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## The Portrayal of Characters with Physical Disabilities in Children's Literature

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## The Portrayal of Characters with Physical Disabilities in Children's Literature

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In the books chosen for this study the physically disabled characters were typically juvenile, Caucasian, and male. Orthopedic disorders were most frequently portrayed. The majority of the physically disabled characters were portrayed in important family and societal roles, and perceived as interesting people rather than as a disability. The role of characters who have a physical disability has been portrayed more positively and more realistically in recent fiction.

**The Portrayal of Characters  
with Physical Disabilities in Children's Literature**

**A Research Paper  
Presented to the  
Faculty of the Library Science Department**

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**In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts**

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**Marilyn Newhouse**

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## Chapter One

### Introduction

In 1986 the Census Bureau published a report which confirms that people in our country who make up the largest minority are the physically disabled, 37,304,000 Americans age 15 and over are categorized as people with physical disabilities. This compares to approximately 29,000,000 blacks and 17,000,000 Hispanics (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1986).

As a minority group, persons with disabilities have been discriminated against by society in their attempts to secure the right to life, freedom, education, shelter, and employment. Much of this discrimination has been based on negative image factors, most of which operate subliminally and are learned early in life. Several researchers support this statement: Baskin and Harris (1977), Margolis and Shapiro (1987), and Jones and Sisk (1970). Baskin and Harris reported that "at remarkably early ages, children do internalize messages relevant to social role and status" (p. 35). Margolis and Shapiro reported in a study by Schroedel in 1979, that children easily accept negative subliminated attitudes which they learn early in life from literature and the mass media. Jones and Sisk (1970) reported in their study that by the age of four or five, children begin to

discriminate against individuals with physical disabilities.

The terms "disability" and "handicap" are used interchangeably, although "disability" is currently the preferred terminology. Bryd, Williamson, and Byrd (1986) defined disability as any chronic abnormality of a physical nature. Jones, Sowell, Jones and Butler (1981) defined handicap as an observable physical impairment (including deficient vision and hearing) or an observable learning problem.

The origin of the word, "handicap" is thought to have been derived from the time when people who had a disability had no choice but to beg in the streets, cap in hand (Biklen and Bogdan, 1977). Thus the word handicap denotes the lowly position in society for a person displaying a handicapping condition.

Handicapism still exists today. Many people in our society are fearful of disablement and avoid association with persons who have a disability. Attitudes toward persons with disabilities are often patronizing and condescending. Many people would prefer the giving of money to "charity" rather than personal involvement with the disabled. In addition, persons with disabilities are often deliberately or unintentionally excluded from social situations which



people fear will be made uncomfortable by the presence of a disabled person.

How many parents have refused to permit their children to play with disabled children or tactfully avoided the possibility? Until recently schools often segregated classes for disabled children in separate buildings, floors or wings of buildings. These policies of separation have done nothing to dispel misconceptions and misunderstandings about people with disabilities.

With the passage in 1975 of Public Law 94-142, which states that every disabled child must be educated in the least restrictive environment, disabled children were at last going to be integrated into the classroom and society. The implementation date of Public Law 94-142 was set at 1978. There has been a gradual moving of the disabled into fuller societal participation due to disabled membership groups publicly asserting their rights and making their needs noticed.

Another phenomenon which occurred at about this same period of time, was the literary interest in producing books which addressed the problems young readers faced in real life. Many of these subjects were formerly taboo ideas and issues. Thus along with family fragmentation, family mobility, and other

personal crises, disabilities became a popular literary topic.

As a consequence of these two occurrences, librarians and classroom teachers became increasingly aware of the need to select and use reading materials which would promote understanding and acceptance of the disabled in our society. An increase in interest consequently produced a greater number of published books which addressed directly or indirectly the problems and lifestyles of the disabled.

Literature can offer an avenue through which non-disabled youth can become aware of and sensitive to the needs, problems, and feelings of the disabled. Indeed, literature allows everyone to experience an unlimited number of lives in addition to one's own. Literature is an important means in helping to counteract misconceptions and discriminatory attitudes towards the disabled and in helping to develop positive feelings. Carefully selected literature can help to prepare non-disabled youth for the experience of personally interacting with children having physical disabilities.

The non-disabled reader is not the only one who can benefit from literature on this topic. The reader who has a physical disability may find a chance to identify with a literary child who is also disabled.

The disabled child needs characters in literature who can show new possibilities and expand horizons. Books are among the most valuable tools available for promoting attitudinal change.

#### Purpose of Study

The purpose of this research was to analyze the portrayal of literary characters who possess a physical disability. This was done by conducting a content analysis. This analysis provided a basis for comparison of characteristics compiled from selected books published between 1980-1990, to books analyzed in earlier studies cited in the literature review. These studies were conducted on books published prior to approximately 1980. At least one of the characters must possess a physical disability for a book to be analyzed. The books chosen reflected the reading level of fourth to sixth graders. The research was confined to analysis of fiction books published and available in the United States between 1980 and 1990.

To a great extent books reflect the society that produces them. The books published between 1980 and 1990 which were analyzed for this research should reflect contemporary perceptions of disability. The image of the physically disabled individual should

reflect a change when literature of the 1980's is compared to the literature of more than ten years ago.

Literature should portray characters with physical disabilities believably, relating honest facts in a sensitive manner. If books portray characters with physical disabilities positively, they have the potential for helping all children to understand differences, likenesses, and the disability itself. Young readers who themselves have disabilities can find identity and inspiration by reading about others in similar circumstances. This research analyzed books and then made comparisons to determine if there has been a change in portrayal of characters with physical disabilities.

#### Problem Statements

1. In the selected books, is the main focus on the physical disability or on the person?
2. Has the role of the physically disabled character become more realistic in reflecting contemporary trends in lifestyles in recent fiction?
3. Has literature shifted from a negative image of disabled characters to one more positive?

## Hypotheses

1. The majority of physically disabled characters will portray a secondary role in the books analyzed.

2. The majority of physically disabled characters will be children or adolescents.

3. The majority of physically disabled characters will be of white Caucasian race.

4. The majority of physically disabled characters will be male.

5. The most frequently portrayed physical disability will be some type of orthopedic disorder.

6. There will not be a majority of physically disabled characters in a certain position in the family as determined by the order of birth.

7. The point of view of books told in the first person will be from a nondisabled character's view rather than that of the disabled person.

8. The majority of physically disabled characters will engage in mutually beneficial interactions in family and societal roles.

9. Books of more recent publication (1980-1990) will portray realistically the role of the physically disabled character.

10. The majority of characters featured with a physical disability will be given a positive role.

11. Books of more recent (1980-1990) publication will place emphasis on the person, rather than on the disability.

### Definitions

Disability is defined by Bryd et al. (1986) as any chronic abnormality of a physical or psychological nature. Acute illness is not included even if life threatening. For this study only the chronic abnormality of a physical nature will be included.

Handicap is defined by Jones et al. (1981) as a person with observable physical impairments (including deficient vision and hearing) or with observable learning problems.

Handicapism is defined as the stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination practiced by society against disabled people.

Stereotype is defined as a conception of a person or group which is held by a number of people and not allowing for individuality.

