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## Portrayal of Characters with Disabilities within K-6 Fictional Literature

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## Portrayal of Characters with Disabilities within K-6 Fictional Literature

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### Abstract

The purpose of this study was to determine how fully characters with disabilities were developed in children's literature. The researcher examined a set of children's fictional books which contained persons with mental and physical disabilities. The sample of books used was gathered using the following method: the Children's Core Collection database was searched using the advanced option. The key words entered were handicapped and disabled, with the limitation to fiction books. The recommendation level chosen was Core Collection and Highly Recommended. Books with a publication year of 2002 or newer were selected. The grade levels criteria used were grades K-6. Twenty-three books met the criteria.

A qualitative content analysis was used to analyze the portrayal of characters with disabilities. Eighteen of the books portrayed the characters with disabilities both positively and negatively. The connection between the positive and negative portrayal was often due to the character with the disability overcoming an obstacle and believing in him/herself. Many people face various struggles and successes throughout their lives, making this connection with the character allow the reader to understand how they are similar and different to the character with the disability. Though 5 of 23 books reviewed provided multi-dimensional characters, 18 of 23 books brought the characters with disabilities to life for the reader. The understanding of a character with a disability interaction with others, surroundings, and actions provided the researcher with a realistic portrayal of a character with a disability. Additional author's notes and appendices provided even more background knowledge to help the researcher make a connection with the character with the disability.

PORTRAYAL OF CHARACTERS WITH DISABILITIES WITHIN K-6 FICTIONAL  
LITERATURE

A Graduate Research Project  
Submitted to the  
Division of School Library Studies  
Department of Curriculum and Instruction  
In Partial Fulfillment  
Of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts  
UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA

by  
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Titled: The Portrayal of Characters with Disabilities in K-6 Fictional Literature

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## ABSTRACT

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Look into the mirror and what do you see? Do you see a person who cannot hear? A person who cannot walk? A person who is handicapped by some mental disability? For many, when they look into the mirror they see what society considers to be normal. As defined by Merriam-Webster's Dictionary *normal* is conforming to a type or standard, free from mental disability (2012). Everyone is unique in one way, shape, or form. It is what makes a person unique that helps to set him/her apart from the rest of society.

Literature for children today should model the idea that everyone is unique and has both mental and physical characteristics that give him/her identity. In reference to deaf children, Golos and Moses (2011) stated, "Children's literature, in addition to 'live' models, can provide positive role models if Deaf characters are portrayed culturally and with accuracy" (p. 279). The same can be said for any other type of disability portrayed within children's literature. Smith-D'Arezzo and Moore-Thomas (2010) believe "literature is used to instill a sense of empathy for those who face discrimination or other hardships" (p. 3).

#### **Justification**

#### **Portrayal of Persons with Disabilities in Literature**

Previous studies of the portrayal of disabled persons in literature have observed how a person with a disability is portrayed in the story and whether or not that portrayal is realistic. For example, Irwin and Moeller (2010) found in the graphic novels they examined, fewer than half displayed an individual with a disability, and when such a

character was presented in many of these novels, the portrayal of the disabled character was negative.

Parents and teachers are working to overcome negative stereotypes that society associates towards persons with disabilities. Literature helps engage students in learning and provides teachers a resource beyond discussions, lectures, and the everyday textbooks. Ayala (1999) stated, “the use of children’s literature as a vehicle to support a cause rather than tell a story tends to produce unidimensional characters” (para. 11). Stories that teachers present to their students need to be ones that portray realistic, believable, positive characters with disabilities. Ayala (1999) also stated the following:

Quality books recognize the natural anxiety that children sense when confronted with physical differences. In order to achieve this, the characters must be portrayed as realistically as possible by including both their strengths and weaknesses and both solely in contrived scenarios with predictable solutions. (para. 11)

The literature that is presented to students today needs to display both the positives and negatives one faces when living with a disability. It is important for children to understand how disabled persons’ lives differ from their own. Literature that portrays characters in realistic scenarios allows readers to become more engaged in the story and more apt to learn and grow from the message the story is telling.

### **Voice for Students with Disabilities**

Mainstreaming of children with disabilities is becoming more common in today’s educational world. Bender (1985) stated, “research throughout the years has consistently demonstrated that mildly handicapped children who are mainstreamed are socially rejected by their non-handicapped peers” (p. 282). When observing a classroom, the

observer often sees children forming groups in which they feel comfortable. Disabled children tend to form groups of their own, often being left out by the rest of their peers. Goar (2012) describes a study by Dr. Anne Snowden of the University of Western Ontario reporting that 53% of children with a disability have no close friends or only one. Children with a disability need an opportunity to let others know why they are different and what makes them unique and special. Literature that portrays characters with a disability accurately provides readers with the opportunity to learn more about disabled persons in the community around them.

### **Deficiencies**

Previous studies of literature and disabilities have focused on various topics. Crosetto, Garcha, and Horan (2009) created an annotated bibliography of youth literature that contained disabilities and disorders. Wopperer (2011) looked at inclusive literature in the library and classroom that focused on the importance of young adult and children's books that portrayed characters with disabilities. Golos, Moses, & Woblers (2012) examined how deaf characters were illustrated in children's books. Earlier Kaiser (2007) had reviewed early childhood literature to see whether or not library collections were disability-inclusive and current. This research study will focus specifically on character development with regard to portrayal of persons with disabilities. The intention is to determine the extent to which these characters are developed beyond being representational or token characters, and ways in which such character development aspects such as motivation, relationship-building, inner thought and reflection occur.

### **Problem Statement**

Inclusion of students with both mental and physical disabilities in the classroom is rising. Literature needs to be made available to help give voice to these children and educate others about the obstacles persons with disabilities face every day. Stories relating to persons with disabilities also provide teachers resources that inform other students about how to interact with people with disabilities within the school and society.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this study is to determine how fully characters with disabilities are developed in children's literature. The researcher will examine a set of children's fictional books containing persons with mental and physical disabilities.

### **Assumptions**

Teachers need good literature to help educate and start discussions within the classroom. Teacher librarians seek quality literature to show teachers and young readers. However, within the set of children's literature the researcher will be reviewing, there may be characters with disabilities that are not portrayed realistically and/or are presented negatively. It is also important to note that both able bodied persons and unable bodied persons will read these stories.

