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Portrayal of Characters with Disabilities in Newbery Books

Casey Pehrson

A thesis submitted to the faculty of  
Brigham Young University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Educational Specialist in School Psychology

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## ABSTRACT

### Portrayal of Characters with Disabilities in Newbery Books

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Commonly practiced in school settings, bibliotherapy promotes healing and problem solving. In schools, bibliotherapy should be utilized to educate and empower students and to enhance the classroom experience. In order to achieve this purpose, teachers need a variety of books to specifically target students' unique needs. Award-winning books, such as those receiving the prestigious Newbery Medal, are important resources for teachers. This study examined the portrayal of characters with disabilities in 249 Newbery Medal and Honor books published between 1922 and 1974. From this sample, 20 books featured a combined total of 21 characters with a disability, as defined by the 13 disability categories (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, IDEA). The majority of characters were portrayed with orthopedic impairment (43%;  $n = 9$ ). Other disabilities represented in this sample of books included visual impairment (19%;  $n = 4$ ); emotional disturbance (14%;  $n = 3$ ); mental retardation (9%;  $n = 2$ ); speech or language impairment (5%;  $n = 1$ ); multiple disabilities (5%;  $n = 1$ ); and other health impairment (5%;  $n = 1$ ). Overall, according to the language and customs of the time period that reflected the settings of the books, characters with disabilities were sensitively portrayed. However, when judged by today's standards, these portrayals were considered insensitive.

Keywords: bibliotherapy, disability, Newbery Medal, content analysis, children's literature

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## DESCRIPTION OF THESIS STRUCTURE

Following the introductory pages (title page, acknowledgments, abstract, table of contents, list of tables, and list of figures), this thesis is segmented into two major sections: (a) the article ready for submission to a journal (pp. 1–30) and (b) the review of the literature (pp. 31–43).

This thesis contains two reference lists. The first reference list (p. 28) contains the references included in the journal-ready article. The second reference list (p. 50) includes all citations used in both the journal-ready article and the section titled “Review of the Literature.”

## **Introduction**

The word, particularly the written word, has great power to influence thought and action, and bibliotherapy taps into this power. Various definitions of bibliotherapy have been offered, but, put simply, bibliotherapy is to treat personal issues through books (Pardeck, 1994), or to use books to help solve problems (Aix, 1993). Bibliotherapy's benefits include producing affective change (Abdullah, 2002; Lenkowsky, 1987), promoting personality growth and development (Lenkowsky, 1987), providing insights to help individuals solve problems (Forgan, 2002; Riordan & Wilson, 1989; Sridhar & Vaughn, 2000), and provoking individuals to gain an understanding of themselves and others (Riordan & Wilson, 1989; Stamps, 2003).

### **Purpose of Bibliotherapy**

One of the most common settings for the practice of bibliotherapy is in schools. In school settings, the purpose of bibliotherapy is threefold: (a) to educate, (b) to empower, and (c) to enhance the classroom experience (Riordan, Mullis, & Nuchow, 1996). Bibliotherapy is a practical approach for educators to achieve this purpose because schools create an atmosphere that is conducive to reading and discussion, a library is usually available, students are gathered five days a week, and curriculum is generally varied and flexible (Rubin, 1979).

Bibliotherapy is useful for educators because the content and process can be adapted to the needs of individual students. In order to most successfully facilitate student development, school personnel are encouraged to systematically match literature to the learner (Cook, Earles-Vollrath, & Ganz, 2006; Sridhar & Vaughn, 2000). With a wide range of unique student needs in every classroom, it is important that educators are familiar with the wide range of available literature. Knowing which books are available, teachers can selectively identify books to specifically target each student's unique needs.

## **Award-winning Literature**

Some of the most available, popular, and recommended books are those that have won literary awards and honors. Generally, award-winning books (a) are available in libraries and media centers, (b) receive high recommendations from educators and librarians, (c) stay in circulation, and (d) tend to have good exposure, popularity, and lasting effect (Friedman & Cataldo, 2002; Hegel, 2007; Hill, White, & Brodie, 2001; Ouzts, Taylor, & Taylor, 2003; Peterson & Karnes, 1976; Prater, 2000). One of the most prestigious awards for children's literature is the Newbery Medal. Established in 1922 and named after British publisher John Newbery, the Newbery Medal is awarded annually by the American Library Association. It goes to the most distinguished contribution to children's literature written by a citizen or resident of the United States (ALA, n.d.; Friedman & Cataldo, 2002).

