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Realistic portrayal of learning disabilities in selected children's books

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Realistic portrayal of learning disabilities in selected children's books

by

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A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty

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ABSTRACT

Children need to see people with disabilities accurately reflected in books so they do not develop stereotypes or misconceptions about disabilities. Furthermore, while some disabilities are evident, a learning disability is a 'hidden' disability that children may not see or understand. Books may be the only way some children come to learn about this disability; therefore, they need to have accurate information. The purpose of this study was to investigate whether children's books pass on accurate and realistic information about learning disabilities to children who read the books. This study identifies and recommends books that are more suitable for children to read to learn about learning disabilities. In this research study, a small sample of children's books were selected, reviewed, and analyzed for the use of a label and the presence of characteristics of learning disabilities using a checklist as a standard of comparison. They were also analyzed for their use of the label "learning disabilities". Findings of the study reveal that most of the authors used the term learning disabilities or dyslexia in describing characters. In most of the books, at least one academic characteristic was identified. Academic characteristics were represented more than social and behavioral characteristics.

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Today there is a lot of literature for children that includes information about disabilities. A disability is no longer as extraordinary as it once was; we meet and interact with people with disabilities on a regular basis. Due to the inclusion of children with disabilities in general classes, children without disabilities interact with children who have disabilities. Many children with disabilities, especially learning disabilities, attend general classes with students in regular schools. Just because children with disabilities are in our schools does not mean there is an understanding of their disabilities.

Sometimes children do not come across people with disabilities on a regular basis. If children have limited access to people with disabilities, what other ways are there to understand a disability? Books may serve as a way to expose children to knowledge about disabilities and raise their awareness and understanding about people with disabilities. They also may help young people who have disabilities know that they are not the only ones with disabilities and show them how other people dealt with their disabilities.

The media has been influential in bringing awareness about disabilities, though in the past the media also helped to promote stereotypes about disabilities. Today authors and publishers are keener on publishing books that include characters with disabilities in realistic ways. Guidelines have been established to help teachers, librarians, and parents select suitable children's literature that appropriately portrays disabilities. The aim of good literature would be to help students see that people with disabilities are more like them than different. It is also important for children with disabilities to see themselves represented in the literature. The question is whether children have access to suitable portrayals so that they are able to understand accurately what a disability is. People may make assumptions and stereotypes about other people because of misinformation. They may think that people with learning disabilities have cognitive problems such as mental retardation. Books with accurate information can help address these misconceptions and assumptions.

Purpose of the Study

This study is being conducted to find out if the characteristics of learning disabilities are accurately portrayed in children's books by comparing them against the characteristics found in textbooks on learning disabilities. Many children's books are being written that include characters with learning disabilities. The probable intent is to bring more exposure to this disability. This exposure is meant to increase students' awareness and understanding of this disability, since it is the largest disability category. The gradual increase in the number of books on learning disabilities being published is a step in the right direction. However, care needs to be taken to investigate whether the books being published are not only well written, but also realistic and accurate. It is important and necessary to include information on people with disabilities, but it is even more important that that information be accurate.

This researcher chose to focus on learning disabilities because it is the most prevalent disability among students today. Lyon (1996) notes that there has been a substantial increase in the number of children who have been identified with learning disabilities relative to other disability categories. In addition, the researcher was more interested in the "unseen" disability. When people see persons with physical disabilities in wheel chairs or persons with visual impairments using canes, it may be easier to relate to them. It is the unseen disabilities, like learning disabilities, that are not understood. Another reason for this focus is that children with disabilities need to be seen in books because these children are in our schools and classrooms. The study will target juvenile literature used in kindergarten to sixth grade.

Significance of the Study

The significance of this study is that it will help determine how accurately learning disabilities are portrayed in selected children's books. The study may result in finding appropriate juvenile literature that can be used in classrooms, homes, and libraries to help children come to a better understanding and acceptance of people who have this disability.

Procedures

In this study, selected children's books with a character that has a learning disability were identified from bibliographies of children's books and websites of national organizations related to learning disabilities and read by the researcher. To increase reliability of the study, my major professor and a small sample of three students, one graduate and two undergraduates pursuing special education training, each read some of the books.

A checklist was completed for each book read. This checklist consisted of three parts. In the first section, the researcher completed general information about the book, such as the title of the book and the use of a label to describe the character. The second section contained characteristics of learning disabilities taken from special education textbooks. The last section of the checklist required information concerning the portrayal of the disability. Specifically, reviewers provided information about services provided to the characters with disabilities, as well as appropriateness of those services. Realism of the portrayal and the use of person-first language (referring to the character as 'having a learning disability' as compared to 'being learning disabled') were also investigated. Every book was also rated as to whether it would be recommended to be read by or to an elementary student as a means of understanding learning disabilities.

Research Questions

In order to be useful in helping children learn about a disability, the portrayal of the disability has to be accurate and realistic. Therefore this study will answer the following questions:

1. Do authors specifically identify a character as having a learning disability by "labeling" him/her?

2. Do the characteristics of characters with "learning disabilities" in children's storybooks match those in textbooks on this disability?

Limitations of the Study

Since this was an initial exploratory study, a small number of books were used. Thus generalizations cannot be made about children's books on learning disabilities as the results of the study may not be a true indication of how LD characteristics are portrayed in children's books.

Due to personal commitments, one reviewer could not read the books as planned, and another could not complete reading her share of books. In addition, it was difficult to locate and obtain some of the books in the local libraries. Thus some books received fewer reviews than others.

As mentioned by Prater (1999), another limitation was that the study relied on other's (published sources) identification of characters with learning disabilities in children's book, and therefore some of the characters identified as representing these individuals may not have represented such characterizations.

Definitions

For the purposes of this paper, the following definitions were used.

Learning disability (LD) is a general term that describes specific kinds of learning problems. A learning disability can cause a person to have trouble learning and using certain skills. The skills most often affected are: Reading, writing, listening, speaking, reasoning and doing math (NICHCY, 2003).

Dyslexia refers to having a severely impaired ability to read (Smith, 2001).

CHAPTER 2. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The accurate portrayal of characters with learning disabilities (LD) is the main purpose of this study. Among the studies reviewed on disabilities and children's literature, almost all point out the importance of books that are well written, accurate, and realistic. These studies addressed the major categories of disabilities, especially physical disabilities. Only a few studies were dedicated to the most prevalent disability today, learning disabilities.

In this literature review, the use of books in bibliotherapy as a way to deal with issues and problems is addressed, followed by a review of the definitions, prevalence and use of the label "learning disability." Next, the characteristics of learning disabilities are addressed. The use of children's literature about disabilities follows. Subsequently, the portrayal of learning disabilities over the years is explored. Finally, the criteria for selecting good books on disabilities are given.

The Use of Books in Bibliotherapy

At the beginning of the twentieth century Samuel Crothers prescribed books to his patients who needed help in understanding their problems. He believed that through the use of books a person's thinking or behavior could change and he labeled this technique "bibliotherapy" (Myracle, cited in McTague, 1998). Books have been seen as a powerful way to help children develop emotionally, increase social sensitivity, achieve insight into their own situations, deal with situations that are difficult, improve their self concept, and cope with life in general. According to Dole (2001), the essential goal of bibliotherapy is to illuminate problems children face, with the purpose of helping the children who are directly affected and to develop empathy and understanding in others. Bibliotherapy usually involves students reading books, usually selected by the teacher, and following up with a discussion. Mirsky (2000) states that through books the reader can see how others solve their problems and how alternative solutions may be generated.

