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# Same but Different: Characters with Developmental Disabilities in Current Juvenile Literature

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## *Same but Different: Characters with Developmental Disabilities in Current Juvenile Literature*

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*As many children first encounter individuals with developmental disabilities (DD) through characters in children's literature, these individuals must be depicted authentically. Using descriptive analyses, we evaluated 38 books written for children and adolescents (11 picture books, 17 chapter books) for their portrayals of characters with developmental disabilities, comparing the portrayals against those published in three previous studies. All books considered were eligible for the 2018 Dolly Gray Children's Literature Award. Data were analyzed regarding personal portrayal, social interactions, and exemplary practices. Results indicated that most characters portrayed have ASD (80%) and the majority are male (65%). Generally, characters with DD are portrayed positively and realistically, but many remain static throughout the stories. They engage in positive social relationships and are included in integrated settings. Implications for educators, authors/publishers, and researchers are provided.*

In 1971, Dolly Gray was born with severe cerebral palsy, unable to walk and unable to speak. Like many other children, she loved stories, and she longed to see herself in the characters and relate to their experiences. She had many of the same feelings, needs, and desires as other children, and although in some ways she was different from her peers, she longed to be included in the world as part of "us" rather than "them." Today Dolly's longings are recognized, and the Dolly Gray Children's Literature Award is given to recognize authors and illustrators who are portraying children with developmental disabilities (DD) in authentic and positive ways.

Books including realistic characters with disabilities are also important for typically developing children, promoting acceptance of and cultivating positive feelings towards individuals with disabilities (Rieger & McGrail, 2015), emphasizing similarities

between individuals with and without disabilities, and representing multiple perspectives (Azano, Tackett, & Sigmon, 2017). The title of one of this year's Dolly Gray Award competitors has become the title and purpose for this article: *Same but Different* (Peete, Peete, & Peete, 2016). Dolly Gray was the same as typically developing children in many ways, but the things that made her different should also be considered.

This article describes a study that analyzed books accepted as contenders for the most recent Dolly Gray Award. After considering necessities for character portrayal, we present the study followed by its results, including a discussion of their significance.

### **Positive Portrayals**

Early media portrayal of individuals with disabilities as dangerous and undesirable (Bogdan, Biklen, Shapiro, & Spelkoman, 1982) caused many individuals, especially

children, to fear them, concluding that difference indicated deficiency. Fortunately, today's society and its literature encourage understanding and inclusion of individuals with disabilities.

Trends noted in past studies have indicated positive literary portrayals of individuals with developmental disabilities (Dyches, Prater, & Leininger, 2009). Currently authors encourage readers to treat individuals with disabilities as friends, not outsiders. They consciously (a) teach about the disability, (b) promote sensitivity for those with differences, and/or (c) represent current conditions accurately (Prater & Dyches, 2008).

However, some books may unintentionally reflect negative attitudes toward those with disabilities or fail to endorse exemplary practices in schools and communities. Because their cultural lenses and past experiences impact the way they portray characters with disabilities (Crisp et al., 2016; Kelley, Cardon, & Algeo-Nichols, 2015), some authors fail to consider characters with disabilities as dynamic, unique individuals (Beckett, Ellison, Barrett, & Shah, 2010; Johnson, 2010). Books that portray a neurotypical child convincing her friends to play with a “weird” child with autism or intervening to save her friend from the consequences of his autism support stereotypes. Books that show strong characters with differences working together are ideal.

### **Understanding and Acceptance**

Children's literature can influence children's attitudes (Smith-D'Arezzo & Thomas, 2010) by providing age-appropriate information about different disabilities in non-threatening ways, hopefully leading to positive interactions and acceptance. Quality literature has the power to cultivate positive

feelings and more accurate understanding of the differences that make people unique as individuals (Johnson, 2010), while recognizing and appreciating their similarities as well. In *Superstar* (Davis, 2017), another of this year's Dolly Gray contenders, Lester, who has high functioning autism, is portrayed with his insecurities, rigidity, intolerance, social awkwardness, sensory overload, and meltdowns. But his superstar strengths in math and science enable him to win the fifth-grade science fair and scientifically figure out a kicking technique that wins for his class the coveted kickball trophy.

Teachers must actively promote open discussion so students feel free to ask about things they don't understand (Wilkins, Howe, Seiloff, Rowan, & Lilly, 2016). For example, if they wonder why Lester doesn't just stop rocking, the teacher might need to explain that Lester's brain is very intelligent, but it works differently from theirs, causing him to see and feel things they do not experience. Reviewing descriptions of his breakdowns (pp. 72 and 121) should help readers relate to what Lester is actually experiencing.

## **Method**

### **Purpose**

The Dolly Gray Children's Literature Award (2000), sponsored by the Council for Exceptional Children's Division of Autism and Developmental Disabilities (CEC-DADD), recognizes authors and illustrators of juvenile literature portraying characters with disabilities. Selection is focused on the characterization of individual(s) with a disability as a main or supporting character (Dyches & Prater, 2005; Dyches, Prater, & Cramer, 2001; Dyches et al., 2009; see [www.dollygrayaward.com](http://www.dollygrayaward.com) for a list of all past award winners). For this study we used a descriptive design to examine selected picture and chapter books featuring

characters with developmental disabilities (DD), comparing these characterizations with those described in studies of three earlier awards (Dyches & Prater, 2005; Dyches et al., 2001; Dyches et al., 2009).

