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Representing Disability in the English Classroom

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Introducing the topic of disability in the English classroom

A basic claim of all intercultural education is that classrooms should welcome diversity and address equity issues in terms of gender, class, ethnicity and/or disability. This paper addresses the topic of presenting disability in the English classroom through children's books. To render disability visible and to discuss it in the English classroom may promote a transformative perception of reality (inclusive of disability and diversity). Only by including diversity of personal and cultural situations will materials in the English classroom address the social and personal realities of children and young people in all their diversity. This means that the author subscribes to the idea that transformation of societies can come about through change of ideological assumptions, and that this change can be read off books and promoted through guided responses to books. So, on the one hand, the article addresses which books on disability to choose, and how; while, on the other hand, it addresses how to approach the reading of particular books. Such a project must be situated within the social model of disability (as against the medical definition of disability that looks up to medical intervention to resolve problems), which describes the social barriers that work against equal opportunities and requires social change (Saunders). The idea of exclusion and inclusion, and of disability, that will emerge from the selected materials and reading approaches, presented in this article, is not connected to special education, instruction, or school organization. It goes beyond the focus on disabled children to reading materials in the classroom for *all* children. It explores feelings of exclusion from familiar backgrounds or from social opportunities. It highlights how difficult it is, sometimes, to integrate in society, to have similar rights and learn in alternative ways. It looks at

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the wider social contexts of contemporary societies and challenges discrimination based on disability.

The article also claims that introducing materials, such as books and pictures in books, that represent disability is no easy task and requires, on the one hand, willingness to see disability as part of contemporary societies and as a curricular topic; and, on the other hand, it requires criteria for choosing books and reading guidelines that will ensure a bias-free discussion of disability and promote change of perception in pupils. Rather than putting forward a list of titles of children's fiction that might be included in the English classroom as positive representations of disability, the article offers teachers and teacher trainers scope for reflection on how to choose the appropriate reading materials for their own classrooms and specific educational contexts. Ideas to generate thought and reflection around children's books on disability will be drawn from research and from one particular *Booktrust* initiative called the *Booktouch* project and its report *Making Exclusion a Thing of the Past: Children's Views on Disability in Book*. Thus, our broad aim is to show elementary teachers, teacher trainers, librarians and parents how it is possible to promote intercultural education and explore disability issues in the English classroom through pedagogical resources that facilitate choice of quality children's books and an interpretive reading framework that might facilitate change of perception in pupils. This framework is developed from within a critical non-discriminatory pedagogy that identifies causes of disability; feelings and reactions to it; self-images and hetero-images of disabled characters; critical incidents and resolutions. It also throws light on power relations and values the transformation of discriminatory realities.

Children's books as inclusive practice

The article works from the assumption that 'mainstream school and society often know little about disability and, despite some valuable instances of inclusion, continue to exclude disabled people from experiences available to other citizens' (Ballard 174) or to exclude the topic from the classroom. In fact, most teachers will not have consciously perceived the importance of looking at representations of disability in children's books in the English classroom, since it is not a topic that deserves consistent representation in most manuals or in children's fiction. As

highlighted by Brenna, the fact that books centering on characters with special needs miss the awards lists serves to continue the marginalization of people with disabilities (Brenna 100).

However, in increasingly more multicultural and inclusive societies it is important to lead children to think about issues of disability in the wider context of representation of difference and diversity and to include the topic in systematic ways. By 'systematic' we do not mean that the topic should be dealt explicitly with in the English classroom, but rather that it is desirable that the many issues surrounding the representation of disability are truthfully and adequately treated and that its representation should be transversal to most learning materials. The early years seem to be critical for understanding disability and generating positive attitudes and perceptions towards it (Innes and Diamond, qtd. by Matthew and Clow 68), though this is a topic that might be addressed at any age and educational level.

In education, researchers have shown that using quality children's books which portray dynamic characters with disabilities may be an effective teaching tool for the inclusive classroom because books can provide positive role models and promote understanding as well change realities into more inclusive places (Sotto and Ball 40). It has also been shown that through books children may be more willing to talk about their feelings about disability (Inquinta and Hipsky).