Books have been used as a way to prevent and treat problems through the technique of bibliotherapy. Favazza and Odom (cited in Mirsky, 2000) state that supplying classrooms with carefully selected reading material is a relatively inexpensive method that could be used to increase exposure to people with disabilities. They conducted a study whereby children in

kindergarten were given two intervention packages. The first intervention consisted of a story time period, which was followed by discussion three times a week. During story time two of the stories had content directly related to a child with a disability; one story highlighted a child with a disability. The guided discussions focused on highlighting the similarities between children with and without disabilities. In the second intervention, there was playtime between children with disabilities and their non-disabled peers. At the end of the study, social contact and the use of children's books were found to be natural, effective strategies for promoting positive attitudes of younger children without disabilities toward their peers with disabilities.

Other authors provide evidence that deliberate use of books, followed by discussion or other exploratory activities, has a measurable impact on attitudes (Hagino, 1980; Salend & Moe, 1983). Salend and Moe (cited in Mirsky, 2000) studied the effects of children's books about disabilities on the attitudes of non-disabled students toward their peers with disabilities. Using three treatment plans: 1) using books, 2) no treatments, and 3) using books and discussion, they studied the most effective way to modify the attitudes of fourth, fifth, and sixth grade students. The results of their study suggest that when exposure to children's books about individuals with disabilities was combined with discussions that highlighted critical information, the books were highly successful change agents.

Ayala (1999) observes that there has been an increase in children's literature that deals with personal and social problems. She attributes this mainly to the use of children's literature as a means for helping children understand and cope with difficult decisions they must face in an increasingly complex society. Given the inclusion movement and subsequent integration of children with special needs in general classes, books have been used to help students without disabilities understand and develop more acceptance for their peers with disabilities.

Learning Disabilities Definitions, Prevalence and Labeling

Currently, learning disabilities has the highest growth rate among all other types of disabilities. There are more children with learning disabilities than other disabilities in general classrooms. Many reasons have been attributed to this high growth rate. The National

Association of State Directors of Special Education in 1983 attributed the increase to (1) improved procedures for identifying and assessing students, (2) liberal eligibility criteria, (3) social acceptance/preference for the classification of learning disabled, (4) cutbacks in other programs and lack of general education alternatives for children who experience problems in the general classroom, and (5) court rulings (Ysseldyke & Algozzine, 1990).

Learning disabilities was formally recognized as a disability in the early 1960s. It is a disability that is not as well understood as the other disabilities. Reasons for this include the invisibility of the disability, as well as a lack of clear-cut characteristics to identify the disability. There are some conflicts concerning the proper definition of learning disabilities. The lack of agreement on the definition of learning disabilities, as well as the nature of learning disabilities itself, means that there is little consensus on the characteristics of the condition (Ysseldyke & Algozzine, 1990). The federal government defines learning disabilities as follows:

> Specific learning disability" means a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in using language, spoken or written, which may manifest itself in an imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or do mathematical calculations. The term includes such conditions as perceptual handicaps, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia. The term does not include children who have learning problems that are primarily the result of visual, hearing, or motor handicaps, of mental retardation, of emotional disturbances, or of environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage. (U.S. Department of Education, cited in Smith, 2001, p.128).

The National Center for Learning Disabilities (2002) defines learning disabilities as neurological disorders that interfere with a person's ability to store, process, or produce information, and create a "gap" between one's ability and performance. Individuals with learning disabilities are generally of average or above average intelligence. Learning disabilities can affect one or more areas of development, such as one's ability to read, write, speak, or compute math, and can impede social skills. Individuals with learning disabilities therefore can have marked difficulties on certain types of tasks while excelling at others.

Many authors, including those who write for children, point out that the term learning disabilities also means learning differently. Students with learning disabilities have trouble learning important skills at school. Hall (1993) observes that in nearly every classroom, there

are students who seem smart but have trouble learning certain things. He adds that a person has a learning disability if he or she has problems learning something despite being taught well and trying hard to learn. In contrast to a person with mental retardation who has trouble learning in all areas, a person with learning disabilities is good at some things but not at others.

Lyon (1996) affirms that learning disability is not a single disorder, but is a general category composed of disabilities in any of seven specific areas: receptive language (listening), expressive language (speaking), basic reading skills, reading comprehension, written expression, mathematics calculation, and mathematical reasoning. He adds that these separate types of learning disabilities frequently co-occur with one another and also with certain social skill deficits and emotional or behavioral disorders such as attention deficit. Hunt and Marshall (2002) observe that although students with learning disabilities are typically thought of as individuals who have difficulty in academic tasks, it is important to realize that most social behaviors also involve learning. Thus some students who experience problems with learning may be frustrated and act out.

According to the National Center for Learning Disabilities (2002), the United States Department of Education estimates that about 2.8 million students are currently receiving special education services for learning disabilities. This number represents approximately 5% of all school-aged children in public schools. Furthermore, 52% of students receiving special education services through the public schools are identified as having learning disabilities. The number of students receiving services for learning disabilities continues to increase.

At the same time that the term learning disability has been used to describe a type of impairment, it has also been seen as a label. While some people oppose labeling, others see it as useful. Osterholm (2001) states that those against labeling support the notion that the assignment of deviant labels has a negative effect on others' perception of the labeled individual. She adds that there is the possibility that the labeled individual might accept both that label as well as lowered expectations from those around him ore her, leading to reduced effort, achievement and self-esteem. Those against labeling such as Keogh (cited in

Osterholm, 2001), state that the LD label serves as a focus for advocacy and for ensuring attention to the problem, as well as a category for providing services.

Characteristics of Learning Disabilities

It should be noted that there is not a clear, definite list that identifies the characteristics of children with learning disabilities. According to the National Center for Learning Disabilities (2002), it is not easy to recognize learning disabilities because there is no single indicator of this disability. The time for concern is when a person repeatedly has problems that result in a negative effect on everyday life. Yyseldyke and Algozzine (1990) state that although many characteristics are attributed to students with learning disabilities, and students who have this disability have many of them, there are no characteristics that are universal and specific to the condition. Woolfolk (2001) affirms that students with learning disabilities are not all alike.

What characteristics should we look for that accurately portray learning disabilities? Due to the lack of a consensus on this dilemma, the investigator looked to special education textbooks used in training special education teachers for a list of characteristics. One textbook in particular outlined the academic, social, and behavioral characteristics that generally describe students with learning disabilities. Another text was used to supplement the information. These characteristics can act as a guideline to use when selecting books for children that address learning disabilities. Some of the academic characteristics included are: Average or above average intelligence, significant discrepancy between potential and achievement, uneven academic abilities and difficulties with written language. Some of the social and behavioral characteristics include: Misinterprets social and nonverbal cues, makes poor decisions, and is distractible. For a complete list of characteristics see Appendix A.

Use of Children's Literature to Learn about Disabilities

As indicated previously, research has found that books can give a broader understanding when combined with discussion and other activities that help children identify more with people with disabilities. Baskin and Harris (1984) noted that the use of literature featuring characters with disabilities was an often overlooked approach in integrating children who are exceptional into academic life. They wrote that good literature offers

resources for understanding, altering, or judging one's own behavior. Kramer (1999) suggests that children's literature serves as a very effective tool for promoting acceptance and respect of all kinds of differences. Blaska and Lynch (1998) add that all young children must be routinely presented in the children's fiction and non-fiction we select in our classrooms. Kelly (1995) and Reed (1988) assert that through reading about disabilities, students can learn to understand their own feelings related to disabilities and learn how to handle interactions, to solve problems, to overcome challenges, and perhaps, most importantly, how to be sensitive. According to Rudman (1995), interaction with people with special needs is the best way to counteract negative preconceptions; becoming conscious of the stereotypes or lack of them in books children read also contributes to better relationships in the children's daily lives.

