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Behavioral Issues, Self-Esteem Struggles, Retention, and More: The Portrayal of Book Characters with Dyslexia

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Abstract

This study examined children's and adolescent trade books portraying school-age characters with dyslexia. All of the books are contemporary realistic fiction, geared to elementary and adolescent readers, and published in the United States between 1993 and 2003. After an extensive search, seventy-two books were located. An analysis of the characters' strengths and difficulties is discussed. Also behavioral characteristics and self-esteem struggles are noted. Furthermore, the article addresses the issue of grade retention and the history of characters' family members with dyslexia.

The power of literature has been a topic of discussion with educators at conferences and in professional publications for years. In fact, it has been suggested by numerous researchers that using children's literature containing characters with disabilities can influence attitudes and feelings toward disabilities (Andrews, 1998; Favazza & Odom, 1997; Radencich, 1986). Also literature can be used as bibliotherapy material to help children and adolescents work through issues with which they may be struggling (Sridhar & Vaughn, 2000). In one study, Monson and Shurtleff (1979) found that children had positive attitudinal change toward dis-

abilities if they either read literature portraying the disability or had the literature read to them by others.

These studies have also lead to many practitioner-oriented pieces encouraging the use of children's and adolescent literature to help people better understand disabilities (e.g., Andrews, 1998; Blaska & Lynch, 1998; Hopkins, 1980). Since many theorists and researchers in the field of literacy are encouraging the use of literature to influence attitudes, impact values, and develop a better understanding of others, it is imperative that there be an awareness of how characters are being portrayed in the texts.

Fictional stories, which take place in the world as we know it, are referred to as contemporary realistic fiction (Norton & Norton, 2002). Everything that happens in contemporary realistic fiction could happen in the world today. There are no elements of fantasy in these stories, and the stories do not take place in a historical time period. Therefore, in this genre, children often read about real issues they may experience and situations they may encounter. According to Hancock (2004), contemporary realistic fiction is especially valuable because it allows readers to "gain insights into challenging situations they are facing or may face" (p. 130).

It seems only natural that if children and adolescents are reading these contemporary realistic fiction books, then studies would be conducted to examine the texts to determine exactly what is presented. Past research has done just that. In fact, analyzing characters who struggle with educational issues in books targeting children and adolescents is not new. A number of studies have examined the portrayal of characters with disabilities in general (Ayala, 1999), while others have looked at the portrayal of those with mental retardation (Prater, 1999), dealing with autism (Dyches, Cramer & Prater, 2001), and struggling with learning disabilities (Dyches & Prater, 2005). However, it is almost impossible to locate research which specifically examines the portrayal of characters with dyslexia. One recent study did examine book characters who were dealing with dyslexia. This quantitative study (Altieri, 2006) examined the issues facing characters with dyslexia and the gender of the character in order to determine if there was a statistically significant relationship between the gender of the character and the type of issues encountered. The extremely limited amount of research may be due to the fact that dyslexia is a very controversial subject in the educational community.

While debates surrounding the topic of dyslexia continue within literacy studies, there is one aspect on which most people agree. Dyslexia impacts language processing, but it is not due to low intelligence, lack of motivation, poor

instruction, vision or hearing problems, cultural disadvantages, or other extrinsic factors (Richards, 1999). This difficulty in developing expected literacy skills such as language processing has other ramifications on children impacted by dyslexia. Research has shown that children experiencing dyslexia often are self-conscious and feel something is wrong with them (McNulty, 2003). Children with dyslexia also have a great deal of self-doubt. Researchers have often stated that this is a result of school experiences (Riddick, 1995; Rubin, 2002). We cannot afford to have stereotypical literature, or literature inaccurately portraying characters with dyslexia, add to the problems experienced in school by children with dyslexia. Knowing this, it is important to closely examine the characters with dyslexia portrayed in literature. This study will specifically examine school-age characters with dyslexia so that we can better understand how these books portray the characters. We will look at the characters' strengths and difficulties mentioned in the texts as well as behavioral characteristics and self-esteem struggles will be noted. Furthermore, the article addresses the issue of grade retention and the characters' family members with dyslexia.

Method

Materials

Numerous sources were consulted in order to locate books portraying school-age children with dyslexia. Over a period of two years, the researcher searched two websites (www.dyslexia-parent.com, and www.interdys.com), three internet bookstores (www.amazon.com, www.barnesandnoble.com, and www.specialneeds.com), and the electronic version of *Books in Print*. These sources were searched repeatedly during that time as recently published books did not show up immediately on the websites. Two media specialists also supplied lists of books they had located on the topic. Articles containing lists of books portraying characters with dyslexia were also examined. The realization that there were far more books published than had been expected made me decide to narrow the range of books examined.

