Children’s Literature That Includes Characters With Disabilities or Illnesses

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Books serve as mirrors for children to see characters who look like themselves and have feelings and experiences similar to their own. Books also serve as windows through which children learn about their world by looking beyond their immediate surroundings and seeing characters and events that occur in other communities or other parts of the world (Rudman & Pearce, 1988; Rudman, 1995).

Children with disabilities or illnesses need to see people similar to them. Perhaps no group has been as overlooked and inaccurately presented in children's books as individuals with disabilities. Most often they were not included in stories and when they were, many negative stereotypes prevailed such as characters who were pitiful or pathetic, evil or superheroes, or a burden and incapable of fully participating in the events of everyday life (Biklen and Bogdan, 1977). Often the difference or disability was the main personality trait emphasized to the reader, not a balance of strengths and weaknesses (Blaska & Lynch, 1994).

In 1992, a study by Blaska and Lynch reviewed 500 award-winning and highly recommended books for children from birth through age eight, and published between 1987-1991, for the inclusion and depiction of persons with disabilities. Of the books that were reviewed, ten (2%) included persons with disabilities in the storyline or illustrations. Within the ten books, persons with disabilities were integral to the storyline in only six of the books. The limited presence of persons with disabilities points out the need for more stories that represent the diversity of society, which includes persons with varying abilities. While more books with characters with disabilities are published today, the percentage is still very small when compared to the total number of children's picture books published each year (Blaska, 1996).

All young children need to have the opportunity to learn about diversity of ability much as they learn about cultural diversity. Yet, often this does not happen. When Blaska conducted an informal survey of parents and professionals about their knowledge and use of children's literature with characters with disabilities, she found they didn't know what literature was available or how to use it appropriately.
Many professionals indicated they would include literature about a disability only when a child with a disability became a member of their class. However, it is important that children learn about disabilities and illness throughout the curriculum and throughout time so when children have the opportunity to interact or be classmates with someone with a disability, they have some previous knowledge and understanding (Blaska, in press).

In another study, Blaska examined 40 early childhood programs in Minnesota for literacy rich environments. These programs included Head Start, nursery schools, early childhood special education and center-based childcare that were serving children 3-5 years of age. She used a checklist of 17 criteria identified in the literature to assess if the environment was rich in literacy, which included looking at the diversity of the literature available to children for independent reading. She found a total of 1,677 books were placed for children to look at independently; these were reviewed for the inclusion of disability or illness. Of these books, 24 had some inclusion, representing 1.4% of the literature available for children's independent use. While most of the classrooms had an ample supply of books representing diversity of culture (73% had 1-10 multicultural books available for students), few had books available that had characters with disabilities. Fifty-seven percent (57%) of the classrooms had no books with characters with disabilities or illness. The remaining 42% had one or two books available (Blaska, 2000).

To assist parents and professionals in the use of this genre of literature, Blaska has identified more than 250 children's picture books that include a character with a disability or illness. She has read and analyzed each book using the Images & Encounters Profile, a tool developed by Blaska and Lynch (Blaska, 1996; Blaska, in press) with ten criteria for reviewing books with characters with disabilities.

The Images & Encounters Profile invites reviewers to examine storyline, language or illustrations and to indicate if the criteria listed below are present. Reviewers should check YES if the criterion was addressed positively, NO if the criterion was addressed negatively, and NP if the criterion was not present. YES is the preferred response. The reviewer is cautioned to be aware of the NO responses when reading and/or discussing each book as these responses may influence how they choose to use the book.

The ten criteria are:

1. Promotes empathy not pity.
2. Depicts acceptance not ridicule.
3. Emphasizes success rather than, or in addition, to failure.
4. Promotes positive images of persons with disabilities or illness.
5. Assists children in gaining accurate understanding of the disability or illness.
6. Demonstrates respect for persons with disabilities or illness.
7. Promotes attitude of “one of us” not “one of them.”
8. Uses language which stresses person first, disability second philosophy, i.e. Jody who is blind.
9. Describes the disability or person with disabilities or illness as realistic (i.e., not subhuman or superhuman.)
10. Illustrates characters in a realistic manner.

When in doubt about using a particular book which includes a person with a disability or illness, the reviewers are cautioned to ask themselves, “Would this story embarrass or humiliate a child with a disability?” (or illness). If the answer is YES, they should consider carefully how to best use the book.

Blaska has also developed strategies for incorporating this genre of literature into the curriculum through text-set development, theme- and literature-based approaches, and inclusionary units or webs. She has incorporated most of this into a guide for professionals, entitled “Images and Encounters: Children's Literature with Disabilities” (Blaska, 1996).
approaches, and inclusionary units or webs. She has incorporated most of this information into the second edition of her book: Using Children's Literature to Learn About Disabilities & Illnesses (In press at Educator's International Press, Inc.).

References:


Biographical note:

Dr. Joan K. Blaska is a graduate of the University of Minnesota and a Professor Emeritus of St. Cloud State University, St. Cloud, Minnesota. She was a teacher trainer for teachers working with young children, birth to grade three, with her speciality working with young children with disabilities. Her areas of research are designing literacy rich environments in early childhood programs, children's literature with characters with disabilities or illness, methods for including diverse literature in the early childhood curriculum, and the emotional response to parenting a child with a disability. Dr. Blaska can be reached at her email: jblaska@stcloudstate.edu

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At its best, multicultural children's literature helps children understand that despite our many differences, all people have feelings and aspirations. Those feelings can include love, sadness and fear and the desire for fairness and justice. Selecting good multicultural books involves an anti-bias approach, an active commitment to challenging prejudice, stereotyping, and all forms of discrimination; good multicultural children's books challenge stereotypes, provide a realistic glimpse into the lives of diverse groups of people, help children learn to recognize unfairness, and provid... Characters: * Do characters represent people from a variety of cultural groups? * Do "good" characters reflect a variety of backgrounds? Using children's literature to learn about disabilities and illness. Moorhead, MN: Practical Press. Blaska, J.K., and Lynch, E.C. 1994. Her areas of research are designing literacy rich environments in early childhood programs, children's literature with characters with disabilities or illness, methods for including diverse literature in the early childhood curriculum, and the emotional response to parenting a child with a disability. Parenting becomes even more difficult when children are diagnosed with a chronic illness or disability. Remember to take care of your own emotional health. Difficult behavior Certain types of illness or disability are characterized by behavior that is not always what parents would want to see in their child. When parents are unable to effectively discipline or correct this behavior, it may exacerbate and become chronic in nature. Financial burden Medical bills can quickly become too much to handle.