### **Limitations**

This research will involve a qualitative examination of characters with disabilities in children's literature highly recommended within the Children's Core. The focus of fictional children's literature books discussing disabilities, either physical or mental, will be limited to a search of *disabilities* and *handicapped* done in Children's Core Collection database, filtered by grades Kindergarten through sixth grade. The Children's Core

Collection is a resource of selected and recommended literature by specialists in library service for children. The resource indexes a variety of youth literature recommended for all libraries.

### **Research Question**

1. How authentically are persons with disabilities portrayed in children's literature?
2. Of the selected children's books, which stories engage readers with fully developed characters, rather than unidimensional characters?
3. How does the text bring the characters and their disabilities to life for the readers?

## CHAPTER 2

### REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

#### Introduction

The purpose of this study is to determine how persons with disabilities are portrayed in children's literature. The following review of research and literature focuses on three areas involving persons with disabilities: disabilities in children's literature, advocacy for persons with disabilities, and stereotyping of persons with disabilities.

#### Disabilities in Children's Literature

Research on portrayal of disabilities in children's literature has been conducted by a number of researchers throughout the past decade. The researchers have often viewed the portrayal of cognitive disabilities over the portrayal of characters with physical disabilities. Koc, Koc, and Ozdemir (2010) explored the relationships between characters with and without physical and sensory impairments in picture books. Their study aimed to address the issue of full inclusion within U.S. classrooms. They selected books from the *Subject Guide to Children's Books 2003*, where the subjects handicapped, physical handicapped, sensory, and blind were searched and yielded seventy-three books. The researchers then checked with four local libraries and a large university library to see which of the seventy-three books they held and were able to find forty-six of the seventy-three. "The purpose was to be able to reach the books accessible to the public" (Koc, et al. 2010, p. 147).

When analyzing each book, Koc, et al. (2010) were looking for the occasion of a relationship between an impaired and nonimpaired character, as well as the role of the person with a physical or sensory impairment and the role of the person without

impairment. The relationships between characters were also categorized as positive, negative, and neutral categories. The researchers found that of eleven relationship categories found within the forty-six books five were positive, three were negative, and three were neutral. Koc, et al. (2010) explained that the study seemed to reflect society's perception about people with impairments. "There are individuals with positive perceptions, and there are also others who have developed negative opinions. But, with the introduction of inclusion of people with impairments into schools, there is a transition trend including both positive and negative opinions," (p. 155-156). He also states that the study showed the number of positive characterizations were higher than the number of negative characterizations. Based on this finding, the positive characterization reflects the transition trend in the society. Koc's, et al. (2010) study focused on physical and sensory impairment in children's literature, whereas in the Dyches, Prater, Cramer (2001) the focus shifted to mental disabilities and autism.

Dyches, Prater, Cramer (2001) analyzed the portrayal of characters with mental retardation and autism within contemporary children's literature. They also looked at related issues discussed within the plot. To be included in the study, books were fiction and had a main or supporting character with mental retardation; only titles published initially in 1997 or 1998 were included. Dyches et al. (2001) found twelve books, six picture books and six chapter books. After reading and noting the portrayals of individuals with mental retardation or autism and their relationship with other characters, she found four themes.

The first theme dealt with the characterization of mental retardation (MR) or autism. Dyches et al. (2001) found that of the 14 characters observed, 10 were portrayed

positively. Positive portrayals were established if the character showed strength over weakness, enhanced positive contributions, higher expectations for character with MR or autism, and displayed character acting on his/her choices. The next theme focused on the relationship between characters with MR or autism and other characters within the story. The most prominent relationship observed was that between the character with MR or autism and his/her sibling. The final two themes involved the changes in the characters with and without MR and autism. Characters without MR or autism showed a positive change, in which they improved their feelings towards the character with the disability. The changes observed in the characters with disabilities were brought on by the changes made by the characters without MR or autism. The changes observed often reflected a positive shift within the literature. As Dyches et al. (2001) stated “children’s books are often the first exposure peers without disabilities have to individuals with mental retardation or autism,” (pp. 242-243). Eight years later, Dyches, Prater, Leininger (2009) did another study that focused on the portrayal of developmental disabilities in juvenile literature. She stressed, “Educational services providers are encouraged to seek out quality literature that contains images of children with disabilities who are seen as ‘people whom readers would like to know or be friends with’” (p. 317).

In Dyches’ et al. (2009) second study her focus moved from mental retardation and autism in literature to developmental disabilities. She evaluated forty-one children’s picture or chapter books that included a main or supporting character with a developmental disability (biographies written in story format were included) the study was limited to titles initially published in 2004-2007 in English by commercial publishers and not vanity presses. Unlike Dyches’ et al. (2001) previous study and Koc’s et al.



(2010) study, non-fiction books were included in the literature that the authors reviewed for the study. Of the forty-one books evaluated in the study thirteen were picture books and twenty-eight were chapter books.

Dyches et al. (2009) had ten reviewers evaluated the literature using guidelines described in one of his previous studies. The reviewers for the study included special education teachers, parent with children who have developmental disabilities (DD), adults with DD, children literature librarians, special education professors, and children's literature illustrators. The reviewers evaluated the literature based on the following guidelines: evaluation of the portrayal of the individual with developmental disabilities, social interactions, exemplary practices, and sibling relationships. The reviewers also looked at the literary and artistic elements. The authors then conducted a separate analysis which evaluated characterization, personal relation, changes in characters with and without DD, and special topics. After evaluation and analysis of the literature, Dyches et al. (2009) found that within the forty-one books there were forty-two characters with DD in main or supporting roles. Of the books reviewed it was found that a portion of the books displayed an overrepresentation of Autism Spectrum Disorder when compared to school-based data, as well as an underrepresentation of characters with intellectual disabilities. There was also an increase trend in the depiction of DD over the past decade. Literature appeared to provide more positive representation of characters that portrayed DD. The characters appeared to be more self-determined, engaged in more care giving and teacher roles, and seemed to enjoy inclusionary recreational activities. With positive representation of DD Dyches et al. (2009) stated, "These books should express the values they intend to teach, thereby shaping the 'evolving moral character of

its readers”” (p. 317). Leininger, Dyches, Prater, and Heath (2010) took Dyches et al. (2009) idea that books should express values they intend to teach a step further by analysis of Newberry Award literature in comparison to the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* (IDEA).

