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Newbery Award Winning Books 1975–2009: How Do They Portray Disabilities?

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Abstract: Newbery books represent quality literature that has a profound social-emotional impact on its readers, yet these books have not been systematically evaluated for their portrayal of characters with disabilities. Thirty-one Newbery Award and Honor books from 1975–2009 were identified and portrayed 41 main or supporting characters with disabilities. These books were evaluated using the Rating Scale for Quality Characterizations of Individuals with Disabilities in Children's Literature. Results indicate the representation of Newbery characters with disabilities is not proportionate to the current U.S. population of students with disabilities. Further, racial representation portrayed in these books is not representative of the diverse students receiving special education services. Trend analyses indicate that overall the portrayal of characters with disabilities is increasingly positive. School personnel are encouraged to select appropriate books for their instructional or bibliotherapeutic purposes. Authors are encouraged to include dynamic, exemplary, and memorable characters who are representative of today's school population of students with disabilities.

The U.S. Department of Education reports that nearly seven million students with disabilities attend public schools in the United States, representing more than 13% of the student population (Planyt, et al., 2009). Almost half of all students identified with a disability receive special education services under the category of specific learning disabilities. Students with speech or language impairments, other health impairments, mental retardation, emotional disturbance, developmental delay, and autism also make up a large percentage of students receiving special education services. In the past 15 years, the rate of students receiving services under the classifications of other health impairment and autism has increased dramatically (U.S. Department of Education [USDE], 2009).

Most students with disabilities are educated in general education classrooms with their non-disabled peers. For instance, most recent governmental reports indicate that 96% of students with disabilities are educated in general school buildings and more than half of these students are educated for most of the school day in general education classrooms (USDE, 2009). Students with speech or language impairments are most likely to be educated with their nondisabled peers, while students with mental retardation, multiple disabilities, and autism are least likely to be educated in general classes for most of the school day (USDE). Students with disabilities also interact with students without disabilities outside of school on a frequent basis. According to parent reports, more than 90% of students with disabilities ages 6–12 visited with friends outside of school occasionally or frequently. Many students with disabilities also participate in extracurricular and community-sponsored activities (USDE, 2005).

Given this trend of including students with disabilities with their nondisabled peers in and out of school settings, school personnel have an obligation to help those without disabilities better understand the needs and capabilities of students with disabilities (Dyches, Prater, & Jenson, 2006). Children come to school today with countless experiences that
have shaped their perceptions, attitudes, and actions, but few have had experiences explicitly intended to increase their understanding of diverse groups of people (Prater, Johnston, Dyches, & Johnston, 2006). One way to increase understanding is through the use of children’s literature. Books that realistically and positively portray characters with disabilities have the potential to increase awareness, understanding, and acceptance of students with disabilities (Dyches & Prater, 2000), and may also be used as a teaching tool to change individuals’ attitudes and behavior (Berns, 2004; Ouzts & Brown, 2000).

Award-winning books recognize outstanding children’s literature and are found on library shelves in most schools and public libraries. Arguably the most prestigious award for children’s literature is the Newbery Medal. The American Library Association (ALA) instituted the Newbery medal to recognize the most distinguished American children’s book published the previous year. Since its beginning in 1922 until 2009, 89 books have received the Newbery Medal and 292 books have been acknowledged as Honor books, bringing the total to 381 award-winning books (ALA, n.d.).

Researchers have evaluated Newbery books on dimensions such as gender (Agee, 1993; Gillespie, Powell, Clements, & Swearingen, 1994; Kimman & Henderson, 1985; Nisse, 2008), race/ethnicity (Nisse; Wilkin, 2009), socioeconomic status and family structure (Nisse, 2008), and other personal attributes (Lathey, 2005), but a recent search of literature found no systematic analysis of Newbery books for their portrayal of individuals with disabilities. Books that contain characters with disabilities vary greatly on how they are portrayed. Studies reveal that although current literature is more realistic and positive in their portrayal of characters with disabilities, characterizations are sometimes inaccurate, disabilities portrayed are different from those students typically encounter in schools, and some practices portrayed are not current (Dyches & Prater, 2005; Dyches, Prater, & Cramer, 2001; Prater, 2003). An analysis of the portrayal of characters with disabilities in Newbery books can help librarians, educators, and parents choose books that appropriately, accurately, and positively depict individuals with disabilities. This may encourage students’ understanding and acceptance of their classmates and peers with disabilities (Prater et al., 2006).