Children's fiction refers to fiction literature written for students in grades kindergarten through eighth. In this study the term juvenile fiction may be used interchangeably with children's fiction.

### Assumptions

The assumptions underlying this research study are (a) children do read fiction books written for children which portray characters having physical disabilities, (b) literature which deals with physically disabled individuals can influence non-disabled as well as disabled children's attitudes, and (c) books selected for inclusion in this study were chosen from lists prepared by recognized authorities whose expertise is accepted by this researcher.

### Limitations

The study was limited to fiction books published and available in the United States which include as a character an individual who has a physical disability. The number of books was limited to twenty-five having copyright dates in the period between 1980 and 1990. The intended reading level of the books selected was juvenile fiction written for approximately fourth to sixth grades. The books were selected from lists found in Bookfinder Vol. III (1985), Bookfinder Vol. IV (1989), More Notes from a Different Drummer (1984), a list compiled from articles found in the bibliography, or from the University of Northern Iowa catalogs under

appropriate subject headings and found in the youth collection.

The content analysis study formed the basis for a comparison between these books and studies of books which are cited in the literature review. The literature review cites studies which involve books published before 1980.

Evaluations concerning the accuracy of the descriptions of the physical disability featured in the books was limited by the knowledge of the researcher. The analysis did not attempt to judge or evaluate the quality of the literature in general.



## Chapter Two

### Review of Related Literature

The review of the literature for this research study focuses on four main components: (a) attitudes of children toward physical disabilities as influenced by literature, (b) stereotypes found in literature, (c) characteristics of contemporary fiction which has a physically disabled character, and (d) criteria for selecting books about the disabled. The researcher relied on opinion articles and research study reports.

Misconceptions about the physically disabled are prominent among young people as well as adults. These misconceptions are shown in negative attitudes and discrimination which may result from fear, prejudice, ignorance, apathy, or misinformation. It is unfortunate that many children and adults associate physical disabilities with negative stereotypes.

Mauer (1979) and Salend and Moe (1983) both reported results of several studies concerning the poor concept held by non-disabled of the physically disabled. Mauer reported a 1937 study by Allport which states that "in the last 40 years, studies have shown that self concept of physically disabled individuals is generally poor" (p.326). She continued with studies by

Lansdown in 1954, Arbuthnot in 1964, and Goodman in 1973, by saying that "social attitudes of the majority culture towards the disabled are negative" (p. 326). Salend and Moe further supported this conclusion by their report of studies by Jaffe in 1965; Novak in 1975; Parish, Ohlsen, and Parish in 1978; and Richardson in 1970, by saying that nonhandicapped students hold "less than positive attitudes" (p.22) toward the handicapped. Finally, Elliott and Byrd (1982) reported conclusions of a study by Lombana in 1980, by stating that "attitudes toward persons with disabilities are predominantly negative throughout all facets of our society" (p. 348).

Books about individuals with physical disabilities have been suggested as a means for encouraging positive attitudes toward disabled individuals by non-disabled children. Monson and Shurtleff (1979) demonstrated that children's attitudes toward physically disabled individuals can be influenced positively by the use of media. Although the experiment used two filmstrips as the intervention in a pretest/posttest design, Monson and Shurtleff pointed out that children who had shown the greatest positive change in their attitudes toward the disabled had read or heard books about specific disabilities.

Salend and Moe (1983) reported that in studies by Greenbaum, Varas, and Markel in 1980, and Litton, Banbury, and Harris in 1980, children's books have been proposed as a vehicle for promoting positive attitudes toward the disabled. After a research study comparing use of books alone and books plus activities, however, Salend and Moe concluded that the "books plus activities" treatment was effective in promoting positive attitudes toward the handicapped, while the "books alone" experiment was not as effective.

Books which have the potential to modify attitudes and combat handicapism need to be realistic, objective, sensitive, believable, entertaining, and well written. Books which emphasize the success of and positively portray disabled individuals plus explain their difficulties can make important impressions on children who may already have stereotyped or even negative ideas about the physically disabled.

The appearance of disabled characters in children's fiction has its roots in mythical, biblical, classical, and contemporary literary forms (Baskin and Harris, 1977). Margolis and Shapiro (1987) state that mythical descriptions of disability are always essentially negative. In myths, blindness is the most frequently discussed disability and is almost always the consequence of a serious transgression on the part

of the blind person. The classic case is Oedipus, who was lame, slept with his mother, and was punished with blindness. Another example is Cyclops with his one eye and insatiable hunger and he, too, was blinded.

Elliott and Byrd (1982) pointed out that the mythical Vulcan, the god of fire, although not blinded is portrayed as having "shriveled legs" (p.349) and being ridiculed when serving the gods on Mount Olympus at a banquet.

Thurer (1980) notes that "the Bible 'marks' Cain for his sin, implying that disfigurement is retribution" (p.13). Jacob was struck lame after his struggle with an angel (Baskin and Harris, 1977).

From its beginnings in the Bible and mythology, handicapism made its way into the realms of classical literature. The negative stereotypes of disability abound in this literature. Stroud (1981) states that:

Early literature involving the handicapped was often poor quality. Handicapped characters were either idealized or vilified. Materials were often heavily moralistic or judgmental: the handicap was frequently viewed as punishment for some perceived wrongdoing. Family members of the handicapped person were portrayed as devoted and selfless. Handicaps were vaguely described, symptoms didn't always fit the disability, and miraculous cures were much in evidence. Authors were often didactic, seemingly more intent on dispensing information than on telling a good story. (p.49)

Elliott and Byrd (1982) concur by pointing out that "literature has long been a bastion of misinformation regarding persons with disabilities, primarily because disability has been so often used as a symbol or embodiment of psychological insight into literary characterizations" (p.349).

Perhaps the best illustration of these stereotypes as an expression of handicapism in classical literature is the character, Captain Ahab in Moby Dick. Captain Ahab, whose scar is said to extend the length of his body, and who is missing a leg, was obsessed with destroying the great white whale. Captain Ahab is portrayed as a "harsh, grim, and quite mad" (Elliot and Byrd, p. 349) captain of his ship.

Another example of the disabled person as sinister and evil in classical literature is Shakespeare's Richard III, who portrays what Margolis and Shapiro (1987) describe as the "twisted mind, twisted body" (p.19) image. Although evidence indicates Richard III may not have been deformed, Shakespeare exploits the negative perception of physical disability by distorting the appearance of the king (Biklen and Bogdan, 1977) to accentuate the evil side of his personality.

Children's literature also abounds with examples of disabilities representing evil embodiments. Monson

and Shurtleff (1979) reported that there was a general consensus by children in their study that the hook in Peter Pan brought to mind the sinister character of Captain Hook, whose very name derives from his disability. Pinocchio, states Thurer (1980), becomes progressively more disfigured as his integrity slips. Margolis and Shapiro (1987) note that Long John Silver in Treasure Island is introduced as a nonevil character with only a casual mention of his wooden leg. However, later, as his treachery is revealed the disability becomes more pronounced. Moore (1984) comments that the Grimm brothers collection of children's folk tales contain "grim-visaged, deformed witches with poor eyesight, who commit insidious acts upon innocent children" (p. 275). Biklen and Bogdan (1977) tell us that Rumpelstiltskin is deformed, the Wicked Witch of the West in the Land of Oz wears an eyepatch, the witch in Hansel and Gretel "leans upon a crutch" (p.21) and the witch who gives Snow White the poisoned apple must first change from a beautiful queen to a hunchbacked, wart-nosed old lady to accomplish an evil deed. Images like these remain in our memories long after the storyline is forgotten.