## **Newbery Book Analyses**

Numerous analyses have been conducted concerning the contents of Newbery books including the characterization of racial and ethnic groups (Gillespie, Powell, Clements, & Swearingen, 1994), the history of gender roles (Powell, Gillespie, Swearingen, & Clements, 1998), the characterization of the elderly (Peterson & Karnes, 1976), and the analysis of character traits (Leal, Glascock, Mitchell, & Wasserman, 2000). Analyses such as these are helpful to teachers and school personnel, who are encouraged to familiarize themselves with literature that is available and appropriate to meet the needs of individual students.

Recently, a study examining the portrayal of characters with disabilities in Newbery books from 1975 to 2009 was completed (Leininger, Dyches, Prater, & Heath, 2010). The purpose of the Leininger et al. (2010) study was to determine the number of Newbery Medal and Honor books from 1975 to 2009 that included characters with disabilities, to identify the types of

disabilities that were represented, and to analyze how those characters were portrayed. Of the 131 Newbery Medal and Honor books published between 1975 and 2009, 31 books featured a combined total of 41 characters with disabilities. The most commonly portrayed disabilities in Newbery books between 1975 and 2009 included orthopedic impairment, emotional disturbance, and mental retardation. Trend analyses indicated that overall portrayal of characters with disabilities was increasingly positive across time.

### **Study Rationale**

Newbery books are among the most available, popular, and recommended books, making them prime candidates for use in bibliotherapy, but Newbery books prior to 1975 had not yet been systematically evaluated for their portrayal of characters with disabilities. Leininger et al. (2010) examined Newbery books from 1975, which marked the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (now known as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act), to 2009. However, Newbery books from 1922, which marked the beginning of the Newbery Award, to 1974, which marked the year prior to the implementation of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, had not been analyzed for their portrayal of characters with disabilities. This study was an extension and a replication of the Leininger et al. (2010) study.

Before they are used for bibliotherapy to teach about disabilities, Newbery books published prior to 1975 should be evaluated to ensure that they depict characters with disabilities appropriately, accurately, and positively. The purpose of this study was separated into two categories: procedural and practical. The procedural purpose of this study was to evaluate the portrayal of characters with disabilities in Newbery books published from 1922 to 1974. The practical purpose of this study was to identify books that are appropriate for use in bibliotherapy to teach about disabilities.

## **Research Questions**

The research questions for this study concerned an analysis of Newbery Award and Honor books published between 1922 and 1974:

1. Which disabilities are portrayed?
2. Are the type and frequency of disabilities portrayed comparable to current rates of identified disabilities in U.S. public schools?
3. How are characters with disabilities portrayed?
4. How are social relationships of characters with disabilities portrayed?
5. What (if any) exemplary practices are featured for characters with disabilities?

## **Method**

### **Location and Selection of Books and Character Portrayals**

All 249 Newbery Medal and Honor books that were published between 1922 and 1974 were eligible for use in this study, but books were only included in the study if they portrayed an important character (main or supporting) with a disability that impacted the plot. The year 1922 was selected as the beginning date for this study because it was the year that the Newbery Medal was first awarded. The year 1974 was selected as the ending date given that Leininger et al. (2010) began her analysis in 1975. The sample of books that contained characters of significance with disabilities was identified by consulting annotated bibliographies, book guides, journal articles, and an Internet bookstore (Leininger et al., 2010).

Disabilities were defined using the 13 categories outlined by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), which include autism, deaf-blindness, developmental delay, emotional disturbance, hearing impairment, mental retardation, multiple disabilities, orthopedic impairment, other health impairment, specific learning disability, speech or language

impairment, traumatic brain injury, and visual impairment. In order to qualify for special education or related services in U.S. public schools, a student's disability must adversely affect his or her educational performance. These same criteria were used to select the characters analyzed in this study. In other words, the character's disability had to be present to a degree that would qualify the character for special education services in U.S. public schools. Books with characters who had a disability that would not affect their educational performance were not included in the study.

Between 1922 and 1974, 249 books received either the Newbery Medal or Honor recognition. Of these 249 books, 20 Newbery Medal and Honor books featuring a combined total of 21 characters with disabilities were identified (see Table 1). Each of the 21 characters was portrayed with a disability that would qualify for special education services in U.S. public schools today.