Leininger et al. (2010) collected eight Newbery Award and twenty-three Newbery Honor books that included a prominent character with a disability and analyzed how the character was portrayed. Books selected for the study had a protagonist, antagonist, or supporting character with a disability. The disability that a character possessed in the book needed to be one that would warrant special education services. To help define each disability, Leininger et al. (2010) used disability categories found and stated in the IDEA 2004. The American Library Association website was used to generate a population of Newbery Honor and Award books falling between the years 1975 and 2009. The sample of books that was then used for the study came from annotative bibliographies, journal articles, and one internet book store.

The books were evaluated using an adaptation of *Rating Scale for Quality Characterizations of Individuals with Disabilities in Children's Literature* which was used by Dyches and Prater in 2000. The scale helped Leininger et al. (2010) evaluate the quality of literature they were sampling for their study as well as depicted the presence of personal portrayal, exemplary practices, social interactions, and sibling relationships throughout each book. With the use of an evaluation instrument, two readers read fifteen books where they established themes, types of disabilities, age and race, and the prominence of characters with disabilities found within the literature they reviewed. The reviewers also established a rating scale which was used to determine whether the

portrayals of the characters with disabilities and practices were exemplary. These ratings were then analyzed across time to determine if any differences existed before and after the reauthorization of IDEA in 1990. According to Leininger et al. (2010), of the 181 Newbery Honor and Award books only eight, 6%, of the award books portrayed characters with disabilities, and eighteen, 23%, of the honor books displayed characters with disabilities. The characters with disabilities portrayed in Newbery books were generally positive and appeared to have improved over time. Leininger et al. (2010) stated, “Despite this general trend, books vary in their depiction of disabilities and certain concerning themes were identified, such as elimination of the characters with the disability or miraculous cures” (p. 594).

Through the studies done by Leininger et al. (2010), Dyches et al. (2009), and Koc et al. (2010), the idea of determining how characters with disabilities are portrayed in children’s literature stayed strong. Each of these studies found positive and negative portrayals throughout the variety of literature that had been reviewed. The idea of education appeared to be a focus in these studies as well. This idea persists for Golos and Moses’ (2011) study which reviewed literature that portrayed deaf characters within the stories. Golos et al. (2011) wanted to know in what ways and how frequently deaf characters in children’s picture books were portrayed from a pathological and cultural perspective. A sampling of 20 books was narrowed by the following criteria: fictional literature, deaf character played a central role, deaf character had no additional disabilities, literature intended for children ages 4-8, book cost less than twenty-five dollars, and book published after 1990.

Golos and Moses (2011) used coding to evaluate the literature in overarching categories medical, deaf culture, and general. The medical code dealt with the literature that stressed the deaf character's inability to hear and speak, as well as deafness as a disability. Deaf culture code incorporated deaf characters interacting with other deaf characters and incorporating communication strategies deaf use. The final code, general, focused on general labeling, communication, and services for the deaf. Calculations were done using coding to look at the frequency of the three categories stated above. Golos et al. (2011) also checked for author and illustrators' hearing status, the benefit of the deaf character signing, the idea that characters magically learned to communicate, and reference to deafness as hearing in a different way.

Within the study, Golos et al. (2011) found that of the twenty books reviewed the portrayal of the deaf characters were from more of a medical perspective rather than a cultural one. They also found that half of the authors had some connection with deafness, and four out of five books that offered the most cultural references were books written by authors who had connection to deaf communities. The study brought attention to that of the literature reviewed, many failed to show deaf characters interacting with other deaf characters. Golos et al. (2011) stated the following:

“they communicated primarily through fingerspelling or by signing individual English words rather than using full and grammatically correct sentences in ASL. This gives the false impression that deaf people only interact with hearing people in a hearing world where they are primarily spoken to and must attempt to use their hearing or speechreading in order to communicate,” (p. 279).

Golos et al. (2011) believed that literature has the potential to strongly affect children's lives. In a follow up study, Golos, Moses, and Wolbers (2012) looked at the same literature from the previous study; however, the study focused on the illustrations rather than text.

Golos et al. (2012) focused on whether picture book illustrations more frequently portrayed deaf characters from pathological or cultural perspectives. They also wanted to determine whether the illustrations matched or mismatched messages about deaf characters included in written text of the picture books being reviewed. The same literature was used from Golos' et al. (2011) study. Upon reviewing the literature, codes were developed of pre-established categories based on cultural and pathological perspectives of deafness. There were also codes for the interactions between deaf and hearing characters, as well as deaf communicating with other deaf characters. It was found that the majority of the interactions involved deaf and hearing characters, with only five illustrations that showed deaf interacting with other deaf characters. More than half of the interactions illustrated were positive; however, about half of them were gesturing when the character was supposed to be signing. There were only eight overall instances where the illustration showed a character who used sign language correctly. When Golos et al. (2012) compared the results from the study with the previous study, which focused on the text, they found that there was a similarity between the two studies. They found that the illustrations and text portrayed the deaf characters in children's picture books from a pathological perspective rather than a cultural perspective. It was also noted that there was rarely interaction between two deaf characters. Golos et al. (2012) stated, "They (readers) would not see representations of environments rich with Deaf culture,"

(p. 244). They found that illustrations and text within children's picture books need to work together in order to engage readers in a rich and well rounded story.

### **Stereotyping of Children with Disabilities**

Bryan, Bryan, and Sonnefeld (1982) conducted a study that looked at first impressions given to learning disabled (LD) children. The study replicated previous findings in order to determine if LD children receive negative first impressions and if non learning disabled (NLD) children that hung out with LD children were seen negatively as well. Bryan et al. (1982) stated, "A substantial body of information now indicates that LD children are held in relatively low esteem by both adults and peers who are acquainted with them" (p. 288). Their study was focused on determining whether or not that idea held true when put to the test through a simulation they generated. Children from a suburban Chicago school were selected and videotaped for the study. According to the district's definition of LD, ten LD boys were chosen as hosts for the experiment, five in second grade and five in fourth grade. They also chose ten NLD boys to play host as well, and the guest roles were filled by NLD boys that were from the host's homeroom.