The opposite extreme stereotype is also found in the children's classics. Margolis and Shapiro (1987) point out that "a crippled" (p.20) Tiny Tim, in A

Christmas Carol, is the symbol of innocence and hope who finally makes Scrooge mend his ways. In Johanna Spyri's Heidi, Clara, the "wealthy crippled girl" (p.20) is cured by Heidi's friendship. Characters like Clara and Tiny Tim reinforce the stereotype that people with disabilities are totally helpless and need to be cared for or, even without medical attention, cured by the able-bodied.

Biklen and Bogdan (1977) also point out that this stereotype is often used by authors as a device for revealing another character's goodness and sensitivity. The purpose of the disabled character in these instances is so that a main character can be seen showing love, kindness, and pity toward the disabled individual.

While characters such as Captain Hook and Captain Ahab provide us with stereotypes of the disabled person as sinister and evil, and Tiny Tim and Clara provide the pitiable and pathetic stereotype, physically disabled characters are assigned other stereotypical roles in more contemporary literature. One of these stereotypes is the use of the disabled person as a hero who over-accomplishes. In spite of seemingly impossible odds, the physically disabled hero or heroine accomplishes the improbable, if not impossible. One other stereotype worthy of mention is the

physically disabled character who becomes the victim, or the object of violence. This stereotype is helpless against non-disabled villains and becomes the object of misfortune.

As Baskin and Harris (1977) and Stroud (1981) report, there has been a gradual and continuing improvement in realistic books for children which deal with physical disability. For reasons cited in the introduction, the years between 1975-1978 marked the emergence of physically disabled characters as believable people who happened to be disabled as opposed to stereotypical, pasteboard props. The fiction writers began writing material which was realistic and objective and most importantly, reflective of the overall picture of adolescent fiction today.

Bekkedal (1973) and Stroud (1980) reported similar findings concerning diversity in books about the physically disabled. Bekkedal pointed out that in a study by Ziegler in 1971, it was found that books about the physically disabled are increasingly diverse in type of disability depicted. Stroud also reports that:

Traditionally, books about the blind and crippled have predominated and this emphasis is still in evidence; however, there are slight indications that the types of handicaps explored in contemporary adolescent fiction are expanding. Among books published within the last five years



which contain a physically handicapped person as the main character or as a character central to the story, six contain characters who are blind, five who are crippled, three who have cerebral palsy, and one who is deaf. (p. 363-364)

Rarely is a physical disability a representation of wickedness in children's literature today, in fact, the disability is more often a sign of goodness (Baskin and Harris, 1977).

Baskin and Harris (1984) further categorized books by disability by stating that books featuring a character with an orthopedic disorder comprise about one-quarter of the total. Polio has all but disappeared, however since 1976 many more books include victims of accidents and wars. Disabled in wheelchairs, using crutches, a prosthesis, or having a limp are again seen more frequently. Orjasaeter (1986) pointed out that characters in wheelchairs are most often boys.

Blindness or visual impairment continues to be present in juvenile fiction. Schwartz (1977) and Orjasaeter (1986) reported that the blind and the sight impaired characters are mostly girls. Baskin and Harris (1977) also made note of the fact that it is not coincidence that blindness is the most common disability in books containing black characters. This permits delivery of messages about "color" blindness.

However, by 1984, Baskin and Harris noted that this approach is no longer as popular as it once was.

In juvenile fiction there are more disabled male characters than female, which is a true reflection of the real world. The overwhelming majority of disabled characters are Caucasian (Baskin and Harris, 1977). The majority of characters with disabilities are children or adolescents, which should be expected since this is the age of the intended audience (Baskin and Harris, 1984). Another characteristic which is a reflection of the real world is, as Moore (1984) reported, that characters are now portrayed as active and independent and, as in real life, not always cheerful. They are also not always completely accepted by the non-disabled, as in real life.

Baskin and Harris (1984) and Elliott and Byrd (1982) reported similar findings in studies that disabled characters in juvenile fiction are frequently excluded from important family roles. Baskin and Harris expand this exclusion to social and romantic relationships. They are frequently shown in jobs requiring minimal human contact. Approximately 30% of the disabled adult characters are married. More than half of the adults with disabilities are portrayed as having no marital relationships, and the remainder are divorced, widowed, or abandoned.

Baskin and Harris (1977) and Elliott and Byrd (1982) also supported one another on the portrayal of disabled individuals as predominately from the lower classes of society. If they have jobs at all, they are in menial or blue-collar occupations, though a few are in industry and the skilled trades.

Perhaps the most encouraging progress in the literary treatment of disabled characters is reported by Baskin and Harris (1984), that is, the growing casual treatment of minor disabled characters as though they were simply a natural part of the passing scene. This is a trend surely looked upon with favor by numerous disability rights advocates.

Literature which portrays individuals with physical disabilities contains a wide range of positive and negative images, of realistic characters and stereotypical characters. From the diverse assortment of books a number of criteria could be considered when evaluating this literature. The question which arises over and over again in the literature is: Is the physically disabled character presented realistically? When the character is unnatural or outrageous, overly heroic or pathetic, they are not credible. Readers must possess the ability to distinguish between literature which portrays the disabled as stereotypes and the literature which portrays the disabled in

realistic terms. In attempting to gain a realistic picture of the "real life" of the physically disabled, readers may turn to the information available in non-fiction literature. Persons with physical disabilities should be accepted as normal individuals with specific strengths and weaknesses. Their challenges are surmountable. They realistically are vulnerable however in specific ways and need particular kinds of support (McLoughlin and Trammell, 1979).

Simons (1987) discussed the adjustment parents and other individuals must make in dealing with the reality of a physically disabled child. There are immediate feelings of grief and shock at the birth, time of accident, or diagnosis of the child's disability. This is followed by denial, guilt, or anger. Then adjustments begin to be made. There may be feelings of isolation, embarrassment, and a variety of problems, including marital stress, brought on by the stress now felt. Siblings may experience feelings of jealousy because of time and attention given to the disabled brother or sister. Finances may be strained and other family members' needs neglected. Family members must deal with the reactions of other relatives and even strangers to the physically disabled individual. Children's fiction could present any or all of these

emotions and situations in presenting physically disabled characters in a realistic light to readers.

Public Law 94-142 has had a tremendous impact on physically disabled persons and their families. Public Law 94-142 guarantees a free and appropriate education to all handicapped children. Persons with physical disabilities are usually mainstreamed so characters in literature should be depicted in a variety of activities rather than isolated activities.

The child whose physical disability affects only his motor performance and the child who is visually impaired should receive an academic education parallel to or comparable to that of a non-disabled child. The hearing impaired individual may have more problems in communication areas, particularly in speech and language development, but should still receive a comparable education (Pearlman, 1981).