### **Book Selection**

All books in this study qualified for the 2018 Dolly Gray Children's Literature Award (DGA). Requirements included (a) a main or supporting human character with a developmental disability, (b) an intended audience of children, adolescents, or young adults, (c) a publication date between 2016 and 2017 (or late 2015 for books published after the books were considered for the 2016 award), (d) initial publication in English, and (e) a commercial publisher.

We began by searching for and identifying books including at least one character with a developmental disability. In consultation with children's literature librarians, we selected search terms and variants including *developmental disability*, *mental retardation*, *intellectual disability*, *syndrome*, *Down syndrome*, *multiple disability*, *autism*, and *Asperger syndrome* to locate books in various electronic lists and other online sources such as Amazon.com, Barnesandnoble.com, Goodreads.com. We also reviewed all books submitted to us by publishers for award consideration.

We defined *developmental disability* as a severe lifelong condition resulting from mental impairments, occurring before an individual is 22 years old and limiting the person in at least three of seven major life activities (e.g., receptive and expressive language, learning, self-direction, capacity for independent living), thus requiring an extended duration or lifelong combination of individualized coordinated supports and assistance (Developmental Disabilities Assistance and Bill of Rights Act, 2000).

Consistent with the mission of the CEC-DADD, we excluded strictly physical/orthopedic disabilities (e.g., cerebral palsy without intellectual disabilities), as these align better with the CEC Division on Physical, Health and Multiple Disabilities. We excluded disabilities affecting only social-emotional functioning (e.g., obsessive-compulsive disorder, ADHD, selective mutism, depression), better aligned with the CEC Division on Behavioral Disorders.

More than 100 of the books we found did not qualify because they include non-human characters, have no major characters who clearly have a developmental disability, are not written in story format, are obviously written for adults, or are self-published. We classified as main characters those who are critical to the plot, often as protagonists or antagonists. Major supporting characters are those who are important to the growth of the main characters and plot structure, but may not be essential to the development or resolution of the story climax.

### **Research Questions**

Having considered the aspects of character portrayal described previously, we analyzed the remaining 38 books in terms of three questions:

1. How are the characters with developmental disabilities portrayed?
2. Are the social interactions involving the characters with developmental disabilities primarily positive or negative?
3. What exemplary practices are portrayed?

### **Instrumentation**

An adaptation of the "Rating Scale for Quality Characterizations of Individuals with Developmental Disabilities in Children's Literature"

([www.dollygrayaward.com/home/rating-scale](http://www.dollygrayaward.com/home/rating-scale); Dyches et al., 2001) was used to gather the data. This scale includes four primary subscales pertinent to this evaluation: (a) Personal Portrayal, 5 items, (b) Social Interactions, 6 items, (c) Exemplary Practices, 5 items, and (d) Sibling Relationships, 5 items. The 21 items on these subscales are rated on a Likert-type scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*).

The Personal Portrayal subscale also includes descriptive items such as name/age/gender of the character with a disability, type of disability, nature of schooling, point of view, and types of relationships with others. The Social Interactions subscale additionally includes descriptive items regarding types of relationships involving the character with disabilities (e.g., primary relationships, victim/perpetrator/protector, dependent/caregiver).

### **Data Analysis**

To analyze characterizations of individuals with DD depicted in the stories, the rating scale was applied by a panel of library media specialists and 14 other reviewers, including special education and children's literature professors, a parent and teachers of individuals with DD, adults with developmental and other disabilities, a children's literature author, and undergraduate student researchers. We compiled the reviewers' evaluations into quantitative and descriptive summaries of each analyzed item. Means were figured for each of the four subscales, and positive and negative valence were determined based on a mean score of greater or less than 3 on a scale of 1-5 (greater than 3 = positive; less than 3 = negative). Discrepancies in analysis of the descriptive data (e.g., type of disability, race/ethnicity) were settled by reviewing sections from the books until reaching consensus.

## **Results and Discussion**

Results regarding types of books reviewed, portrayal of characters with DD, social interactions, and exemplary practices are described in this section and discussed with examples from specific books. Comparison with previous studies (Dyches & Prater, 2005; Dyches et al., 2001; Dyches et al., 2009) are also included.

### **Categories of Books Reviewed**

We found 38 books (11 picture books and 27 chapter books) eligible for review for the 2018 Dolly Gray Award—19 for each of the two years included. These totals are substantially higher than the 10 per year published in 2009 (Dyches et al.), more than double the 2005 rate of 8.5 per year (Dyches & Prater), and triple the 2001 total of 6 per year (Dyches et al.).

**Main/supporting character level.** Of these books, 37 have a main or supporting character with DD, and one (*Gap Life*; Coy, 2016) includes four minor supporting characters with disabilities, which we analyzed as composite characteristics since none of the characters was vital to the plot individually. Seven books (*Bent not Broken*, *Earth Force Rising*, *Elemental Island*, *Gap Life*, *Just My Luck*, *Prince Noah and the School Pirates*, *No One Needed to Know*) include more than one minor character with DD mentioned generally as a group, like a school, classroom, or group home, but not individually critical to the plot; they were not analyzed. Many characters on *Earth Force Rising* (Tesler, 2016) are “bred” to have ASD because of this group's unique strengths and talents; therefore, we analyzed only the main character, Jasper Adams. A few of the books also include characters with other disabilities such as traumatic brain injury (*Bent Not Broken*; Nicholson, 2017) and speech impairments (*No One Needed to Know*; Driver, 2017).