Table 1

*Newbery Books Featuring Characters with Disabilities (1922–1974)*

Year	Title	Award	Character (main/supporting)	Disability
1922	Queer Person	Honor	Queer Person (main)	Multiple Disabilities
1932	Jane's Island	Honor	Dr. Fritz von Bergan (supporting)	Orthopedic Impairment
1936	Young Walter Scott	Honor	Sir Walter Scott (main)	Orthopedic Impairment
1938	The White Stag	Winner	Damos (supporting)	Visual Impairment
1940	By the Shores of Silver Lake	Honor	Mary (supporting)	Visual Impairment
1942	Little Town on the Prairie	Honor	Mary (supporting)	Visual Impairment

1944	Johnny Tremain	Winner	Johnny (main)	Orthopedic Impairment
1944	These Happy Golden Years	Honor	Mary (supporting)	Visual Impairment
1947	The Hidden Treasure of Glaston	Honor	Hugh (main)	Orthopedic Impairment
1949	King of the Wind	Winner	Agba (main)	Speech Impairment
1950	The Door in the Wall	Winner	Robin (main)	Orthopedic Impairment
1955	The Wheel on the School	Winner	Janus (supporting)	Orthopedic Impairment
1957	Miracles on Maple Hill	Winner	Marly's father (supporting)	Emotional Disturbance
1959	The Witch of Blackbird Pond	Winner	Mercy (supporting)	Orthopedic Impairment
1967	Up a Road Slowly	Winner	Aggie (supporting)	Mental Retardation
			Katy (supporting)	Emotional Disturbance
1967	The Jazz Man	Honor	Zeke (main)	Orthopedic Impairment
1970	Our Eddie	Honor	Eddie (main)	Other Health Impairment
1971	The Summer of the Swans	Winner	Charlie (supporting)	Mental Retardation
1971	Sing Down the Moon	Honor	Tall Boy (supporting)	Orthopedic Impairment
1972	The Planet of Junior Brown	Honor	Junior Brown (main)	Emotional Disturbance

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## Measures

Books were evaluated using a 2008 adaptation of the *Rating Scale for Quality Characterizations of Individuals with Disabilities in Children's Literature* (Dyches & Prater, 2000). This instrument has been used in studies evaluating the portrayal of characters with mental retardation and autism (Dyches, Prater, & Cramer, 2001) and developmental disability

(Dyches & Prater, 2005) in children's literature. The rating scale evaluates personal portrayal, social interactions, sibling relationships, exemplary practices, impact of disability on plot, impact of setting on disability, and point of view. Each section contains items that are rated on a scale of 1 (Disagree) to 3 (Agree). A copy of this rating scale is available in Appendix B.

### **Procedures**

A content analysis examining the portrayal of characters with disabilities in Newbery books between 1922 and 1974 was completed. Each of the 20 books was evaluated by two trained readers using a 2008 adaptation of the Dyches and Prater (2000) rating scale. Both readers were graduate students of school psychology at Brigham Young University who were trained by the developers of the rating scale. The two readers read and rated each book independently, and then their evaluations were compared to determine inter-rater reliability, which was calculated to be 84%. The readers then met to settle discrepancies. In other words, when the ratings between the two readers did not match, the readers met to discuss the difference and come to an agreement concerning the rating. The agreed-upon rating was used as the final data. Additionally, both readers recorded information regarding the types of disabilities represented and the ethnicities and prominence of the characters with disabilities. This information was compared to 2009–10 U.S. public school information and demographics.

### **Data Analysis**

Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the ratings. Data to be considered included the frequency of disability representation (i.e., How often was each disability represented?) and the percentage of disability representation (i.e., How often was each disability represented in comparison to other disabilities?). These statistics were compared to 2009–10 U.S. public school statistics to determine how comparably the earlier Newbery books featuring characters with



disabilities ( $n = 20$ ) characterize what is currently found in the schools. Additionally, data were compiled concerning gender, ethnicity, and prominence of character; personal portrayal; social relationships; exemplary practices; relationship variables (e.g., victim/perpetrator/protector, dependent/caregiver, pupil/instructor); setting; point of view; and purpose of the book.

The rating scale was used to determine the appropriateness and accuracy of the depiction of the characters with disabilities. Acceptable ratings for each category on the rating scale were determined based on the average rating for each section. The average rating was calculated by adding each item's rating (1, 2, or 3) within each section of the rating scale and dividing the total by the number of items in that section. Ratings were considered "acceptable" if they were 2.0 or above, indicating neutral or positive.

## **Results**

Of the 249 Newbery Medal and Honor books between 1922 and 1974, 20 books featured a combined total of 21 characters with a disability. Of those 20 books, 9 (45%) received the Newbery Medal, and 11 (55%) received the Newbery Honor. The following information is presented to answer the research questions of this study.