As noted above, a lot of agreement exists about the need to use literature as a tool to help promote positive attitudes and acceptance of people with disabilities. One problem that should not be overlooked is whether the books are providing children with correct information. Many people may have assumptions or stereotypes about people with disabilities, and books, if not accurate, may reinforce these assumptions further. Children especially may lack information on what it means to have a learning disability. McTague (1998) suggests that children's literature dealing with learning disabilities can help people develop awareness and understanding of the problems that confront individuals who have these learning disabilities.

There is a definite need for books that have characters with learning disabilities. Tubman (1985) found there was need for more disability-related literature for children especially in the area of learning disabilities. Respondents of his survey, 63 elementary school principals and nine librarians on the Eastern Shore of Maryland, ranked learning disability number one over thirteen other disabilities as an area where more children's books were needed. This researcher urged that these books were needed to serve as an educational tool to promote peer acceptance of children with disabilities by their nondisabled counterparts, and to assist the reader to understand some of the problems associated with learning disabilities.

Portrayal of Learning Disabilities over the Years

Historically, the most common disabilities in children's literature included characters with either orthopedic or visual impairments, though this is now changing (Ayala, 1999). Not much investigation has been done on books depicting learning disabilities. It should be noted that learning disabilities was identified as one category of disabilities within the past thirty years, so it is a fairly new term. In 1968, the label "specific learning disability" became a federally designated category of "handicapping conditions" (Hallahan, Kauffman & Lloyd, 1996). Many states established a special education category for learning disability during the late 1960s and early 1970s (Lyon, 1996). Being a newly identified disability, learning disability has not been addressed as much in books that children read as other disabilities.

Doherty-Hale (1984) states that the first comprehensive bibliography on juvenile fiction portraying the "handicapped", *Notes From a Different Drummer* (1977) by Barbara Baskin and Karen Harris, lists only four books featuring a child with a learning disability. She adds that books about learning disabilities were just beginning to appear and that in some books, the portrayal of neurological symptoms was inaccurate or confusing.

In their subsequent analysis of juvenile books written from 1976 to 1981, Baskin and Harris (1984) found a dramatic increase in the quantity of new titles in the field of children and adolescent books about disabilities. One of their findings was that, like in the real world where there were more males with disabilities than females, male characters outnumbered females. They noted that the most extreme imbalance occurred in stories about characters with learning disabilities, which depicted four times as many boys as girls. Since then little has been written about the depiction of people with learning disabilities in children's literature in relation to their accurate and realistic portrayal. Tubman (1985) found only twelve children's books that were written about learning disabilities. According to McTague (1998) there is a wide range of children's books on learning disabilities, but they are not readily available to the general public. She asserts that there is a need to make these books easily available so that all those interested in reading about LD can find these books without any difficulty.

Criteria for Selection of Good Books on Disabilities

One of the most common criteria in selecting books about children with special needs is that books must realistically and accurately portray persons with disabilities (Prater, 1999; Rudman, 1995; Myles, Orsmbee, Downing, Walker & Hudson 1992; Tubman, 1985). Engel (cited in Tubman, 1985) urged that one of the questions that need to be asked before a book is chosen is whether accurate information is given about the disability in text and illustration. She elaborated on this by asking several questions: Is the nomenclature accurate? Is the description of the disability consistent with medical or psychological practice? Are the social, psychological, and emotional ramifications of the exceptionality developed in credible manner?

Myles, et al. (1992) add that books with exceptionalities need to be interesting, have a well-developed plot, clearly defined characters, and a motivational story line. Heim (cited in Ayala, 1999) provided five criteria for the evaluation of children's literature: Accuracy of information, lack of stereotypes, literary quality, confronting the disability, and not "using" characters with disabilities. An example of using characters with disabilities is when characters without disabilities develop a greater appreciation, affection, or understanding of the character with a disability. In such cases, characters with disabilities have been used as a catalyst for a character or characters without disabilities to change (Prater, 1999). Rudman (1995) further recommends that books focus on what the characters with special needs can do rather than dwelling on what they cannot do, and that people with special needs should appear as major and minor characters in approximately the same proportion as they occur in real life. Furthermore, they should be as fully dimensional as the other characters and be varied in their race, economic background, social class, religion, age, and lifestyle.

Accuracy of content is a major concern of those selecting literature about people with disabilities (Umerlik, 1992). Andrews (1998) reiterates that the most important and most often cited criterion when selecting inclusion literature is accuracy of information. She adds that teachers must select materials that accurately portray the disability lest they perpetuate society's myths and stereotypes. Furthermore, terminology used to discuss related issues must

be accurate, and the use of people-first language, language that puts the person first and the label second, is most desirable.

CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to determine whether authors identified a character as having a learning disability and whether such characters were accurately portrayed in children's books. This chapter presents the procedure for selecting the books for analysis, the development of the instrument, a description of research participants, and the steps in the data analysis process, as well as a section on interrater reliability. A qualitative research methodology was used in this study.

Procedure for Selecting Books for Analysis

To qualify for this study, books had to have a character with a learning disability. Books were selected that were at an elementary reading level, that is, kindergarten to sixth grade. Because this is an initial study, the total number of books analyzed was required to be small, so only a sample of the books identified was chosen for this study. Newer books were desirable. However, older books were included if they met the other criteria.

To identify children's books that included characters with learning disabilities for this study, a variety of sources were located. One of these was the examination of textbooks that contained annotated bibliographies of books about children with special needs: *Children's Literature*, by Rudman, (1995); *Sensitive Issues*, by Rasinski and Gillespie (1992); and *Understanding Abilities, Disabilities and Capabilities,* by Carlin, Laughlin, and Saniga (1991). The researcher also located websites of national organizations that address issues on disabilities, particularly learning disabilities. The researcher assumed that the national organizations would provide credible and authoritative lists of books on their websites.

One organization, the National Information Center for Children and Youth with Disabilities (NICHCY, 2001) compiled a resource list that is intended to help parents and professionals identify books that are written about or include characters who have a disability. Eight books on learning disabilities for different ages were presented. LD Online (2002), a website for parents, teachers and other professionals on learning disabilities, had a selection of seventy-three fiction books intended for and about students with learning disabilities. The list contained books for both elementary and high school students. Another

useful website was that of Kansas State University library, which had a list of books on learning disabilities.

In most cases book titles appeared on both the annotated bibliographies and internet websites, thus the researcher decided to select those books that appeared in more than one source. A total of thirty books, both fiction and nonfiction, were identified.

From this list a further selection was made to reduce the number of books for the study. This selection was done by selecting books according to their recommended reading levels. Books were selected so that the sample contained literature to cover all the grades from kindergarten to sixth grade in approximately equal proportions. A large number of books were grouped at the intermediary level (fourth to sixth grade). The researcher did not find a lot of books for the younger children (kindergarten to second grade) and this impacted the books chosen. A small number of books, fourteen, was selected for this study.