The purpose of this study was to determine the number of Newbery Medal and Honor Books from 1975–2009 that include prominent characters with disabilities and analyze how these characters are portrayed. Because students were entitled to a free and appropriate public education after the passage of the Individuals with Disabilities Act [IDEA] in 1975, we were interested in books published after the enactment of this law. We also compare the results of this evaluation with characteristics of the current U.S. school population.

Method

Book Selection

Books were included in the evaluation if at least one main (protagonist or antagonist) or supporting character had a disability. The disability had to be of a degree that would warrant special education and/or related services in school settings, even if the setting for the book was not in school or if the character was an adult. The disability categories from IDEA 2004 were used as a framework to define each disability. Characters with illness-related impairments were not evaluated if the character’s disability appeared to not affect his/her educational performance (e.g., cancer). Characters with orthopedic impairments were included if their disability was deemed significant enough to warrant physical or occupational therapy services.

The American Library Association’s website (www.ala.org) was consulted to generate the population of Newbery Award and Honor books. The sample of books that included characters with disabilities was created by consulting annotated bibliographies and book guides, journal articles that recommended juvenile literature about disabilities, and one Internet bookstore (Baskin & Harris, 1984; Dyches & Prater, 2005; Prater, 2000; Prater et al., 2006; Robertson, 1992; Ward, 2002). Eight Newbery Award and 23 Honor books included 41 characters with disabilities. Table 1 lists the books with additional information including the type of disability portrayed.
An adaptation of the Rating Scale for Quality Characterizations of Individuals with Disabilities in Children’s Literature (Dyches & Prater, 2000) was used to evaluate each Newbery Award and Honor book. This instrument combines literary standards and standards related to current practices and values regarding individuals with disabilities. The rating scale eliminated the literary standards items, given that Newbery Award and Honor books, by definition, represent quality literature. The other sections of the scale included personal portrayal, exemplary practices, social interactions, and sibling relationships. Each section contains several items which are rated on a scale of 1 (Disagree) to 3 (Agree).
**Personal portrayal.** Six items comprise the personal portrayal section, including accuracy of the portrayal of the disability, the depiction of the character with a disability as realistic, the portrayal of the character’s strengths and abilities, the emphasis on similarities between characters with and without disabilities, the use of person-first language, and the growth of the character with a disability.

**Exemplary practices.** Four items comprise the exemplary practices section, including citizenship opportunities, appropriate services, valued occupations, and the promotion of self-determination for the character (Turnbull, Turnbull, & Wehmeyer, 2007).

**Social interactions and relationships.** Six items comprise the social interactions section, including presence of reciprocal relationships, acceptance, promotion of empathy rather than pity, positive social contributions, promotion of respect, and a variety of relationships.

**Sibling relationships.** Five items are included in the sibling relationships section, including the emotional experiences of the siblings, the siblings’ opportunities for growth, the reciprocity of the sibling relationship, family responsibilities of the siblings, and the siblings’ awareness of the nature of the disability and its effects on the character with a disability (Meyer & Vadasy, 2008).

**Data Analysis**

A content analysis of each book was conducted using the evaluation instrument. Two readers read and independently evaluated 15 books (48%), with an inter-rater agreement of 81%. They then met and came to agreement on the ratings.

