Pre-service Teacher Candidates Experiences with Literature with Characters with Disabilities

and a Framework for Classroom Implementation

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Amanda Lea Eppley, M.Ed.

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This Master’s Research Project has been approved

for the Department of Teacher Education

Dianne M. Gut, Ph.D., Associate Professor, Special Education

John E. Henning, Ph.D., Professor and Chair of the Department of Teacher Education

Checking this box indicates this document has been submitted and successfully cleared a plagiarism check. Supporting documentation has been provided to the Department Chair.
Abstract

Using literature that includes characters with disabilities has several potential benefits for students with and without disabilities. This research study describes preservice teacher candidates’ experiences with implementing a project examining literature with characters with disabilities within an Introduction to Exceptional Learners university class. This article describes the potential benefits of using literature with characters with disabilities in classrooms and provides information for preservice and novice teachers to utilize regarding the selection and evaluation of literature that includes characters with disabilities. In addition, an example framework for implementation using biblotherapeutic processes is outlined.
Little research has been conducted regarding the use of literature that includes characters with disabilities in classrooms. Research that has been conducted has shown that including this type of literature in classrooms provides opportunities for students to learn about diversity, identify with experiences of characters in the reading, read about characters with similar experiences, provide role models for students to identify with, and provides opportunities for students to see characters who are like them when reading (Gavigan, & Kurtts, 2011; Kurtts & Gavigan, 2008; Nasatir & Horn, 2003). Additionally, utilizing this type of literature provides opportunities to teach acceptance and create inclusive classroom environments that promote charter building and respect for others (Litner, 2011). Unfortunately however, in the field teachers do not often utilize literature that includes characters with disabilities in the curriculum, nor do they include these books in classroom libraries (Nasatir & Horn, 2003).

In the current study, teacher candidates were provided information regarding literature that includes characters with disabilities within a required course in the teacher education program. Preservice teachers were educated about potential benefits for students, received information for evaluating the literature, and were provided with a potential framework for the incorporation of literature including characters with disabilities in classrooms. Preservice teachers selected and evaluated the book, and wrote reflections.

The aim of the research was to determine if the assignment would encourage preervice teachers to include literature with characters with disabilities in their future classrooms. If they found the assignment beneficial it would have major implications for both teacher education programs and P-12 students.

**Literature Review**

**Why Use Books with Characters with Disabilities in the P-12 Classroom Setting?**
Using literature that includes characters with disabilities has several potential benefits for students. Litner (2011) utilized literature with characters with disabilities in social studies classrooms indicating that part of teaching social studies should include promoting character development. Providing instructional opportunities for students to learn about diversity assists in teaching tolerance and celebrating difference, which is especially important in inclusive educational classrooms.

Using exceptional children’s literature in the classroom provides avenues and opportunities for all students to internalize, embrace, and celebrate difference. Such literature has the power to develop, shape, and reinforce dispositions essential to the maintenance and perpetuation of civic thought and action. (Litner, 2011, p. 202)

Verden and Hickman (2009) conducted research in which literature was used with students with emotional and behavioral disorders. Though the literature was not identified as being exceptional children’s literature, the researchers reported selecting literature that related to the students’ experiences. Teachers read the literature out loud to the class and provided opportunity for discussion and reflection through journaling. The researchers found that students opened up more about their experiences in discussion and writing, were able to identify with characters in the literature that served as role models, and were able to link the characters behaviors with their own. The researchers also noted students’; prosocial skills began to improve. According to the authors,

Findings from this study suggest that reading aloud has far more comprehensive potential across higher grade levels and in classrooms with students who may have emotional and behavioral disorders or other disabilities, providing them with opportunities to identify with prosocial role models, and reflect on circumstantial, relational, and behavioral
similarities between the stories and themselves, which have the potential to positively influence behavior choices. (Verden & Hickman, 2009, p.14)

**How are Characters with Disabilities Represented in Books?**

According to Nasatir and Horn (2003) literature that includes characters with disabilities can be divided into two main categories. The first includes individuals with disabilities in literature as a part of diversity. Characters with disabilities are simply represented in the literature as any other character would be represented. The plot does not incorporate any theme regarding the fact that the character has a disability. The second category is literature that educates readers about disabilities and increases awareness. In this type, readers gain greater understanding about specific disabilities and learn about how having a disability may impact a person’s life.