**Fiction/nonfiction.** A majority of the books ( $n = 33$ , 87%) are fiction, with 13% ( $n = 5$ ) either biography (*The Girl Who Thought in Pictures*, Pablo Pineda) or based on a true story (*A Girl Like Tilly*, *Janine and the Field Day Finish*, *MyaGrace Wants to Get Ready*, *Same but Different*). Most of the books analyzed are written in first person ( $n = 23$ ). Of these, 13 are recounted as the voice of the individual with DD, six as a family member, four as a different individual, and three from dual perspectives (*Afterward*, *Bent Not Broken*, *Same but Different*). Twelve of the books are written in third person, with a narrator telling the story. See Table 1 for a list of the books including title, author, illustrator (if applicable), year published, fiction/biography classification, and appropriate reading/interest levels. See Tables 2 and 3 for brief summaries of these characteristics.

### **Positive Nature of Portrayals**

As several dimensions of character portrayal have been analyzed across studies, they have generally shown increasingly positive perceptions of individuals with developmental disabilities: from 71% positive depiction in 2001 (Dyches et al.), to 72% positive in 2005 (Dyches & Prater), and 81% positive in 2009 (Dyches et al.) In the current study, when we averaged and categorized the scores from the rating tables we found positive personal portrayal of the individual(s) with DD in 37 books (97%).

Characters with DD were identified as positively portrayed if they met all or most of the following criteria: (a) emphasizing strengths over weaknesses, (b) making positive contributions, (c) envisioning positive expectations, (d) becoming self-determined, (f) expanding reciprocal

relationships, and (e) experiencing full citizenship in the home and community (Turnbull, Turnbull, Wehmeyer, & Shogren, 2016). Positive portrayals were identified in 37 of the books; none had an overall negative portrayal.

Most of the books in the study portray both positive and negative aspects of the character with DD ( $n = 25$ , 66%), with many emphasizing the strengths of the individual. For example, *Superstar's* Lester (Davis, 2017) has difficulty controlling the embarrassing symptoms of his autism, but he is also portrayed as a diligent researcher and gifted young scientist. R. J. in *Same but Different* (Peete et al., 2016) is awkward socially, but he is talented in math and statistics. Lauren, in *Slug Days* (Leach, 2017), experiences what she calls "slug days" when she is having a challenging time coping with the responsibilities of the day, and "butterfly days" when she feels the day goes perfectly. Charlie, in this year's winning chapter book *The Someday Birds* (Pla, 2017), ritualistically scrubs and rinses his hands 11 times per washing, is afraid of new people and situations, and drives his family into deep boredom studying and lecturing about rare birds. But Charlie is a gifted artist and burgeoning biologist, conversing easily with professional scientists.

And these characters do make contributions. R. J. finds ways to use his knowledge of sports statistics to engage with his family. Charlie, the bird scientist, actually discovers two major research communities, one to which he is introduced and one into which he accidentally runs when he is running away from emotions he didn't think he had. Temple Grandin, whose biography won this year's award in the



Table 1. *Books with Main or Supporting Characters with DD Analyzed in this Study*  
(Books cited in the article are indicated with \*)

<b>Title, Author (Illustrator), Year, Reading/Interest Levels</b>
<b>Autism Spectrum Disorders (30)</b>
* <i>Afterward</i> , Jennifer Mathieu, 2016, High School
<i>Albert is My Friend</i> , Linda Barboa & Jan Luck, 2015, Lower Elem.
<i>The Alien Logs of Super Jewels</i> , B. K. Bradshaw (Travis Hanson), 2015, Upper Elem.
* <i>Bent Not Broken</i> , Lorna Schultz Nicholson, 2017, Middle School
<i>Blue Bottle Mystery (Graphic Novel)</i> , Kathy Hoopmann, 2015, Upper Elem.
* <i>A Boy Called Bat</i> , Elana K. Arnold (Charles Santoso), 2017, Upper Elem.
<i>Chester and Gus</i> , Cammie McGovern, 2017, Upper Elem.
* <i>Earth Force Rising</i> , Monica Tesler, 2016, Upper Elem.
* <i>Elemental Island</i> , Kathy Hoopmann, 2015, Upper Elem./Middle School
* <i>Everyday Hero</i> , Kathleen Cherry, 2016, Upper Elem.
* <i>A Girl Like Tilly</i> , Helen Bates (Ellen Li), 2016, Lower Elem.
* <i>The Girl Who Thought in Pictures: The Story of Dr. Temple Grandin</i> , Julia Finley Mosca (Daniel Reiley), 2017, Lower Elem.
* <i>Isaac and His Amazing Asperger Superpowers!</i> , Melanie Walsh, 2016, Lower Elem.
<i>Just My Luck</i> , Cammie McGovern, 2016, Upper Elem.
<i>Lisa and the Lacemaker (Graphic Novel)</i> , Kathy Hoopmann, 2017, Upper Elem.
* <i>No One Needed to Know</i> , D.G. Driver, 2017, Upper Elem.
<i>On Cue</i> , Cristy Watson, 2016, Middle School
* <i>On the Edge of Gone</i> , Corinne Duyvis, 2016, Middle School
* <i>Pearla and Her Unpredictably Perfect Day</i> , Rochel Lieberman (Lloyd Jones), 2016, Lower Elem.
* <i>Same but Different: Teen Life on the Autism Express</i> , Holly Robinson Peete, Ryan Elizabeth Peete & RJ Peete, 2016, Middle School
<i>Slug Days</i> , Sara Leach, 2017, Upper Elem.
* <i>The Someday Birds</i> , Sally J. Pla, 2017, Middle School
<i>Summerlost</i> , Ally Condie, 2016, Middle School
* <i>Superstar</i> , Mandy Davis, 2017, Upper Elem.
<i>Tournament of Champions: Rookie of the Year</i> , Phil Bildner, 2017, Upper Elem.
<i>un/Fair</i> , Steven Harper, 2016, Middle School
* <i>Welcome to the Show: A Mickey Tussler Novel</i> , Frank Nappi, 2016, Middle School
<i>West Meadow Detectives: The Case of the Maker Mischief</i> , Liam O'Donnell (Aurelie Grand), 2016, Upper Elem.
* <i>West Meadow Detectives: The Case of the Snack Snatcher</i> , Liam O'Donnell (Aurelie Grand), 2015, Upper Elem.
<i>The World From Up Here</i> , Cecilia Galante, 2016, Middle School
<b>Down syndrome (3)</b>
* <i>Jon's Bouncing Ball</i> , Marva Dale Bicknell, 2015, Lower Elem.
* <i>Pablo Pineda: Being Different is a Value</i> , Maria Sala & Albert Bosch (Silvia Alvarez), 2017, Lower Elem.
* <i>Prince Noah and the School Pirates</i> , Silke Schnee (Heike Sistig), 2016, Lower Elem.
<b>Intellectual Disability (2)</b>
* <i>Janine and the Field Day Finish</i> , Maryann Cocca-Leffler, 2016, Lower Elem.
* <i>The Silver Gate</i> , Kristin Bailey, 2017, Middle School
<b>Multiple Disabilities (2)</b>
* <i>Gap Life</i> , John Coy, 2016, High School
* <i>Myagrace Wants to Get Ready</i> , Jo Meserve Mach & Vera Lynne Stroup-Rentier (Mary Birdsell), 2016, Lower Elem.
<b>Unspecified or Various Developmental Disabilities (1)</b>
* <i>Scribbles</i> , Theresa Mackiewics, 2017, Lower Elem.



