The portrayal of disabled characters in children's literature

Literature is a representation of life, minorities and marginalized groups have sometimes struggled to find their place in literature. One of these marginalized groups is the disabled. Studies have shown that the number of books featuring characters with disabilities has increased in the last decade. The range of disabilities portrayed has also increased. An increase in literary representation is not automatically a positive improvement because not all depictions are accurate and positive. The number and variety of disabled characters shown in children’s literature have increased, however not all of these books portray disabilities in a realistic or non-stereotypical fashion.

One category of disability currently receiving a lot of attention in children’s literature is learning and communication disabilities. A study detailed in a 2003 article by Mary Anne Prater published in Learning Disability Quarterly looked at 90 books including characters with learning or communication disabilities. The most common disability portrayed was a reading disability, such as dyslexia. Other learning disabilities in the books included problems with math, social skills, oral language and motor skills. More than 50 percent of the books studied were written in the point of view of the character with the learning disability (Prater). One common topic discussed in books involving characters with learning disorders is the effect of the disability on the child’s confidence. “Some of the characters with learning disabilities improve their self-esteem after demonstrating their strengths to others.” (Prater) That type of portrayal like that reinforces the idea that someone must be talented or better at something than someone else to be
confident. Showing characters who are confident in who they are or who gain confidence from the inside teaches children that traditional skills are not the only thing that makes someone worthwhile. Looking after Louis, by Lesley Ely, is one example of a picture book featuring a character with a communication disorder. Louis is an autistic elementary school age boy. Unlike many of the books in the study, this one is narrated by a classmate. The website, www.circleofinclusion.org, is dedicated to providing services and advice to people caring for children with disabilities. The site includes a set of nine evaluation criteria for studying the portrayals of disabled characters in children’s literature. One criteria for evaluation is the storyline – how problems are solved, the disabled person’s role and the standard for success. In this story, the narrator is upset because the students are allowed to go out and play when it is not recess because Louis had a good time playing soccer earlier. The conflict is resolved by the narrator learning that sometimes there are exceptions to rules. This incident highlights what is different about Louis and creates the potential for readers to feel the situation is unfair. Another criterion is the use of tokenism. One of the positive aspects of this book is that Louis does have distinct physical characteristics and his own unique interests. In today’s highly-regulated teaching atmosphere this is not a long-term solution; teachers are not able to make a habit of using class time for extra recess. Children reading this book are unlikely to walk away with a better understanding of the disability or even how to interact with autistic classmates. Very little concrete information about autism is included in the story, although the book does include an information page in the back that discusses the disorder.

Information pages are one aspect of a new emerging genre according to Emiliano C.
Ayala's essay, "'Poor little things' and 'Brave little souls': The portrayal of individuals with disabilities in children's literature." The genre, informational/educational, is "informational manuals geared for children to understand and cope with their disability" (Ayala). The books still tell a story, but the author uses the story as a vehicle to get across the information and facts about the disability or condition. Many of these books include separate information or frequently asked questions pages in the front or back of the book. Some of the ideas the books focus on include the origin of the disability and how it is treated (Ayala). My Friend Isabelle, by Eliza Woloson, is an informational/educational book written for ages 2-6. The book is about two children, Charlie and Isabelle, who has Down syndrome. Charlie points out the things he and Isabelle have in common, such as both like to draw, play at the park and eat cheerios. He also points out some differences between himself and Isabelle - he is tall, Isabell is short - he knows a lot of words, sometimes Isabelle is difficult to understand. The overall message of the book is that differences are positive and necessary to the world. Charlie is not always the leader, at one point, Isabelle teaches Charlie how to dance to Stevie Wonder. According to the Circle of Inclusion criteria, "who's doing what?" is one aspect to study in terms of disability portrayal. Both characters in this book are leaders and participators. Woloson points out some of the main things a child would notice about a child with Down syndrome during the story. At the end of the book there is an informational page which provides more facts about the condition in a child-friendly style. Isabelle's character is based on the author's real-life daughter with Down syndrome, so this portrayal is coming from someone with personal, first-hand experience with the condition.
Being aware of how the disabled character is portrayed is one of the most important things to look at in children's literature featuring disabilities. The focus of Ayala's essay is on the once common portrayal of disabled characters as a "poor little thing" or "brave little soul." The disabled character is seen as either pitiful or someone who is so brave for coping with the challenges in his or her life. Ayala noted "...Mellon saw these two types of characterizations in most of the books she reviewed and concluded that these broad stereotypes often cast children with physical disabilities in a negative light and inaccurately neglected the tremendous differences that exist within any group of children." Such stereotypes promote the idea that every physically disabled child bravely faces their condition without fear and that they should be pitied. Children need to see physically disabled characters handling their situations in different ways to understand that everyone has different coping mechanisms and people should not assume they know how someone feels about their condition. Beyond the content of the text, the language used can convey certain messages. The Circle of Inclusion evaluation criteria recommend looking for loaded words and dated language. Loaded words can include "docile," "backwards," "dumb," and "special" among others (Circle). In terms of dated language, it is important to note when the book was written and how language has changed since then. Some words and phrases that were once common are no longer considered acceptable.

Our Teacher's in a Wheelchair, by Mary Ellen Powers, is a non-fiction book with a positive message but a somewhat dated approach. It was published in 1986. Brian Hanson is a teacher at a daycare center who is in a wheelchair after being partially paralyzed from a sports injury. The book seems to be aimed at elementary school students. The sentences are short and written with simple vocabulary. At times, the author over-explains simple concepts and states
the obvious. The language used makes the text appear to be written for readers with no experience around people with physical disabilities. When Powers is discussing Brian's ability to drive, she says, "…he parks his car in a special place for the handicapped." In this context, the word "special" seems to unnecessarily point out differences. Saying "he is allowed to park in a designated spot close to the building," conveys the same idea. The author also goes out of her way to explain some people are uncomfortable around Brian at first and paralysis is not contagious. Black and white photos are used to illustrate the story. On a positive note, the book depicts Brian as a fully-functioning member of society with friends, a career and hobbies.

However, the book that stood out most from the books considered for this paper was Looking Out for Sarah, by Glenna Lang. It tells the story of a real life team consisting of Sarah Gregory Smith, who is blind, and her guide dog, Perry. The story is told from Perry's point of view, giving the book a unique style that will appeal to many children. Perry is protective of Sarah, yet respectful of her independence. During the story Sarah does ordinary things such as doing errands and chores. She also visits a local school and plays guitar for the students. Perry recalls when he and Sarah walked for a month from Massachusetts to New York City. Readers also learn about the job and role of a guide dog. Sarah is portrayed as a person with a full life who happens to have a disability. Sarah's character is strong and not someone the audience should feel sorry for. Although the illustrations are a little abstract, they are colorful and appealing. The text uses language that is descriptive, but still leaves something to the imagination. This story could be read to a wide age range as well. Overall Looking Out for Sarah is a great example of a positive portrayal of a disabled character as a full participant in society and life.
Disabled characters have an easier time finding their way into children's literature today than they did in the past. A wider range of disabilities is included in current books as well. There has a dramatic increase in the number of characters portrayed with learning disabilities and autism. Many books feature disabled characters portrayed as fully functioning members of society with distinct personalities and lifestyles. However, there are still books in libraries and being written that do not have the best choices in language, illustrations or overall message. It is still important for teachers and parents to be conscious of what books they share with children.
Works Cited


Circle of Inclusion Site. 2002. Circle of Inclusion. 6 Nov. 2008

<http://www.circleofinclusion.org/English/books/section1/a.html>.