Appendix A provides a list of the books reviewed for this study. This list includes two books by the same author. The reason for this was the limited number of books recommended for second to fifth grade levels. Thus one author, Janover (1988; 2000), had two of her books selected because they fell in different age categories. At least one of her books went down to the second grade reading level. Furthermore, some other books that could have been selected were not available. They were either out of print or not accessible in the local community. The researcher then developed an instrument to determine the accuracy of the portrayal of characters with learning disabilities.

Development of the Instrument

The instrument consisted of three sections (see Appendix B): the first section consists of questions on the reviewer and general information about the book. The second section was a checklist to determine the presence of characteristics of learning disabilities. The last section contained questions concerning the realism of character portrayal, services received by the character, use of first-person language, and recommendations for using the book.

To create the instrument, the researcher reviewed special education textbooks to find the characteristics of learning disabilities. The professional texts used were *Introduction to Special Education: Teaching in an Age of Opportunity* (Smith, 2001), and *Educating*

Exceptional Children (Kirk, Gallagher & Anastasiow, 2000). The characteristics were placed in two categories: academic characteristics and social and behavioral characteristics. The list of characteristics was given to Dr. Anne Foegen, a faculty member in special education whose area of expertise is learning disabilities, to ensure content validity. The researcher then constructed the instrument with input from faculty members, both in special education and general education.

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Research Participants

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To increase reliability of the study, a sample of two undergraduate and two graduate students volunteered to also read the books, in addition to a faculty member, and the researcher. Because of the exploratory nature of this study, only a small sample of participants was desired. Each participant was to read about three-quarters of the fourteen books and complete a checklist for each book read. The four participants were invited to participate on the basis of being interested in the field of and currently receiving special education training. However, one student later withdrew from the study due to personal commitments. Approval was obtained for this project from the Human Subject Research Office at Iowa State University.

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Coding Procedures

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The researcher and research participants chose one book to read and complete the checklist on for reliability purposes. We then met together to discuss the process of completing the checklist. During the discussion we came up with a set of notes to follow when completing the checklist. The result was the Users Manual for the LD Portrayal Checklist (see Appendix C), which gave specific guidelines for completing the checklist. During the discussion on the checklist, focus was given to eleven major areas that are briefly described below.

Reading Level

First, the reviewer was to indicate the reading level the book was most suitable for, primary (K-3) or intermediate (4-6) levels, or both if appropriate. The reviewer was then to indicate whether an adult was required to read the book to a child or whether the child could read the book on his or her own. The reviewer could check both if appropriate.

Demographics

Reviewers were to indicate whether a label was given to the child identifying a specific disability. The reviewer then indicated whether the character's specific characteristics or a description was given. Age, grade, and gender were recorded for each character with a learning disability.

Academic Characteristics

For the eleven academic characteristics identified (see Appendix B), one was required to check whether it was stated or inferred in the book. The reviewer also identified the page number and paragraph where a characteristic was depicted for reference purposes. If a specific characteristic on the list was not stated or inferred, the reviewer left it blank.

Social and Behavioral Characteristics

Eleven social and behavioral characteristics were included in the checklist (refer to Appendix B). The same procedure as in the academic characteristics was followed.

Other Characteristics

If there were other characteristics described that were not included on the two previous lists, they were listed and described here. Page and paragraph numbers were also indicated for reference purposes.

Realism

This category was created to determine how realistic the portrayal of the character was according to the reviewer. Realism was rated using a Likert scale from very realistic to not realistic.

Services

Whenever applicable, the type of educational service(s) provided to the character with a learning disability was indicated, with a brief description and was rated on its appropriateness. Again, for reference purposes the page and paragraph numbers were to be recorded.

People-First Language

This was included to determine if characters with this disability were referred to using people-first language. An example would be that the child had a learning disability as opposed to an LD child. People-first language was included in the 1990 Amendments to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Books with copyrights prior to 1990 were not expected to use this type of language.

Recommendation

This category was developed to indicate the reviewer's opinion on whether the book was advisable to be used by elementary students as a means of understanding learning disabilities.

General Comments

For each book, a general comment category was created. This allowed the reviewer to share insights, perceptions, and other information that did not fall under the above areas.

Analysis of the Responses and Inter-rater Reliability

This study incorporated a descriptive research design involving the review of fourteen children's books on learning disabilities. Descriptive research determines and reports the way things are (Mugenda & Mugenda, 1999). In this investigation, the researcher attempted to determine the extent to which authors actually used a label and which characteristics of learning disabilities were evident in children's storybooks. Data collected on each book were organized on a computer-generated database in order to classify and quantify the resulting trends. Simple descriptive statistics were then used. Computations of frequencies,

percentages, range, and mode were used to organize the data into the eleven major areas elaborated above.

The main focus of the analysis however, was on the books' representations of academic and social/behavioral characteristics. For each book, the percent agreement on the presence of academic and social/behavioral characteristics between raters was calculated to establish interrater reliability. A high level of agreement between raters that a characteristic was stated or inferred in a book, confirmed the presence of the characteristic. Characteristics with a high percent agreement (sixty percent and above) were identified.

Five reviewers, including the researcher, rated the books. One book was initially read and reviewed by all the reviewers. Three books were reviewed by four reviewers, five books by three reviewers, four books got two reviews each and one book got one review. It was not possible to assign the books so that each book received equal number of reviews as planned earlier on as one of the reviewers withdrew from the study due to personal commitments. For the book reviewed by all five reviewers, agreement of at least sixty percent was applied to identify characteristics that were present in the book. For books reviewed by four reviewers, the characteristics were selected if three quarters of the reviewers agreed it was present. Finally, where three reviewers reviewed a book, a characteristic was identified as present in a book if two-thirds of the reviewers checked it was present.

CHAPTER 4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The purpose of this analysis was to determine the accurate portrayal of learning disabilities in a sample of children's books. The findings of the study are discussed below. First general information on the books is provided, including findings on the labels used by authors. The portrayal of the various characteristics of learning disabilities across the books is then given. A discussion section concludes this chapter.

General Information on the Books

All fourteen books were analyzed. However, in subsequent analysis, five books were not included as each had two reviewers or less. Table 4.1 is a summary of specific demographics, while Table 4.2 is an overall summary of the fourteen books. Demographics include author, title, copyright date, gender of the character, grade and age of the character, label used to describe the character, and whether or not educational services were provided. The oldest book was published in 1974, and the newest was published in 2000. Only one book was published prior to 1976. Up to this time there had been no agreed upon definition of learning disabilities. This may explain why the label LD is not used in *He's My Brother*, published in 1974. Six books were published after 1990. The year 1990 is significant because it is when people-first language was mandated with amendments to IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act). This is discussed in Appendix D.

A reading level was found for each book. Of the fourteen books, seventy-nine percent (11) were placed at the intermediate reading level (third to sixth grade), fourteen percent (2) were considered appropriate for both intermediate and elementary. Only seven percent of the books (1) were placed at the elementary level (kindergarten to third grade).

In the majority of the books (about 57%), the character was labeled as having a learning disability; the term learning difference was used in one book. In half of these books, the disability was specifically identified as dyslexia. In one book (7%) the disability was identified as a neurological impairment. Five of the books (about 36%) did not have a label attached to the character.

Apart from two books (14%) the grade level of the character with learning disabilities could be identified in all the books. For most of the books, which was nine (64%), the

characters with LD were between fifth and sixth grade. Only one book (7%) had a character in a higher grade (seventh grade), and in two books (14%) the character was estimated to be in a grade under fifth. In terms of gender portrayal, male characters (71%) were portrayed in more books (10) than female characters (29%) in the books (4).