Bryan et al. (1982) filmed TV talk show-like interviews led by the hosts chosen for the experiment. The guests were engaged in two interviews, one done by a LD peer and another hosted by a NLD peer. The interview lasted for three minutes and was videotaped by the experimenter, where five videotapes held four interviews. The videotapes were then viewed and analyzed by 51 college students from Northwestern University.

Two groups of students viewed and analyzed the videos. The groups were composed of students from an introductory psychology course over two academic

quarters. The students analyzed the videos and rated each child on 20 items previously employed by Bryan and Sherman in 1980. The two broad topics in which the 20 items were organized were adaptability and social hostility. Within adaptability, the viewers of the tapes analyzed each child according to the following characteristics: perseverance, rigidity, gregariousness, planfulness, talkativeness, fearfulness, aesthetical sensitivity, emotional stability, imagination, energy, curiosity, seclusiveness, and originality. Social hostility was also broken down to contain the following characteristics: irresponsibility, fickleness, rudeness, inconsiderateness, conscientiousness, and spitefulness.

Bryan et al. (1982) analyzed first impressions of LD and NLD children who assumed the host role. A second analysis examined whether first impressions were evoked by NLD guests when interacting with LD hosts. They also looked at nonverbal behaviors that correlated with first impressions. Bryan et al. (1982) stated, “smiling and looking behaviors might distinguish LD from NLD children and, thus, be important in affecting first impressions of them” (p. 292). The study replicated similar results from previous studies showing that LD children often evoke negative first impressions, and NLD children who associate with LD children also demonstrate a negative first impression. Similar results regarding impressions of persons with disabilities occurred in studies from more recent years. Salih and Al-Kandari (2007) moved away from first impressions of persons with LD and focused their research on educators’ attitudes towards students with mental retardation (MR). They too found negative responses.

Salih et al. (2007) looked at determining if teaching the course, *Social Work with Disabilities* (SWWD), would improve educators’ attitudes towards students with MR. Two groups of students enrolled in spring courses participated in the study; one group

was the control group, and the other was the experimental group. Within the control group there were 30 students who were enrolled Social Work with Groups. The experimental group contained 31 students who were enrolled in the SWWD course. Both groups, instructed by different instructors, were engaged in a three hour lecture each week, read text assigned for the class, completed various assignments, and participated in fieldwork. The information collected was compared to an attitude inventory scale.

Salih et al. (2007) found that with the instruction of the SWWD course, the students enrolled within the course did not demonstrate a change in attitude towards children with MR. Many of the students had negative attitudes towards children with MR even though 47.5% reported that they had enrolled in other courses related to disability, over 60% recognized individuals with MR, and 42.6% had contact with persons who have MR. Salih et al. (2007) felt that courses need to be created to address issues related to attitudes as part of their performance objectives. While Salih et al. (2007) worked with college aged students, Smith-D'Arezzo and Moore-Thomas (2010) did a study with elementary students and their attitudes towards peers with mild intellectual disabilities.

Smith-D'Arezzo and Moore-Thomas (2010) wondered if children read and discussed books that presented characters with disabilities in a positive light, if their attitudes toward their peers with disabilities, specifically cognitively disabled, change. Upon choosing literature for the study, they considered three criteria: a main character with a newly diagnosed learning disability; the character with a disability was portrayed positively; strong character development of the character with a disability gave the book literary value. Five books were chosen that fit the above mentioned criteria. The



principal and teacher of the school and classroom of where the study was being done chose two books out of the five, *Do Bananas Chew Gum* by Jamie Gilson and *Egg-Drop Blues* by Jacqueline Turner Banks.

Smith-D'Arezzo and Moore-Thomas (2010) stated, "Based on personal experience, we knew that presenting the books without guided reading is not enough to override prior knowledge and attitudes that children bring to text" (p. 5). They "found strong evidence that prior knowledge has 'an intrusive effect on both the quantity and quality of students' memory representation of text'" (Smith-D'Arezzo & Moore-Thomas, 2010, p. 5). Students were presented with an adjective checklist significantly correlated to children's behavioral intentions. When presenting the checklist to the students, Smith-D'Arezzo and Moore-Thomas (2010) introduced the students to a fictional character who had a disability of some kind. The character was male and had a learning disability.

Smith-D'Arezzo and Moore-Thomas (2010) worked with a group of 14 fifth grade students. They collected data on the students' attitudes towards peers with disabilities through the adjective checklist, as well as interviews with the students, teachers and the principal. The children each read one of the two books chosen for the study. The books were read over a four week period, where during each week the students met with one of the researchers to discuss the story and their feelings towards the book. During the book discussions, Smith-D'Arezzo and Moore-Thomas (2010) talked about the positive qualities about the characters that had disabilities within the stories. After the four week period, the students were engaged in another adjective checklist and interviews.

Smith-D'Arezzo and Moore-Thomas (2010) found that the fifth graders saw learning disabilities very negatively. Four recurring themes were found within the data

collected. The themes were: learning disability as seen as a character deficit, learning disability seen as either the student's or parents' fault, learning disability seen as a limited mental capacity, and learning disability seen as a personal characteristic. Smith-D'Arezzo and Moore-Thomas (2010) found that prior knowledge played a significant role in how students interpreted and comprehended what they were reading; "It was evident that the students relied on their own prior knowledge of not being friends with kids who are 'special eds' to form a skewed memory representation," (Smith-D'Arezzo & Moore-Thomas, 2010, p. 10).

Whether it is a child or an adult, research has shown that persons with disabilities are stereotyped and often times viewed in a negative manner. Smith-D'Arezzo and Moore-Thomas (2010) found that prior knowledge had an effect on students when they analyzed stories containing a child with a disability. Salih et al. (2007) also found that though college aged students had prior learning about disabilities, it did not matter when it came to the study; these young adults showed negative attitudes towards children with mental retardation. Years have passed and studies have been done, but consistent results have continued to occur in regards to stereotyping and persons with disabilities.

### **Summary**

Much research has been done on how characters with disabilities are portrayed in children's literature. A commonality in research has been how characters with disabilities are interacting with characters without disabilities (Dyches et al., 2001; Koc et al., 2010; Golos et al., 2011; Golos et al., 2012). Researchers have also looked at the ways in which the characters with the disability change over time (Dyches et al., 2001; Dyches et al. 2009). It is important to note that how the disability is portrayed appeared as a common

theme among most of the research done. No matter how the character with a disability is portrayed within a story, researchers have analyzed how the author has portrayed the character and whether it was culturally or pathologically portrayed (Dyches et al., 2001; Dyches et al., 2009; Koc et al., 2010; Leininger et al., 2010; Golos et al., 2011; Golos et al., 2012).

