

## Chapter #9

### CREATING AN IMAGE OF PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES IN LITERATURE LESSONS

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#### ABSTRACT

Inclusive education provides an opportunity for students with disabilities to learn with their non-disabled peers. However, inclusive classrooms do not guarantee that non-disabled students will accept or form friendships with students with disabilities. Therefore, there is a need for intervention that facilitates the acceptance of students with disabilities. Literary works are a readily available resource in education to help students learn about society's diversity and its cultural contexts, as long as they depict these social groups appropriately. This study aimed to identify the different recurring patterns of the disability conception within the content of youth literature in primary education, employing content analysis. The research results reveal that people with disabilities are extremely underrepresented and depicted stereotypically in the examined literary works. This representation can reinforce students' negative attitudes toward people with disabilities. Therefore, the stereotypical content should be clarified and discussed during the lessons.

*Keywords:* disability representation, youth literature, content analysis, inclusive curriculum.

#### 1. INTRODUCTION

Social inclusion and all society members' active participation are vital for practicing human rights and promoting human dignity. Nowadays, the concept of accepting diversity plays an important role in social policy.

Inclusion was a dominant topic of discussion during the last decades of the twentieth century and the first part of the twenty-first century. In 1994 at the Salamanca World Conference on Special Needs Education, 25 international organisations and 92 governments developed a "statement that called for inclusion to become quite simply the norm" (Clough 1998, p. 2). A review of the last two decades of literature shows that inclusion has become an important part of educational thinking (Allen, 2008), gained high status, and acquired international currency (Hodkinson, Ghajarieh, & Salami, 2018).

Inclusion could be a great benefit to disabled students as they have an opportunity to spend most of their time being schooled with their typically developing peers. It also can promote greater social acceptance of difference and impairment. However, evidence consistently shows that being placed in mainstream educational settings does not guarantee that disabled children will be accepted, evaluated, and integrated into the classroom (Martinez & Carspecken, 2007; Lindsay & McPherson, 2012, Schiemer, 2017). Despite having several possibilities during the day interacting with their peers with disabilities, non-disabled children usually ignore their peers with special needs (Rillotta & Nettlebeck, 2007; Tavares, 2011). Nearly fifty percent of children with disabilities feel lonely, isolated, unsafe, and feel that they do not belong within their class (Lindsay & Edwards, 2012).

In light of all this, teachers need to take steps to promote the acceptance of children with disabilities. Literary works as readily available resources can be used by the teachers to help students learn about disabilities (Azano, Tackett, & Sigmon, 2017), if they represented appropriately.

## **2. BACKGROUND**

### **2.1. Inclusion and textbooks**

Cultural adaptation of disability is not self-generated; it develops gradually over a long period of time, affected by several different factors. Among other factors, beliefs and misconceptions about disability contribute to this process. Educational institutions could reinforce these beliefs by not receiving attention and emphasis in the curriculum not to be clarified (Ferguson, 2001). Children's attitudes towards their peers with disabilities are often firmly determined by their degree of knowledge about disability, which stems from their social environments (Ison et al., 2010). Children's lack of knowledge about disabilities often comes from negative attitudes towards their disabled peers and social exclusion of children with disabilities (Lindsay & McPherson 2012). Considering that the perception of disability often forms attitudes and behaviours, it is important to develop children's understanding of individuals with disabilities (Hunt & Hunt 2004). At schools, textbooks can be an easily accessible resource that teachers can use to help students learn about people with disabilities (Prater, Dyches, & Johnstun, 2006). Using textbooks that include disability issues can positively influence students' self-image and motivation with disabilities (Wieman, 2001) and will likely motivate non-disabled students to learn more about their disabled classmates (Hodkinson & Ghajarieh, 2014). Moreover, inclusive textbooks can help non-disabled young learners to realize diversity in their teaching materials, which raise their appreciation for diverse and different characters, and also tolerance among these students of others' impairments (Rasche & Bronson, 1999). Textbooks can be considered "tools" that help students become familiar with society's diversity and its social and cultural contexts (McKinney, 2005). A realistic and non-prejudicial image of people with disabilities should be an important part of public education institutions' textbooks (Artman-Meeker, Grant, & Yang, 2016). It can help students understanding the needs and reality of these people (Ostrosky, Mouzourou, Dorsey, Favazza, & Leboeuf, 2015).