### **Research Question #1: Which disabilities are portrayed?**

Almost half of the characters were portrayed with orthopedic impairment (43%;  $n = 9$ ). Other disabilities included visual impairment (19%;  $n = 4$ ); emotional disturbance (14%;  $n = 3$ ); mental retardation (9%;  $n = 2$ ); speech or language impairment (5%;  $n = 1$ ); multiple disabilities (5%;  $n = 1$ ); and other health impairment (5%;  $n = 1$ ). Overall, only 7 of the 13 disability categories (54%) were represented in this sample of books, leaving 6 disability categories (autism, deaf-blindness, developmental delay, hearing impairment, specific learning disability, and traumatic brain injury) unrepresented. This information is outlined in Table 2.

Table 2

*Types of Disabilities in Newbery Books (1922–1974)*

Type of Disability	Number of Characters	Percentage
Orthopedic Impairment	9	43%
Visual Impairment	4	19%
Emotional Disturbance	3	14%
Mental Retardation	2	9%
Speech or Language Impairment	1	5%
Multiple Disabilities	1	5%
Other Health Impairment	1	5%
<b>Total</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>100%</b>

**Research Question #2: Are the type and frequency of disabilities portrayed comparable to current rates of identified disabilities in U.S. public schools?**

The rates of identified disabilities in Newbery books published between 1922 and 1974 are not comparable to the current rates of identified disabilities in U.S. public schools (based on 2009–10 U.S. public school data and demographics). In the Newbery books between 1922 and 1974, the top four disabilities represented included orthopedic impairment (43%), visual impairment (19%), emotional disturbance (14%), and mental retardation (9%). The top four disabilities represented in U.S. public schools, however, include specific learning disability (39%), speech or language impairment (22%), other health impairment (10%), and mental retardation (8%) (USDE, 2010). This information is outlined in Table 3.

Table 3

*Disabilities in Newbery Books (1922–1974) Compared to Disabilities in U.S. Public Schools*

Disability	Percentage of Disabilities	
	Newbery Books (1922–1974)	Schools (2009–10)
Autism	0	4
Deaf-Blindness	0	<1
Developmental Delay	0	5
Emotional Disturbance	14	7
Hearing Impairment	0	1
Mental Retardation	9	8
Multiple Disabilities	5	2
Orthopedic Impairment	43	1
Other Health Impairment	5	10
Specific Learning Disability	0	39
Speech or Language Impairment	5	22
Traumatic Brain Injury	0	<1
Visual Impairment	19	<1

The gender ratio of characters with disabilities in Newbery books was comparable to the gender ratio of students with disabilities in U.S. public schools. Over half of the characters with disabilities ( $n = 21$ ) were male (71%;  $n = 15$ ), while the rest were female (29%;  $n = 6$ ). A similar gender ratio is seen in schools, as 67% of students receiving special education services are male and 33% are female (USDE, 2010). When examining ethnicity, based on descriptions found in the text, the majority of characters with disabilities appeared to be Caucasian (71%;  $n = 15$ ). Other represented ethnicities included Black (14%;  $n = 3$ ), Native American (10%;  $n = 2$ ), and Other (5%;  $n = 1$ ). Ethnic representation of Newbery characters is not proportionate to ethnic representation of students receiving special education services in the schools (USDE, 2010). Caucasian, Native American, and Other characters with disabilities in Newbery books were overrepresented while Black characters were slightly underrepresented. Hispanic and Asian/Pacific Islander characters with disabilities were not represented at all. This information is outlined in Table 4.

Table 4

*Demographics of Characters and Students with Disabilities*

Demographic	Number and Percentage of Disabilities	
	Newbery Books (1922–1974)	Schools (2009–10)
Male	15 (71.4%)	66.9%
Female	6 (28.6%)	33.1%
Caucasian	15 (71.4%)	54.1%
Black	3 (14.3%)	16.8%
Hispanic	--	22.1%
Native American	2 (9.5%)	1.2%
Asian/Pacific Islander	--	5.1%
Other	1 (4.8%)	0.7%

### **Research Question #3: How are characters with disabilities portrayed?**

More of the characters with disabilities were supporting characters (57%;  $n = 12$ ) as opposed to main characters (43%;  $n = 9$ ). For example, supporting characters included Mary in *By the Shores of Silver Lake*, *Little Town on the Prairie*, and *These Happy Golden Years* (all books in the *Little House on the Prairie* series), Marly's father in *Miracles on Maple Hill*, and Tall Boy in *Sing Down the Moon*, while main characters included Queer Person in *Queer Person*, Sir Walter Scott in *Young Walter Scott*, and Johnny Tremain in *Johnny Tremain*. The majority of characters with disabilities were dependent on others for care (62%;  $n = 13$ ), such as Zeke in *The Jazz Man* and Charlie in *The Summer of the Swans*, as opposed to caregivers (38%;  $n = 8$ ), such as Damos from *The White Stag* and Agba from *King of the Wind*. The majority (71%;  $n = 15$ ) were pupils, having been explicitly taught academic or social lessons by others, as opposed to instructors (29%;  $n = 6$ ). Examples of pupils included Robin in *The Door in the Wall* and Eddie in *Our Eddie*, while examples of instructors included Dr. Fritz von Bergan in *Jane's Island* and Janus in *The Wheel on the School*.