Table 2. *Characterizations in Picture Books (n=11)*

<b>Book</b>	<b>Character(s)</b>	<b>Personal Characteristics</b>	<b>Level</b>	<b>Depiction</b>	<b>Portrayal</b>	<b>Character Development</b>	<b>Point of View</b>
<i>Albert is My Friend</i>	Albert	Elementary boy, ASD	Main	Partially Realistic	Mixed	Slightly Dynamic	Albert's Friend
<i>A Girl Like Tilly</i>	Tilly	Lifespan female, ASD	Main	Realistic	Mixed	Slightly Dynamic	Narrator
<i>*The Girl Who Thought in Pictures</i>	Temple	Lifespan female, ASD	Main	Realistic	Mixed	Dynamic	Narrator
<i>Isaac and His Amazing Asperger Superpowers!</i>	Isaac	Elementary boy, ASD	Main	Realistic	Mixed	Slightly Dynamic	Isaac
<i>Janine and the Field Day Finish</i>	Janine	Elementary girl, ID	Main	Realistic	Mixed	Slightly Dynamic	Narrator
<i>Jon's Bouncing Ball</i>	Jon	Elementary boy, DS	Main	Not Realistic	Mixed	Slightly Dynamic	Jon
<i>Myagrace Wants to Get Ready</i>	Myagrace	Teenage girl, MD	Main	Partially Realistic	Mixed	Slightly Dynamic	Myagrace
<i>Pablo Pineda</i>	Pablo	Lifespan male, DS	Main	Realistic	Positive	Dynamic	Narrator
<i>Pearla and her Unpredictably Perfect Day</i>	Pearla	Elementary girl, ASD	Main	Partially Realistic	Mixed	Slightly Dynamic	Narrator
<i>Prince Noah and the School Pirates</i>	Noah	Elementary boy, DS	Main	Partially Realistic	Mixed	Slightly Dynamic	Narrator
<i>Scribbles</i>	Scribbles	Elementary girl, unspecified DD	Supporting	Realistic	Mixed	Slightly Dynamic	Narrator

Note. ASD = autism spectrum disorder; DD = developmental disability; DS = Down syndrome; ID = intellectual disability; MD = multiple disabilities.

\* indicates 2018 Dolly Gray Award winner.