The current study argues that when we try to integrate students with disabilities into regular education, we need to gradually incorporate the issues of people with disabilities into the curriculum of standard schools and classroom environments, thereby reducing barriers to inclusive education.

### **2.2. Disability and youth literature**

Youth literature provides a powerful tool through which students make sense of both their cultural heritage and the world they live in (Ullah, Ali, & Naz, 2014). However, literary works can also function as mirrors, allowing students to self-reflect and recognize similarities and differences between themselves and the characters in literary works (Gilmore & Howard, 2016).

The disability representation of children's literature has a history dating back four to five thousand years (Flood, 2016). Since the 1980s, there have been numerous studies examining the portrayal of childhood literature (Greta, 1986; Harrill, Leung, McKeag, & Price, 1993; Ayala, 1999; Dyches, Prater, & Cramer 2001; Prater, 2003; Quayson, 2007; Beckett, Ellison, Barrett, & Shah, 2010; Hughes, 2012; Hodkinson & Park, 2017). These

studies highlight that people with disabilities are portrayed primarily through negative stereotypes; they are often portrayed as fearful, evil, and often become ridiculous. Moreover, characters with disabilities often become victims of violent acts, often beaten and in several cases killed. Quayson (2007) emphasizes that if children's literature contains disability characters portrayed negatively and used scary scenarios and images, it might make children dislike these characters. According to Wall and Crevecoeur (2016), such stereotypes in children's literature result in problematic attitudes towards disabled people. Almerico (2014) points out that literary characters have a powerful influence on children, almost as strong as the real people they encounter every day. The negative stereotyped portrayal of people with disabilities in children's literature can significantly contribute to the general fear of children toward people with disabilities. Wall and Crevecoeur (2016) highlight that this problematic representation may also have a negative impact on readers' attitudes towards people with disabilities.

### **2.3. The theoretical background of the analysis**

The analysis of disability content in school textbooks and children's literature is closely related to inclusive education. Research in inclusive education has highlighted the conditions required for the successful implementation of inclusive education. One of these is that inclusive classrooms need inclusive books, textbooks that depict people with disabilities in a realistic way. Therefore, it is necessary to analyse current textbooks' disability content to uncover and remove stereotyped representations (Prater & Dyches, 2008).

The present study aimed to identify and critically analyse the presence of disability found within youth literature employed to support the Hungarian National Curriculum. The analysis was based on the categories of stereotypical representation revealed by the researches of Biklen and Bogdan (1977), and Rubin and Strauss Watson (1987 since these studies provide a detailed, complex description of the disability characters found in literary works. Analysing children's literature, Biklen and Bogdan (1977) found ten different commonly occurred stereotypical representations of people with disabilities, such as disabled people are 'pitiable and pathetic,' 'an object of violence,' 'sinister and evil,' 'curio or exotica,' 'an object of ridicule,' 'super cripple,' 'their own worst enemy,' 'a burden,' 'asexual' and 'incapable of fully participating in everyday life.' In 1987, Rubin and Strauss Watson added a stereotype category to the list of Biklen and Bogdan's stereotypes, such as a person with a disability being isolated from disabled and non-disabled peers'.

## **3. METHODS**

### **3.1. Research questions**

The textbooks' content reflects society's norms and attitudes on certain topics of a given era, but it can also shape them (Whitbourne & Hulicka, 1990). Textbooks can thus serve as a staple between curriculum content and social perceptions; they can help to explore and understand social processes and the possibilities of how these could be changed.

This paper focuses on the results of a study investigating the representation of disability in the literary works found in primary school Hungarian Literature textbooks. As in fact, students read these literary works in primary school classes so that they can serve as an instructional vehicle for students' understanding of individuals with disabilities; we formed the following research questions:

- What kind of disability concept can be found in literary works
- How can these representations affect students' perception of people with disabilities?