**How do you Evaluate Literature with Characters with Disabilities?**

It is not simply enough to use books that include characters with disabilities in the classroom. It is necessary to evaluate these books, just as one would pre-read any other book to determine if the book is appropriate for use in the classroom. Nasatir and Horn (2003) found no evaluation tool providing guidelines for teachers to use to determine if books with characters with disabilities were appropriate for use in the classroom. They developed an evaluation tool, “Nine Ways to Evaluate Children’s Books That Address Disability as a Part of Diversity” See Figure 1. This tool encourages the examination of several aspects of a book before incorporating the book into the classroom. The recommendations are to:

1. Examine illustrations, specifically ensuring illustrations do not depict stereotypes, tokenisms, and depict the characters with disabilities in various roles.
2. Examine the story line. The character with the disability should not have to display extraordinary abilities. The disability should not be considered the problem in the story. The story should be able to be told in the same way if the character did not have a disability.

3. Look at the Lifestyle. The story should accurately depict the daily life and routine of a person with a disability in a non-stereotypical manner.

4. Weigh the relationship between people. Examine the roles of the characters. Leadership roles and supporting character roles of characters with and without disabilities should be balanced.

5. Consider the effects on a child’s self-image. Characters with disabilities should be seen as perspective role models for students who read the literature.

6. Consider the author’s or illustrator’s background and perspective. Read the biographical information on the jacket flap examining it for the possibility of background knowledge and personal experiences with individuals with disabilities.

7. Check for loaded words. The literature should contain no words that would be considered offensive to an individual with a disability. Words such as “slow,” “crazy,” “lazy,” and “cripple,” are examples. In addition using terms like “afflicted with” and “suffering from” have negative connotations.

8. Determine the copyright date and target age. Due to the limited number of books available containing characters with disabilities, educators may find several older books. These books should not be excluded based on the lack of person-first language used in the book. Educators can read the books out loud to students making appropriate modifications as they read. Also, educators need to ensure that the developmental level
of the intended student audience is taken into consideration when selecting the book.

What the educator deems is appropriate for the developmental level may differ from the suggested target audience age found on the book.

(Nasatir & Horn, 2003, p.6-8)

Are There Very Many Quality Books with Characters with Disabilities?

Leininger, Dyches, Prater and Heath (2010) examined Newberry Award winning books published between 1975 and 2009. They found only eight (6%) of the 131 books awarded in that time frame had a main or supporting character with a disability. In addition, 23 (18%) books receiving the Newberry Honor had a main or supporting character with a disability. Not surprisingly, the authors (2010) found that 74% of the books that have characters with disabilities were published after the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Act in 1990.

In examining Newberry books that included characters with disabilities, the authors found that, “the representation of characters with disabilities in Newberry books is not proportionate to the current school population of children and adolescents with disabilities” (Leininger, Dyches, Prater, & Heath, 2010, p.587). Specific learning disabilities and speech and language impairments are the disability categories serving the greatest number of students receiving special education services, however, mental retardation, orthopedic impairments, autism and multiple disabilities were the most commonly portrayed disabilities in school-age characters with disabilities found in the Newberry books (Leininger, Dyches, Prater & Heath).

According to Nasatir and Horn (2003), prior research has been conducted reporting that most early childhood classrooms do not have books that depict individuals with disabilities. Teachers’ reasons for not having books that depict individuals with disabilities can be narrowed
down to funding and lack of knowledge. Teachers cited lack of available funds to purchase books, not knowing where to get books, and not knowing how to select appropriate books as the reasons these books did not appear in their classrooms.

**How to Use the Books**

One potential way to use books with characters with disabilities in classrooms is to use bibliotherapeutic techniques. Bibliotherapy is a method that uses literature to provide a medium for students to identify with literary characters who share experiences similar to the students’.

