

## MAPPING DISABILITY REPRESENTATION IN PRIMARY SCHOOL YOUTH LITERATURE

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### Abstract

The growing number of inclusive classrooms resulting in significant changes in education. One important change is that there is an increasing number of opportunities for students with disabilities and their peers to be grouped for learning.

However, equity in access does not guarantee equity in outcomes in terms that nondisabled students will become accepting the ones who have disabilities. Therefore, there is a need for intervention that facilitates the acceptance of students with disabilities.

In an educational setting, youth literature can provide an easily accessible resource that helps students to become familiar with the diversity of society and its social and cultural contexts. These literary works, serving as a link between curriculum content and social perception, can affect the readers' self- image, interpersonal sensitivity and opinion toward different minority groups and social problems. It is therefore important that literary works do not contain biased content, or, if they do, textbooks or teachers should provide an opportunity for discussion of them.

The research examined the representation of disability found within youth literature that is employed to support the Hungarian National Curriculum. The study employed content analysis to identify different recurring patterns of the disability conception within the content of youth literature in primary education by using a code system which was based on Biklen and Bogdan's (1977) stereotypes categories.

The analysis of the data resulted in a number of findings, which have been grouped into individual themes including exclusion, the portrayal of characters with disabilities as an 'object of evil', or as an 'object of violence', as well as the elimination of people with disabilities as the solution of the 'happily ever after' story ending. In addition, in the literary works examined there is a severe lack of appropriate images of people with disabilities presented in everyday situations, as a part of a given socio-cultural environment.

These negative representations lead us to question the continued uncritical use of these literary works with students at primary schools as part of our National Core Curriculum. We suggest that such exclusionary and stereotypical storylines could create negative preconceptions toward people with disability by students and could also promote the segregation of disabled people in society. Therefore, these literary works could not be applied uncritically by teachers during the lessons.

**Keywords:** *Disability, youth literature, content analysis, elementary schools.*

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### 1. Inclusion and textbooks

Social inclusion and the active participation of all members of the society are vital for practising human rights and promoting human dignity. Nowadays, the concept of accepting diversity plays an important role in social policy. The education system generally reflects the social structure by conveying the social norms to the students.

Textbooks have an important role among the tools in the education of children aged 7–14 in Hungary. Students use them every day to elaborate on the different information in them. During this process, the content of the textbooks has an effect on the ideology and the attitudes of the students. The attitudes acquired at school may also have an impact on student's social perception. Thus, inclusive school attitudes towards minority groups can be extended to the attitudes of the whole society.

Over the past few years, great emphasis has been placed on the importance of inclusive curricula to increase the visibility of minorities (Nind, 2005). The importance of disability representation in general education became more and more important due to the fact that inclusion of disability issues can positively influence the self-image and motivation of such students (Wieman, 2001) and will likely motivate non-disabled students to learn more about their disabled classmates (Hodkinson & Ghajarieh

2014). Moreover, inclusive textbooks can help non-disabled young learners to realize diversity in their teaching materials, which raise their appreciation for diverse and different characters, and also tolerance among these students of others' impairments (Rasche and Bronson 1999). Textbooks can be considered as "tools" that help students to become familiar with the diversity of society, and its social and cultural contexts (Mc Kinney, 2005). A realistic and non-prejudicial image of people with disabilities should be an important part of the textbooks of public education institutions. It can help students understanding the needs and reality of these people.

## **2. Disability and youth literature**

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

The disability representation of children's literature has a history dating back four to five thousand years (Flood, 2016). Since the 1980s, there have been numerous studies examining the portrayal of childhood literature (Greta, 1986; Harrill, Leung, McKeag, and Price, 1993; Carlisle, 1998; Ayala, 1999; Dyches, Prater and Cramer 2001; Prater, 2003; Hughes, 2006; Quayson, 2007; Beckett, Ellison, Barrett and Shah, 2010; Hodkinson and Park, 2017). These studies highlight that people with disabilities are portrayed primarily through negative stereotypes, they are often portrayed as fearful, evil, and often become ridiculous. Moreover, characters with disabilities often become victims of violent acts, often beaten and in several cases killed. Quayson (2007) emphasizes that if children's literature contains disability characters that are portrayed in a negative way and used scary scenarios and images for them it might make children dislike these characters. According to Wall and Crevecoeur (2016), such stereotypes in children's literature result in problematic attitudes towards disabled people. Almerico (2014) points out that literary characters have a very strong influence on children, almost as strong as the real people they encounter every day. The negative stereotyped portrayal of people with disabilities in children's literature can make a significant contribution to the general fear of children toward people with disabilities. Wall and Crevecoeur (2016) highlight that this problematic representation may also have a negative impact on readers' attitudes towards people with disabilities.

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

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

The present study aimed at identifying and critically analysing the presence of disability found within youth literature that is employed to support the Hungarian National Curriculum. The analysis was based on the categories of stereotypical representation revealed by the researches of Biklen and Bogdan (1977), Rubin and Strauss Watson (1987) and Marshall (2012), since these studies provide a detailed, complex description of the disability characters found in literary works. Analysing children's literature, Biklen and Bogdan (1977) found ten different commonly occurred stereotypical representations of people with disabilities, such as disabled people are 'pitiable and pathetic', 'an object of violence', 'sinister and evil', 'curio or exotica', 'an object of ridicule', 'super cripple', 'their own worst enemy', 'a burden', 'asexual' and 'incapable of fully participating in everyday life'. In 1987, Rubin and Strauss Watson added a stereotype category to the list of Biklen and Bogdan's stereotypes such as 'a person with a disability being isolated from disabled and non-disabled peer'. Marshall in 2012 also added another stereotype representation type to the previous list, he found descriptions about 'people with disabilities as childish and cannot behave like an adult'.