### 3.2. Content analysis

To address the research questions, a content analysis of the sample textbooks was conducted; content analysis is a systematic, objective, quantitative examination of message characteristics (Neuendorf, 2017) intended for the analysis of message contents to unfold "what they mean to people, what they enable or prevent, and what the information conveyed by them does" (Krippendorff, 2004, p. 2). During content analysis, recurring patterns provide the basis for interpretation and can "reveal the more subtle messages embedded in a text read by a student in a classroom" (Hoffman, Wilson, Martinez, & Sailors, 2011, p. 28). In quantitative content analysis, the text should be measurable and analysable by compiling special categories and topics into different study categories, the frequency of which can already be measured and analysed (Majoros, 2004). According to McQuail (2010), latent reports are the most important in modern content analysis, and they cannot be read directly from the quantitative analysis data. He assumed that it is not enough to count the frequency of the textual elements, but also have to examine their relationships. It may also be telling if some content is missing from the text.

### 3.3. Data analysis

The study began with selecting literature books for primary school students from the list of approved textbooks for the academic year 2019, which was revealed by the Hungarian Government. 39 books were selected from the list; whose literary works were analysed along with the research questions. In the chosen 39 textbooks, we examined 2301 literary works to reveal if they have any disability-related content. We found content related to disability in 132 literary works, and these works were further analysed along the research questions presented above.

Within the study content, textual and discourse analysis were applied. The first phase of the research, the macro analysis, focused on finding the disability-related messages represented within the examined literary works. The analysis targeted the frequency and location of the Hungarian words for disability in different literary works. The numbers of occurrences were analysed using descriptive statistics. We calculated the absolute and relative occurrence of each search term during this phase to reveal how frequently disability or disabled people were mentioned in the texts. Within the microanalysis stage, the relevant hits were examined to identify how disability was located within the text and what conception of disability was represented in them. We used linguistic analysis to reveal 'hidden assumptions' about disability and disabled people (Crawford, 2004, p. 21). In this procedure, linguistic forms such as lexicon, agency and action, voice, verbs, and adjectives (Ninnes, 2002) were scrutinized. Finally, the demarcated units were analysed how the constructed representation of disability might influence pupils' concept of disabled people (Hodkinson et al., Ghajarieh, & Salami, 2018).

Designing the coding system of the content analysis applied both inductive and deductive techniques. As a starting point, we developed the coding system of the analysis based on the disability-related stereotype categories compiled by Biklen and Bogdan (1977), and Rubin and Strauss Watson (1987). However, the need to develop additional categories arose during the analysis, so the basic code system was supplemented. Individuals with disabilities as (13) frightening characters, (14) dirty, filthy individuals, and disability as (15) punishment and (16) illness were depicted in the categories we added. The recurring patterns explored by the code system during the research formed the basis for the interpretation of the disability-related terms found in the texts.

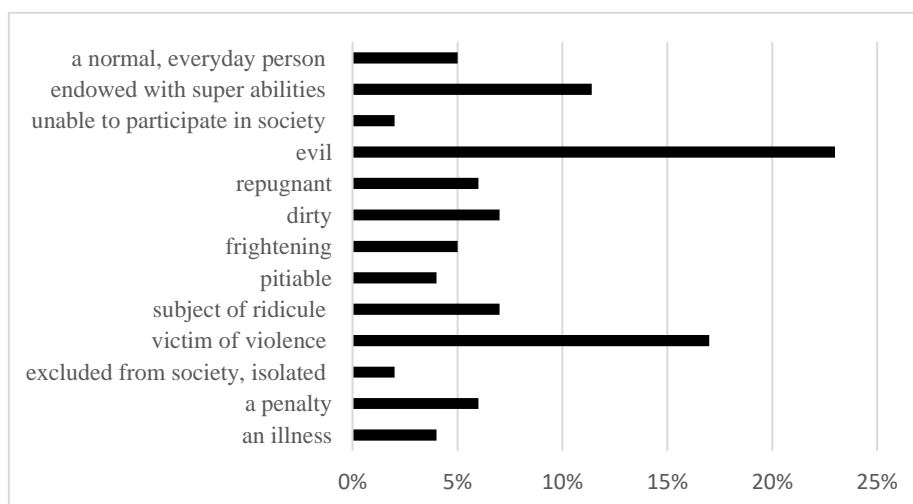
## 4. RESULTS

### 4.1. The categories of disability representation and their distribution in the works examined

The frequency analysis of disability content in literary works revealed that the concept of disability and people with disabilities as actors are present in the reviewed literary works, although they are very underrepresented (absolute frequency is 132, relative frequency is 0.053). The representation of disability most often reflects a stereotypical view (95% of all depictions of people with disabilities). 83% of all depictions contain negative stereotypes, while 12% of the representation writers employ positive stereotypes to describe the characters with disabilities. Realistic, stereotype-free representation of people with disabilities was found only in 5% of cases.