Table 4.1. Book Demographics

Category	Number	Percent
Copyright Dates		
Prior to 1976	1	7.00
1976-1990	7	50.00
1991-1995	2	14.00
1996-2000	4	29.00
Reading Level		
Intermediate	11	79.00
Primary/Intermediate	2	14.00
Primary	1	7.00
Label		
Learning disabilities	4	28.60
Dyslexia	4	28.60
Other (neurological)	1	7.00
None	5	35.70
Grade of Character		
7th grade	1	7.10
5th-6th grade	9	64.30
$< 5^{th}$ grade	2	14.30
Unidentifiable	2	14.30
Gender		
Males	10	71.00
Females	4	29.00

$n = 14$

Table 4.2. Summary of the Children's Books

Author	Title of Book	Copy Right	Reading Level	Gender	Age/ Grade	Label	Services
Ailleo, B.	Secrets Aren't Always For Keeps	1988	Inter	F	10/5th	LD	Yes
Birdseye, T.	Just Call Me Stupid	1993	Inter	M	10/5th	No	Yes
Cutler, J.	Spaceman	1997	Inter	M	10/5th	LD/ Dyslexic	Yes
DeClements, B.	Sixth Grade Can Really Kill You	1985	Inter	F	11-12/6th	LD	Yes
* Gehret, J.	The Don't Give Up Kid	1990	Inter	M		LD	Yes
Giff, P.	The Beast in Ms. Rooney's Room	1984	Inter	M	8/2nd	No	Yes
Greenwald, S.	Will the Real Gertrude Hollings Please Stand Up?	1983	Inter	F	11	LD	Yes
* Griffith, J.	How Dyslexic Benny Became a Star	1998	Inter	M	5th	Dyslexic	Yes
* Janover, C.	Josh: A Boy with Dylexia	1988	Inter	M	5th	LD/ Dyslexic	Yes
Janover, C.	How Many Days Until Tomorrow?	2000	Inter	M	12/5th	Dyslexic	No
Lasker, J.	He's My Brother	1974	Primary/ Inter	M		No	No
* Lewis, M.	Wrongway Applebaum	1984	Primary/ Inter	M	10-11/5th	No	No
* Levinson, M.	And Don't Bring Jeremy	1985	Inter	M	13/7th	Neurological Impairment	Yes
Polacco, P.	Thank You Mr. Falker	1998	Primary	F	5-10/K-5th	No	Yes

* Were not included in the data analysis.

Accuracy of the Portrayal of Learning Disabilities

In all books, regardless of whether or not the character was labeled as having a learning disability, a description of the character's attributes was analyzed. Academic characteristics were portrayed more (9 books) than social/behavioral (5 books). Tables 4.3 and 4.4 show the percentage of agreement on the presence of the characteristics.

Academic Characteristics

Out of eleven academic characteristics, nine were identified as present to some extent in the books (see Table 4.3). The most frequently occurring characteristic was *experiences substantial delays in academic achievement, especially in reading*. This characteristic was reported in all nine books. The next characteristic commonly identified was *experiences difficulties with written language*, which was evident in five books. In four books, the characters had *significant discrepancy between potential and achievement*. In three of the books, the characters were identified as having *average or above average intelligence*. The other five characteristics were present in only one or two books. Two characteristics were not recorded at all: *Not actively involved in learning tasks*, and *poor problem solving skills*. In terms of which books represented most academic characteristics, *Will the Real Gertrude Hollings Please Stand Up?* had six. Four books have four characteristics each. The rest of the books (four) had between one and three characteristics.

Social/Behavioral Characteristics

As shown in Table 4.4, about half of the eleven social/behavioral characteristics were identified as present in the books. Out of a total of eleven social/behavioral characteristics, six characteristics were identified as occurring in some of the books. Two characteristics were identified in three books. These are *has difficulty making and retaining friends*, and *may have behavioral problems*. The other four characteristics were identified in only one book each. Compared to the academic characteristics, this proportion of representation in books was low.

Table 4.3. Percentage of Agreement Above 0.60 on the Academic Characteristics by Book

Characteristic	Mr. Falker	Secrets	Sixth Grade	Beast	Space-Man	Stupid	Gertrude Hollings	How many days?	Brother	TOTAL
Number of Raters	5	4	4	4	3	3	3	3	3	■
Average intelligence	0.60	1.00	1.00							3
Significant discrepancy			0.75		1.00		0.67	0.67		4
Substantial delays	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	0.67	1.00	1.00	0.67	0.67	9
Uneven academic abilities					0.67		0.67			2
Not active in learning tasks										0
Poor language							0.67	0.67		2
Listening/speaking delays							0.67			1
Written language difficulties	0.80	1.00		1.00			1.00	1.00		5
Arithmetic difficulties	1.00				0.67					2
Organizational problems		0.75								1
Poor problem solving										0
TOTAL	4	4	3	2	4	1	6	4	1	■

Table 4.4. Percentage of Agreement Above 0.60 on the Social/Behavioral Characteristics by Book

Characteristic	Mr. Falker	Secrets	Sixth Grade	Beast	Space-Man	Stupid	Gertrude Hollings	How many days?	Brother	TOTAL
Number of Raters	5	4	4	4	3	3	3	3	3	
Immature					1.00					1
Misinterprets social cues										0
Makes poor decisions					0.67					1
Cannot predict behavioral consequences										0
Difficulty making friends	0.60					0.67			1.00	3
Naive					1.00					1
Distractible					0.67					1
Impulsive										0
Over reliant on teachers & peers										0
Low frustration tolerance										0
Behavioral problems			1.00		0.67				0.67	3
TOTAL	1	0	1	0	5	1	0	0	2	

The book *Spaceman* was identified as having a higher number of social characteristics, five. *He's My Brother* had two characteristics and the other three books had one characteristic each.

Table 4.5. Summary of Academic and Social/Behavioral Characteristics Found by Book

Book Title	Academic Characteristics	Social/Behavioral Characteristics	TOTAL
Thank You Mr. Falker	4	1	5
Secrets Aren't Always For Keeps	4	0	4
Sixth Grade Can Really Kill You	3	1	4
The Beast in Ms. Rooney's Room	2	0	2
Spaceman	4	5	9
Just Call Me Stupid	1	1	2
Will the Real Gertrude Hollings Please Stand Up?	6	0	6
How Many Days Until Tomorrow?	4	0	4
He's My Brother	1	2	3

Discussion

Book Demographics

Based on the selected books, a majority of books were identified that are at the intermediate level. Why are so many of the books at the third to sixth grade level? One reason that more books may be written for this age group is because children in this group have been or are being identified as having learning disabilities. Schools may try not to identify and label a child in the primary grades (K-2). In addition, more authors may choose to write about this group because around third grade students begin to focus on peers. It is important for them to feel that they belong. In comparison, children in the earlier grades may not be as concerned with belonging. Feldman (1999) states that from around four to seven years of ages, children see friends as others who like them and they share toys and activities together. Children at this stage do not usually take others' personal qualities into consideration. It is around age eight to ten that children take others' personal qualities and traits into consideration. He adds that from age eleven to fifteen the main criteria for children's friendship shift toward intimacy and loyalty. Authors may therefore write for children at intermediate grades, so as to help the children to negotiate friendships and help them relate with and understand others.