## **4. Research design**

### **4.1. Research questions**

The present research aimed at identifying and critically analysing the presence of disability in the literary works that can be found in school textbooks of Hungarian Literature in Hungary. In order to identify the discourse-level barriers and enablers of disability content in the sample literary works and to

reveal how stereotypical representations of disability are manifested in them we posed the following research questions:

- How does disability appear in the literary works?
- In what social context is it represented?
- What kind of disability concept can be found in literary works?
- How can these representation effect students 'perception about people with disabilities?

#### **4.2. Method**

To address the research questions, a content analysis of the sample materials was conducted using Atlas.ti software. Content analysis is a systematic, objective, quantitative examination of message characteristics (Neuendorf, 2017) intended for the analysis of message contents to unfold 'what they mean to people, what they enable or prevent, and what the information conveyed by them does' (Krippendorff, 1995, p. 2).

The study began with a selection of literature books for primary school students from the list of approved textbooks for the academic year 2019, which was revealed by the Hungarian Government. 39 books were selected from the list, whose literary works were analysed along the research questions.

In order to examine the disability-related messages in the literary works, the analysis first focused on the frequency and location of the Hungarian words for disability in the content. In the first phase of the research each textbook was read page by page, searching for texts which referred to disability or people with disabilities. The numbers of occurrences were analysed using descriptive statistics. During this phase we calculated the absolute and the relative occurrence of each search term to reveal how frequently disability or disabled people were mentioned in the texts. Within the second stage, the relevant hits were analysed to identify how disability was located in the texts and what conception of disability was represented in them. In the third stage of the analysis, the relevant hits were imported into Atlas ti. software and analysed to identify different recurring patterns of the disability conception within the content by using a code system which was based on Biklen and Bogdan (1977), Rubin and Strauss Watson (1987) and Marshall's (2012) stereotype categories. The interpretation of the terms related to people with disabilities formed on the basis of these recurring patterns.

#### **5. Results**

The analysis of the data produced a range of findings which have been grouped into individual themes. In the texts, a considerable amount of examples has been found which referred to the stereotype categories presented above. In this paper, we turn to consider in detail those that have appeared in the largest number of literary works examined.

##### **5.1. Types of disability representations and their distribution in the examined literary works**

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

##### **5.2. The disabled character as an object of an evil**

Within the literature reviewed for this research, the disabled character was often portrayed as an evil villain. One of the characters in Stevenson's novel *Treasure Island* is Pew the blind man, who is described as the most evil rogue of them all. In each part of Pew's involvement within the story, he is continuously seeking revenge on the nondisabled characters. This allows the reader to believe that a person with a disability 's condition of life makes them place blame and guilt on others. Another negative representation of disability may also be observed in a Hungarian legend, the *Son of the White Mare*. Within the story one of the main characters is a „deformed dwarf” who is represented to be sly and mean. As an object of evil, he was introduced within the story when he takes the food of people by force. Moreover, these characters often were depicted as terrifying, horrible people.

According to Quayson (2007), when students read stories such as those they are made to dislike the character which he believes leads to them developing a stigma towards disability.

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

Another finding of this research was that the disabled character was often portrayed as an object of violence. Abused characters with disabilities are mostly helpless in this situation. In Stevenson's novel *Treasure Island*, Pew the blind man falls under the horses that crush him, and nobody goes to help him. One of the main characters in *The Story about the Echoes of Tihany* is a mute princess who becomes the victim of the wrath of the Wave King. János Lackfy writes in his poem about a one-eyed cat: “*And if you don't die in the fight, then my dad will kill you!*”

These depictions influence students to believe that, according to Goodley and Runswick-Cole (2011), the disabled body can be an easy target for real physical violence of non-disabled others. This perception of disability might enable students to place disabled people lower than themselves in terms of importance and hierarchy in society (McGrail and Rieger, 2014).

### 5.4. Disability as a problem or punishment

In the literary works analysed, the contrast between disability and perfection was striking. Disability usually appears as a problem or a mistake related to the appearance or the personality of the disabled character. For example, in *Story about the Echoes of Tihany*, we read the following about the protagonist, who is a blind princess: “*God made her not only beautiful but also gentle, kind-hearted, smart, and patient, however, she was mute*”. The writer contrasts the beauty, goodness (which are positive attributes) of the princess with the muteness (which in this context can be interpreted as a negative attribute). Another example can be found in the story of Sándor Kányádi, *The Silent Tulip*, in which the punishment of the evil gardener is to shrink into a dwarf. This distorted view of disability plants a seed into the minds of children which later might lead to insecurities in respect of people with disabilities.

## 6. Conclusion

The main finding of the research is that the presence of people with disability is underrepresented and problematic in the sample literary works for young people. This is because disability is formulated in the negative in these texts. They are often symbolised as an entity of evil or an object of violence. In addition to this, people with disabilities are frequently represented as unimportant in society and that it is essential that they should disappear. We can also conclude that there is a severe lack of appropriate images of people with disabilities presented in everyday situations, as a part of a given socio-cultural environment.

These representations lead us to question the continued uncritical use of these literary works with students at primary schools as part of our National Core Curriculum. We suggest that such exclusionary storylines might promote student's preconceptions toward people with disabilities and also their segregation in society. Therefore, a review of the employment of these literary works must be conducted to ensure that they are not applied uncritically by teachers during the lessons.

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