After high school a physically disabled person should be as capable as the non-disabled in seeking either a college education or job placement. It would probably be necessary to provide some physical aids, adaptations, and/or assistance in order for that person to function in either setting. The physical setting could involve problems with living accommodations, transportation, accessibility, or the need for assistance in any daily activities. All these

potential problems could be evaluated and then, with an understanding of the physical limitations, be dealt with so that an individual with physical disabilities could still chose a life style in which one can realistically function as a member of society (Pearlman, 1981). Again, literature should emphasize the success and independence which individuals who have a physical disability can attain as well as the difficulties they face.

Information concerning the disability presented in children's fiction should be accurate and matter of factly presented. If treatment of the disability is presented in the literature, there should not be miraculous cures, but of more importance is a positive self-accepting attitude. Literature should show physically disabled people who have positive self concepts and are optimistic about life.

The literature should emphasize the similarities between disabled and non-disabled persons rather than the differences. Disabled and non-disabled persons should be depicted in mutually beneficial interactions and situations. The literature should also provide role models for the disabled who read the material.

Unfortunately many stereotypes grow out of the idea that the disability defines the person. The focus of good fiction concerning a disabled person should not

be on the disability, but rather on the person who happens to be disabled (Mellon, 1989a). Aspects of a disability may be revealed, not as the main focus, but through the unfolding of a story. Characters can be developed as people who happen to be disabled, just as they happen to have freckles, or happen to have red hair, or happen to hate spinach. Books can focus on the similarities that exist among all children rather than the differences caused by the disability (Mellon, 1989b).

The varying levels of quality which exist in literature about the physically disabled make it necessary for the librarian, teacher, parent and others selecting books to be careful in their selections and recommendations. They must exercise caution and analyze a book's content and messages before purchasing or recommending it. It is possible to assemble literature which offers exciting reading about physical disabilities for young readers.

In good literature can be found the joys and sorrows of fellow human beings which can draw readers into the work and they can begin to sense the point of view of a character whose problems are, in some way, different from their own. That ability to assume the point of view of another person, in this case, that of

a physically disabled person, becomes an important result of the desire to create empathy for others.



## Chapter Three

### Method and Procedure

This research study assessed the portrayal of characters with physical disabilities in children's fiction. Schwartz (1977) states that "very little analysis has been done by standard reference texts on the portrayals of disabled people in children's literature" (p.10). Since this assessment was made in 1977 some analysis has been compiled and reported for books published prior to 1980 concerning portrayal of characters with physical disabilities. This study used a content analysis procedure to study twenty-five books published since 1980 and then made a comparison between the reported studies and the information compiled in the content analysis. The study was limited to books published and available in the United States between the years 1980 and 1990. These books must have had a character who is considered physically disabled. Books which focus on characters which are mentally or emotionally disabled were not included. The intended audience for these books was approximately fourth through sixth graders. Since all sources do not necessarily agree on recommended reading levels, if just one source recommended a book for fourth through sixth grades the book was included.

The researcher compiled lists which satisfied these criteria from the following sources: (a) Bookfinder Vol. III (1985), (b) Bookfinder Vol. IV (1989), (c) More Notes from a Different Drummer (1984), (d) University of Northern Iowa catalogs, youth collection, and (e) a list compiled from articles found in the bibliography, all with the specified copyright date.

The list of books compiled from the Bookfinder series were taken from the following subject headings: handicaps, blindness, deformities, amputee, muteness, wheelchair (dependency on), multiple handicaps, birth defects, braces on body/limbs, deafness, limbs (abnormal or missing), lameness, and paraplegia. A list of books taken from More Notes from a Different Drummer (1984) can be found on pages 55-481 of that text. In the University of Northern Iowa catalogs books were located using appropriate subject headings and found in the youth collection. A list compiled from articles found in the bibliography of this research paper was recorded as the researcher read each article and kept a running list of books referred to in the articles.

The analysis included 25 books published between the years 1980-1990. These were compared in portrayal

of characters with physical disabilities to results of studies cited in the literature review.

To obtain the titles selected, the researcher relied on the University of Northern Iowa youth collection, Luther College curriculum library, Decorah Public Library, Decorah East Side Elementary library, and Keystone Area Education Agency collection. Any titles not available from these libraries were sought through interlibrary loan. In the event of a book still being unavailable in time for this research study, another book title was selected from the list. Appendix A lists the books used in this study.

An analysis instrument was developed and used as a checklist to describe portrayal of the disabled character featured, and the characteristics of the literature which portrays them. This analysis content checklist comprises appendix B.

The content analysis checklist portion of this research was comprised of bibliographic information including author, title, city of publication, publisher and copyright year. The disabled character was defined in terms of name, age, sex, and race or nationality. The race or nationality of the physically disabled character may have been related to the reader through text or by illustrations.

The role of the physically disabled character was categorized as main or secondary. The main characters were those three or four characters to which the most time is devoted to character development. Others were considered secondary.

The physical disability exhibited by the character was categorized as an orthopedic disorder, a visual impairment, a hearing impairment or a speech impairment. The orthopedic disorder category included a character with a physical deformity, an amputee, a character who used a wheelchair, a character with a birth defect impairment, a character who was lame, a paraplegic, or a quadriplegic. A visual impairment included a character who was blind or partially sighted, a hearing impairment included a character who was deaf or partially deaf, and a speech impairment included a character who was mute. There was an "other" category.

The family position was determined by the order of birth in the physically disabled character's family. If the disabled character was first born in the family that person was oldest, last born was youngest, and any child between was considered a middle child. This included half brothers or sisters. If there were no brothers or sisters the character was an only child. There was an "other" category.

The point of view taken by the author of books selected was determined by that person's relationship to the physically disabled character, the disabled character himself, a friend, or a family member. The narrative could be first person or third person point of view.

The role the physically disabled character took within the family and society was determined by evidence or lack of evidence of the following situations. Mutually beneficial interactions were present when the physically disabled character was depicted engaging in honest communication and in a wide variety of situations. Evidence of the physically disabled character behaving independently, having responsibilities, having jobs, or playing a vital role within the family and/or society indicated mutually beneficial interactions. Interacting as an equal in the family and in society was evidence of mutually beneficial interactions.

Evidence such as the physically disabled character receiving but not giving, decisions being made for the individual by someone else, or actual dependence for care could indicate the character was sheltered by family or society.

If the physically disabled character was portrayed as being a burden for a family or a society, there should have been evidence of alienation from society.

For the independent role in society to have been present the physically disabled character would be engaged in a variety of activities, for example, for this age audience the character could relate life at school. The character would encounter problems typical for his age and attempt to solve them using his own resources. The disability was just one of many factors which affected the character's life, not the totality of that life.

The images projected by characters possessing a physical disability may have included the following:

1. The evil image was portrayed when the physically disabled protagonist exhibited characteristics which were morally bad or wrong, wicked, offensive, sinister, harmful, disgusting, or treacherous. The character might cause harm, pain, or misery.

2. The "goodness" image was portrayed when the physically disabled protagonist exhibited characteristics which were virtuous, righteous, innocent, kind, or morally correct or good.

3. The victim image was portrayed when the physically disabled protagonist was helpless, pitiable,

pathetic, or unfortunate. They often suffered, needed to be cared for, or were harmed by someone.