In some of the books, other characters feared associating with the character with a disability (24%;  $n = 5$ ). This was apparent as the school children were afraid to come near Janus's yard in *The Wheel on the School* and as family members seemed to tiptoe around Marly's father because they were wary of his fluctuating moods in *Miracles on Maple Hill*. In some of the books, characters without disabilities experienced feelings of guilt in relation to the character with a disability (29%;  $n = 6$ ). This was evident in *Johnny Tremain* when Dove feels guilty for handing Johnny a cracked crucible which badly burned his hand and in *Up a Road Slowly* when Julie feels remorse for how she treated Aggie.

From their interactions with the character with a disability, most characters without disabilities experienced positive changes (81%;  $n = 17$ ), while the rest seemingly remained neutral (19%;  $n = 4$ ). Along these lines, there appeared to be a theme of inspiration throughout the sample of books. This was evidenced when the character with a disability acted as a catalyst to facilitate another character's personal growth. Examples of this include Will Clerk's interaction with Sir Walter Scott in *Young Walter Scott*, Laura's interaction with Mary in the *Little House on the Prairie* series, Sara's interaction with Charlie in *The Summer of the Swans*, and Julie's interaction with Aggie in *Up a Road Slowly*. In each of these relations, the character without a disability learns something from the character with a disability. From Sir Walter Scott, who has an orthopedic impairment, Will Clerk learns diligence and perseverance, which can be gathered from his comment, "As for Mr. Scott, you may take him for a poor lamiter, but he is the first to begin a row and the last to end it" (p. 190). From her sister Mary, who is blind, Laura learns to be content with what she has, as illustrated by her statement, "Mary is a great comfort to me . . . she has never once repined . . . [she] is a rare soul, and a lesson to all of us" (p. 217). From interacting with her brother Charlie, who has mental retardation, Sara recognizes her protective instinct, as portrayed by her comment, "I can't help myself. When I think somebody has done something mean to Charlie I can't forgive them. I want to keep after them and keep after them" (p. 96). From her experience with her classmate Aggie, who has mental retardation, Julie develops compassion, which she is encouraged to act upon in a letter from Uncle Haskell after Aggie's death. In his letter, Uncle Haskell says, "I'll say to my sad-faced little Julie: Guilt feelings will do nothing for either you or the Kilpin child. But your compassion as you grow into womanhood may well become immortality for the girl you call Aggie" (p. 64).

Several characters without disabilities experienced an attitude change at some point in the book toward the character with a disability. This acceptance is apparent with Queer Person in *Queer Person*, Janus in *The Wheel on the School*, and Aggie in *Up a Road Slowly*. At the beginning of *Queer Person*, Queer Person is described as “controlled by a black spirit” (p. 5) and as “wrong in its head” (p. 8). By the end of *Queer Person*, however, after Queer Person becomes a respected member of the tribe, it is said of him, “And to think! Humph! They called him an idiot!” (p. 336). In reference to Janus, who has an orthopedic impairment in *The Wheel on the School*, one of the children says, “I can’t think of anything much more useless than a wagon without wheels, except maybe a man without legs” (p. 59). Later, however, the children’s opinion of Janus changed as they realized, “He wasn’t a fearsome ogre to be hated and outwitted . . . Janus had become important . . . he had become a friend!” (p. 77). Throughout most of *Up a Road Slowly*, Julie is ruthless toward Aggie, and even cancels her own birthday party because her aunt requires her to invite Aggie. Julie describes Aggie in this way,

Aggie was a mistreated, undernourished, and retarded girl . . . she hardly recognized a dozen words in the primer . . . she would stand beside my aunt’s desk floundering through a page that the youngest child in the room could have read with ease, and after each mistake, looking around the room to grin and smirk as if her failures were evidences of some bit of cleverness on her part. It was dreadful to watch her; I averted my eyes from Aggie whenever possible. But it was not Aggie’s retardedness that made her a pariah among us; it was the fact that she stank to high heaven. . . . I loathed poor Aggie, who seemed to have a perfect gift for making herself repulsive. (pp. 17–18)

Julie’s aversion to Aggie is softened after Aggie’s death, as illustrated by Julie’s comment, “It had been the filth and the stench and the silly grimaces, the garbled speech and the

stupid responses that had made Aggie revolting. And now she was pretty” (p. 61). Julie continues by saying, “It seemed such a terrible waste—ugliness all one’s life, and something pretty discovered only after one was dead” (p. 61).