Research in the area of children's books and intercultural education has pointed to several ways through which societal pressures for exclusion may be removed. Children's books and fictional materials are particularly useful to confront children, through personal and emotional engagement, with unfamiliar situations and ideas, good and bad solutions, and to challenge readers to make connections between what they read about and their living contexts, especially when there are unexpected events and interpretations that differ from theirs. 'Books send very strong signals to children about themselves – who they are, what they can do, who they can be, and who is different from them' (Lewis). Books are believed to address hearts rather than facts and to define – for children – what is 'normal', 'acceptable', 'worthwhile' as well as what is invisible and devalued (Cole and Valentine). Rosenblatt (1991) stresses literature's role to develop a sense of empathy for people who face discrimination. Several other authors, among which many bibliotherapists, will highlight the need and the right of all children to see

themselves represented, in their diversity, in children's books. Others, such as Matthew and Clow, will defend that inclusion of reading materials about disability and 'special people' should not be viewed as a separate activity, but be included in a casual way as part of the everyday contact of children with fiction. Matthew and Clow conclude through focus group discussions with youth librarians that 'casual inclusion of images of disabled people in everyday children's books would be a better solution' to the lack of good examples of inclusive books (67). This way books would be 'images that reflect the real world' (67).

Reading will not change realities, but it may well constitute 'a first step toward changing attitudes and building relationships' (Smith-D'Arezzo 92). Smith-D'Arezzo also claims that characters in literature may be used as a strategy to introduce children in classrooms to peers who have disabilities and to teach children about diversity. Teaching about diversity, social justice and social issues should be the main focus to reduce prejudice. However, she also makes it very clear that defining appropriate criteria for selecting books is as important as it is to guide children's reading and inviting connections of what they read with their own experience as part of a well designed study. 'To be inclusive', writes Ballard, 'requires that we strive to identify and remove all barriers for learning for all children. This means that we must attend to increasing participation not just for disabled students but for all those experiencing disadvantage, whether this results from poverty, sexuality, minority ethnic status, or other characteristics assigned significance by the dominant culture in society' (Ballard 2).

However, there are common pitfalls to the use of children's books for this end. Not all books about disability are acceptable. Beckett, Ellison, Barrett, Shah and Bryne (2010), while claiming that books will influence child readers' perceptions of social life, call attention to the need to evaluate the standpoint of representing disability. They argue that there are many examples in 'good' children's books that use discriminatory language and negative stereotyping or fail to represent disability in a non-marked or biased way. Jackson (2009) reports about his difficulty in finding disability-positive books. He characterises these as being able to dispel stereotypes, support those labeled 'disabled' and start discussions about 'difference' and 'feeling different' among students, besides empowering children with disabilities, offering genuine insights into a person's life and feelings, and portray socially inclusive contexts. Brenna argues

for characters with disability that are described in 'their unique patterns of individuality and human growth' (101). Several claims have been made that there aren't enough good books in the English language (where the market is huge) and that characters with disabilities are almost invisible, or play secondary roles. Research in the area of representation of disability in children's fiction is very limited, on a par with the few titles published that portray main characters with disabilities in a positive non-biased way. Furthermore, it has also been claimed that representation of disability in children's books hardly meets the disabled children's lives and experiences (Matthew and Clow 67). Besides, there is, among writers, illustrators, critics and educators the fear of not using children's books about disability 'in the right way' (Matthew and Clow 72).

Notwithstanding, from the children's book world perspective, there has recently been a surge of interest on the issues of diasbility that focus on: bringing together the children with special needs and the books; finding books suitable for disabled children in order to help them enjoy books, better integrate in the society, develop their abilities, and live a happy life. Online bookshops offer selections of books for children with special needs, research on recommending how to present books to children with special needs is growing. More important, or as important, may be all the initiatives that have strived to put 'disability' in the picture of children's books[1], or bring it into the standard classroom, and have addressed disability as one, among many, representations of diverse ways of living.

Selecting appropriate books and activities

From the perspective of multicultural or intercultural education, inclusion of books with characters with disabilities may not be enough to change perceptions. Books have to be carefully chosen as positive portrayals and strategies for guiding the reading have to be developed in order to effectively change children's perceptions through reading. It is generally assumed, among children's literature experts, that reading about children with disabilities will promote acceptance of them in reality, but as Smith-D'Arezzo and Moore-Thomas (2010) show this may not always be the case. Sometimes previous exposure to disabilities had more to do with change of perceptions. Previous preconceptions and prior knowledge may inhibit attitude

change through reading, write Smith-D'Arezzo and Moore-Thomas. This implies that attention should be given to guiding readings and promote debate about reading. Matthew and Clow write that there is evidence that children's books 'are only really helpful in promoting inclusive education when the disabled and non-disabled children (are) together' (77, quoting Pirofsky) .

Choosing books on disability that are disability-sensitive may seem a tricky business and leaves many a teacher with the fear that by choosing a politically correct book its interest and pedagogical relevance as authentic material will be lower. There are certainly some pitfalls to be avoided, which may be classified as situations that create and sustain social and cultural division.