To determine whether the portrayals of the characters with disabilities and practices were exemplary, a cut-off score was determined. The minimum score for exemplary portrayals and practices was set at a minimum of 2.0 on a scale of 1–3, indicating a neutral or positive rating. Ratings for each section on the rating scale were determined based on the average rating for each section as a whole. The average rating was calculated by adding each item’s rating (1, 2, or 3) within each section and dividing the total by the number of items rated in that section.

Ratings were analyzed across time to determine if differences existed before and after the reauthorization of IDEA in 1990. The 1990 reauthorization emphasized the concept of ‘person-first’ language and increased levels of integration of students with and without disabilities.

Information on the types of disabilities, the age and race/ethnicity of the characters with disabilities, and the prominence of the characters with disabilities (e.g., main or supporting character) was recorded. Prominent themes regarding the portrayal of characters with disabilities and related practices were identified as well.

**Results**

Of the 131 Newbery books awarded between 1975–2009, 8 (6%) of the books that contain main or supporting characters with disabilities are Newbery Award winners and 23 (18%) are Newbery Honor books. Most Newbery books with characters with disabilities were published after 1990 (74%; n = 23). This increase correlates with the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act in 1990.

Not all books that included a character with a disability qualified for a thorough analysis. Books that included a character with a disability were disqualified for two primary reasons: the character with a disability was not a main or supporting character; or the character’s disabilities appeared to not affect their educational performance (e.g., temporary illness). Thorough analyses of characters were not possible for some books because not enough information was included to conduct an evaluation, but the characters had enough influence on the plot to be included as supporting characters. For example, three supporting characters (Dicey’s mother with emotional disturbance in Dicey’s Song, Bix’s mother with emotional disturbance in The Moves Make the Man, and MacGregor with an orthopedic impairment in The House of the Scorpion) were counted in the demographic statistics but their characterizations were not evaluated.

Characters with disabilities were evaluated according to today’s standards. Therefore, even if a book portrayed a character living in an earlier time period (e.g., Constance who
Figure 1. Percentage of all characters with disabilities portrayed in Newbery books.

Types of Disabilities Portrayed

Of the 13 disability categories in IDEA, all but traumatic brain injury are portrayed in the Newbery Award and Honor books evaluated. Orthopedic impairment, emotional disturbance, and mental retardation are the most commonly portrayed disabilities while deafblindness and developmental delay are the least commonly portrayed disabilities. See Figure 1 for percentages of all characters with disabilities in the Newbery books.

The representation of characters with disabilities in Newbery books is not proportionate to the current school population of children and adolescents with disabilities. When comparing characters with disabilities in Newbery books ages 6 to 21 \( (n = 24) \) with students ages 6 to 21 receiving special education services (USDE, 2009), significant discrepancies arise. While mental retardation (MR; 21%; \( n = 5 \)), orthopedic impairment (OI; 17%; \( n = 4 \)), autism (Aut; 13%; \( n = 3 \)), and multiple disabilities (MD; 13%; \( n = 3 \)) are the most frequently portrayed disabilities in school-age Newbery characters, specific learning disabilities (SLD; 46%), speech or language impairment (SLI; 19%), mental retardation (MR; 9%) and other health impairment (OHI; 8%) are the most frequently occurring disabilities of students receiving special education services. Of the school-age Newbery characters, only two (8%) are portrayed with a specific learning disability and only one (4%) was portrayed with a speech or language impairment. See Figure 2 for comparisons of Newbery characters and school-aged students with disabilities across all 13 IDEA categories.