Within the negative stereotypes, additional subgroups could be identified, which distribution is also quite different. The vast majority of representations with a negative stereotype refer to a person with a disability (94% of all negative stereotypical representations), while expressions containing a negative stereotype describing disability as a concept account for only six percent of this group's results. Negative stereotypes about people with disabilities mostly refer to the character's personality (38% of negative stereotypes). Individuals with disabilities are most often portrayed as evil, cruel characters in the literary works examined, and to a lesser quantity as actors who cannot participate fully in social life (Figure 1). Depicting the external characteristics of people with disabilities is also not without negative stereotypes. They are mostly scary figures who wear dirty, torn clothes, in many cases repulsive, or have a pathetic appearance. One characteristic form of portraying characters with disabilities is that they are present as victims in the story. They often become victims of violence or ridicule.

*Figure 1.*  
*Percentage distribution of negative stereotypes about disability revealed in the analysed literary works (N=132).*



The analysis of the data produced a number of results, which were grouped into individual themes. In the following, we discuss the stereotypical representations present in the largest proportion in the literature works examined in detail.

#### **4.2. The topic of exclusion**

Research findings showed a significant focus on excluding individuals with disabilities from society in the literary works we examined. In the analysed stories, the characters with disabilities often live alone, in exile, having no friends or family. For example, this theme of exclusion is detailed in Durrell's *My family and Other Animals*. The Rose-beetle Man figure always appears lonely here; he never has company; he acts to entertain himself. We cannot know where he lives, he always emerges from nowhere, and his figure disappears into nothingness when he leaves. In the short story of Pál Békés: *The Lead Soldier*, we meet the protagonist on the street as he lies on the sidewalk. He was thrown away because he was no longer needed. Also, in Stevenson's novel *Treasure Island* Pew, the blind was deserved, left alone behind by his comrades, crying, "you will not leave old Pew, mates." Nevertheless, nobody answers or even helps him. Furthermore, the topic of exclusion appears in Andersen's story of *The Ugly Duckling* as well. In this story, one can well trace how someone becomes an exile in society simply because of a difference in his physical appearance. The well-known story focuses on a duckling that is ugly because it does not have the same features compared to others, so the stigma of someone with a dissimilar body from the 'norm' can be connected to the storyline (Hodkinson & Park, 2017). Because of this difference, the duckling is excluded and teased for much of the story. These literary works demonstrate clearly common issues surrounding 'normalcy' and 'aesthetic nervousness' that disabled people have to encounter in society daily.

#### **4.3. The disabled character as a scapegoat**

In the analysed literary works, the individuals with disabilities often cause the complication, the trouble, in many cases appearing as a scapegoat in the story. In *Story about the Echoes of Tihany*, the silent princess causes the death of the wave king's son because she does not reciprocate his love. In Gárdonyi's novel *Stars of Eger*, the one-eyed Jumurdzsák commits child abduction in two cases, which impact the further development of the story. Moreover, in many cases, these characters appear in the story as seeking revenge on non-disabled characters. This allows the reader to believe that people with disabilities blame and cause guilt on others because of their condition (Dahl, 1993). Another negative representation of disability may also be observed in a Hungarian legend, the *White Mare's Son*. Within the story, one of the main characters is a "deformed dwarf" who is represented to be sly and mean. As an object of evil, he was introduced within the story when he takes the food of people by force. Moreover, these characters often were depicted as terrifying, horrible people. This type of depiction can easily result in negative prejudices about people with disabilities, as the readers usually dislike these characters. This perspective can also become a reality and cause fear of people with disabilities when students think that disability character traits determine the person's personality with a disability (Solis, 2004). This belief, far from reality, can play a role in the aesthetic nervousness towards individuals with disabilities because of their different physical appearance (Quayson, 2007).