For the personal portrayal section, 55% ( $n = 11$ ) of the books received an acceptable rating. This section examined how accurately and realistically the characters with disabilities were portrayed; how developed and credible the characters with disabilities were portrayed; how the abilities, interests, and strengths of the character with disabilities were portrayed; how characters with disabilities were portrayed in comparison to characters without disabilities; and how language was used to describe characters with disabilities and the disabilities themselves.

Overall, some books (40%;  $n = 8$ ) in this sample used language that was appropriate according to the standards of their time period as well as today’s standards. Most books (60%;  $n = 12$ ), however, used language that would not be acceptable by the standards of any time period and are considered particularly insensitive when judged by today’s standards.

Unacceptable references to characters with disabilities included *queer person, idiot, wrong in its head, dumb, possessed, handicapped, useless, cripple, lame, lamiter, ruined, numps, crookshanks, retarded, and retard*. Many of these references promote the idea that the disability defines the person or that the person with the disability is somehow insufficient or inadequate.

One of the sections on the rating scale evaluated the impact of the disability on the plot. For this section, 80% of the books ( $n = 16$ ) received an acceptable rating. This portion of the rating scale examined how the characters with disabilities grow, learn, change, and develop. It also determined the focus of the book, whether it was to: (a) teach about a disability, (b) include a character with a disability whose presence minimally impacts the story, (c) include a character with a disability whose presence and disability impacts the story, or (d) include a character with



a disability whose presence impacts the story, but the disability is irrelevant. For many of the books (55%;  $n = 11$ ), the purpose was to include a character with a disability whose presence and disability impacted the story. Examples of books with this purpose include *Up a Road Slowly*, in which Aggie has mental retardation and is rejected by her peers, and *The Wheel on the School*, in which Janus has an orthopedic impairment and helps the school children find a wagon wheel to give storks a place to nest. For others, the purpose was to include a character with a disability whose presence minimally impacted the story (35%;  $n = 7$ ). Examples of books with this purpose include *Jane's Island*, in which Dr. Fritz von Bergan has an orthopedic impairment, and *The Witch of Blackbird Pond*, in which Mercy has an orthopedic impairment. The purpose of other books was to include a character with a disability whose presence impacted the story, but the disability was irrelevant (10%;  $n = 2$ ). Examples of books with this purpose include *The Jazz Man*, in which Zeke has an orthopedic impairment, and *Johnny Tremain*, in which Johnny has an orthopedic impairment. This section also noted whether or not additional information was provided to help the reader learn more about the disability. None of the books in this sample provided additional information for the reader.

Another section of the rating scale evaluated the impact of the setting on the disability. For this section, 100% of the books ( $n = 20$ ) received an acceptable rating. This portion of the rating scale identified the setting, examined how the attitudes and practices portrayed were congruent with the attitudes and practices for those with disabilities during that era, and considered how the place of the story affected the life of the characters with disabilities. The majority of the books (80%;  $n = 16$ ) took place in the United States (65%;  $n = 13$ ) or England (15%;  $n = 3$ ). The remainder of the books took place in Holland, Scotland, Morocco, and an

undisclosed village. Time periods ranged from the year 400 to the early 1970s, but the majority (65%;  $n = 13$ ) of the books were set sometime between 1870 and 1970.

For the point of view section, 100% of the books ( $n = 20$ ) received an acceptable rating. This section identified whether the point of view was from a character with the disability or a character without a disability and whether or not it was realistic. In this sample, the books were written and told from the point of view of either a narrator (75%;  $n = 15$ ), including *The Hidden Treasure of Glaston*, *The Door in the Wall*, and *The Wheel on the School*, or a character without a disability (25%;  $n = 5$ ), including *The Witch of Blackbird Pond*, which was told from Kit's point of view, and *Up a Road Slowly*, which was told from Julie's point of view.