As previously discussed, only contemporary realistic fiction, or books which take place in the world as we know it (Norton & Norton, 2002), were used in the current study. However, it was also determined that all of the books selected for the study would contain a school-age central character with dyslexia. Some of the original books had older adults who had dyslexia but the researcher wanted to focus solely on characters with dyslexia who were children and adolescents since that was

the target audience for all the books. It was determined that all books had to be originally published in the United States, and that they must be published relatively recently, between 1993 and 2003. After examining all of the above sources, a total of seventy-two books were included in the study. A grant received by the author allowed the purchase of all of the books. Specific texts mentioned in this article, as well as selected books portraying school-age characters with dyslexia published since this study, are listed in an annotated bibliography at the end of this article.

Procedures

Each book was read and analyzed multiple times. Passages were copied, and charted for each text. On each chart, the researcher listed the title of book, age and gender of character, and format of book. Noted in detail was the following information: strengths, difficulties, behavioral issues, self-esteem issues, grade retention, and family members with dyslexia.

Results and Discussion

Overall Findings

Out of 72 books included in this study, there were 55 female characters with dyslexia and 17 male. While the total number of books appeared to be significant, that was due in large part to one particular series geared toward young girls. The largest series included in this study was Betancourt's *Pony Pal* books. These chapter books contain a female character, Anna, who has dyslexia. Forty-two of the books in the study were from that series. There were even more books in the series that were not used in the study because the texts did not fall within the publication date specified for the research. While there were other series in the study, including ones by Goodman, Baglio, Rue, and Winkler, the largest number of individual series books included by these authors was three. None of those series were near the size of the *Pony Pal* series. Thus, while it was evident that there is a disproportionate number of female characters in the books with dyslexia, this is due to the fact that many of the books were part of a larger series. It is important to note the gender imbalance as research has shown that children tend to prefer to read about characters of their own gender (Bleakley, 1988). It is therefore evident that male readers will have far fewer texts to select from with male characters who are dyslexic. If one were to examine the books used in the study, and only counted each book

character with dyslexia once, one would find that there were a total of 26 unique characters with dyslexia. Of these, 12 are female and 14 are male.

Along with gender, another issue to consider is the age of the characters portrayed with dyslexia in the books. 78% of the books portrayed children in fifth grade or lower. Therefore, while younger readers may have a number of books to read, the book choice is limited for older children. Middle school adolescents have very few books portraying characters with dyslexia in their age range. Unless older children choose to read about younger characters, they will be much less apt to read about a character who experiences dyslexia.

The format of the texts were also examined. It was determined that four of the books were picture books, or books where pictures are as important as the text in conveying meaning. One of those books was even quite lengthy and would probably not be read with very young children. While this is unfortunate, it is not surprising as research has shown similarly low percentages for picture books portraying learning disabilities (Prater, 2003).

When Prater (1999) examined the percentage of books portraying characters with mental retardation, the number of picture books was much higher. However, mental retardation is often diagnosed quite young which is not true with many other disabilities. Dyslexia, like most learning disabilities, is normally not diagnosed at an extremely young age rather it is regularly not formally tested until school age. That may account in part to why there are so few picture books with characters who have dyslexia. However, picture books could still portray school age children, older siblings, etc. with dyslexia to broaden the reading experiences for very young children.

One finding was particularly interesting. Recent research on learning disabilities (Prater, 2003) looked at a large number of books and found that the term "dyslexia" was rarely used in children's books. The author would instead choose another term to refer to the character such as "struggling reader." That was not found to be true in this current study. In fact, 77% of the unique characters in the books analyzed for this study were referred to as having dyslexia. That is an interesting finding because the word dyslexia is still considered to be controversial, but it may show a trend that authors are becoming more comfortable with using the term in their stories.

It is important to take a closer look at each of the characters therefore an examination of their strengths and difficulties follows. Also, since research has shown that children and adolescents labeled as dyslexic have had issues with a positive

self-concept, the self-esteem of the characters will be noted and any of their behavioral problems will be discussed. Finally, grade retention of the characters and a look at whether their ancestors were noted as having dyslexia will be examined.