#### 4.4. Contrasting normalcy and disability

In the literary works analysed, the contrast between disability and perfection was noticeable. Disability usually appears as a problem or an error related to the appearance or personality trait of the disabled character, as opposed to other characters or even their own other character traits. When disability appears within the other characteristics of the disabled person, it is usually connected by the 'but' conjunction with the other traits. This often means that, unfortunately, disability is also present as a negative trait among other characteristics of the individual. For example, in *Story about the Echoes of Tihany*, we read the following about the protagonist, who is a blind princess: “*God made her not only beautiful but also gentle, kind-hearted, smart, and patient; however, she was mute.*” The writer contrasts the beauty and goodness (which are positive attributes) of the princess with the muteness (which, in this context, can be interpreted as a negative attribute). Another example can be found in the story of Sándor Kányádi, *The Silent Tulip*, in which the punishment of the evil gardener is to shrink into a dwarf. This distorted view of disability can cause students to feel insecure concerning people with disabilities. This perception suggests to students that only the “normal” is acceptable to society (Santiago, 2007) and that people with otherness face punishment and exclusion.

#### 4.5. The disabled characters as an object of violence

Research results show that a character with a disability usually dies or is injured in the story. Moreover, in the vast majority of cases, the disabled person is a victim of a violent act. Stevenson, in his novel *Treasure Island*, describes the death of the blind character as follows: “*Down went Pew with a cry that rang high into the night, and the four hoofs trampled and spurned him and passed by. He fell on his side, then gently collapsed upon his face and moved no more*”. In *The Story about the Echoes of Tihany*, the mute princess also becomes a victim of violence; the King of the Waves kills her as revenge on his son's death. János Lackfy writes in his poem about a one-eyed cat: “*And if you do not die in the fight, then my dad will kill you!*” In Ady's poem, a fool black piano, cries, wins, hums, and suffers because his blind master tears, tortures it. The one-eyed character of Géza Gárdonyi's *Stars of Eger* was found under the castle wall. He was beaten and almost dead.

In these lines, we can read real acts of violence that are humiliating, often painful, or fatal to the character with a disability. These depictions influence students to believe that the disabled body can be an easy target for real physical violence of non-disabled others (Goodley & Runswick-Cole, 2011). Moreover, this perception of disability might enable students to place disabled people lower than themselves in terms of importance and hierarchy in society (McGrail & Rieger, 2014).

### 5. CONCLUSION

The present study explored and analysed the representation of disability in literary works in the textbooks of primary schools in Hungary. One of the research's main findings is that people with disabilities are underrepresented in the sample texts. The results also show that in the examined literary works, the characters with disabilities mostly appear stereotypically. A considerable amount of the stereotypical representation is made up of characters depicted by negative stereotypes. The main recurring patterns of the most significant negative stereotypes include a person with disabilities as a scapegoat, disability as punishment, and disability as an object of violence. The analysed literary works strongly reflect the notion that deviation from the “norm” physically or mentally is always

reprehensible, negative. According to Santiago (2007), this approach may have the consequence that learners become highly norm-oriented and find it difficult to accept individuals who differ from these criteria defined and accepted by society. Thus, they may have problems adapting the concept of social diversity and accepting members of different minority groups.

These results draw attention to the fact that these literary works are not inclusive; most of them reflect the perception of the moral model of disability. They do not help students get to know people with disabilities; they rather suggest fear about them and can lead to their isolation. Such a one-sided depiction of disability can reinforce students' prejudices who read works about people with disabilities and create an obstacle to social inclusion (Hodkinson & Park, 2017).

Given the results, it can be considered that the use of the analysed literary works without critical analysis is not recommended in literature lessons. Exploring the stereotypical contents of literary works from different historical eras can show students that prejudices about people with disabilities have existed for centuries. At the same time, analysing stereotypes can help students rethink their own prejudices about people with disabilities (Flamich & Hoffmann, 2014). Therefore, in teaching these literary works, emphasis should be placed on a critical examination of the stereotypical representation of disability. However, it would be useful if inclusive literary works appear in literature textbooks, as the results of Prater and Dyches's (2008) research show, it is only inclusive literature that can be arguably useful for all children. Inclusive readings based on more than just fiction reflect social diversity, but these literary works can also contribute to developing a positive self-image of students with disabilities (Beckett, et al., 2010). These are unquestionably essential conditions for the social integration and inclusion of people with disabilities.

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