Figure 2. Comparison of U.S. students and Newbery characters with disabilities ages 6–21.
Portrayal of Characters with Disabilities

Characterizations were analyzed for sex, age, and race/ethnicity. Over half of all Newbery characters with disabilities (n = 41) are male (63%; n = 26). When considering only characters up to and including 21 years of age (n = 24), the percentage of male characters with disabilities is 71% (n = 17). This is a fairly accurate representation of gender distribution, where 67% of students ages 3–21 receive special education services in the schools are male (USDE, 2008). Over half of the Newbery characters with disabilities are children or adolescents (56%; n = 23), with eight elementary-age characters (35%), nine middle school-age characters (39%), and six high school-age characters (26%). No characters are younger than age six. A majority of the characters with disabilities appeared to be White (76%; n = 31), based upon descriptions found in each text. Three other races/ethnicities are represented, including Black (12%; n = 5), Hispanic (7%; n = 3), and Asian (5%; n = 2). Considering characters ages 6 to 21 (n = 24), most are White (83%; n = 20) with only three Black characters (13%; n = 3) and one Hispanic character (4%; n = 1). Racial/ethnic representation of Newbery characters is not proportionate to diverse students receiving special education services in the schools (USDE, 2009). White school-age characters with disabilities in Newbery books are overrepresented while Black and Hispanic characters are underrepresented. Asian/Pacific Islander and American Indian/Alaskan Native school-age characters with disabilities are not present at all.

A majority of the books reviewed include characters who lived in the U.S. (77%; n = 24), and approximately half of the books are set in the present day (52%; n = 16). The main focus of most of the Newbery books (77%; n = 24) was to include a character with a disability whose presence and disability impacts the story. The remaining seven books contained a character with a disability whose presence impacted the plot, but the disability was irrelevant to the plot. Only a few books (13%; n = 4) are told in first person by the character with the disability; most are told in first person from the point of view of a character without a disability, such as a friend or sibling (38%; n = 12), or from an omniscient point of view (48%; n = 15).

Almost half the characters with disabilities that were evaluated (42%; n = 16) had characters without disabilities that feared associating with them (e.g., in Because of Winn-Dixie, the Dewberry brothers are scared of Gloria because they think she’s a witch). Just over half of the characters with disabilities (53%; n = 20) had characters who experienced feelings of guilt in relation to them (e.g., in Getting Near to Baby, Little Sister’s mother feels guilty for sending her and her sister to live with their aunt). Many characters without disabilities (66%; n = 25) experienced positive changes because of their relationships with characters with disabilities (e.g., in Good Masters! Sweet Ladies! Jack befriends the miller’s son and helps him when other boys throw rocks at him).

Based on the personal portrayal ratings for each evaluated character with a disability, 84% (n = 32) of characters received an acceptable rating. Over time, the personal portrayal of characters with disabilities has improved, from an average rating of 2.0 (n = 9) for characters from 1975–1990 to an average rating of 2.5 (n = 28) for characters from 1991–2009 (See Figure 3).

Overall average ratings were calculated for personal portrayal, exemplary practices, social interactions, and sibling relationships (if applicable). These ratings were compared for each disability portrayed. Specific learning disability (n = 2) and visual impairment (n = 2) received the highest overall average ratings (2.7). Mental retardation (n = 5) and emotional disturbance (n = 5) received the lowest overall average ratings (2.0 and 1.9 respectively; See Figure 4).

Portrayal of Exemplary Practices

Most characters (87%; n = 33) received an acceptable rating for exemplary practices. The portrayal of exemplary practices associated with characters with disabilities has improved over time, from an average rating of 2.0 (n = 9) for characters in 1975–1990 to an average rating of 2.5 (n = 29) for characters in 1991–2009 (See Figure 3).
Portrayal of Social Interactions

Almost two-thirds of characters with disabilities (66%; n = 25) received an acceptable rating for social interactions. The portrayal of the social interactions of characters with disabilities in Newbery books has improved over time, from an average rating of 1.9 (n = 9) for characters in 1975–1990 to an average rating of 2.4 (n = 29) for characters in 1991–2009. See Figure 3 for a graphic representation of this increasing trend.

Sibling Relationships

Only 32% (n = 12) of the 38 characters that were evaluated are depicted in a sibling relationship, and most of these relationships (92%; n = 11) received an acceptable rating. The portrayal of sibling relationships has remained constant over time, with characters receiving an average rating of 2.4 (n = 4) for 1975–1990 and for 1991–2009 (n = 8).