According to Cook, Earles-Vollrath and Ganz,

> Bibliotherapy is frequently used as an introduction for students without disabilities to understand the variety of disabilities that might be present in their classroom, school, or community. By taking away the fear of differences, bibliotherapy can help peers be more likely to embrace and include students with disabilities in their everyday activities. (2006, p.93)

Similarly, Kurtts and Gavigan (2008) report

> Children's literature has also been used successfully to address disability issues with children and adolescents. Bibliotherapy has proven to be a useful strategy for addressing the needs of students with disabilities in addition to helping those without disabilities to understand the lives of children with special needs. (p. 23)

Gavigan and Kurtts (2011) identify a framework for incorporating this type of literature in the classroom that includes pre-reading, guided reading, post-reading discussion and follow up that includes activities. During pre-reading, teachers should connect student’s background knowledge to the reading. During guided reading teachers encourage students to make their own connections with the characters in the book. During post-reading teachers encourage problem
solving, whereas students identify alternatives solutions to challenges characters faced within the readings. Follow up activities could include things such as writing, journaling, games and role plays (Gavigan & Kurtts, 2011).

**Methodology**

The current research was modeled after assignments given to university students as discussed in Gavigan and Kurtts (2011) and Kurtts and Gavigan (2008). In both studies the researchers provided instruction to pre-service teachers regarding the use of books with characters with disabilities in order to teach bibliotherapy. The researchers had participants select two books from a provided list, critically read the book, and write a reflection. Participants were asked to discuss how characters were presented: pathetic, sad, pitied, heroic, or realistically. They were also were instructed to examine the characters relationships in the book and reflected upon what students in their classrooms could learn from the book.

**Participants**

Participants in the current study were university students enrolled in the course Characteristics of Students with Exceptionality, required for all preservice teachers, regardless of licensure area. The university class consisted of 25 students, eight male and twelve female students. Twelve were early childhood majors, three were enrolled in the middle school program, five were preparing to teach high school, three special education, one music and one indicated the licensure area as other.

**Procedures**

This course is meant to be introduction to special education for all university students enrolled in any teacher education program and is a requirement for all education majors at the university. During the first class of the semester the instructor/researcher presented information
derived from current research regarding using literature that includes characters with exceptionalities in the classroom using lecture format and PowerPoint.

Next, participants were given a copy of “Nine Ways Evaluate Children’s Books” developed by Nasatir and Horn (2003). This was followed by a discussion regarding the need to preview and evaluate literature that includes characters with disabilities in the classroom before incorporating these books into the curriculum or classroom libraries.

The instructor modeled one method for using literature in the classroom. The instructor read aloud “The Hickory Chair” (Fraustino, 2001) modeling bibliotherapeutic strategies. Participants were asked questions before, during, and after the reading followed by a de-brief in the form of a class discussion.

The discussion focused on the use of literature with exceptional characters, including reasons to use such literature. Nasatir and Horn’s (2003) evaluation tool, “Nine Ways to Evaluate Children’s Books” was used during the discussion to evaluate “The Hickory Chair.”

Participants were provided a copy of the evaluation tool, and a list of books that have a main or supporting character with a disability. The list contained books categorized by disability type, so participants were able to easily select a topic of interest to them. The researcher also made available several books from the list for participants to examine.

**Assignment Guidelines**

Students were then given the following assignment guidelines.

1. Select a book that contains a main or supporting character with a disability. A list of potential books is attached to the assignment guidelines. You may select a book not on the list with instructor permission.
2. Critically read the book. Consider the following:
   a. How is the character with a disability portrayed?
   b. How are relationships with non-disabled peers or adults described?
c. Does the literature encourage acceptance of and respect for diversity and difference?
d. What is the ultimate objective of the book? What message does the author want to leave the reader with? Is this message clear and appropriate?
e. Check the illustrations: Do the illustrations perpetuate stereotypes? Do the illustrations show a token person with a disability? Do the illustrations depict a person with a disability as active or passive?
f. Look for loaded words: Loaded adjectives, such as “retarded,” “lazy,” and “slow,” may be used to describe persons with exceptionalities. In addition, phrases such as “confined to a wheelchair” or “suffering from,” although in some contexts accurate, can ultimately be harmful as they limit potential and possibility.

3. Written 3-4 Page Reflection should include the following
   a. Brief summary of the book
   b. Critical review considering the questions asked in #2 (Not all questions need to be incorporated into the reflection include what you feel should be included)
   c. Would this book be appropriate for use in the classroom? Why or why not?
   d. What could students learn from this book?
   e. How could this reading be implemented in the classroom?