Though not measured by a specific section of the rating scale, a common theme throughout this sample of books seemed to be that of overcoming difficulties. The disability was often presented as an obstacle that helped the character develop other important abilities and attributes. For example, Mary, who is blind in the *Little House on the Prairie* series, had the opportunity to leave home and receive a college education at a school for the blind. Queer Person in *Queer Person*, Agba in *King of the Wind*, and Robin in *The Door in the Wall* all became skilled in their various endeavors in spite of, or perhaps because of, their disabilities. Damos, though blind in *The White Stag*, was compensated by other senses and abilities and was revered as a prophet. Some characters, including Dr. Fritz von Bergan in *Jane's Island*, Johnny in *Johnny Tremain*, and Tall Boy in *Singing Down the Moon*, seemed to develop humility and empathy as a result of their disabilities. And several characters, including Sir Walter Scott in *Young Walter Scott*, Mary in the *Little House on the Prairie* series, Robin in *The Door in the Wall*, Janus in *The Wheel on the School*, Marly's father in *Miracles on Maple Hill*, Mercy in *The Witch of Blackbird Pond*, and Charlie in *The Summer of the Swans*, possessed or developed an

optimistic perspective that one's situation does not dictate happiness, and that positive attitude came seemingly in relation to their disabilities. As Robin's father told him in *The Door in the Wall*, "None of us is perfect. It is better to have crooked legs than a crooked spirit. We can only do the best we can with what we have. That, after all, is the measure of success: what we do with what we have" (p. 76).

Overall, this theme of overcoming difficulties—of the ability to succeed despite some obstacle—is an important and inspiring message to send, but the way that message was communicated was not always ideal, particularly when considering books for use in bibliotherapy. For example, three characters acquired their disability in the book, including Johnny in *Johnny Tremain*, Eddie in *Our Eddie*, and Tall Boy in *Sing Down the Moon*. While acquiring a disability promoted positive growth and development for the character, the manner in which the disability was acquired potentially communicated the idea that disabilities are punishing, or to "teach him a lesson." The theme of overcoming was also not ideal for use in bibliotherapy as two characters experienced miraculous cures of their disabilities. When a large ball of wax fell out of Queer Person's ear in *Queer Person*, he was miraculously cured of multiple disabilities (hearing impairment and speech impairment). Once this healing occurred, Queer Person reentered society and even won the affection of the chieftain's daughter. Hugh, in *The Hidden Treasure of Glaston*, experienced a miraculous healing of his orthopedic impairment in the presence of the Holy Grail. As a result of this miracle, Hugh is referred to in this way: "Tis thine own Hugh, no longer a cripple, but sturdy and whole and free" (p. 323). This communicates the idea that the character was somehow insufficient or inadequate until he was "relieved" of his disability.

**Research Question #4: How are social relationships of characters with disabilities portrayed?**

A section of the rating scale was dedicated to examining social interactions. For the social interactions section, 50% ( $n = 10$ ) of the books received an acceptable rating. This section examined how characters with disabilities engage in reciprocal relationships, how characters with disabilities are accepted, how characters without disabilities empathize with characters with disabilities, how characters with disabilities contribute positively to the social growth of characters without disabilities, how characters with disabilities are respected, and how various relationships between characters with disabilities and others are portrayed.

A common occurrence in the books (40%;  $n = 8$ ) was the isolation of the character with a disability. This was obvious in *Queer Person*, when Queer Person was on the outskirts of the tribe until he was cured of multiple disabilities (hearing impairment and speech impairment) and in *King of the Wind*, when Agba spent the majority of his time wandering, in jail, or with his horse. Other examples of isolation are found with Janus in *The Wheel on the School*, Aggie in *Up a Road Slowly*, and Zeke in *The Jazz Man*. Each of these characters was represented in the books as spending most of his or her time alone without social interaction.

Not all of the characters with disabilities in this sample were portrayed as having a sibling relationship. Of those that had a sibling relationship (30%;  $n = 6$ ), 100% received an acceptable rating. This section examined how siblings of the characters with disabilities experience a wide range of emotions, how siblings of the characters with disabilities have opportunities for growth that are not typical for siblings of children without disabilities, how the sibling relationship is reciprocal, how siblings are given household responsibilities, and how the siblings appear aware of the nature of the disabilities and their effects on the characters with

disabilities. Examples of sibling relationships include Mary and her sister Laura in the *Little House on the Prairie* series, Eddie and his sister Sybil in *Our Eddie*, and Charlie and his sister Sara in *The Summer of the Swans*.

**Research Question #5: What (if any) exemplary practices are featured for characters with disabilities?**

For the exemplary practices section, 70% ( $n = 14$ ) of the books received an acceptable rating. This section examined how characters with disabilities participate in full citizenship opportunities; how characters with disabilities receive services appropriate for their age, skill level, and interests; how valued occupations for characters with disabilities are available; and how the self-determination of characters with disabilities is portrayed.