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the portrayal of characters with disabilities in Newbery books from 1975–2009. A discussion of the results with examples from the books, limitations of the study, implications for practitioners, and suggestions for future research follow.

Portrayal of Characters with Disabilities

The most common portrayals of characters with disabilities in Newbery books are orthopedic impairments (e.g., Martha Wallis in One-Eyed Cat), emotional disturbance (e.g., Mrs. Tillerman in Dicey’s Song), and mental retardation (e.g., Joel in What Hearts). The least common portrayals of characters with disabilities are deaf-blindness (e.g., Mr. Randolph in The Great Gilly Hopkins), and developmental delay (e.g., Andrew in Yolonda’s Genius). Characters with a specific learning disability (e.g., Maybeth in Dicey’s Song) or a visual impairment (e.g., Squeaky in Dragon’s Gate) received the highest overall average ratings, while portrayals of characters with mental retardation and emotional disturbance received the lowest overall average ratings.

Discrepancies arise when comparing school-age characters with disabilities to students receiving special education services today. While the most commonly portrayed disabilities in school-age Newbery characters are mental retardation (e.g., Ronald in Crazy Lady), orthopedic impairment (e.g., Perkin in Catherine, Called Birdy), multiple disabilities (e.g., Dabney in Sweet Whispers, Brother Rush), and autism (e.g., Natalie in Al Capone Does My Shirts), the most common disabilities for students receiving services in the schools are specific learning disability, speech or language impairment, mental retardation, and other health impairment (USDE, 2009). Also, only one character had a speech or language impairment as a primary disability (Ton-Ton in The House of the
Scorpion), but two characters had a speech or language impairment in addition to another disability (Chris in The Westing Game and Jason in Rules) and were classified under multiple disabilities. Only two characters (Maybeth in Dicey’s Song and Ben in Whittington) are identified as having specific learning disabilities, both in the areas of reading, and only one character had a disability classified as other health impairment (Joey has ADHD in Joey Pigza Loses Control). Also, while specific learning disability was the most positively portrayed disability, mental retardation was one of the least positively portrayed disabilities. This is important, considering mental retardation is also one of the most commonly depicted disabilities in Newbery books and one of the most common disabilities of students receiving special education services in the schools (USDE, 2009). These results are similar to results from an analysis of Caldecott award-winning books, where the types of disabilities encountered in the books are not those that students are most likely to encounter (Dyches et al., 2006).

Newbery books have an overrepresentation of school-age characters with disabilities that are White and an underrepresentation of characters with disabilities that are Black and Hispanic as compared to IDEA data (USDE, 2009). Most school-age characters in Newbery books are White, while only three school-age

Figure 4. Overall average ratings of portrayal, exemplary practices, social interactions, and sibling relationships of Newbery characters by disability.
characters are Black (e.g., Sean in *Feathers, Dabney in *Sweet Whispers, Brother Rush, Andrew in *Yolonda’s Genius) and one was Hispanic (Ton-Ton in *The House of the Scorpion). No characters with disabilities are Asian/Pacific Islander or American Indian/Alaskan Native. Readers often identify better with characters with who possess similar traits (Dyches & Prater, 2000), yet few characters with disabilities from diverse cultural backgrounds are represented in Newbery books. This is not surprising given that historically Newbery books have not included many racially/ethnic diverse characters (Bader, 2002; Gillespie et al., 1994; Nisse, 2008).

Most characters with disabilities are supporting characters rather than main characters. Of those main characters with disabilities, all are children or adolescents (e.g., Billie Jo in *Out of the Dust, Penny in *Penny from Heaven). While about half the characters with disabilities had other characters who feared associating with them (e.g., Jason’s peers are afraid to interact with him because he is nonverbal and uses picture cards to communicate in *Rules) or experienced feelings of guilt (e.g., Billie Jo’s father blames himself for the accident that caused her disability in *Out of the Dust), most characters without disabilities experienced positive changes because of the relationship (President Roosevelt provides many jobs for the unemployed in *Eleanor Roosevelt: A Life of Discovery, Mrs. Olinski brings four unique sixth graders together to create an academic bowl team in *The View from Saturday, and Lester drives Mips and her friends to the hospital to see her injured father in *Savvy).