While a great deal of research has been done on the portrayal of persons with disabilities within children's literature, the current study will extend this research and consider both physical and mental disabilities portrayed in the literature. Further, this study will focus on fictional children's literature for grades kindergarten through sixth.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY OF STUDY

Elementary schools need quality literature that reflects realistic viewpoints of persons with disabilities. The purpose of this study was to determine how persons with disabilities, both mental and physical, are portrayed in children's literature.

#### Research Design

Qualitative content analysis “emphasizes an integrated view of speech/texts and their specific contexts” (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009, p. 308). According to Forman and Damschroder (2008), it “always entails counting words or categories...to detect patterns in data” (p. 40). This form of analysis goes beyond counting text and retrieving objective content from texts to really examining meanings, themes, and patterns found among a population of texts. The analysis “involves a process designed to condense raw data into categories or themes based on valid inference and interpretation,” (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009, p. 309). This analysis utilizes open-ended data collection techniques that focus on detail and depth, rather than measurement.

#### Data Collection

The population of books used in this study was fictional books that deal with a disability, either mental or physical. To obtain the sampling of books, *Children's Common Core* database was used to search, using the advanced option. Two searches were made, one using the key word handicapped and the other using the key word disabilities. The researcher limited the search to fictional books only, which also had a copyright year of 2002 or earlier and were considered a part of the *core collection* or *most highly recommended*. This provided the researcher with literature that, according to the

*Children's Common Core*, should be found within elementary libraries and would meet within the ten year age of a library collection. Grade level criteria used were kindergarten-6<sup>th</sup> grade. This allowed for a sampling of disability literature that would be found within an elementary school library. The titles that were used in this study included 23 that dealt with a disability of some kind (see Appendix A for book list).

To obtain copies of each book, the researcher began by checking for access to copies of the 24 titles within their current school's library collection. If a book was not found within the researcher's school's library collection, the researcher looked for access to the remaining copies within the Scott County Public Libraries. Finally, if the researcher did not have access to the book locally, the researcher turned to World Cat to interlibrary loan those books.

### **Data Analysis**

The researcher read each book twice. During the first reading, the researcher began coding the text. "Coding is the process of reducing the entire content of the messages in your sample into quantitatively analyzable data" (Spurigin & Wildemuth, 2009, p. 301). Anticipated themes were developed prior to reading and placed in the data analysis tool used when reading the text. As the researcher began reading the sampling of books, unanticipated themes appeared. This encouraged the researcher to use constant comparison, "the systematic comparison of each text" (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009, p. 311). The following table was used when coding the texts.

**Table 1 Coding Text**

<b>Book Title</b>	<b>Multi-Dimensional Character</b>	<b>Stock Character</b>	<b>Positive Portrayal</b>	<b>Negative Portrayal</b>	<b>Type of Disability</b>	<b>Terminology</b>

The researcher analyzed the text set using coded themes. The first theme referred to stock character or a unidimensional character, where the researcher determined if the character with the disability was just a bystander/outlier within the story. The second theme was multi-dimensional character or a fully developed character, where the researcher analyzed if the character with the disability showed emotion, if the reader could understand the character's thought process, and if the character played a main role in the story. For the next two themes, the researcher determined if the character with a disability was portrayed in a positive or negative manner. The researcher also looked for the type of disability the character had, and whether it was mental or physical. Terminology will also be analyzed throughout the text. The researcher will take notes on what words the authors used when referring to the character with a disability, such as disabled, retarded, handicapped, etc. After analyzing text, the researcher will draw conclusions from the coded and descriptive data.

### **Limitations**

A limitation of this study is that the researcher used a small sampling of text. The text has been pulled from the Children's Core Collection Database with a limitation of only fictional text for grades K-6. "Any time humans observe phenomena or interpret meaning, there is bias. Content analysis strives for objectivity and replicability" (Spurigin & Wildemuth, 2009, p. 301). The current study has only one coder, the researcher. It is assumed that the researcher will act in a non-biased manner while coding and analyzing text, to keep data from being skewed by the researcher's subjective judgments and biases.

## CHAPTER 4

### FINDINGS

#### **Data Analysis**

This qualitative study was done in order to determine if there was a positive portrayal of characters with disability in children's books for grades Kindergarten through sixth grade. The books that were part of this literature review were selected and highly recommended within Children's Core Collection Database with the search limitations of *disabilities* and *handicapped*, filtered by grades Kindergarten through sixth grade.

In order to answer the three focus questions of this study, each of the chosen books was read, then reread and coded to mark where the characters with disabilities were positively and/or negatively portrayed within the story. Terminology used in reference to the disability was also noted. The researcher also looked at whether the character with a disability was unidimensional or fully developed within the story.

#### **Positive and Negative Portrayals**

The first question of this study's purpose was to determine how authentically disabled persons are portrayed within children's literature. The coding used showed that 18 of the 23 books reviewed had common elements that contribute to displays of both positive and negative portrayals of characters with disabilities and five showed only positive portrayals (see Table 2). Positive portrayals ranged from acceptance of the character with a disability by others to the character's demonstration of strong confidence and self-esteem. Negative portrayals ranged from the character with a disability being a burden to others to demonstration of strong self pity and lack of self-esteem. Coding also

showed the different types of disabilities discussed within the stories and terminology used in regards to the characters with disabilities within the stories. With both the positive and negative images of the characters with disabilities within the stories, there is an understanding of the struggles and successes the characters with disabilities experienced.