Situations that create and sustain social and cultural division

Some of these situations concern the voice of disabled characters (or other excluded characters). For Sotto and Ball, in order to be positive role models, children's books should portray characters with disabilities as dynamic, i.e. able to participate in an adventure, interact with others and show growth (42). They should be problem solvers. Smith-D'Arezzo, a former special education teacher, selects realistic[2] images of characters with disabilities from quality literature, highlighting that they should be 'cast in a positive light' and be presented 'with all their flaws' (76). She further points to the need for books about characters with disabilities to 'present special education issues accurately' (77) and to address cognitive (mental and learning disabilities), physical or emotional disability. Children's books and materials may give voice to the excluded character, simulating experiences of exclusion, struggles and possibilities. Norms and limits imposed on them.

'Fear, ignorance, prejudice and resentment of disabled people are embedded in society's consciousness' (Brown 36). Though literature they may be examined and challenged as they often are not in classrooms and in society. The exclusion of persons based on disability is a form of oppression that denies access and opportunity and which views someone as worthless in society. Thus, among degrading and devaluing practices to be avoided we might include the following: main characters with communication problems (such as dys-fluency, mutism, articulation disorder, hearing loss, dyslexia, or language disorder) are often depicted as 'weak,

timid, withdrawn and spineless', conclude Sotto and Ball after reviewing 30 children's books (Sotto and Ball 42).

Another devaluing practice concerns the visibility of disabled characters. Brenna notes that among the American Newbery and Canadian Governor General's Award winners for English text over the last twenty years, there are no books centering on characters with special needs and when there are they are in secondary positions.[3] 'Common stereotypes include the idea that people with exceptionalities are generally not capable, persistent or independent, have communication difficulties, lack a sense of humour, and that a single disability is somehow all encompassing' (Brenna 100).

Further degrading representation practices may refer to over-simplification. Matthew and Clow claim that children's books in Britain often represent limited views of disabled people in a flat way, as tragic victims, saintlike, possessing superhuman strength and resilience, 'needy recipients of charity', or 'wholly defined by their impairments or differences' (67).

In general, as a result of this kind of representations, children's perceptions of disability tend to be negative. Smith-D'Arezzo and Moore-Thomas explored fifth-graders perceptions of a learning disability and concluded that they saw it 'as a large negative construct involving chararcter deficit, student and parent culpability, limited mental capacity, and character traits' (12).

Practical suggestions for the classroom

Taking into consideration the research that has been described allows the teacher to reflect on which books *not* to select. One argument of this article is that provided features as the above-mentioned are given dully consideration, any book on disability may be used if there is an appropriate frame of mind, i.e. clear about the power relations between disabled and non-disabled or attentive to the many social uses of power relations that will allow for transformative perceptions of disability as a social use of power relations. Including disabled characters in books and discussing them in the English classroom is a strategy that promotes equal dignity of all persons despite their perceived disadvantages. Openness, curiosity and commitment to

understanding the issue of disability are required on the part of students and teacher in order for difference to be respected. Awareness of who is being talked down to is also crucial.

Some very broad criteria may be useful to guide teachers' searches for the right books for his/her classroom. Here are some suggestions from the BARFIE (Books and Reading for Intercultural Education) project and catalogue which includes 138 books from 18 European countries, selected by professionals in the field of literature for children:

1. Books should be about disadvantaged young people; disadvantages of different kind should be taken into consideration, i.e. disadvantages due to ethnicity, religion, colour, disability, social status, etc.
2. The plot of the stories should be interesting and stimulating for an audience of varied age groups.
3. The book's literary values should generally be acknowledged by teachers, critics, scholars, librarians or other experts.

Further recommendations for the English classroom are a series of websites where the teacher may track down reading lists of books on children with disabilities, such as: the International Children's Digital Library at http://www.icdlbooks.org; http://www.letterboxlibrary.com/acatalog/index.html; Book Trust at http://www.booktrust.org.uk; Bookhead at http://www.bookheads.org.uk; Cool-Reads at http://www.cool-reads.co.uk; Booktrusted at http://www.booktrusted.co.uk. Contemporary writers of fiction seem to be sensitive to the topic, with a major impulse given, for instance, in the UK, through the Quentin Blake Award and the Bookmark report *Making Exclusion a Thing of the Past* (Bookmark), which presents some important guidelines to approach the issue of disability. The Booktrust report includes answers of students on how they felt about disability in books and how they reacted in a series of workshops led by children's authors and illustrators. Some of the very good ideas used in that project may be found at http://www.childreninthepicture.org.uk/documents/quentin_blake_award_project_report_001.pdf. Here are some examples, adapted from the Quentin Blake Award Project Report that a teacher may use in the English classroom before, during or after the reading of a book:

- Brainstorm the term 'disability'.
- Discuss the extent to which disability is a 'black and white' issue, or whether it is more of a spectrum or continuum.
- Develop own writing ideas on the subject or plotlines (collective) after which students are split into smaller groups to explore different ways of writing the story (play script, comic strip, graphic novel, newspaper article).
- Discuss published books about or which include portrayals of disability.
- Prepare questions to interview the author/illustrator of a particular book (on physical disability, on dyslexia or on any other diversity issue).
- Remember fictional disabled characters students read about it in their childhood: what do students remember? How positive is it? What is there in common among those characters?
- Look at particular fairy tales and how they portray physical disability: what kind of characters are the disabled characters? What happens to them? What may students conclude?
- Consider contemporary films and television programmes. What messages do they generally convey about disability? Consider *Shrek* and *Tracy Beaker* as examples.
- Brainstorm on how to raise awareness and improve visibility of disabled people without making it 'an issue' or exacerbating stereotypes.
- Discuss different types of books – horror, thriller, fairy stories, fantasy, and adventure – which students like best and why. What makes a good story? Generate ideas for a book.
- Use own ideas to develop characters: one of them has to be a wheelchair user. There may be other disabled characters. Discuss how many there should be and why. Which characters will be female and male? Which will be heroes and villains?
- Illustrate own characters. Practical considerations to be discussed: how are they dressed, whether/when the characters ask people for assistance, does the character propel herself or needs to be pushed?

- Interview authors (imaginatively or in person) about certain characters they have created.
- Brainstorm about what might the difficulties of drawing deafness.
- Draw a deaf character and present it to the rest of the group explaining own interpretation.
- Create a potential character in a book by drawing it with eyes closed and using the non-writing hand.
- Write the beginning of a fairy/magic story.
- Take a group of mainstream children to a special school to develop a workshop there on books about disability.
- Suggest that a particular central character in a story might be disabled. How might this knowledge have affected the plot or the students' interpretation of the story?
- Make a list of books students have read that feature disabled characters.
- Have groups of students develop 'story maps' that feature a disabled and a non-disabled character. The story map is a giant treasure island and the children have to illustrate the characters' journey across the island to reach the hidden treasure.
- Have students go through blurbs, covers, author biographies and titles. How do they influence choices to pick up a book?
- Consider the following statements for a class debate:
    - Readers will not accept disabled heroes or heroines;
    - People are more likely to accept a disabled villain;
    - A book featuring a wheelchair user (for example) will be seen as trying to 'make a point' or be 'too politically correct'.
- How do books feature disability? Have students choose favourite illustrators and create artwork in their style featuring disabled characters (eg. In the style of, for example, Lauren Child, if students are familiar her work).

Further useful resources, such as visual prompts may be found at http://www.childreninthepicture.org/uk/inspiration.htm.

Conclusion

The article started by highlighting some experts' voices that overlap and compete on the perceptions and needs of people with disabilities and the role of children's books to stand up against the absences, limitations and misrepresentations of disability not only in children's books, but also in classrooms and in society at large.

The article also highlighted that there seems to be constant apprehension that while addressing such a topic – representation of disability in children's books – teachers, teacher trainers, artists, parents and librarians will be subscribing to the deep culture of exclusion that pervades contemporary societies. Focusing on disability and on special people might set them further apart and underlies divisions between those that are 'special' and 'non-special'.

The article has tried to contradict this by offering suggestions on how to select and use reading materials in the English classroom that may simultaneously put disability in the picture and represent it in all fairness. It was suggested that teachers may use several websites and make use of research in the area to select books that are suitable to their classrooms. It was also suggested that some forms of thinking about disability are forms of oppression and that therefore when choosing books teachers may wish to focus on some features of the books, such as: whether they include characters with disabilities in culturally valued activities and quotidian settings; whether they center on characters and their intrinsic value despite being perceived as 'others'; and whether they invite the reader to read about unfamiliar situations as a way into critical reflection.

Finally, it was further highlighted that besides selecting 'good' books teachers and teacher trainers may wish to consider specific approaches to the reading materials which aim at transforming biased and discriminatory views on disability.

Notes

[1] One such event is a collection of books for children with special needs and a travelling exhibition organized in the last 20 years in Norway with the support of IBBY.

[2] Smith-D'Arezzo uses Huck's definition of realistic fiction as 'imaginative writing that accurately reflect(s) life as it was lived in the past or could be lived today' (Smith-D'Arezzo 78; Huck 454).

[3] Matthew and Clow quote ten guiding principles to put children with disabilities 'in the picture' and will defend that the point is not that they should be main characters, but that they should be there as a 'natural feature of every child's landscape' (principle 2) (Matthew and Clow 71).

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