4. The super hero image was portrayed when the protagonist over accomplished or over achieved, often in something improbable.

5. The realistic image was portrayed when the physically disabled protagonist role reflected the real world. This character was portrayed as active and independent as much as possible. They were treated as normal individuals with specific strengths and weaknesses. They were vulnerable in specific ways and needed particular kinds of support (McLoughling and Trammell, 1979). Evidence of financial or emotional stress on one or all family members was evidence of realistic portrayal.

For a positive image to be projected an attitude of approval and acceptance toward the person possessing a physical disability must have been perceived by the reader. A positive image meant depicting physically disabled characters in mutually beneficial interactions and situations with the non-disabled. It may have included depicting physically disabled characters as good role models.

For a negative image to be projected the physically disabled characters lacked positive characteristics or qualities, such as honesty or high

moral values. Negative attitudes were a part of the physically disabled person's character, and expressions of handicapism may have been included.

For a character who had a disability to be seen as a disabled person the disability was just one of the many facts about that person's life or personality. If the person was seen as a disability that disability was viewed as the totality of that life or personality.



## Chapter Four

### Analysis of the Data

Twenty-five books were analyzed for use in this study of the portrayal of characters with physical disabilities. A list of these books can be found in Appendix A of this paper. Books which included a physically disabled character who was also mentally or emotionally disabled were not included in the study. Physical disabilities which were the result of a chronic illness were also not included. For a hypothesis to be accepted a simple majority of the hypothesized characteristics needed to be present.

In the first category of physically disabled characters portraying a main or a secondary role the results showed that nearly three out of four books in the study featured a physically disabled character in a main role.

In four books, The Seeing Summer, The Case of the Somerville Secret, Footsteps, and Apple is My Sign, more than one character fit the definition of physically disabled. Only the main physically disabled character was included in the analysis. In three of these four books there were two physically disabled characters. In The Seeing Summer, Carey and Jenny's abductor was described as limping a little, and "He

shuffled" (p. 72). In The Case of the Somerville Secret, "Sixty" had six toes on each foot and a "scarface". In Footsteps, Liverguts had a hook for a hand. These three characters were all secondary. It was the fourth book, Apple is My Sign, which had large numbers of physically disabled characters in secondary roles which led this researcher to limit to one the number of characters analyzed per book. In Apple is My Sign Harry's entire family was deaf and he attended a school where all the students were deaf and some of the teachers were deaf. The researcher felt that by including all the students and teachers in Apple is My Sign, the results of this study would have been significantly affected. Therefore, only one physically disabled character was included in the tabulations from each book.

In order for hypothesis one to be accepted a majority of physically disabled characters must have been portrayed in a secondary role, therefore, hypothesis one was rejected.

Table 1

## Roles given physically disabled characters

Role	Number	Percentage
Main	18	72%
Secondary	7	28%
	<u>25</u>	<u>100%</u>

For the category of age of the physically disabled character, two ranges for age were established. Adults were age 20 or more years and juveniles were age 19 or younger.

The range in ages for physically disabled characters was from newborn in Hide Crawford Quick, (Crawford's birth took place during the story) to the elderly Mrs. Kearns in My Own Private Sky. Crawford's disability was announced by Lizzie, "How come this baby is broke?" (p. 27). Mrs. Kearns' disability was announced by Greg, "Hey, I hear they cut off the old lady's leg!" (p.73). None of the stories covered a period of years so the ages remained relatively constant.

With only two exceptions, A Way of His Own and Blind Outlaw, the age of the juvenile physically disabled character was stated in an exact number of years. In the adult age group, however, not one of the characters' ages were stated exactly. Ages were implied, such as a doctor described as being near retirement in The Case of the Somerville Secret, which gave the reader some idea of their age. In Footsteps the author hinted at his character's, Mr. Seed, age by saying, "he was four times as old as me and forty times as clever..." (p. 53). The "me" character was twelve.

When the role of the physically disabled characters was examined in light of the age of the characters, all adult disabled characters were portrayed in a secondary role with the exception of one, Mrs. Kearns, in My Own Private Sky. The juvenile physically disabled characters, with only two exceptions, Winners and Tough Tiffany, were always portrayed in a main role.

Since the age of the characters often reflects the age of the intended audience, the age category fit the second hypothesis and was accepted.

Table 2

Age of physically disabled characters		
Age	Number	Percentage
Adults	6	24%
Juvenile	19	76%
	<u>25</u>	<u>100%</u>

Only three of the physically disabled characters analyzed were not of the Caucasian race. The lone black was a juvenile female who played a secondary role in Tough Tiffany. The Melanesian and the Native American were juvenile males in The Silent One and A Way of His Own, respectively, and played main roles.

There was only slightly more variance in numbers according to nationality. Nineteen physically disabled

characters were Americans, four were English, one was French, and one was Fijian.

The evidence of physically disabled characters being overwhelmingly Caucasian led to the acceptance of hypothesis three.

Table 3

Race/Nationality of physically disabled characters

Race	Number	Percentage
Caucasian	22	88%
Black	1	4%
Other		
Native American	1	4%
Melanesian	1	4%
	<u>25</u>	<u>100%</u>

Male characters with a physical disability outnumbered their female counterparts. Of the 18 male physically disabled characters, 13 of these were cast in a main role. Of the seven female characters, five played a main role. So while the percentages of either sex being cast in a main role are about the same (72% and 71%) the actual numbers are in favor of the male protagonist.

When age of the characters was examined in light of the sex of the characters, the most popular physically disabled character becomes the juvenile male (13), then the juvenile female (6), followed by the adult male (5), and then the adult female (1).

Hypothesis four states that the majority of physically disabled characters will be male and this was confirmed by the research.

Table 4

## Sex of physically disabled characters

Sex	Number	Percentage
Male	18	72%
Female	7	28%
	<u>25</u>	<u>100%</u>

The total number of physically disabled characters remains at 25, however, when tabulating the physical disabilities into types there are 26. In The Silent One the disabled character possessed both a hearing impairment and a speech impairment. In this category there were a variety of physical disabilities, the orthopedic disorder was the most frequently portrayed.

Table 5

## Types of physical disabilities portrayed

Disorder	Number	Percentage
Orthopedic disorder	11	42%
Visual impairment	6	23%
Hearing impairment	3	12%
Speech impairment	4	15%
Other		
Cerebral palsy	2	8%
	<u>26</u>	<u>100%</u>

In the category of orthopedic disorder three characters became physically disabled as a result of an automobile accident, two of these accidents occurred

during the story. One was male, two were female. Two adult male characters became physically disabled as a result of war. They were both in secondary roles. One adult male became physically disabled as a result of a carriage accident. He also played a secondary role. The largest group within the orthopedic disorder category was the characters born with a disability. Two were dwarfs, both male, both adult, and both in secondary roles. Of the three remaining in this category all were juvenile (one being a newborn), two male and one female, one was lame, one was missing a leg, and one had a deformed hand.

Of the visually impaired, all the characters were blind since birth except the girl in Blind Flight. Her blindness was not medically explained but she was expecting to undergo an operation in the future which would hopefully enable her to regain her sight. This was the only blind character with this expectation. Twice as many female characters (4) were blind as males (2). All the blind characters were in main roles except one.