For the twelve books where the age of the character could be determined, all but three of the characters were in the fifth or sixth grade. The three remaining characters were in seventh grade, second grade (where the character with LD was held back for a year) and in one book the character portrayal was estimated to range from kindergarten to about fifth grade. It was interesting to note that in all the books selected for this study the character with a disability was always a child. There were no adults with a learning disability in any of the books. Baskin and Harris (1984) also found that in their analysis of 348 children's and adolescents' books about impairment, nearly two-thirds of characters were children or adolescents. While this illustrates that books are being written for children about other children, it is important to also include adults with disabilities. This is necessary as learning disabilities has been described as a life-long disability (Smith, 2001). Thus children need to know that adults also have this disability.

There were not as many books with female characters as with male characters. This agrees with the general consensus that even though both boys and girls are identified as having learning disabilities, boys are more likely to be identified (Lesar, 1990). This also ties in with previous investigations that have found that portrayals of male characters tend to outnumber the females as the primary characters with disabilities (Ayala, 1999). In a study of a group of 215 girls and 199 boys from kindergarten through third grade, Shaywitz, Shaywitz, Fletcher, and Escobar (1990) found that significantly more boys than girls were identified as reading disabled. Lesar (1990) and Anderson (1997) attest to the fact that there is a greater ratio of male students than female students being served in special education. Thus books written for children may be reflecting the reality in our schools where more boys than girls are identified as having learning disabilities.

Use of Labels in Describing Characters with Learning Disabilities

In this analysis, most books used the labels *learning disability* and *dyslexia* to describe the character with a disability. Similarly, in her study on the characterization of mental retardation in children's and adolescent literature, Prater (1999) found that most authors identify and label characters specifically as having mental retardation. Other authors are less specific and leave it up to the reader to determine what the disability is.

In relation to the issue of labeling, Ayala (1999) identified a new trend in a growing number of children's books whereby they contain factual/educational information about the disability either in the preface or appendix of the book. She stated:

> "The purpose for providing factual information about the disability is to help the reader understand the origin, characteristics and treatment of the disability portrayed. Often in the form of questions, these descriptions answer many of the common questions and correct misperceptions about the specific disability." (Ayala, 1999, p.109)

This was the case in some books in this study such as *Secrets Aren't Always For Keeps*. Thus it was necessary to use the label learning disability to clearly identify the disability before describing it.

Accuracy of Portrayal of Characteristics of Learning Disabilities

For the most part, the books had a description or gave characteristics related to learning disabilities. Some of the books had characteristics that were directly stated and/or

that were inferred, while some books addressed very few characteristics, if any. In general, academic characteristics (9 books) were referred to more often than those of a social or behavioral nature (5 books). Authors seem to have shied away from portraying social and behavioral characteristics of people with LD. This representation does not provide a balanced picture of LD, because children often have these social problems. At the same time, overrepresentation of social and behavioral characteristics should be avoided as this may confuse the reader to think a character has behavior disorders.

Some specific characteristics seem to be referred to more often than others. These characteristics may be more easily described or portrayed than others. Examples of this would be *experiences substantial delays in academic achievement, especially in reading,* and *difficulty making friends.* In S*ixth Grade Can Really Kill You*, the character, Helen, is in sixth grade, and is indicated as having a reading problem. The book clearly states that she reads at a second grade level. Thus the characteristic of delayed academic achievement is easily identifiable as it is stated directly in the text. In the book *He's My Brother,* evidence of the character having difficulty making and retaining friends is evident in examples where he plays with younger children.

For those characteristics not commonly identified by the reviewer, it may be that they are harder to describe or portray. In addition, the way the book was written may have been difficult for reviewers to decide on the presence of the characteristic.

The characteristic *experiences substantial delays in academic achievement, especially in reading* was the most common in the books. This is consistent with the literature base that most students with learning disabilities have difficulties reading. Hallahan and Kaufmann (cited in Woolfolk, 2001) classified the following as the most common student characteristics of learning disabilities: specific difficulties in one or more academic areas; poor coordination; problems paying attention; hyperactivity and impulsivity; problems organizing and interpreting visual and auditory information; disorders of thinking, memory, speech, and hearing; and difficulties making and retaining friends.

Using books with different representations of academic and social/ behavioral characteristics may help children see how a learning disability is manifested in different

people. People who have LD may also have social and behavioral problems. The social difficulties often caused by LD may stem from problems in learning appropriate behavior or from repeated failures in school that lead to low self-esteem, helplessness or acting out (Carlson, 1987). On the other hand, people with LD may have academic problems only and not have behavior problems.

CHAPTER 5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This chapter contains the summary and the conclusions of this study. At the end of the chapter recommendations are given for further research on children's books on learning disabilities.

Summary

This study investigated the accurate and realistic portrayal of learning disabilities in selected children's books. Since books may be the only way that some children come to learn about LD, it is important that books provide accurate information. Accuracy of portrayal was analyzed by finding the interrater agreement on the presence of the characteristics of learning disabilities. The use of labels in describing characters with learning disabilities was also examined.

Conclusions

From this study, it can be concluded that children's books on LD often use the label *learning disability* or *dyslexia* to describe the character with this disability. By using this label, the disability of the character is emphasized. This is important as reading the book alone may not be enough for a child to know the character has LD. Furthermore, some authors label the character to help clearly identify the disability and then provide appendices that provide children with more information concerning what a learning disability is.

Due to the nature of learning disabilities, no one person can have all the characteristics of this disability. The characteristics rated in this study included academic and social/behavioral. Except for *Spaceman*, all the books portrayed more academic than social characteristics. Some characteristics were portrayed more than others. This may be attributed to the ease of describing these characteristics and/or locating them in the books. These characteristics may be more typical in the sample of books analyzed in this study. Authors may also address these common characteristics more than others. Academic characteristics of LD were portrayed more than social/behavioral characteristics. A book that has several social characteristics may be used in a discussion to share some of the social characteristics that a person with LD may or may not have.

As noted by others, books should be used in combination with other means to learn about disabilities. Some of the means used include incorporating discussion in reading stories. This is very important because teachers and parents can point out inaccuracies, as well as stereotypes, that may still exist in some books. They can alert children to the fact that more current books will be expected to provide more accurate information as well as be more realistic in their portrayal of LD. Prater (1999) affirms that the mere presence of a character with mental retardation in a book does not guarantee the accuracy of the portrayal. This same caution should be used with books on learning disabilities. Books written for children are of particular concern as for some children, books may be their first intimate exposure to individuals with disabilities (Prater, 1999).

It is important to note that school districts in Iowa are mandated to include textbooks that reflect multicultural gender-fair education, but not special education. Although there are several pieces of special education legislation, none address books on or about disabilities.

Recommendations

The following recommendations may improve the study, aid in further research, and identify ways in which the results may be used. One recommendation if a similar study were done would be to provide incentives for people to read and review the books. In this study, reviewers were selected based on their willingness to participate and their special education training. Reading the books and completing the checklists was a big investment of time. Moreover, the reviewers in this study also had to invest time to go through training to increase reliability of the study. In the final analysis, the reading and completing of checklists took longer than expected.

Another recommendation is based on the difficulty of matching some of the characteristics in the instrument with those in children's books. Perhaps a rating scale approach can be applied whereby reviewers rate the presence of characteristics on a Likert scale. For example, reviewers could be asked to indicate the presence of the characteristic *has average or above average intelligence* on a scale of one to five with a rating of one being not identified, a rating of three being the characteristic is implied and a rating of five if the characteristic is clearly stated in some way.