Table 2

*Positive and Negative Portrayals*

<b>Book Title</b>	<b>Positive Portrayal</b>	<b>Negative Portrayal</b>
A Corner of the Universe	Acceptance by others, nonjudgmental	Name calling, lack of self-esteem, burden to others
Alchemy and Meggy Swan	Acceptance by others, self confidence	Burden to others, name calling, self pity
Best Friends	Acceptance by others	None
Black Book of Colors	Acceptance by others	None
Carrying Mason	Acceptance by others	Burden to others, name calling
Catherine's Story	Acceptance by others	None
Comfort	Self confidence	Name calling
Dagger Quick	Self confidence	Burden to others, babied by others
Eleven	Acceptance by others, acceptance of self	Lack of self-esteem
Flight	Acceptance by others, want to help	Burden to others, lack of self confidence, name calling
Good Night Commander	Self confidence	Negative self image, burden to others
Harry Sue	Positive self-esteem	Self pity
Just Because	Acceptance by others	None
Kami and the Yaks	Self confidence	Burden to others
King of the Mound	Positive self-esteem	Burden to others
Ms. McCaw Learns to Draw	Self confidence, acceptance by others	Acceptance by others
Now is the Time for Running	Acceptance by others	Burden to others
One-Handed Catch	Acceptance by others, Positive self-esteem	Burden to others
Owl Ninja	Self confidence, support from others	Unfit for tasks
Pigeon and Pigeonette	Acceptance by others	None
Rules	Acceptance by others	Burden to others, mocking, assumed others thoughts
So B. It	Acceptance by others	Burden to others, ashamed
White Crane	Self confidence, supported	Unfit for tasks



Eighteen of the stories reviewed portrayed characters with disabilities both positively and negatively. However, there were five books that only looked at the positive image. One book, *Pigeon and Pigeonette* by Dirk Derom and Sarah Verroken, only focused on the positive portrayal of the two characters with disabilities. Pigeonette is a young bird who has tiny wings and has left her unable to fly. As winter is approaching, she must find a warm place to stay since she is unable to make it south. She soon comes into contact with Pigeon who is able to fly, but cannot see where he is going. Together they form a bond and become a flight duo. Pigeonette brings the sense of sight and Pigeon brings the ability to fly, so that the two become one. Through this positive portrayal there is a sense of struggle that the two characters face before they find each other. With the struggles present within the story the reader is able to connect with the idea that through difficult times there is still success.

Overall, eighteen of the books portrayed the characters in both a negative and positive manner. The connection transition between the negative and positive portrayal was often due to the character overcoming a struggle in his/her life. The growth of the character throughout the story enabled many of the characters to accept their differences and be confident in who they are, giving these books more authentic character portrayals. One example of this is in *King of the Mound* by Wes Tooke, where Nick is recovering from a spell of Polio that has left him to walk with a limp and dependant on heavy brace. When Nick starts working to help out the baseball team his father plays for, he gets the opportunity to meet and learn from Satchel Paige, a great baseball pitcher. Due to his skin color, Satchel is not allowed to play for the major leagues, but does not let that discourage him from doing what he loves. Satchel teaches Nick, who feels that because

of his newfound disability he is a burden on and will not be able to play baseball anymore, that with hard work and dedication anything is possible. Nick goes on to being able to move around without his brace and starts to pitch again for his former baseball team.

## Terminology

Most of the stories explained or identified the disability one or more of the characters possessed within the story. The terminology used often reflected language which is commonly heard in today's society (see Table 3).

Table 3

### *Disability and Terminology*

Book Title	Type of Disability	Terminology
A Corner of the Universe	Mentally Disabled	Schizophrenia, autistic, freak, alien, mentally ill, funny
Alchemy and Meggy Swan	Deformed Legs, legs did not sit correctly within her hips.	Crippled, evil, uggleosome, crookeleg, monstrous child, ill-formed wench, misshapen creature
Best Friends	Wheelchair	None
Black Book of Colors	Blind	None
Carrying Mason	Mental Disability	Retard, Feeble-minded, dumb, slow, idiot
Catherine's Story	Learning Disabled	Special
Comfort	Polio loss of function in leg and arm, PTSD	click (because of brace), handicapped, crippled, war neurosis
Dagger Quick	club foot, gun shot off father's leg	Cripple
Eleven	Dyslexia	learning disability, dyslexia
Flight	Learning Disability, Paralysis	Angry (Mrs. Brewster), learning disability, slow, dumb, stupid
Good Night Commander	Missing leg	None
Harry Sue	Quadriplegic	Quad, vegetable, turnip, gimp
Just Because	Not Stated	None
Kami and the Yaks	Deaf	None
King of the Mound	Polio (loss of leg movement)	Polio, Cripple, hopalong
Ms. McCaw Learns to Draw	Learning Disability	None
Now is the Time for Running	Mentally Disabled	Crazy, special, different
One-Handed Catch	lost hand in meat grinder	Cripple
Owl Ninja	Extra and lost limbs. Blind	Crippled boy, one-legged samurai, freak girl, unwanted, handicap

Pigeon and Pigeonette	Pigeon (blind), Pigeonette (can't fly)	None
Rules	David (Autism), Jason (paralyzed)	Different
So B. It	Mentally Disabled	Bum brain, Angora Phobia (A.P.), twisted up, handicapped, mentlaly disabled
White Crane	Extra and lost limbs. Blind	Crippled boy, unwanted, freak girl, handicap

Many children understand that people are bullied for a variety of reasons. By reading stories where a character is being bullied for their disability, the reader can relate feels he/she may have once felt when they were bullied or picked on. The terms stupid and dumb were used throughout a couple of stories. This familiar terminology allowed young readers to connect with the stories at a deeper level. In *Carrying Mason* by Joyce Magnin, the mentally disabled mother, Ruby Day, was referred as dumb and stupid by many people in the story. As the main character shares conversations with Ruby Day, she is able to gain an understanding that though Ruby Day has a mental disability, she still understands what others say about her when they think she isn't listening. Ruby Day does not let these comments destroy her will to achieve success in her daily activities. These comments, though hurtful, push her to show others she is just as capable as any person without a disability.

Another story that used the terminology of stupid and dumb was *Flight* by Elizabeth Stow Ellison. In this story the character with the disability, Evan, referred to himself as these things. Evan knew that there was something wrong with him, but since everyone pushed him through, not focusing and assisting him with his struggles, Evan saw himself in a negative way. With the persistence and help of his younger sister, Evan was able to see that he could succeed and that he wasn't dumb. Many readers face similar struggles like Evan, and many don't have that person there to advocate for them

and help them to see that they can succeed. Through this story, readers can grow with Evan and learn to accept that it is okay to be different.