The hearing impaired characters were all deaf from birth. In Apple is My Sign, the main character's entire family was deaf and the father wished for Harry to be protected from the hearing, so Harry was sent to an all deaf student school. In this category all

characters were male, juvenile, and all were in main roles. One character was both deaf and mute, Jonasi, in The Silent One.

The speech impairment category was limited to muteness. All mute characters were unable to speak since birth. All were male, juvenile, and had main roles.

Cerebral palsy victims were portrayed in two books included in the research. Both physically disabled characters were male, both juvenile, and both in main roles.

Hypothesis five was accepted as orthopedic disorders were the most frequent type of physical disability portrayed.

Apparently most authors attach little significance to the family position as determined by the order of birth of the physically disabled characters. In the cases where the author did relate the character's position in the family, the physically disabled character was always a juvenile. None of the adult characters had his/her position in the family revealed.

One of the physically disabled characters, Doreen Marshall in The Absolute. Ultimate End, was one of a set of twins. The author did not feel it necessary to state which child was firstborn. Jonasi, in The Silent One was the only foster child in the study.



In only one book was the position in the family of any real significance. Crawford, in Hide Crawford Quick, was the youngest, long-awaited, and only boy in a family of four girls. When he was born with part of a leg missing, the joy of his birth is marred by his disability.

Where the position in the family was related to the reader, there appeared to be no definite pattern so the hypothesis stating no majority would be found was accepted.

Table 6

## Family position of physically disabled characters

Position	Number	Percentage
Oldest	4	16%
Middle	2	8%
Youngest	3	12%
Only child	2	8%
Unknown	6	24%
Other		
Foster	1	4%
Twin	1	4%
Adult	6	24%
	<u>25</u>	<u>100%</u>

The third person point of view was the favored viewpoint by authors in this study. In The Alfred Summer the author used a combination of third person and first person, disabled character, thus the total was 26 instead of 25.

Table 7

Point of view from which story was told

Person	Number	Percentage
First		
Disabled person	2	8%
Friend	4	15%
Family member	1	4%
Third	19	73%
	<u>26</u>	<u>100%</u>

An unexpected finding in this category was that no sibling and no parent of a disabled character told the story from a first person viewpoint. From the first person viewpoint, only two were told by the disabled person while five were narrated by others, four being friends of the disabled and one being the daughter of a disabled character.

The hypothesis did not include the third person point of view which was the most frequent. In those instances that the first person point of view was used, however, a nondisabled character told the story three times as frequently as the disabled character. Therefore this hypothesis was accepted.

As the role the physically disabled character played in the family may differ from the role played in society, this category needed to be considered in two separate frameworks. While the reader was able to ascertain every physically disabled character's role in

society, there were seven characters with no mention made of their role in a family.

The "Independent" category was not included on the family role checklist. A family is by nature a group whose members depend on each other. Within the framework of the family structure the trait of being independent would be a component of "mutually beneficial interactions." In the methodology (see p. 31) the evidence of mutually beneficial interactions is interpreted as evidence of a character's independent role.

Table 8

## Role in the family of physically disabled characters

Role	Number	Percentage
Mutually beneficial interaction	13	52%
Sheltered	3	12%
Burden	2	8%
Unknown	7	28%
	<u>25</u>	<u>100%</u>

## Roles in society of physically disabled characters

Role	Number	Percentage
Mutually beneficial interaction	19	76%
Independent	2	8%
Sheltered	2	8%
Burden	2	8%
	<u>25</u>	<u>100%</u>

Both tables show that the hypothesis could be accepted because a majority of physically disabled

characters did engage in mutually beneficial interactions in family and society.

No adults were sheltered or a burden in the family or societal roles. The characters considered burdens were all males. Only one Caucasian American was a burden to society or to his family, Crawford in Hide Crawford Quick. Crawford was a newborn and considered a burden by his sisters and father. Born with part of one leg missing, his sisters do not want their friends to see Crawford. As the family was discussing their plans to attend the school Christmas program, Roberta cries, "Mama, I'm not going to the Christmas program if we take that baby along" (p. 144-145). Gracie, another sister, gives us more evidence after she was ordered by Roberta to hide Crawford so that their friends wouldn't see his deformity. Gracie thinks:

That was the way it was going to be with Crawford. All of them were going to be sorry that he was part of the family. They were going to bury him in their midst and then pretend that everything was fine and dandy. When people came, they were going to hide him upstairs and then laugh and have fun downstairs and do things that were important to them and pretend. She was going to do it, too. (p. 117)

This evidence shows actual alienation of Crawford from the sibling's society. The fact that no other Caucasian Americans were burdens was probably the influence of society more than any other single factor.

Two American males were considered sheltered by their families. Both were sheltered by an older sibling. The role of physically disabled characters in the family was revealed for only two adult characters, while the role in society was established for all the adult characters.

In real life, the role images one projects are multiple and varied. Several of the physically disabled characters in the study also were not always limited to just one image role. On the checklist several physically disabled characters were included in more than one group. One character was depicted in four image roles, two characters were in three image roles, six were in two image roles, and sixteen characters were in one image role category.

Table 9

## Image roles of physically disabled characters

Role	Number	Percentage
Evil	1	3%
Goodness	6	16%
Victim	8	21%
Superhero	5	13%
Realistic	18	47%
	<u>38</u>	<u>100%</u>

When comparing the image role of physically disabled characters several patterns emerged. Only one secondary disabled character was cast in an evil image

role, that was Dr. Roberts in The Case of the Somerville Secret. In Autumn Street evidence of realistic treatment of a secondary role disabled character was shown when Elizabeth's father returns from World War II with part of one leg gone. She says:

Bad things had happened to my father, so I knew that he understood. Part of his leg was gone. He had a new lower leg, made of wood and metal in fascinating, complicated combinations. After the first, startling sight of the place where his real leg ended and the new one began, it didn't seem terrible any more. (p. 182)

All adult characters in the novels, again with the exception of The Case of the Somerville Secret, were given realistic treatment. Evidence of realism was found in Mrs. Kearns in My Own Private Sky. Mrs. Kearns had a leg amputated as the result of a car accident and refused to use her artificial leg, preferring instead to use a wheelchair. Eleven-year-old Arthur learned of her refusal to walk on her own when he sneaked into the physical therapy room of the hospital:

A big hole was opening up inside of me. Greg and Mr. Halverson had been right all the time. Mrs. Kearns had a perfectly good artificial leg and she wouldn't walk on it! I wish I hadn't come to see for myself. I didn't know the Mrs. Kearns with the shaking hands and sweating face, the one who had lost her nerve. I wanted the other Mrs. Kearns. The one with a sky of her own. The one who could do anything if she felt like doing it. (p. 219)

All physically disabled female characters reflected a realistic image. Although there were fewer female (7) than male (18) physically disabled characters, it was surprising that none were cast in the role of a victim or the role of the goodness image. Two females were depicted as superheroes in addition to realistic roles. In Blind Flight Debbie Whitfield became a "superhero" when she brought a plane down safely despite being blind. Evidence of realism shown by a female disabled character was expressed when the special education teacher in The Absolute, Ultimate End was explaining Maggie's new volunteer work with the school's program for the handicapped. Maggie's reaction was: "Seizures! Not in front of me, they better not! Also, to be visually impaired and to have a hearing deficiency, I've always known as blind and deaf, but if she wanted to be fancy, okay" (p. 35).