McKee (1987) recommended that specific criteria be developed for evaluating books with characters with physical disabilities. This can also be applied in books on learning disabilities, whereby specific criteria for analyzing books about learning disabilities are available. These criteria can guide students, teachers, and other readers of these books.

Gender differences were not analyzed in this study. For further research, the portrayal of LD characteristics of female versus male characters can be investigated to see if there are significant differences in gender portrayal. In addition, books that depict children who are culturally or ethnically diverse and who have a learning disability might also be investigated. The books selected in this study did not have characters with LD who were culturally and ethnically diverse. There is a need to review a wider selection of books to find out how characters of diverse races and ethnicities are depicted in books since learning disabilities affects all kinds of children. The researcher concurs with Ayala (1999) that this is an area that needs to be addressed more.

In addition, this study focused on books at the elementary to intermediate level. Further investigation may be conducted on books written for older children, such as adolescents. McKee (1987) asserts that this may provide a more complete picture of characters with disabilities to which children are exposed.

Teachers and parents should be aware that though there are good books on LD, some do not accurately portray learning disabilities. Thus they need to consider several factors when using them in classrooms or at home. Some of those factors include the use of people first language, realistic situations that are age or grade appropriate to the child, and the characteristics used to describe the child are, in fact, ones typical of children with learning disabities. Teachers should therefore promote not only the reading of books about disabilities, but integrate this with discussions to help children understand what LD is and what it is not. At the same time, the diversity of books available about LD is encouraging. The books found in this study addressed many important aspects about learning disabilities that can help children understand people with LD more. For example, educational services were addressed, letting children know how LD is addressed in schools. Also some books were

autobiographical in nature and this provided a realistic view of LD, that the reader can understand even better.

APPENDIX A: CHILDREN'S BOOKS ON LEARNING DISABILITIES

Aiello, B. & Shulman, J. (1988). *Secrets aren't always for keeps.* Henry Holt & Co.

Birdseye, T. (1993). *Just call me stupid.* Holiday House

Cutler, J. (1999). *Spaceman.* Puffin

DeClements, B. (1995). *Sixth grade can really kill you.* Puffin

Gehret, J. (1992). *The don't give up kid (and learning differences).* Verbal Images

Giff, P (1984). *The beast in Ms. Rooney's room.* Yearling Books

Greenwald, S. (1985). *Will the real Gertrude Hollings please stand up.* Dell Publishing

Griffith, J. (1997). *How dyslexic Benny became a star.* Yorktown Press

Janover, C. (1988). *Josh: A boy with dyslexia.* Waterfront Books

Janover, C. (2000). *How many days until tomorrow?* Woodbine House

Lasker, J. (1974). *He's my brother.* Whitman

Levinson, M (1985). *And don't bring Jeremy.* Holt, Rinehart, and Winston

Lewis, M. (1984). *Wrongway Applebaum.* Putman

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

APPENDIX B: CHECKLIST INSTRUMENT

LD PORTRAYAL CHECKLIST

Reviewer: _____

Book Title: _____

Author: _____

Publisher: _____ Copyright: _____

Reading Level: Primary (K-3) _____   Intermediate: _____ (4-6)

Adult Reads: _____   Child reads: _____

1.   *Does author give a label to the child?*

        Yes (indicate label) _____ No

                    (If yes, give page number and paragraph number)

2.   *What is the gender of the character with LD?* Male ____   Female ____

3.   *What are the age and grade levels of the character?* Age _____ Grade _____

4.   (a) *Does author identify characteristics or give a description of the disability?* (Please circle)

        Yes   No

    (If "Yes"-complete #4b and #4c)   (If "No"-skip to #5)

4. (b) Check each characteristic that is used to describe the character with learning disabilities, checking whether the characteristic is specifically stated or inferred. Include the page number and paragraph number on which you based your response.

Academic Characteristics	Stated	Inferred	Page (s) #	Paragraph #
Has average or above average intelligence				
Significant discrepancy between potential and achievement				
Experiences substantial delays in academic achievement, specifically in reading				
Has uneven academic abilities				
Not actively involved in learning tasks				
Evidences poor language and/or cognitive development				
Delays, disorders, or discrepancies in listening and speaking				
Difficulties with written language				
Difficulty in performing arithmetic functions or in comprehending basic concepts				
Difficulty in organizing and integrating thoughts				
Poor problem solving skills				

Social and Behavioral Characteristics	Stated	Inferred	Page (s) #	Paragraph #
Possesses immature social skills				
Misinterprets social and nonverbal cues				
Makes poor decisions				
Cannot predict behavioral consequences				
Has difficulty making and retaining friends				
Is too trusting of others' motivations and sincerity; naïve				
Is distractible				
Is impulsive				
Tends to be over reliant on teachers and peers				
Has low tolerance for frustration				
May have behavioral problems related to school				

Adapted from:
Smith, D.D. (2001). *Introduction to special education: Teaching in an age of opportunity*. Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon
Kirk, S. A., Gallagher, J.J., Anastasiow, N.J. (2000). *Educating exceptional children*. Boston, NY: Houghton Mifflin Company.

4. (c) *What other characteristics are included that are not part of the above checklist?*

5. *Realism*

   In your opinion, how realistic is the character portrayal?

1	2	3	4
Not realistic	Somewhat realistic	Realistic	Very realistic

6. (a) *Does the child receive services?*

   Yes   No

   (If yes, give page number and paragraph number)

   (b) *Description of the service(s)*

   (c) *In your opinion, the services provided are...*

1	2	3	4
Very appropriate	Appropriate	Somewhat appropriate	Not appropriate

7. *In your opinion, the author uses person-first language...*

1	2	3	4
Always	Most of the time	Somewhat	Rarely

8. *(a)* Would you recommend this book to be read by or to an elementary student as a means of understanding learning disabilities? *Circle one of the following:*

Strongly recommend   *Recommend*   *Do not recommend*

(b) Explain your response.

9. *General comments*

APPENDIX C: USER'S MANUAL FOR THE LD POTRAYAL CHECKLIST

Page 1

Adult Reads: _____   *Child Reads:* _____

Select either of the choices or both, as in some cases a child at intermediary level may read the book.

Question (3) What are the age and grade levels of the character? Age ___ Grade ___

Indicate the span or bulk of time for which the student has been in a particular grade in the book, for example: mostly in fifth grade. You can also indicate the age range of the character across the book if available.

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Question (4b) Check each characteristic that is used to describe the character with learning disabilities, checking whether the characteristic is specifically stated or inferred. Include the page number and paragraph number on which you based your response.

- ❑ If a characteristic has been stated or referred in several places, give only three examples of the page where it can be found. Look for the major statements.
- ❑ If a characteristic is inferred, and also stated, place a check on the stated only.
- ❑ Also illustrations can be stated or inferred; if there are any that help portray the characteristics, state the page number and a brief description in Question (4c): *What other characteristics are included that are not part of the above checklist.*

Academic characteristics

- ❑ Under the academic characteristics, note that these refer to the content areas: written language, reading and math only. Thus if student has difficulties in social studies, only count it as a characteristic if it is the result of reading difficulties.
- ❑ Thus disregard characteristics in non-academic areas such as art, music, sport, home economics, physical education, and band.
- ❑ If anybody alludes to the character being bright (such as Trisha's grandmother in *Thank you Mr. Falker*) check that the first characteristic has been met. That is, if anyone says the child is bright, smart, etc. the first characteristic (has average or

above average intelligence) is <u>inferred</u>. If anyone says the child is smart, with supporting data-then check the <u>stated</u> box.