Table 3. *Characterizations in Chapter Books (n=27)*

<b>Book</b>	<b>Character(s)</b>	<b>Personal Characteristics</b>	<b>Level</b>	<b>Depiction</b>	<b>Portrayal</b>	<b>Character Development</b>	<b>Point of View</b>
<i>Afterward</i>	Dylan	11-year old boy, ASD	Supporting	Realistic	Mixed	Slightly Dynamic	Ethan and Caroline (friend and sister)
<i>The Alien Logs of Super Jewels</i>	Jewels	Elementary girl, ASD	Main	Realistic	Positive	Dynamic	Jewels
<i>Bent Not Broken</i>	Faith	Deceased female, ASD	Supporting	Realistic	Positive	Slightly Dynamic	Madeline and Justin (friend and brother)
<i>Blue Bottle Mystery</i>	Ben	Elementary boy, ASD	Main	Realistic	Mixed	Slightly Dynamic	Ben
<i>A Boy Called Bat</i>	Bat	Elementary boy, ASD	Main	Realistic	Positive	Dynamic	Narrator
<i>Chester and Gus</i>	Gus	10-year old boy, ASD	Supporting	Realistic	Mixed	Dynamic	Chester (dog)
<i>Earth Force Rising</i>	Jasper	12-year old boy, ASD	Main	Realistic	Mixed	Dynamic	Jasper
<i>Elemental Island</i>	Jakob	12-year old boy, ASD	Main/ Supporting	Partially Realistic	Positive	Dynamic	Astie (Jakob's cousin)
<i>Everyday Hero</i>	Alice	Pre-teen girl, ASD	Main	Realistic	Mixed	Dynamic	Alice
<i>Gap Life</i>	Kate, Nicole, Brent & Shawn	Varied, Multiple Disabilities	Supporting	Partially Realistic	Positive	Slightly Dynamic	Cray (friend and caretaker)
<i>Just My Luck</i>	George	Pre-teen boy, ASD	Supporting	Realistic	Mixed	Slightly Dynamic	Benny (brother)
<i>Lisa and the Lacemaker</i>	Lisa	Teenage female, ASD	Main	Realistic	Mixed	Slightly Dynamic	Narrator
<i>No One Needed to Know</i>	Donald	16-year old male, ASD	Supporting	Realistic	Negative	Slightly Dynamic	Heidi (sister)
<i>On Cue</i>	Toby	12-year old boy, ASD	Supporting	Realistic	Mixed	Slightly Dynamic	Randy (sister)

<i>On the Edge of Gone</i>	Denise	16-year old female, ASD	Main	Realistic	Positive	Dynamic	Denise
<i>Same but Different</i>	Charlie	15-year old male, ASD	Main	Realistic	Positive	Dynamic	Charlie and Callie
<i>The Silver Gate</i>	Wynn	11-year old girl, ID	Main	Partially Realistic	Mixed	Slightly Dynamic	Narrator
<i>Slug Days</i>	Lauren	Elementary girl, ASD	Main	Realistic	Mixed	Slightly Dynamic	Lauren
<i>*The Someday Birds</i>	Charlie	12-year old boy, ASD	Main	Realistic	Positive	Dynamic	Charlie
<i>Summerlost</i>	Ben	Deceased boy, ASD	Supporting	Realistic	Mixed	Static	Cedar (Sister)
<i>Superstar</i>	Lester	10-year old boy, ASD	Main	Realistic	Mixed	Dynamic	Lester
<i>Tournament of Champions: Rookie of the Year</i>	Red	11-year old boy, ASD	Supporting	Realistic	Positive	Slightly Dynamic	Rip (friend)
<i>un/Fair</i>	Ryan	11-year old boy, ASD	Main	Realistic	Mixed	Dynamic	Narrator
<i>Welcome to the Show</i>	Mickey	Young adult male, ASD	Main	Realistic	Mixed	Slightly Dynamic	Narrator
<i>West Meadow Detectives: The Case of Maker Mischief</i>	Myron	8-year old boy, ASD	Main	Realistic	Positive	Slightly Dynamic	Myron
<i>West Meadow Detectives: The Case of the Snack Snatcher</i>	Myron	8-year old boy, ASD	Main	Realistic	Positive	Slightly Dynamic	Myron
<i>The World From Up Here</i>	Russell	8-year old boy, ASD	Supporting	Realistic	Mixed	Slightly Dynamic	Wren (sister)

Note. ASD = autism spectrum disorder; ID = intellectual disability. \* indicates 2018 Dolly Gray Award winner.

picture book category (Mosca, 2017), changed the cattle industry as well as the public's perception of autism forever.

Characters' visions of themselves are portrayed as well. The picture book *Isaac and His Amazing Asperger Superpowers!* (Walsh, 2016) portrays Isaac's accomplishments in a highly self-confident first-person voice. In Isaac's understanding, Asperger syndrome represents ability, not disability. *A Boy Called Bat* (Arnold, 2017) is an optimistic loveable boy with autistic characteristics who loves and takes good care of his pet skunk; he plans to be a veterinarian like his mother. Pearla, in *Pearla and her Unpredictably Perfect Day* (Lieberman, 2016), accidentally makes triangle cookies and flat cupcakes at her father's bakery, but in her optimistic self-confidence she sells them regardless of their "imperfections."

The fantasies also portray strong positive characters with developmental disabilities; self-determination is an important theme for some of them. In *On the Edge of Gone* (Duyvis, 2016), Denise, a 16-year-old with ASD, recounts her struggle to find her missing sister, Iris, and get Iris and their drug-addicted mother into their assigned shelter before the earth is struck by a comet. The advanced decision-making skills characteristic of her autism are clearly apparent. The picture book *Prince Noah and the School Pirates* (Schnee, 2016) portrays young "Prince Noah" who goes to a school that takes place on ships, different ships for those with different needs (including Noah's Down syndrome). When pirates attack, the ships cannot escape unless all students do their best; everyone must contribute.

### Themes for Portrayals

We analyzed portrayals of the 38 individuals with DD categorized across three themes: (a) personal portrayal, (b) social interactions, including relationships with siblings, and (c) exemplary practices. Each theme is explained with examples from the books.

**Personal portrayal.** Portrayals of individuals with DD were analyzed in relation to (a) disabilities (b) personal characteristics, and (c) realistic character development.