A discouraging element found in some of the books reviewed was authors eliminating the character with the disability at some point in the story. This was accomplished through removing the person from the home (e.g., Mrs. Connolly is sent to an institution in *Afternoon of the Elves and Ronald is sent to live with his aunt and uncle in *Crazy Lady) or death. Four characters die of natural causes (Mrs. Tillerman in *Dickey’s Song dies in a hospital in Boston, FDR in *Eleanor Roosevelt: A Life of Discovery dies of a cerebral hemorrhage, El Patron in *The House of the Scorpions dies from heart failure, and Dabney in *Sweet Whispers, Brother Rush dies from respiratory paralysis), one suffers an accidental death (Crane-man, in *A Single Shard is jostled off a bridge by an overloaded cart), and one commits suicide (Adam in *A Corner of the Universe hangs himself in the shed). When authors eliminate characters with disabilities, a message is conveyed to readers that these individuals should be “remembered fondly and sadly but not confronted” (Rudman, 1995, p. 308).

Another way authors dealt with characters with disabilities is to eliminate the character’s disability through miraculous cures. For instance, Little Sister, who has selective mutism and had not talked for months in *Getting Near to Baby, inexplicably begins talking at the end of the story and said her voice had been lost in sadness. In *Penny from Heaven, Penny loses the use of her arm and fingers in a wringer accident, then miraculously regains their use when she reaches for her lucky bean. In *The Westing Game, Dr. Denton Deere, 15-year old Chris’ partner in the game, suggests that Chris has “pyramidal tract involvement.” At age 11 Chris began having difficulty speaking and controlling his arms and legs, resulting in the necessity of using a wheelchair. Later he receives a new medication that keeps his limbs steady and his speech well-controlled. While Chris’ condition is never medically verified in the story, and experimental research was being conducted to treat speech and movement disorders in the 1970s, it is not likely that during this time period that one single medication could control both Chris’ speech and muscle movements.

Newbery characters with disabilities are often used to facilitate the growth or development of characters without disabilities. In *Rules, Catherine comes to understand and accept her younger brother, David, who has autism. Throughout the book David shows little development, serving primarily as a catalyst for Catherine’s emotional growth. Character representations like these do not represent the full range of contributions of characters with disabilities (Prater & Dyches, 2008). More portrayals that show positive contributions of characters with disabilities are needed. An example of this is Jack in *Good Masters! Sweet Ladies! Despite his intellectual disability, Jack saves money to buy a cow for his family, helps gather their hens’ eggs, and befriends another boy who is teased by other village boys.
Most stories are not told from the point of view of the character with the disability. For example, in *Missing May*, Summer tells the story of her Uncle Ob, who has an orthopedic impairment and in *The Moves Make the Man*, Jerome tells of his friend Bix, who has an emotional disturbance. Only a few stories are told from the point of view of the character with the disability, such as Joey in *Joey Pigza Loses Control* and Jack and Constance in *Good Masters! Sweet Ladies!*. Books that are written from the point of view of the character with a disability allow the reader to gain greater insight into their lives (Prater & Dyches, 2008).

The personal portrayal, exemplary practices, social interactions, and sibling relationships depicted in Newbery books are generally positive and showed improvement over time. Examples illustrating these dimensions are presented below.