- ❑ There is significant discrepancy between potential and achievement if there is supporting documentation that the child was smart/bright.
- ❑ Note that the characteristic: Evidences poor language and/or cognitive development refers to thought process development. There is evidence of immaturity in cognitive thought process.
- ❑ The characteristic: Delays, disorders, or discrepancies in listening and speaking. Check listening only if a physical problem with ear is evident. Check speaking only if there is inability to make sounds correctly (e.g. stuttering)
- ❑ The characteristic: Difficulties with written language-has to do with writing or spelling.
- ❑ The characteristic: Difficulty in performing arithmetic functions or in comprehending basic concepts-watch for real life math such as following directions (e.g. go two blocks east, then five blocs west).
- ❑ The characteristic: Difficulty in organizing and integrating thoughts-watch for expression, written or verbal.
- ❑ The characteristic: Poor problem solving skills-refers to math problem solving or any other related academic problem solving.

<u>Social characteristics</u>

- ❑ Only focus on the characteristic if the behavior/social characteristic is a result of the disability. To help you with this ask: Is the behavior/social characteristic a direct result of the disability?

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Question (5) Realism

In your opinion, how realistic is the character portrayal?

- ❑ Give your response in relation to the learning disability.

❑ Note that you can state two opinions here, one as you would as a general reader, that is from the child's viewpoint, and one as your view as a special educator (as a professional).

Question (6c) In your opinion, the services provided are

Very appropriate   Appropriate   Somewhat appropriate   Not appropriate

Consider how the services provided are appropriate as far as helping the character.

APPENDIX D: ADDITIONAL DATA

The following is a summary of information on the books regarding realism of the character portrayal, services provided to the character and their appropriateness, and use of person-first language. Also a summary of responses is given on whether the book is appropriate to be recommended as a way for children to learn about learning disabilities. Finally general comments on the books are reported.

Realism of Character Portrayal

The rating of the realism of character portray varied among reviewers. For the majority of the books (10), the books' portrayal of the character was rated as realistic or very realistic. This concurs with previous research findings that authors appear to be moving towards portraying the character with a disability as "fully functioning members of the society," (Ayala, 1999). Four of the books were rated as very realistic in their portrayal: *Secrets Aren't Always For Keeps*, *Spaceman*, *Sixth Grade Can Really Kill You*, and *Thank You Mr. Falker*. These books can be used in the classroom as examples of realistic character portrayal.

In a few of the books (4), at least one reviewer rated the realism as either somewhat realistic or not realistic. For example, one reviewer rated *And Don't Bring Jeremy* as somewhat realistic because the portrayal of the character comes across as a mix of LD and mental retardation. Others in this group included: *The Beast In Ms Rooney's Room*, *He's My Brother*, and *Wrongway Applebaum*. In using these books, the reader should note there is a likelihood that the LD portrayal is not realistic.

Services

With the exception of three books (21%), the other eleven books (79%) indicated that the character received some type educational service. These services were mostly to help with reading or writing. A range of educational services were provided. In half of the books (7), the service provided was in the resource room. For example, in *Secrets Aren't Always For Keeps*, Jennifer goes to a resource room for one hour daily. In *Just Call Me Stupid,* Patrick goes to a reading resource room where he gets one-on-one help in reading using worksheets with letter sounds and blends. In three books (21%), the service provided was identified as

"after school tutoring." This was the case in *Thank you Mr. Falker*, where the character, Trisha, received tutoring in reading after school. In one unique case, *Spaceman*, the character attended a fulltime county special education school where he received help in all subject areas. In *The Beast In Ms. Rooney's Room*, the character, Richard, was held back for one year in first grade.

The study illustrates that, for the most part, students with disabilities are portrayed as receiving various educational services in different settings, particularly in the resource room. It is helpful for children to know that children with LD usually receive services, and that a diversity of services is offered depending on the needs of the student.

Use of Person-First Language

For the majority of the books (86%), people first-language was used. Books given a rating of 'always' and 'most of the time' were considered to use people-first language. Only in about fourteen percent (2) of the books was the language used to describe the character as 'somewhat' person-first. Even books with copyright dates earlier than 1990, before the IDEA amendments on using people-first language were passed, were rated as using people-first language with only two exceptions: *Sixth Grade Can Really Kill You,* and *And Don't Bring Jeremy.*

Recommendation of Books

Of the fourteen books, only four (about 30%) received at least one review that they should not be recommended to be used in helping children understand learning disabilities. Reasons for these recommendations varied. For example, one reviewer of *The Beast In Ms. Rooney's Room* considered the story "okay," but felt the book was predictable, and the character rather one dimensional. A reviewer of *And Don't Bring Jeremy* considered it a fairly good book, but did not feel it provided a good picture of LD as it was not realistic enough. The reviewer felt the focus of the book was on the character's older brother. Finally, concerning *Wrongway Applebaum*, a reviewer noted that it really was not about learning disabilities as they impact academics; its focus was on baseball.

On the other hand, the book *Sixth Grade Can Really Kill You* was strongly recommend as "it not only gives a fairly accurate description of LD, it also gives a great look

at how the child feels about herself, school, and life in general!" *The Don't Give Up Kid And Learning Difference,* was strongly recommended as it showed children that they can be good at many other things, even if they have trouble with reading. *Josh: A Boy With Dyslexia* was also strongly recommended for its good explanation of how a person with LD learns differently. Not only are facts about LD included within the story, but also at the end of the book more information on LD is provided through questions and answers. *Thank You Mr. Falker* offers hope to children with LD that their reading problems can be overcome with proper help, patience, and kindness. One reviewer strongly recommended it, stating:

> "This book is well written and does a nice job presenting an illustration of learning disabilities on a level children can easily relate to."

General Comments

This is an overview of the reviewers' insights, perceptions, and other information about the books that did not fall under the above areas. Most of the comments had to do with whether the book was interesting to read. *Sixth Grade Can Really Kill You* was described as 'easy to read, funny and humorous to keep interest.' Most reviewers enjoyed reading *Secrets Aren't Always for Keeps.* One reviewer described *Thank You Mr. Falker* as one of her favorite books and that she planned to share it with students.

Other books, such as *Spaceman,* were seen as inspirational. This book could be used to motivate students if a teacher had a student who was similar to this character and was able to relate to the book in some way. *Secrets Aren't Always For Keeps* was considered a good book, especially because in the last few pages it addressed some questions about LD. Similarly, one reviewer commented that *The Don't Give Up Kid And Learning Differences* 'had a valuable parent resource guide on LD at the end of the book.

In *Just Call Me Stupid* one reviewer stated that she was not sure that the character's problems were the result of LD, but wondered how much was due to his father's constant verbal abuse. The reader did not get a clear picture of what the character's disability looked like. On the same book, a reviewer stated that it was a good book, but she found it difficult to answer many of the questions on the checklist adequately. *How Many Days Until Tomorrow* was considered a good book to read. A reviewer stated that though Josh, the character with LD, was labeled as dyslexic, the only things that alluded to that in the book was his dislike

for reading, spelling in his letter, and when talking some of his words were not correct (jumbled). This book was therefore excellent in not stereotyping Josh.

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