The rubric used for the assignment specified that written reflections should be well-developed critiques linked with considerations for individuals with disabilities. The reflection should include a summary of the book selected that is brief and concise. Participants should develop a well thought out argument for or against using the book in the classroom, describe potential P-12 student benefits and how the book could be used within a P-12 classroom.

Participants were given two weeks to complete the assignment. After two weeks, participants were divided into groups to discuss and critique their book. This was followed by a large group discussion summarizing insights and thoughts about the assignment. After class, participants received the link to an online survey regarding their thoughts about the assignment. All participants (n=25) completed the survey.
Results

The results of the study can be narrowed down into potential benefits for students both with and without disabilities, impact on classroom environment and classroom community, and the need to evaluate literature. In addition the reactions of preservice teachers regarding the assignment and incorporating literature with characters with disabilities into classrooms will be examined.

Benefits for Students Without Disabilities

When asked if students without disabilities would benefit from literature that includes characters with disabilities, 89% agreed that students without disabilities would benefit from the literature. When asked why eight provided explanations related to teaching children about diversity, eight described learning about acceptance, empathy and respect, and three described benefits to learning about a specific disability type. One student stated:

It will show them that those with disabilities are NOT just their disability. Normally when thinking of a person with a disability, one thinks of just the person’s disability and them assumes they can’t function or other things like that. Yet showing students who are not affected with disabilities literature with students who DO have disabilities, it will help them learn empathy and acceptance.

Benefits for Students with Disabilities

When asked if students with disabilities would benefit from reading literature, 81% agreed or strongly agreed that students with disabilities would benefit. One stated:

I think that incorporating literature including characters with disabilities would be beneficial for those students with disabilities because they can relate to the characters. I
think that it is emotionally helpful because it helps them see that they aren’t the only one dealing with their disability, and that they can still be leaders and achieve their goals.

When asked if using literature with characters with disabilities would increase student understanding of disabilities, 93% felt reading these books would be effective in teaching about disabilities.

**Impact on Classroom Community**

When asked if reading literature depicting students with disabilities in class could help improve the classroom community, 89% agreed or strongly agreed that it would improve the classroom community by increasing students’ understanding and acceptance of one another.

**Intent to Use Literature in the Classroom**

Eighty-one percent of participants indicated they would likely incorporate literature with characters with disabilities in their classroom libraries, while 19% said it was unlikely or they were undecided. One said “I think that such characters should be represented in all classroom libraries. Even if the material is not directly a part of the curriculum, the literature should still be available to students.” Another responded, “As long as the story and pictures were amusing I think the students would look at it as any other story.”

**Importance of Evaluating Literature**

When asked if they will evaluate literature that includes characters with disabilities before including it in the classroom, 89% said they probably or definitely would, while 11% stated they didn’t know if they would or not. Several indicated they would read any book before introducing it in class. Many noted they would check for person-first language, illustrations and loaded words. One stated, “I think I would probably use the checklist that we used in class for
our own books. I feel it was a very nice, comprehensive list, and that it really made me think about how different aspects of the book(s) would impact the children.”

**Reaction to the Assignment**

When asked if they enjoyed the assignment all participants (n=25) stated they enjoyed the assignment. When asked if the assignment should be used next semester, 65% felt it should be used, while 35% were undecided. One said, “Before this class, I never really considered how to incorporate books and materials that involved disabilities. Now I am aware how important it is to bring this to the classroom to spread awareness. It was an excellent assignment.” Another reported

I would recommend this assignment because it made me more aware of just how many books there are out there that include characters with disabilities. Plus it was not the typical assignment. So being able to read a picture book was nice.

Some who were undecided felt like the workload was unfair. The book list included a range of books including picture books that would be appropriate for early childhood majors through novels appropriate for middle and high school teachers. The instructor allowed participants to choose their own books; therefore anyone could select a picture book or a longer novel. However, some who read longer books felt all of their classmates should also have read longer books, and would have benefited more in the assignment if they had read a longer book.