Character Strengths

It was evident from reading the books that while the characters with dyslexia had a wide variety of strengths, a few types were noted repeatedly. The most common strength noted was memory. For 42% of the characters with dyslexia, having a “photographic memory” was viewed as an asset. In Winkler & Oliver’s Hank Zipzer series, Hank was often seen bragging about his ability to recall details. A photographic memory also helped Delia, the female protagonist in *Double Dutch* (Draper, 2002), hide her dyslexia for years from her family, friends, and teachers. Maddie, in *Under the Stars* (Baglio, 2000), also states that she can remember 100% on spoken Spanish tests.

The second most common strength mentioned in the books was physical ability which could be shown in a variety of ways. In this study, 38% of the characters talked about being very good at climbing, ball handling, gymnastics, or sports. The characters would often talk about being chosen first for teams because of their physical ability. However, it was evident that strength and physical ability were related to the gender of the character with dyslexia. It was much more common for boys than girls to have this particular strength. In fact, seven of the ten unique characters with this strength were male.

Finally, characters with dyslexia were also described as good at working with their hands and talented with drawing and/or art. It was interesting to note that equal numbers of males and females were good at working with their hands. It was not dependent on whether the character was a boy or a girl. In fact, it appears 19% of the characters clearly were talented with fixing a flat tire on a bike, lawn mowers, or even a gurgling toilet. However, drawing and art were heavily related to the gender of the character.

Character Difficulties

While the characters exhibited difficulty with reading and spelling, the primary symptoms associated with dyslexia (Pennington, 1991), math proved to create problems for many of the characters. 62% of the unique characters tended to have difficulty with math. For some of those characters the struggle was due to difficulty reading word problems or writing down steps, which might be seen more as a

reading and writing issue. However, that was not the only area of math which created problems for the characters as many others also struggled with remembering math facts. The next most common difficulty found was social skill (38%). A lack of friends was mentioned for some of the characters, and frequently there was teasing by other children. Also, while having a photographic memory was considered a strength for many of the characters in the books, for 27% of the characters with dyslexia, memory was a difficulty. Finally, oral speech also created issues for 23% of the characters.

Behavioral Issues and Self Esteem

It was evident that 50% of the characters either exhibited behavioral problems in the stories or referenced coping mechanisms that had to be implemented to deal with behavioral issues. In some books, like the Zipzer series, the character was a class clown. However, in others, like *McCracken's Class #5: Tough Luck, Ronnie* (Oliver, 1994), the character with dyslexia was a bully feared by many students.

In over 70% of the books, the characters exhibited very low self-esteem through comments they made about themselves. Unfortunately, two very common words that were repeatedly stated in the stories were “stupid” and “dumb.” Hank Zipzer even states at one point, “I’m the stupidest person in the world (Winkler & Oliver, 2003, p. 109) and in *Bronx Masquerade* (Grimes, 2002), the male character with dyslexia states that everyone thought, “I was three degrees below a moron” (p. 124). Delia in *Double Dutch* (Draper, 2002) even refers to herself as “dumb as a rock” (p. 66). Unfortunately, this attitude is often mirrored in others’ views. In *McCracken's Class #5: Tough Luck, Ronnie* (Oliver, 1994), Ronnie’s mother tells her at one point that “I have never seen such a dumb kid” and “A roach has more brains than you!” (p. 93).

Research supports that children and adolescents with learning disorders have been shown to have a low self-concept and a sense of hopelessness that impedes future success (Brooks, 2001; McNulty, 2003; Ryan, 1994). Studies have also shown that interventions focusing on low self-esteem along with academic support often help people with dyslexia (Rawson, 1977; Scott, Scherman & Phillips, 1992). Realistic fiction should help the reader realize that it is possible to deal with problems and take control of them (Hancock, 2004). Since research has shown that those with dyslexia have a low self esteem, we don’t want literature to add to this problem. Readers should have the opportunity to see characters that work through their struggles and successfully manage their dyslexia.

Grade Retention

The idea of retaining a character because the child was not making appropriate literacy progress was fairly common in the stories. In 27% of the books read, the character struggling with dyslexia was retained a grade, and in many other books retention was threatened as a possibility if the character did not improve academically. Research has shown that signs of difficulties which may be associated with dyslexia can begin very young (Pennington, 1991). In fact, Pikulski (1996) stresses that early diagnosis is critical to helping children with dyslexia succeed. Unfortunately, it appeared that this often did not come early in life for the characters in the books. The disadvantages of grade retention are well documented in published research (Jimerson, Petcher, Graydon, Schnurr, Nickerson, & Kundert, 2006; Silbergitt, Appleton, & Burns, 2006). In fact, for many students the only more stressful event they can imagine would be going blind or losing a parent (Anderson, Jimerson, & Whipple, 2005). However, the scary prospect of being retained was a very real threat used in many of the stories.