All the stories related by a first person point of view were viewed as realistic in the analysis. The first person narrative could in itself make a story sound more believable by virtue of the personal nature. In Chelsey and the Green-Haired Kid the author uses humor as Chelsey and Jack discuss their plans. Chelsey, a paraplegic since age three, says, "But we could take two extra blocks out of the way and avoid the hill completely, Jack, I know it's a long way, but

you need me to stand guard for you." To which Jack replies, "STAND guard?" (p.80-81).

When comparing the type of disability with the image role, the characters who were mute were not portrayed realistically, as none of the four was deemed realistic. The Boy in the Blind Outlaw was judged to be between 10-15 years old by his fellow workers. He came out of nowhere, could not speak, but was able somehow to communicate very clearly with a magpie, a coyote, young rabbits, and an outlaw horse.

Auguste, too, in The Silent Voice, came out of nowhere, was taken into the household of Master Bernard through the influence of a street urchin, persecuted by his fellow students but never thought ill of them. He had more talent than the Master had ever seen, and Auguste just happened to be a former student of Master Bernard's own former Master teacher!

Another pattern appeared between image role and nationality. Fifteen Caucasian Americans out of 17 were seen in realistic image roles, while only three out of eight other race/nationality characters were seen as realistic.

The hypothesis was accepted because a majority of characters with physical disabilities featured in books with a 1980-1990 copyright were portrayed in a realistic image role.



Not only were the majority of physically disabled characters portrayed realistically, they also projected a positive image.

Table 10

## Image projected by physically disabled characters

Image projected	Number	Percentage
Positive	24	96%
Negative	1	4%
	<u>25</u>	<u>100%</u>

The only negative image projected by a character was that of Dr. Roberts, alias Dr. Owen, in The Case of the Somerville Secret. Dr. Roberts had a questionable past, changed his name, and lied and falsified medical reports to aid criminals. Dr. Roberts was an adult male in a secondary role.

Characters with physical disabilities can be portrayed as persons who happen to be disabled or the author can use the character as a prop by focusing on the disability and not developing the character, thus, the reader never sees beyond the disability. In Footsteps Mr. Seed was a dwarf. He had a name but the author frequently refers to him as "the dwarf" thereby emphasizing the disability aspect of his character.

In the research 17 characters were seen as a disabled person. Eight characters were portrayed as a disability.

Emphasis on the person can best be seen in books such as Chelsey and the Green-Haired Kid, The Alfred Summer, Half the Battle, My Own Private Sky, Autumn Street, and A Way of His Own. The disability in each case was only one facet of the character's total personality. After reading these books, one tends to remember the character's personality rather than his disability.

The Alfred Summer character of Lester will be remembered for his joy in his new relationships, his courage, caring, and his humor. The Half the Battle story is more a story of relationships and courage than it is of a physically disabled character.

In contrast, in The Waiting Game the entire story relies on the fact that Big Dan is deaf, and that's one of only two things the reader ever learns about him. In Blind Flight the heroine must be blind to provide the story with a different aspect. Blindness was what was significant about the character, Debbie Whitfield. In The Seeing Summer the author uses her blind character to dispense information about blindness and throws in a weak plot as a bonus at the end of the story.

The final hypothesis was rejected since a number of books did place emphasis on the disability (8) rather than on the person (17).

Table 11

Perception of disabled characters as seen by reader

Seen as	Number	Percentage
Disabled person	17	68%
A Disability	8	32%
	<u>25</u>	<u>100%</u>

## Chapter Five

### Conclusions, Comparisons, Recommendations and Summary

#### Conclusions

In preparation for analyzing children's fiction books, a list of 65 books was prepared from the sources cited. After carefully considering each book, only 25 actually fit the definition which qualified them for this study.

Based on the data analyzed, literature which deals with a physically disabled character tends to use elements which are similar. Many of the checklist categories had very similar, predictable results. Nearly all categories on the checklist had majority percentages when compiled.

The typical physically disabled character in this study was a preteen or a teenager, and an American Caucasian. This can be explained because these characteristics reflect the intended reading audience. The character played a main role, was male, and had an orthopedic disorder. The family position occupied by this character was varied and appeared to be unimportant. Told in third person the character was depicted as having mutually beneficial interactions in his family and society.

Children's fiction is by nature not necessarily realistic. In spite of this the characters become quite real and can leave an impression on the reader. The roles were portrayed realistically in most cases in this study. This could be a reflection of today's tendency in the media to present even the most hideous situations realistically to their readers or viewers.

Most characters were presented in a positive manner and perhaps most importantly the characters were seen as people who just happened to have a physical disability. It would seem ideal if the research had supplied evidence to show that all physically disabled characters were seen as persons who happened to be disabled, that a physical disability was only one of the many factors which affect a character's personality. This was not found to be true 100% of the time but the research does indicate that by a ratio of more than two to one the books convey this positive message about the disabled.

#### Comparisons

Based on the data analyzed, nine of eleven hypotheses were accepted. Most of the hypotheses were predicted on the basis of the reports and studies cited in the review of the literature.

The age of the majority of physically disabled characters was stated in the literature review (Baskin and Harris, 1984, p. 36) as being close to the age of the intended audience of juvenile readers. Since most of the physically disabled characters were juveniles, age 19 or under, the analysis would concur with the Baskin and Harris report.

Baskin and Harris (1977) indicate that an "overwhelming majority" of physically disabled characters are Caucasian. This research also found the majority of the disabled characters to be Caucasian. Apparently the media's interest in minority groups does not extend to including both physically disabled and a minority race in one story. Baskin and Harris report that there are more male characters than female in juvenile fiction. The results of the study point to the same conclusion. The hypothesis stating that there would be a majority of physically disabled characters that were male was accepted as there were 18 male and only seven female.

In their 1984 publication Baskin and Harris categorized books by disability. They reported that orthopedic disorders made up about one-fourth of the total disabilities in fiction books. According to this research the orthopedic disorder category comprised 42% of the physically disabled total. Orjasaeter (1986)

stated that characters using a wheelchair are most often boys, however, this research found only one wheelchair user, a female.

Schwartz (1977) and Orjasaeter (1986) concluded that visually impaired characters are most often girls. This research had twice as many blind females as males. As for other types of disabilities Bekkedal (1973) and Stroud (1980) reported on diversity of disabilities. Stroud gave the following breakdown of types of disabilities: blind, 6; crippled, 5; cerebral palsy, 3; and deaf, 1. Assuming "crippled" is some type of orthopedic order, this research compared as follows: blind, 6; orthopedic disorder, 11; cerebral palsy, 2; and deaf, 3. The two studies are comparable in numbers except the orthopedic disorders category has definitely become more popular as a disability in juvenile fiction.