When asked how often participants encountered reading materials with characters with disabilities in their school experiences/current observations, 46% reported not at all, while 54% reported occasionally. No one reported frequently encountering books with characters with disabilities in them.
Discussion

Limitations

There were several limitations to this study. The class consisted of twenty five students which limited the sample size for the study. Another limitation was the researcher was also the instructor for the class. The researcher had no prior relationship with the research participants in the study, and conducted the study at the beginning of the semester in order to reduce potential bias. In addition, survey information was anonymous, in order to encourage participants to be honest when responding to the survey. In addition, it is likely students who felt they would not be teaching reading did not feel as much of a benefit from the assignment. For example, participants planning to teach math or music did not connect with the content as much as early childhood, language arts and social studies preservice teachers. When assigning the project in the future, the instructor would stress the importance of using books to learn about diversity in students, and how that would benefit all students, may change the students opinions.

Implications

Prior research has established a foundation for implementing this assignment in teacher education programs (Gavigan & Kurts, 2011 and Kurts & Gavigan, 2008). This study attempts to fill the gap in the research by collecting and analyzing data from preservice teachers who participated in the assignment.

After examining the results from the current study it appears that an assignment of this nature had a positive impact on general education preservice teacher learning regarding teaching students with exceptionalities. Preservice teachers were able to participate in discussions regarding the need for students with exceptionalities to be included to the fullest extent possible in inclusive classroom settings. Future teachers were able to identify that using literature with
characters with exceptionalities is a way to openly discuss individuals with disabilities in the classroom setting, enable students with disabilities to be equally represented in classroom literature, and provide potential role models for students with disabilities. Participants in the study reported gaining greater insights into the needs of students with disabilities. Incorporating an assignment of this type into future teacher education courses would continue to benefit both preservice teachers and P-12 students.

In increasing preservice teacher awareness regarding the needs of students with disabilities, P-12 students will benefit as a direct result. Through the use of modeling and providing strategies for creating more inclusive classroom settings and teaching students to reflect upon the needs of students with exceptionalities instructors lay a foundation for preservice teachers. When these teachers begin to teach in their own classrooms, utilizing the methods they have learned and practiced they will in turn be creating a classroom community that encourages respect for diversity, and creates an environment where the needs of all students are taken into consideration.

Teachers already in the field can utilize this information to further include students with exceptionalities in their classrooms. By incorporating literature with characters with exceptionalities into lessons teachers create opportunities for students to learn about individuals with disabilities in the context of learning about diversity, learn about the life of individuals with disabilities, allow students with disabilities to relate to characters in literature, and provide appropriate role models for students with disabilities. Sadly, research has shown that there is a general lack of this type of literature typically found in classroom settings. Teachers can utilize the list provided (See Appendix) to assist in finding literature that might be appropriate for their classrooms.
References


### Nine Ways to Evaluate Children's Books That Address Disability as a Part of Diversity

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<td>3. Look at the Lifestyles:</td>
<td>The text and illustrations offer genuine insights into the daily routine and work in the life of a person with a disability.</td>
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<td>4. Weigh the Relationships Between People:</td>
<td>The children with disabilities function in essential leadership roles.</td>
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<td>5. Consider the Effects on a Child’s Self-Image:</td>
<td>There is one or more persons with whom a child with a disability can readily identify as a positive and constructive role model.</td>
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<td>6. Consider the Author’s or Illustrator’s Background:</td>
<td>The author’s or illustrator’s background strengthens the value of his or her work.</td>
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<td>7. Explore the Author’s Perspective:</td>
<td>The author’s perspective strengthens the value of his or her written work.</td>
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<td>8. Watch for Loaded Words:</td>
<td>This book has no loaded words (e.g., “slow”).</td>
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<td>9. Look at the Copyright Date and Target Age:</td>
<td>The copyright and target age are appropriate for the intended audience.</td>
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**Book Selections**

**ADHD**


**AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDERS**


**CEREBRAL PALSY**


**DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES**


**DOWN SYNDROME**


**DYSLEXIA**


**Epilepsy**


**HEARING IMPAIRMENT**


**LEARNING DISABILITIES**


**PHYSICAL DISABILITIES**


**SPEECH IMPAIRMENTS**


**VISUAL IMPAIRMENTS**