**Disabilities.** Various disabilities are depicted among characters in the books. Of the 38 characters with developmental disabilities, 30 (80%) have ASD, 3 (8%) have Down syndrome, 2 (5%) have intellectual disabilities excluding Down syndrome, 2 (5%) have multiple disabilities, and 1 (3%) has an unspecified developmental disability. These statistics do not realistically represent the ratios of children with developmental disabilities enrolled in U.S. schools; books analyzed in the three past studies were also disproportionate, but in different directions.

According to the most recent data, of the 13% of school children who have been classified as having a disability, 9% have autism compared to 6% having intellectual disabilities including Down syndrome (McFarland et al., 2017). The drastic increase in proportion of books including a character with autism compared to those having a character with another DD may be due to the increase in prevalence of ASD. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2016), 1 in 68 children has now been diagnosed on the autism spectrum. The tendency to include

characters with ASD is obviously meeting readership needs for these children; however, the disproportion could imply misleading comparisons.

**Age/time of life.** Ages of characters in the books with DD range from infant to adult. In three books the characters with DD are depicted as infants or toddlers as well as in later stages of life: *A Girl Like Tilly*, *Pablo Piñeda*, and *The Girl Who Thought in Pictures*. In the more closely focused books, 12 characters are elementary-aged children, 12 are upper elementary, and 5 are teenagers; 2 books have a deceased character with DD; and *Gap Life* (Coy, 2016) has 4 supporting characters of various ages with DD.

**Gender.** In the past studies of Dolly Gray Award books, the majority of characters with ASD were male, with a decreasing trend. All of the characters with autism were male in 2001 (Dyches et al.), 84% were male in 2005 (Dyches & Prater), 64% were male in 2009 (Dyches et al.). In this year's study the percentage of characters with autism who are male increased to 72%. Because the male to female ratio for autism is 4.5:1, males are only slightly under-represented in the books currently analyzed (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2016). This could be an overcorrection of the earlier trends.

Because females demonstrate some of the characteristics associated with autism differently than males, many girls suffer undiagnosed. A book like *A Girl Like Tilly* (Bates, 2016) can be especially useful in recognizing the problem. Tilly puzzles her family: an obviously bright girl who struggles at school, a child at an age when peers seem all-important who doesn't want to make friends—at times

she doesn't even know if she is a girl or a boy. Since she cannot communicate how she really feels, she withdraws. Finally a psychologist realizes that Tilly has autism; the puzzling characteristics are explained; her family is able to help her move forward.

Overall 65% ( $n = 24$ ) of this year's characters with DD are male; the picture book category has slightly more female ( $n = 6$ ) than male ( $n = 5$ ) characters. In one of the chapter books, *Gap Life* (Coy, 2016), minor male and female characters with DD were analyzed as composite.

**Ethnicity.** Previous studies of characters with DD show that individuals of diverse ethnicities were not represented at all in 2001 (Dyches et al.) and accounted for only 14% in 2005 (Dyches & Prater). In this study 26% of the books included characters of diverse ethnic backgrounds who have DD, representing more accurately how DD is actually distributed among ethnicities. In 2016 the U.S. Census Bureau reported the U.S. population as 76.9% White alone (not mixed), 17.8% Hispanic, 13.3% Black alone, and 5.7% Asian. Despite improvement over books studied in the past, the eight books that depict an ethnically/culturally diverse main or supporting character with DD do not represent actual proportions. Hispanics are underrepresented by 12.5%, Blacks by 2.8%, and Asians by .4%. In several instances the ethnicity of the character is unclear; thus these data should be interpreted with caution.

**Character development.** Most of the books portray characters who are at least partially realistic as they show both their strengths and weaknesses in various aspects of their lives.

**Realistic.** Characters with DD who are realistically depicted are not superhuman or subhuman, are not cured miraculously, and are not depicted in ways not congruent with current knowledge and practice related to their disability. Most of the books analyzed portray a character with DD who is realistic ( $n = 29$ , 76%); in some this character with DD is only partially realistic ( $n = 8$ , 21%). One book was found with an unrealistic character with DD. *Jon's Bouncing Ball* (Bicknell, 2015) portrays a child with Down syndrome seeking adventure in Yellowstone National Park, and reviewers consider it unrealistic (and unwise) for young Jon to be in the national park by himself encountering and interacting with strangers.

In contrast, in *Janine and the Field Day Finish* (Cocca-Leffler, 2016), Janine, a realistic young child with intellectual disabilities and delayed physical development, can't run all the way around the field, but she enthusiastically enjoys field day as she cheers on her more athletically talented classmates and comforts a friend who falls. She doesn't overcome her physical weakness; she enjoys doing what she can within her limitations.

The title character in *MyaGrace Wants to Get Ready* (Meserve Mach & Stroup-Rentier, 2016) is a teenage girl with autism, intellectual disabilities, and cerebral palsy who is generally portrayed realistically. She is excited about going to a school dance. Her family supports her in getting ready: her brother practices dancing with her, and others help her choose a dress, fix her hair, and get her nails professionally painted—the interests, needs, and concerns of most girls her age. MyaGrace is portrayed as

being more like than different from other teens, though the extent of her disabilities is not emphasized.

**Dynamic.** Of the books analyzed, only 12 (32%) feature characters classified as dynamic; characters in the remaining books are portrayed as static, showing little to no growth. The brevity of picture books makes it challenging to portray strong character growth; however, some do show significant change. For example, Theresa in *Scribbles* (Mackiewicz, 2017) lacks self-confidence in her academic work. But when she takes initiative to ask her teachers for help during class, she gains confidence and skills. *The Girl Who Thought in Pictures* (Mosca, 2017) shows dramatic changes in the development and progression of autism hero Temple Grandin, from a toddler who would “never be normal” to a world-acclaimed scientist, inventor, researcher, lecturer, and inspiration to the entire autism community. Chapter books have the space and sophistication to begin bringing characters with disabilities, particularly autism, out of social isolation.