The Baskin and Harris (1984) and the Elliott and Byrd (1982) reports both found physically disabled characters often excluded from important family roles. Baskin and Harris extended this to societal roles. This research found 52% of the physically disabled characters enjoying healthy family relationships, and 76% of them engaging in satisfying societal interactions. Their reports stated approximately 30% of the disabled adult characters were married. This

research found 33%. While their reports stated more than half of the adults with disabilities were portrayed as having no marital relationships, this research found 33% of the adults having no marital relationships. The remainder of their physically disabled characters were divorced, widowed, or abandoned, while 33% of the numbers in this research were in this category. The trend would seem to be to allow people with physical disabilities to portray more typically adult roles.

The research indicates that there are more books available which portray physically disabled characters realistically and positively as Baskin and Harris (1977) and Stroud (1981) stated, than there were previously. While characters such as Captain Ahab, Captain Hook, and Long John Silver once abounded in children's literature these embodiments of evil were non-existent in the books analyzed for this study. Tiny Tim and Clara, representatives of the helpless characters, have very few counterparts in recent literature.

The literature portraying characters with physical disabilities has become more realistic during the 1980's. This trend toward realistic treatment may be the result of the popularity of "problem" books and "problem of the week" television programs. The public



seems very interested at the moment in knowing what it is really like to be abused, terminally ill, or any of several emotionally charged situations.

Although most characters in the analysis were portrayed as people who happen to be disabled, about one third of the characters were still defined by their disability. In The Seeing Summer, Jenny Lee is basically used as a prop, probably to dispense information about what blind people can do despite their blindness. This is not entirely undesirable but in The Alfred Summer the reader learns something about cerebral palsy without it being obvious.

Several books truthfully related the emotional and financial stress which a disability can place on a family. In Half the Battle sibling jealousy is used to create realism. Loren, the nondisabled brother cannot compete with Blair whose disability always gives him favored status in his parents' eyes. Loren has always known this and the author puts these thoughts into words, "But there was no way out. As always, Blair won the battle. He had weapons Loren couldn't begin to compete with" (p. 26).

Some books had physically disabled characters who had no problems, no stress, no hangups, as was the case of Jerry Joralemon in One of Us. Jerry, who was blind helps Nora make friends when he has none of his own.

He suggests to Nora what to do to make friends, then he kindly tries to step aside so he would not embarrass her. There was no evidence of realism in this character.

### Recommendations

Literature influences and in turn reflects the attitudes of a society, therefore analysis of the literature which portrays characters with physical disabilities is valid. Further research could involve different aspects of the portrayal of characters with physical disabilities. Different forms of media could be analyzed for their portrayal on television, in soap operas, commercials, or regular programming, or in motion pictures.

The addition of emotional and/or mental disability could be an added criteria for selection of books to be analyzed. More types of disabilities or one particular disability could be studied and grouped by intended audience or reading level. A sampling of fiction or nonfiction books on blindness, for example, could be analyzed and compared after being categorized by groups such as; young readers, juvenile, young adult, and adult readers.

The frequency checklist could be expanded or modified for additional study. Some additions to the

checklist might include; evidence of discrimination shown to disabled by nondisabled, evidence of poor self-concept shown by physically disabled, evidence of specific kinds of stress portrayed, and the use of humor in these books.

Books which portray characters with physical disabilities should be used in the classroom. Since the majority of books in the study portrayed the characters realistically they could help children to understand how much we are all alike and learn to think of the personality apart from the disability. The physically disabled student could benefit not only from better understanding by peers but by the provision of a role model.

#### Summary

The purpose of this research was to analyze the portrayal of characters with physical disabilities in books published and available in the United States between 1980-1990. Twenty-five books were included in a content analysis type of research. At least one character must have possessed a physical disability; this excluded a mental or emotional disability. The reading level of the books was fourth through sixth grade. The results of the study were then used as a comparison to studies cited in the literature review.

The analysis indicated that physically disabled characters are usually given a main role. They were typically juvenile, Caucasian, and male. Orthopedic disorders were most frequently portrayed. These characteristics were also cited as being present in previous literature analyses.

The comparisons did show a change in the portrayal of disabled characters in some areas. In more recent literature physically disabled characters are enjoying important family and societal roles. The physically disabled were largely excluded from these roles in literature analyzed before 1980. The image roles of physically disabled characters have become more realistic and they are portrayed more positively than before 1980. Some characters are still seen as a disability but the majority are now seen as interesting people engaged in a variety of activities. Their lives may be complicated by a disability, but not determined by their special needs. The books analyzed in this study would appear to reflect an attitude which is currently considered desirable in our society.

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## Appendix A. List of books analyzed

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- Cowley, Joy. The Silent One. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1981.
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- Garfield, Leon. Footsteps. New York: Delacorte Press, 1980.

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- Hurmenca, Belinda. Tough Tiffany. Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1980.
- Lowry, Lois. Autumn Street. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1980.
- Milton, Hilary. Blind Flight. New York: Franklin Watts, 1980.
- Newman, Robert. The Case of the Somerville Secret. New York: Atheneum, 1981.
- Raskind, Mary. Apple is My Sign. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981.
- Rounds, Glen. Blind Outlaw. New York: Holiday House, 1980.
- Slepien, Jan. The Alfred Summer. New York: Macmillan, 1980.

## Appendix B: Content Analysis Checklist

Title \_\_\_\_\_ Author \_\_\_\_\_  
City of  
publication \_\_\_\_\_ Publisher \_\_\_\_\_  
Copyright date \_\_\_\_\_  
Name of disabled character \_\_\_\_\_

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Role of disabled character	Evidence
_____ Main	
_____ secondary	

Age of disabled character \_\_\_\_\_

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Race/Nationality \_\_\_\_\_

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Sex  
\_\_\_\_\_ Male  
\_\_\_\_\_ Female

Physical disability  
\_\_\_\_\_ Orthopedic disorder  
\_\_\_\_\_ Visual impairment  
\_\_\_\_\_ Hearing impairment  
\_\_\_\_\_ Speech impairment  
\_\_\_\_\_ Other \_\_\_\_\_

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Family position  
\_\_\_\_\_ Oldest  
\_\_\_\_\_ Middle  
\_\_\_\_\_ Youngest  
\_\_\_\_\_ Only  
\_\_\_\_\_ Unknown  
\_\_\_\_\_ Other \_\_\_\_\_

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Point of view  
\_\_\_\_\_ First person  
\_\_\_\_\_ Disabled person  
\_\_\_\_\_ Family member  
\_\_\_\_\_ Friend  
\_\_\_\_\_ Other \_\_\_\_\_

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\_\_\_\_\_ Third person

Role in family  
\_\_\_\_\_ Mutually beneficial interactions  
\_\_\_\_\_ Sheltered  
\_\_\_\_\_ Burden  
\_\_\_\_\_ Other \_\_\_\_\_

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Role in society  
\_\_\_\_\_ Mutually beneficial interactions  
\_\_\_\_\_ Independent  
\_\_\_\_\_ Sheltered  
\_\_\_\_\_ Burden  
\_\_\_\_\_ Other \_\_\_\_\_

## Image role

- Evil
- Goodness
- Victim
- Super hero
- Realistic
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

## Image projected

- Positive
- Negative

## Seen as

- Disabled person
- A disability