### **Authors' Connection to Story**

To enhance the authenticity of the characters with disabilities, some stories had appendices or author's notes at the end of the book. After reading and rereading each book, the researcher noted that some books provided appendices or notes from the author that gave further background knowledge to the story and the character portrayed with a disability. This addition helped to explain to the reader ideas behind how the story was created and if it was based on real life experiences. One example is *Catherine's Story* by Genevieve Moore, where a note is provided to the reader at the end of the story. Moore talks about how the story is based on an infant child who suffered from a kind of epilepsy known as *infant spasm* and *West Syndrome*. This explanation provides background behind the character's disability and brings meaning to the character Moore was talking about within the story.

Another book that provided a note at the end was *Carrying Mason* by Joyce Magnin. Magnin explains how in the past people with developmental delays, like the character Ruby Day, were sent to live in institutions away from their families and friends. She explains that after watching a documentary about the history of mental retardation and viewing how the people were being treated within the institutions, she got the idea to write *Carrying Mason*. The documentary challenged her to write the story about a person with a developmental delay overcoming the obstacles.

Table 4

*Character Development*

<b>Book Title</b>	<b>Stock Character</b>	<b>Multi-dimensional Character</b>
A Corner of the Universe	Adam	
Alchemy and Meggy Swan		Meggy Swan
Best Friends	James	
Black Book of Colors	Thomas	
Carrying Mason	Ruby Day	
Catherine's Story	Catherine	
Comfort	Father	Ann Fay
Dagger Quick	Frederick (father)	Kitto
Eleven	Sam	
Flight	Evan, Mrs. Brewster	
Good Night Commander		Commander
Harry Sue	Christopher Dinkins (Homer)	
Just Because	Clemmie	
Kami and the Yaks	Kami	
King of the Mound	Nick	
Ms. McCaw Learns to Draw	Dudley	
Now is the Time for Running	Innocent	
One-Handed Catch		Norman
Owl Ninja	Kyoko (extra fingers and toes) Mikko (one arm) Taji (blind)	Niya (one leg)
Pigeon and Pigeonette	Pigeon, Pigeonette	
Rules	David and Jason	
So B. It	Sophia Lynne, Bernadette	
White Crane	Kyoko (extra fingers and toes) Mikko (one arm) Taji (blind)	Niya (one leg)

**Character Development**

The second question of this study was to determine which of the books reviewed portrayed multi-dimensional characters or stock characters and the third question of this study was to determine how the text brings the characters to life. Twenty of the books portrayed the characters with disabilities as stock. The seven books that displayed multi-

dimensional characters were those in which the character with a disability was telling the story in first person narrative allowing the reader to understand the character's thoughts and feelings.

In *Alchemy and Meggy Swan* by Karen Cushman, Meggy Swan is a young girl who is unwanted by everyone around her because of her "bum leg." The story begins with Meggy feeling sorry for herself and hating the world. As time passes, she gains confidence in herself through her acceptance by others in her community. Through the author's writing, the reader is able to connect with Meggy's struggles in making connections with other characters. Knowing that the opinions of others affects the way she views herself, allows the reader to understand the role Meggy's disability plays in her life. Understanding her thoughts brings to focus her struggles and growth as a person. Her ability to open herself up to others around her, allows her to gain confidence in herself. Once she has confidence in whom she is, the negative perceptions of those around her have little to no affect on her ability to succeed in life.

In *Dagger Quick* by Brian Eames, Kitto, who suffers from a club foot, tells the story of his journey to find his mother and brother who have been kidnapped. Kitto showed passion and self confidence in himself, accepting every challenge that was set before him. He disliked when people would look at him with pity or treated him as if he could not handle tasks set before him. Kitto's determination in himself became apparent to the people around him, who came to look at him as an equal, and not as a person with a disability.

Through many of the stories that portrayed stock characters, most were well written stories that brought the character to life for the reader through the author's

writing. Within these stories, the author's developed the character with the disability through interactions with other characters, as well as their surroundings and the activities the character with the disability was engaged in. One example of this is the book, *So B. It* by Sarah Weeks. The main character's mother is mentally disabled and her neighbor, who cares for both of them, will not leave her apartment. The young girl is determined to find out about her past and who her father is. She cares deeply for both her mother and neighbor, but is in search of answers she cannot gain from her mother. Through dialogue between the mother and daughter, the reader gains an understanding of what the mother is like and what it must be like to be the young girl. Within the dialogue the reader is able to see that the mother is dependent on others, especially the daughter. She talks with the daughter as if she was a young child and the daughter was the mother. The daughter soothes her mother when she is upset, caressing her head and singing to her. The daughter also makes sure the mother is fed and well rested. Through these interactions, the reader is able to understand how the daughter is not an average young girl, but one with many responsibilities.

Another story is *Rules* by Cynitia Lord, where a young girl has a brother who has autism and a friend who is paralyzed. Through interactions and insights into the girl's thoughts, the reader is able to connect with the brother and friend on a deeper level. The young girl also talks of her frustrations with her brother and the way people look at him. Her brother is very literal, and when their dad says he will be there to pick him up by six, the brother gets very upset and throws at tantrum if their father is late. Engaging readers with the young boy's episodes allows the reader to connect with the young girl telling the story and understand the boy's disability a little better. When looking deeper into the

main characters thoughts, the reader can see that she has insecurities of her own. The main character and the boy who is paralyzed become friends through the main character drawing communication cards for the boy. As their friendship develops, the girl becomes insecure about telling others that her friend is in a wheelchair and cannot talk like everyone else. There is one incident where the girl hides from a friend when she was walking with the boy who was paralyzed because she did not want to be seen with the boy or the other girl to judge the boy because of his disability. As the story goes on, the girl begins to accept her own insecurities, is able to enjoy life and her relationships with her brother and the boy who is paralyzed without worrying what others think.



## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Inclusion of students with both mental and physical disabilities in the classroom is rising. Literature needs to be made available to help give voice to these children and educate others about the obstacles persons with disabilities face every day. Stories relating to persons with disabilities also provide teachers resources that inform other students about how to interact with people with a disability within the school and society. The purpose of this study was to determine how fully characters with disabilities are developed in children's literature.

#### Summary

Twenty-three children's books, which met established selection criteria, were reviewed and coded for themes regarding the portrayal of characters with disabilities. The coded themes were used to establish the authenticity of the characters with a disability within the stories and the ability of the reader to connect with the characters.

