discover that he has only five arms, they dismiss him. He cannot find a job till he shows an extraordinary success by saving a pet shop. The owner of the shop is impressed by his ability of doing different jobs with his arms at the same time, so Oliver finally finds a job. Although the story has a happy ending, the message of the book implies that it is very hard to be accepted in the society without having physical perfection or extraordinary abilities.

As noted earlier, some of the success stories may be considered unrealistic or stereotypical. It is the role of the teacher and parent to facilitate discussions to critically reflect upon the message of the book. For example, the teacher may ask the children what they think about the employers' behaviors and how the children would feel if they were treated like Oliver. Also, techniques of creative drama can motivate children to empathize with Oliver. Saunders (2000) notes that early childhood teachers have an essential role in helping young children develop a critical view about impairments in children's books. This is not a complete sentence. She explains that once children start to read by themselves, they may not have a chance to develop a critical view of the literature they read. As a result, children's books including characters with impairments should be discussed with young children to state that people with impairments are valuable and contributing citizens (Saunders, 2000).

#### *Implications for Practice*

There are several key issues that educators should consider while using children's literature portraying people with impairments in entertaining and educating young children. First, the quality of the books should be evaluated. According to Dyches and Prater (2005), characters with impairments presented in children's literature should be integrated fully in society, to enjoy positive and reciprocal relationships with non-disabled characters, and to have opportunities to make and act on choices. Therefore, one issue for consideration in books would be to portray people with impairments as having individual and complex personalities with a full range of activities and emotions such as joy, anger, enthusiasm, and love is crucial. It is also important that authors should be careful about portraying characters with an impairment where the impairment is not essential to the story but is one of many character traits (Dyches et al., 2001). In fact; book authors need to focus on the person or the story, not create the story around the impairment. Also, when portraying people with impairments in the books, focusing on a person with disability's extraordinary achievements or making the person into a super human who almost have magical abilities raises false expectations that people with impairments have to overcompensate to be accepted into the community (Biklen & Bogdan, 1997; Schwartz, 1997). Derman-Sparks and the ABC Task Force (1989), in *Anti-Bias Curriculum Tools for Empowering Young Children*, suggest that teachers look at the illustrations, the story line, note the copyright date, and watch for out-dated words. Additionally, while working with young children teachers should consider that young children could not easily distinguish between fact and fantasy, therefore the books chosen must present realistic information about different characters with impairments.

Second, teachers should carry an awareness of how children's literature organizes and reproduces impairment. Children may realize that there are similarities and differences in all children, only if teachers use a combination of various activities addresses the varied disability issues. Initially, before or after reading a book portraying a character with the impairment, the teacher may have students sit in a group and list ways in which they are alike and ways they are different from one another such as having blue or brown eyes, being good at math or art. Once children understand that everyone has strengths and weaknesses, it becomes *okay* to be different. Similar to this activity, a teacher may also lead a class discussion on the nature and cause of impairment, and how certain impairments affect a person's life.

Third, in an attempt to help children be familiar with disability issues, teachers may use a book of non-fiction written by a person with impairment (or a close one) for its bibliotherapeutic value. Through exposing children to the works of literature, children may expand their limited experiences by exploring that the good life can be lived, even in the face of imperfection and adversity. According to Grindler, Stratum, and McKemma, (1997), listening and reading used in conjunction with discussion may change attitudes more than listening or reading alone. Some of the topics that might be addressed in a class discussion are the specific words that the author uses to describe the character with the impairment, whether the author uses dated ideas and out dated language in the book. How the author describes or implies the character's impairment and what stereotypes are associated with the impairment can be additional topics to a class discussion. Finally, the teacher can ask children the reason that the author chooses to make the character disabled (Shapiro, 2000).

Class discussions about barrier free environments can also be used to help students understand the nature of disabling conditions. Such discussions can be held to enable students to share ideas and help them to realize that creating barrier free environments requires being sensitive to individual differences. Additionally, teachers can use videos to explain various impairment areas. Inviting guest speakers with impairments who bring their real-life experiences into classroom would also help students gain insights about impairments. Teachers can ask students comprehensive questions that students answer after reading a book portraying characters with impairments. Students can define vocabulary terms in their own words and write reactions to the books that they read. Through book reading, class discussions, projects, videos, and guest lecturers, children may explore impairments from a variety of perspectives and can develop positive attitudes towards people with impairments along with an enhanced awareness about disability issues.

Overall, teachers, librarians, and parents who want to have literature portraying impairments should carefully select their collections and be aware of the stereotypes that might be implied between lines. With the recognition of the ways in which children's literature contributes to and perpetuates the negative perceptions about impairment and removing these biases from children's education, professionals who work with/for children will create environments in which all people are included.

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