**Personal portrayal.** Most personal portrayals of characters with disabilities in the Newbery books are positive. For example, Crane-man, in *A Single Shard*, was born with a shriveled and twisted calf. Crane-man is able to take care of himself and Tree-ear, an orphan Crane-man raises as his son. Crane-man gathers food for them to eat, makes himself a new crutch when it breaks, and weaves mats and sandals. Crane-man tells Tree-ear that he does not spend time feeling sorry about something he cannot change and knows that he will have two good legs when he leaves this world. An example of a negative personal portrayal is Mack in *Scorpions*, who has an intellectual disability. Sixteen-year-old Mack is the second oldest of the Scorpions gang in Harlem. He convinces 12-year old Jamal to vie for leadership of the gang and gives him a gun to assert his authority. Mack drinks alcohol and uses drugs, has been imprisoned for various charges, and eventually lies his way into becoming the leader of the Scorpions gang.

**Exemplary practices.** Exemplary practices for characters with disabilities are also generally positive. For example, in *Feathers*, Sean was born deaf and uses sign language, lip reading, and a TTY phone to communicate with others. His sister and parents are fluent signers and they view Sean’s deafness not as a disability, but just a part of who he is. Sean is good looking, does well in math, and plays basketball at the “rec” center with hearing and non-hearing boys. Although he attends a separate school from his peers, this is not uncommon for his disability (USDE, 2009). *Sweet Whispers, Brother Rush* is an example of a book including few exemplary practices. Dabney, who has multiple disabilities (mental retardation and other health impairment), attends school; however, no special education classes, activities, or friends are mentioned. Dabney spends most of his time at home with his younger sister, Tree, who takes care of him. Dabney’s mother physically abused him when he was little, is away from home most of the time, and does not want to face Dabney’s disabilities. Dabney does not receive medical help for his porphyria (a condition affecting his nervous system and skin) until it is too late and he dies from respiratory paralysis.

**Social interactions.** Many of the social interactions of characters with disabilities are positive. For instance, in *Catherine, Called Birdy*, Catherine, the daughter of an English knight, is best friends with Perkin, the “goat boy.” He has one leg that is much shorter than the other and lives with his grandmother in a cottage. Perkin pays one goat each year for his grandmother’s rent, and is described by Catherine as clever, wise, and kind. Perkin and Catherine’s relationship is reciprocal and full of fun and teasing. Perkin teaches Catherine things like the names of birds and how to forecast weather from looking at the sky, while Catherine teaches Perkin to read and confronts some boys who imitate Perkin’s unique way of walking. Catherine eventually gives Perkin money to buy his freedom so he can become a scholar. An example of a character with a disability having negative social interactions with others is Miggery Sow in *The Tale of Despereaux*. Mig was sold by her father (who named her after his prize-winning pig) to a man who beat her until she lost most of her hearing. She is later taken to the castle to work as a servant in the kitchen and is treated poorly by everyone except the Princess Pea. Mig thinks mainly of herself and her dream to become a princess, so she aids Roscuro the rat in kidnapping the Princess Pea. The princess feels sorry for Mig and eventually Mig is returned to her father who treats her like a princess, but this is mainly out of his feelings of guilt.
Sibling relationships. While only a third of the characters with disabilities have siblings, and the portrayal of sibling relationships has remained fairly stable over time, most of these relationships are depicted positively. For example, in Whittington and Dicey's Song, Ben’s sister and Maybeth’s brother help teach the characters with disabilities how to read, in Rules Catherine develops rules for David so he can interact better with others, in Al Capone Does My Shirts Moose helps Natalie get accepted to a special school, and in Feathers Frannie interprets for her brother Sean, who is deaf. Sibling relationships are important because they are often the first, most intense, and longest peer relation a person will have (Mandleco, Olsen, Marshall, & Dyches, 2003).

Limitations

A few limitations to this study should be noted. First, it is possible that not all main or supporting characters with disabilities in Newbery books were identified and evaluated. It is possible that some characters were missed because they were not included in the sources consulted by the researchers, although attempts were made to avoid omissions by seeking information from multiple sources.