**Social interactions.** We analyzed several aspects of social interactions involving the characters with DD, including their types of relationships and specific relationships with others, particularly friends, parents, siblings, and peers. Typically developing characters are sometimes changed by interacting with the character with DD.

**Overall social relationships.** Rating the characters' overall social relationships, we found that 34 (92%) of the books portray what we consider positive social relationships, with only four (8%) showing relationships we noted as



negative. In the chapter book *No One Needed to Know* (Driver, 2017), the individual with DD, George, is bullied throughout the entire novel, both by boys his age and by friends of his sister, Heidi, who narrates the story. Few instances enable George to experience positive social interactions. In contrast, *West Meadows Detectives: The Case of the Snack Snatcher* (O'Donnell, 2016) portrays positive social relationships throughout the story as Myron and his friends work together to solve mysterious events at their elementary school.

**Primary relationships.** In the study sample, the most prevalent primary relationship is with a friend without a disability ( $n = 18, 47\%$ ). For example, In *Everyday Hero* (Cherry, 2016) Alice, who has ASD, is struggling to fit in at her new school. Megan befriends Alice and helps her navigate the various social norms of teenage life. Later Megan becomes the one in need of help, and Alice becomes her *hero*. In *Superstar* (Davis, 2017) Lester is frequently rescued, comforted, and reassured by the friendship of Abby, who sits next to him in class. Other characters with DD were found to have a primary relationship with a sibling ( $n = 10, 26\%$ ), parents ( $n = 4, 11\%$ ), a friend with a disability ( $n = 3, 7\%$ ), paid personnel ( $n = 2, 5\%$ ), or others ( $n = 1, 3\%$ ).

Of the books in the study, 24 (63%) were analyzed for sibling interactions, as they portray a family in which a child with a developmental disability has at least one sibling. All were judged to show positive though realistic sibling relationships. The teenage twins who wrote *Same but Different* (Peete et al., 2016) share a realistic positive relationship. Subtitled *Teen Life on the Autism Express*, the

alternating chapters written by Callie, who is typically developing, and Charlie, who has ASD, describe what teen life is like for them, and the phrase *autism express* reflects their tone and approach. Positive support is dominant, but conflicted feelings occur when Callie resents looking after Charlie, and Charlie resents being looked after. Charlie and Callie are pen names for R.J. and Ryan Elizabeth Peete, who wrote this book with support and guidance from their mother, noted autism advocate Holly Robinson Peete. (Callie and Charlie made their first appearance in the 2012 Dolly Gray winner *My Brother Charlie*, in which the voice of Callie—co-written by then 10-year-old Ryan—tells about the characteristics of and the love she shares with her twin.)

An influential primary relationship with parents is portrayed in the picture book biography *Pablo Pineda*, which is subtitled *Being Different Is a Value* (Sala & Bosch, 2017). Pablo has Down syndrome, and the school near Pablo's home in Spain does not accept children with disabilities. However, Pablo's parents refuse to accept that restriction or be intimidated by the school. They get their son a tutor to help him reach the top of his class. After graduating first among his schoolmates, Pablo attends and graduates from college, after which he becomes an actor and an advocate/public speaker for rights of individuals with Down syndrome. His parents believe in and support him every step of his journey.

*The Someday Birds* (Pla, 2017) conveys complex relationships of an individual with developmental disabilities interacting with both siblings and an unusual "other." Charlie, who has both high functioning autism and obsessive-

compulsive disorder, is taking a road trip cross country with his older sister, younger twin brothers, and a “strange” individual named Ludmilla, who is looking after them and driving an ancient camper named “Old Bessie.” Ludmilla's bizarre appearance is topped only by her bizarre behavior. Charlie's sister manages him and tries to get him to behave as “normal” as possible; the twins constantly mock and tease him; and Ludmilla manages the unruly crew with insight, sensitivity, intelligence, and strength that Charlie eventually learns to respect.

**Relationship with characters without developmental disabilities.** In addition to memorable friendships, characters with DD are otherwise influenced by neurotypical individuals and in turn influence their typical associates. The percentage of characters with DD who are represented as victimized by others (e.g., through bullying, teasing, ridiculing, shunning) has decreased since the earliest studies. From 83% represented as victims in 2001 (Dyches et al.), the percentage was down to 39% in 2005 (Dyches & Prater), though up slightly to 43% in 2009 (Dyches et al.). In the current study, the victimization total is down to 34%. The teasing (name-calling) and bullying suffered by Donald, the teenager with autism who embarrasses his sister in *No One Needed to Know*, has been mentioned. Bat, the boy with ASD in *A Boy Called BAT* (Arnold, 2017), is frequently called names by his older sister. R. J. Peete (alias Charlie) in *Same but Different* is manipulated cruelly by classmates. Some characters were considered victimized by reviewers because they victimized themselves with self-pity.

Changes in characters interacting with the individual with DD were categorized as positive, neutral, or negative. The majority of the books portray these typically developing characters as experiencing positive change with this association ( $n = 30$ , 79%). Some books portray characters who interact with the character with DD as neutral, suggesting that they did not change positively or negatively as a result of their interaction ( $n = 8$ , 21%). No books showed negative impact by a character with DD. Data on this theme were not analyzed in earlier studies.