The researcher posed three questions in the research process. The first question considered the authenticity of the characters with a disability within each story. The researcher coded the positive and negative portrayals of the characters with disabilities. The researcher also made note of the types of disabilities discussed and the various terminology used within the books that referred to the character with the disability. After each book was read and reread, the researcher noted the books that provided appendices or notes from the author that gave further background knowledge in regards to the story and the character portrayed with a disability. The researcher found that within 18 of 23 books reviewed, the characters with disabilities were authentically portrayed. The

characters that showed both positive and negative portrayals allowed the researcher to observe the characters struggles and successes. Within today's society, everyone faces struggles and successes of all kinds. Making this connection to a character with a disability within a story, allows the reader to get a better understanding of how the character's life is similar and different from their own.

The second question of the study was to determine of the books reviewed which portrayed stock or multi-dimensional characters and the third question of this study was to determine how the text brings the characters to life. The researcher defined a stock character as one who is a bystander/outlier within the story and a multi-dimensional character as a fully developed character within the story. Characters with disabilities that were presented in first person were considered multi-dimensional. When a character with a disability told the story, the researcher was able to see and understand the characters' thoughts and feelings and gain a deeper understanding of the character. The researcher also looked at the interactions the character with the disability had with other characters and the actions the character with the disability portrayed throughout the story in determining that the character was multi-dimensional. Characters with disabilities who were bystanders/outliers within the story were considered stock. The inability to know the thoughts and feelings of the character with the disability and lack of interaction with the other characters within the story provided the researcher with limited knowledge of who the character with the disability was. The researcher found that 21 of 23 books reviewed portrayed stock characters. Even though many of the characters were stock characters, the researcher found that 18 of 23 books reviewed brought the characters with disabilities to life for the reader. Through the interactions the characters with disabilities

had with other characters and understanding the surroundings and actions of the characters with disabilities, allowed the researcher to understand the character with the disability better. The addition of author's notes and appendices at the end of some of the stories provided the researcher additional information that helped make the character appear more realistic and believable.

### **Conclusion**

The researcher found that of the 23 books reviewed, 21 displayed stock characters and only five had stock characters in addition to multi-dimensional characters. Though many of the characters with disabilities were not multi-dimensional, the positive and negative portrayals within the stories allow readers to connect and gain a more authentic understanding of the character. The struggles the characters with disabilities faced provides readers without disabilities a window into what life is like for people sharing similar disabilities as the ones portrayed within the stories.

The addition of author's notes or appendices to the stories provides additional background knowledge. This addition connects the author to his/her writing and provides them with credibility regarding the disability the character(s) had within the story.

### **Recommendations**

The focus of this study was on the portrayal of characters with disabilities within children's literature. For a future study, a researcher may want to examine a wider variety of disabled children's literature. The current research focused on literature for Kindergarten through grade six using only highly recommended books within the past 10 years on the *Children's Core Collection* database. Pulling from other review sources

such as *School Library Journal*, *Horn Book*, *Booklist*, etc would provide the researcher with a wider variety of text to review.

Another aspect the researcher could add to a future study is the background knowledge that the author brings to the story. Does an author's prior knowledge/experience of a specific disability bring more credibility to a story? Examining the author's knowledge on a specific topic may offer more realistic characters for readers. One might investigate if an author's note regarding his/her backgrounds on the topic plays a role in how students connect with the story.

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## APPENDIX A

**BOOKS USED FOR TEXTUAL ANALYSIS  
AS ORDERED BY CHILDREN'S CORE COLLECTION**

<b>Title</b>	<b>Children's Core Recommendation Level</b>	<b>Grade Levels</b>
Stryer, A. S. & Dodson, B. (2007). <i>Kami and the yaks</i> . Bay Otter Press.	Core Collection	3, 2, 1, K
Safran, S. & Chambers, M. (2011). <i>Best friends: A pop-up book</i> . Tango.	Highly Recommended	K
Faria, R. & Cottin, M. (2008). <i>The black book of colors</i> . Greenwood/Anasi Books.	Highly Recommended	3, 2, 1
Zemach, K. (2008). <i>Ms. mccaw learns to draw</i> . Arthur A. Levine Books.	Core Collection	3, 2, 1
Derom, D & Verroken, S. (2009). <i>Pigeon and pigeonette</i> . Enchanted Lion Books.	Core Collection	2
Elliot, R. (2011). <i>Just because</i> . Tragalar.	Highly Recommended	3
Morre, G. & Littlewood, K. (2010). <i>Catherine's story</i> . Frances Lincoln Children's.	Core Collection	3, 2, 1
Ellison, E. S. (2008). <i>Flight</i> . Holiday House.	Core Collection	4
Giff, P. R. (2008). <i>Eleven</i> . Wendy Lamb Books.	Core Collection	4
Hostetter, J. (2009). <i>Comfort</i> . Calkins Creek.	Core Collection	5
Zahedi, M. Akbarpour, A. (2010). <i>Good night, commander</i> . Greenwood Books.	Core Collection	5, 4, 3
Tooke, W. (2012). <i>King of the mound: My summer with satchel paige</i> . Books for Young Readers.	Core Collection	6, 5, 4
Eames, B. (2011). <i>The dagger quick</i> . Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers.	Core Collection	6, 5, 4
James, R. (2011). <i>Owl ninja</i> . Candlewick Press.	Core Collection	6, 5
Magnin, J. (2011). <i>Carrying mason</i> . Zonderkidz.	Core Collection	6, 5
Williams, M. (2011). <i>Now is the time for running</i> . Little, Brown, and Co.	Highly Recommended	6
Cushman, K. (2010). <i>Alchemy and meggy swan</i> . Clarion Books.	Highly Recommended	6, 5
Fussel, S. & James, R. (2010). <i>White crane</i> . Candlewick Press.	Core Collection	6, 5
Auch, M. J. (2006). <i>One-handed catch</i> . Henry Hold and Co.	Highly Recommended	6, 5, 4
Lord, C. (2006). <i>Rules</i> . Scholastic Press.	Highly Recommended	6, 5, 4
Stauffacher, S. (2005). <i>Harry sue</i> . Knopf.	Highly recommended	6, 5
Weeks, S. (2004). <i>So b. it: A novel</i> . Laura Geringer	Highly	6, 5

Books.	Recommended	
Martin, A. M. (2002). <i>A corner of the universe</i> . Scholastic Press.	Highly Recommended	6, 5