Family Members with Dyslexia

Dyslexia has been shown to have a genetic link (Torppa, Tolvanen, Poikkeus, Eklund, Lerkkanen, Leskinen, & Lyytinen, 2007). Therefore, whether or not the characters in the books had older family members with dyslexia was noted. 27% of the characters with dyslexia in the stories had parents or grandparents who experienced similar literacy difficulties when they were young. However, within the pages of these texts, it was not unusual for the author to note that these difficulties often went undiagnosed. In the books examined, there was only one instance where the author referred to the parent as dyslexic. Since the first generation of people that were formally diagnosed with dyslexia are just now adults (McNulty, 2003), the books are accurate in not representing grandparents, and in some cases parents, as formally diagnosed but instead stating that they exhibited characteristics of dyslexia.

The gender of older relatives who experienced dyslexia was also noted. For all but two of the characters, the literacy difficulty involved a male relative. While some researchers believe that the ratio of males to females with dyslexia may be as high as 4.51 to one (Miles, Haslum & Wheeler, 1998), several studies (Lubs, Rabin, Feldman, Jallad, Kushch, Gross-Glenn, 1993; Shaywitz, Shaywitz, Fletcher, & Escobar, 1990) found the imbalance only to be true with school-identified children, and it may be as equal as a one-to-one ratio. Since the difficulties with these

characters' relatives were often not formally diagnosed, one would expect that the ratio could be much closer to one to one.

Recommendations for Future Research

The current research looked at one genre, contemporary realistic fiction. Future research may want to examine other genres. It would be especially interesting to see how dyslexia is portrayed in autobiographies and biographies written for children and adolescents. Also, all of the books were originally published in the United States so studies conducted on books published in other countries could have different findings. There are a number of adolescent books published in Canada, the United Kingdom, and other countries containing a character with dyslexia which might be another area to examine. Finally, more of a historical analysis may be enlightening as this would enable educators to determine how and if the portrayal of dyslexia has changed over time. Dyslexia is a controversial subject, and yet it is a term being used in literature. Therefore, it is vital that research continue to examine how it is portrayed in the literature accessible to children.

Educational Implications of This Study

Contemporary realistic fiction is designed to help readers see themselves in books and to also allow them to look at people and experiences that may be outside their immediate experiences. Since people in the educational field continue to tout the benefits of exposing children to a wide variety of literature, we must examine the available literature portraying characters with dyslexia. It is evident that until recently the term dyslexia was rarely used in children's books. While we are still extremely limited in the number of picture books and books portraying male characters with dyslexia, it is important that we begin to examine those which are available. We need to closely examine the portrayal of children's and adolescents' literature to determine if the portrayal is accurate and helping children understand dyslexia or merely perpetuating myths and stereotypes or glossing over the issue. Only through careful analysis and selection of books can we ensure that the literature we choose will benefit children.

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- Baglio, B. M. (2000). *Dolphin diaries #4: Under the stars*. New York: Scholastic.
Many children would dream about living an adventurous life like the children in this story as this family travels around studying dolphins. Brittany, whose dad is the boat's captain, is also along for the journey. However, when the McGrath's assistant, Maddie, begins to home school the McGrath children and Brittany, the trouble for Brittany begins.
- Beckhorn, S. W. (2003). *Sarey by lantern light*. Camden, ME: Down East Books.
Sarey struggles with reading and children making fun of her. When her parents decide to move to a rural location, Sarey's struggles do not end. However, in the new home, she makes her first true friend and begins to get help with her dyslexia. When she saves her Pa's life, her father realizes that Sarey can now read well.
- Draper, S. M. (2002). *Double dutch*. New York, NY: Athenenum.
Delia, a high school student, has managed to hide her inability to read due to a series of incompetent teachers. As she finds out she must pass a state exam to continue competing on the double dutch team, it becomes clear that Delia isn't the only student hiding secrets in the story.
- Gilson, J. (1997). *Do bananas chew gum?* New York: HarperTrophy.
This story is about a male protagonist, Sam Motts. Sam's reading difficulties create a lot of problems with school and in his latest job, babysitting a second grader. Along with struggling with reading, Sam deals with a move to a new school, listening to his parents argue about his difficulties, and getting scheduled for even more of the dreaded testing.

Grimes, N. (2002). *Bronx masquerade*. New York: Penguin Group.