This study found an increase in characters with DD assuming important social roles. Over 42% of these characters taught others rather than merely learning from others—a notable increase from the 2009 study that found only 24% could be considered informal teachers. This study also found five books featuring characters who went on to influence their society by having meaningful careers: for example, scientist, baseball player, actor, chef. None of the previous studies found books portraying characters with DD who had meaningful careers.

### **Exemplary Practices**

This study evaluated some exemplary (and some not so exemplary) practices related to individuals with developmental disabilities found in the books examined in this study.

**Past practices.** All but three of the books are set in contemporary times. Those that depict earlier periods are relatively consistent with the attitudes and practices toward individuals with DD during those eras. *The Silver Gate* (Bailey, 2017) portrays Wynn, a girl with DD during medieval times. According to the “rules”

of her community, Wynn was supposed to be abandoned at birth because of her disability, but she is saved and hidden by her mother for 11 years. She is called a *half-wit* and *changeling*—terms not acceptable today. The family must live in hiding and in fear; eventually her brother must help her run away to avoid being sold by their father into slavery. These practices occurred in most areas of the world during the last century.

Other unfortunate practices have been slower to disappear. In *Welcome to the Show* (Nappi, 2016), set in 1950, Mickey Tussler, a prodigious young major league pitcher, who happened to have ASD, was characterized as having “slowness of mind” and referred to as a *retard*. In the early 1960s, Temple Grandin was expelled from school when she threw a book at a girl who was taunting her (Mosca, 2017); at that time children could be expelled with no legal process.

**Schooling/education.** We analyzed the books for two topics relevant to current practices affecting the quality of life for characters with DD: the characters’ schooling/education and their residence. Educational environments for students with DD have become more inclusionary throughout the years. Of the books depicting school settings in the 2005 (Dyches & Prater) study, 46% of children with DD were in general education classes, increasing to 54% in the 2009 (Dyches et al.) study. In the current study 68% of the books depict schooling: In these, 58% of students with DD are attending only general education classes (e.g., Lester, Charlie, Temple Grandin), and 31% are attending both general and special education classes. Some students receive extra one-on-one assistance in their general education class (e.g.,

paraeducator, counselor). These data show lower rates than the national data, which indicate that over 60% of students with disabilities spend over 80% of their time in general education classes (McFarland et al., 2017). Few characters with DD receive sole instruction in special education classrooms as portrayed in *On Cue* (Watson, 2016) and *Afterward* (Mathieu, 2017).

**Residence.** The most common residence for the characters with DD portrayed in the books is the family home ( $n = 31$ , 82%). Some of the books do not depict a specific place of residence ( $n = 4$ , 11%). *Gap Life* (Coy, 2016) is the only book to depict a group home. In *Earth Force Rising* (Tesler, 2016) the main character with DD lives in an institution for most of the story. Charlie and his siblings in *The Someday Birds* (Pla, 2017) leave and eventually return to a fairly typical family home in California, but most of the book takes place in scattered places during their trip to Virginia. The remainder of the books did not include enough information to accurately judge the home location.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

The results from this descriptive study are not intended to be generalized; they apply only to the 38 books evaluated. A limited number of reviewers analyzed and rated these books, so data for positive/negative valence should be interpreted with caution. Future research should increase the number of reviewers to at least 30, include standardized training, and conduct reliability checks with all reviewers, to strengthen the analyses. In addition, analysis of the Dolly Gray Award books published between 2009 and 2015 should be considered along with quantitative data.

## Implications for Practitioners and Publishers

Literature that includes characters with disabilities can enrich student learning by exposing students to an array of characters who are like them in some ways and different in others. Lenses of books allow readers both to look beyond their own experience and to closely and critically examine themselves as they learn to accept people who may seem different and difficult to understand (Prater & Dyches, 2008).

Acceptance requires more than brief exposure. Students need explanations, discussion, and opportunities to ask questions; thus many books include information and discussion suggestions to broaden knowledge and perspective for educators and students (Crisp et al., 2016).

Authors, illustrators, and publishers are to be commended for their contributions to the rapid increase in the number of books commercially published that include characters with DD. Furthermore, the depictions of these characters are increasingly inclusive and positive. However, other developmental disabilities besides ASD are receiving less attention than expected. Portrayals of a wider variety of developmental disabilities are warranted.

## Conclusion

From the 38 books analyzed in this study, two were chosen for the 2018 Dolly Gray Children's Literature Award, as they authentically portray individuals with developmental disabilities in an engaging story for children or youth. Most of the books considered for the 2018 award depict authentic characters who enjoy reciprocal relationships with family and friends and receive at least some of their education with typically developing classmates. But the two award-winning books are exemplary in all criteria. In the chapter book awardee, *The Someday Birds* by Sally J. Pla (2018), Charlie, an 11-year-old boy with ASD and OCD, learns to cope with fears and obsessions and to more fully engage in reciprocal relationships with family members and others who care about him. The picture book winner, *The Girl Who Thought in Pictures* by Julia Mosca (2017), shares highlights from the life of Temple Grandin, showing her self-determination and character strength in coping with challenges and contributing to the world in many ways. Such books can help children recognize similarities as well as differences, strengths as well as challenges, in individuals with developmental disabilities.

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# DADD Online Journal

Research to Practice

Focusing on individuals with  
autism, intellectual disability and other developmental disabilities

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## DADD ONLINE JOURNAL

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