Second, there are areas of possible bias in the determination of which characters with disabilities were eligible for evaluation. The researchers judged whether or not a character’s disability was serious enough to warrant special education or related services in a school setting according to IDEA standards. This limitation was addressed by consulting the IDEA definitions of each disability as well as consulting with knowledgeable professionals in the field of special education.

Finally, characters with disabilities were evaluated according to today’s standards. This meant that books set in different time periods (e.g., A Single Shard, set in Korea in the 1100s) may not have depicted best practices or positive attitudes towards characters with disabilities. Although these depictions may have been accurate for the time, they may have also lowered the book’s rating. Historical books can serve as a springboard for discussions with students about how our attitudes and treatment of individuals with disabilities have changed over time.

Implications for Practice

Future books could include characters with disabilities from more culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds; portray disabilities commonly encountered in school settings today (e.g., specific learning disability and speech or language impairment); depict certain disabilities (e.g., emotional disturbance and mental retardation) more positively; depict more characters with disabilities as main characters that tell the story from their point of view; and continue to include positive, yet realistic sibling relationships. More books are needed that are set in the present day with characters whose disability is not the focus of the book but just part of the description of who they are. Improvements in these areas may help children and adolescents reading these books relate better to the characters with disabilities. Since students with and without disabilities are interacting frequently in and out of school (USDE, 2009; Yell, 2006), a call for more accurate portrayals of characters with disabilities in Newbery books is warranted.

Future Research

This study focused on evaluating the portrayal of characters with disabilities in Newbery books, but there are several potential areas for future research. This study could be extended to evaluate Newbery books from 1922–1974. The portrayal of characters with disabilities in these books could be compared with the results of this study. Because not all children and adolescents were guaranteed a free, appropriate education before 1975, it is possible that earlier Newbery books do not reflect exemplary practices or positive attitudes towards characters with disabilities.

Although an evaluation of the portrayal of characters with disabilities in Caldecott books has already been conducted (Dyches et al., 2006), the results of these two studies could be compared. The current study identified no main or supporting characters with disabilities under the age of six. The Caldecott books are more likely to include younger characters since picture books are meant for a younger audience. Comparisons between the picture and chapter books could be made, as well as
between younger and older characters with disabilities.

Future research could also compare the portrayal of characters with disabilities in Newbery books with other award-winning books. Awards such as the Boston Globe-Horn Book Award or the American Library Association Notable Books for Children Award could be considered for use as a comparison against the Newbery books.

Studies could also be conducted that survey teachers’ use of Newbery books in the classroom. A guide containing recommended Newbery books with characters with disabilities and ways to use the books in the classroom could be developed. This may foster students’ understanding of individuals with disabilities as well as the development of reading and critical thinking skills.

Conclusion

The personal portrayal, exemplary practices, social interactions, and sibling relationships associated with characters with disabilities in Newbery books are generally positive and have improved over time. Despite this general trend, books vary in their depiction of disabilities and certain concerning themes were identified, such as elimination of the character with the disability or miraculous cures. Most characters with disabilities are supporting characters and are used mainly to facilitate the emotional growth of characters without disabilities. Very few stories are told from the point of view of the character with the disability. Another area of concern was the discrepancies between school-age Newbery characters with disabilities and students receiving special education services today. Care should be taken by parents and school professionals to choose books that accurately and positively portray characters with disabilities. As Catherine recommends in Rules to her brother David, who has autism, “If you can only choose one, pick carefully” (Lord, 2006, p. 85).

Children and adolescents reading Newbery books will encounter many memorable characters that face similar struggles of making friends, fitting in, doing well in school, dealing with loss, and being happy in spite of difficult situations. When non-disabled students identify with characters with disabilities, they may begin to understand that they have more in common with their classmates with disabilities than they previously thought. Also, characters with disabilities in Newbery books may serve as a catalyst for students with disabilities as they continue to more fully understand themselves and develop life skills to work through their own challenges.

References


### Juvenile Literature Cited