This text won the Coretta Scott King Award. When innovative English teacher, Mr. Ward, starts Open Mike in class, eighteen voices speak up. Through the poetry shared during Open Mike, the reader learns about each of the voices and the person behind them. One of the students struggles with reading difficulties.

Janover, C. (2004). *Josh: A Boy with dyslexia*. Backinprint.com.

This book has had numerous printings. Josh, a ten year old boy, struggles with dyslexia. Life is going well until his family decides to move. Once again the dyslexia creates more struggles for him. Josh's life is turned upside down when he must deal with a bully. Josh, like any child, yearns for respect and friendship. The book ends by discussing the characteristics of dyslexia and sharing a list of organizations which may be consulted.

Lester, T. (1999). *Welcome to dyslexic park*. Fresno, CA: Poppy Lane Publishing.

This story is told through the eyes of a 12-year-old boy, Tyler, who has dyslexia. While he talks about his struggles with reading, he also talks about his many successes. Children will enjoy reading the note at the end detailing Tyler's life now.

Oliver, D. (1994). *McCracken's class #5: Tough luck, Ronnie*. New York: Random House.

Children fear Ronnie. She is the class bully and desperately needs a tutor. The adventures begin when the teacher assigns Ronnie to fellow student Rosa, the class brain, for tutoring. The fifth-grade student fears that Ronnie will cause her physical harm, but instead Rosa helps the teacher better understand Ronnie's difficulties.

Peterseil, T. (1996). *The safe place*. New York: Pitspopany Press.

Kinneret Pfeiffer, an Israeli girl struggles with language difficulties. Like many struggling readers, her parents are disappointed at her educational progress. In fifth grade, Kinneret meets a special resource room teacher who gives her hope and respect. While it is evident that Kinneret is starting to do better, the reader realizes that her future will not be easy.

Polacco, P. (1998). *Thank you, Mr. Falker*. New York: Philomel Books.

Trisha, like most children, can't wait to start school. However, her many reading difficulties create a great deal of heartache for her until fifth grade when she meets an amazing teacher. The author dedicates this book to George Felker, the real Mr. Falker, who is a hero to her.

Robb, D. B. (2004). *The alphabet war: A story about dyslexia*. Morton Grove, IL: Albert Whitman & Company.

When Adam starts having to put words together in first grade, the alphabet war begins. Adam struggles to read, and by the end of second grade feels hopeless about his situation. Finally, in third grade he begins to receive help for his reading difficulties, and

he realizes that it is more important to focus on the things he can do than focus on those he can't.

Rorby, G. (1996). *Dolphin sky*. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons.

Buddy struggles with her inability to read. Her one true human friend is her grandfather, who understands her. Then she meets Jane, a compassionate woman who helps her deal with her difficulties. The reader will want to cry along with Buddy, a very believable character who deals with more than her fair share of heartaches as she struggles to save some dolphins, help her grandfather, and conquer her difficulties. The book ends with an epilogue and a glossary written by Buddy.

Root, A., & Gladden, L. (1995). *Charlie's challenge*. Temple, TX: Printmaster Press.

Charlie Cooper wants to build a castle and win first prize in a toy store contest. He struggles to understand how he can build such an amazing castle and yet has to get help to write his name on the entry. The teacher recognizes that he may have a learning difficulty and through testing, and then being taught by a special teacher, Charlie realizes that he can do anything.

Stern, R., & Worcester, H. P. (2003). *Beryl E. Bean #3: Adventure Lonely leader*. New York: HarperCollins Children's Books.

Poor Beryl is busy making plans to be elected Spring Leader in her class when Alex, the son of a family friend, moves into the house. Unfortunately, Alex is instantly popular with the other students, and it is going to be a tough race between Alex, who struggles with dyslexia, and Beryl for Spring Leader. In this chapter book Beryl learns about Alex's dyslexia and about working with people.

Winkler, H., & Oliver, L. (2003). *Hank Zipzer: I got a "D" in salami*. New York: Grosset & Dunlap.

This book is part of a series. The humorous occurrences in Hank's life continue in this book. Poor Hank is now faced with showing his report card to his parents. However, what is a guy to do when his report card accidentally gets chopped up in a new batch of salami his mom plans to deliver? Hank and his friends are faced with yet another dilemma.

About the Author:

Jennifer L. Altieri teaches graduate courses in literacy education at The Citadel. In the past few years, she has published in *Teaching Exceptional Children*, *Teaching Children Mathematics*, and *Reading Research and Instruction*. Dr. Altieri was one of the educators recently featured in *SC Biz* magazine's Who's Who in South Carolina. She also serves on the IRA Standards 2010 Committee.