Notable examples of exemplary practices include the following: Mary goes to college and learns how to read Braille in the *Little House on the Prairie* series; Dr. Fritz Von Bergan is a distinguished scientist in *Jane's Island*; Mercy falls in love with and ends up engaged to John Holbrook in *The Witch of Blackbird Pond*; and Hugh from *The Hidden Treasure of Glaston*, Robin from *The Door in the Wall*, and Janus from *The Wheel on the School* all fulfill their missions despite their orthopedic impairments. Each of these examples promotes the idea that individuals with disabilities should not be defined or limited by their disabilities.

Overall average ratings were calculated for personal portrayal, exemplary practices, and social interactions. These ratings were compared for each book and for each disability portrayed. Ratings were considered acceptable if they were 2.0 or above, indicating neutral or positive. The ratings for the books in this sample were generally positive and followed no specific trend across time. This information is represented in Figure 1. Visual impairment ( $n = 4$ ) and other health impairment ( $n = 1$ ) received the highest overall average ratings (2.6 and 2.3, respectively).

Multiple disabilities ( $n = 1$ ) and speech or language impairment ( $n = 1$ ) received the lowest overall average ratings (both 1.7). This information is represented in Figure 2.

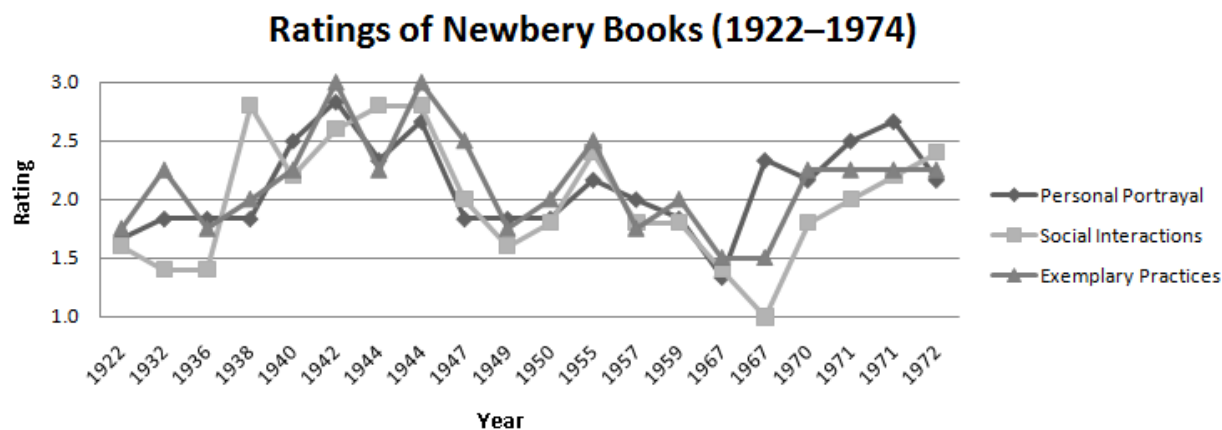


Figure 1. Personal portrayal, exemplary practices, and social interactions ratings over time.

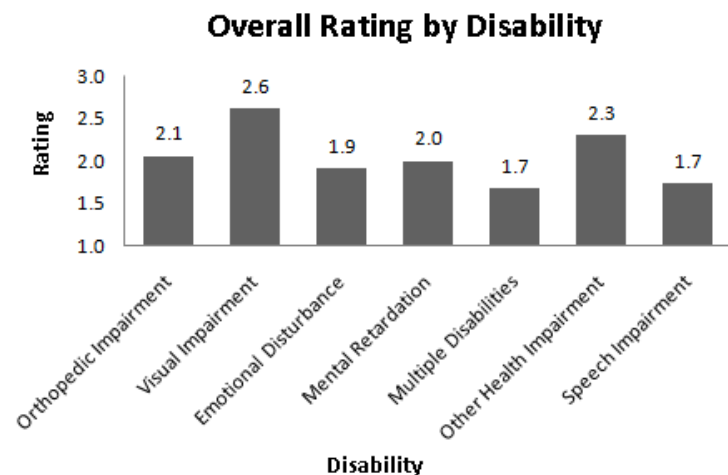


Figure 2. Overall average ratings of personal portrayal, exemplary practices, and social interactions of Newbery characters by disability.

## Discussion

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the portrayal of characters with disabilities in Newbery books between 1922 and 1974. In conjunction with that procedural purpose, the practical purpose of this study was to identify books featuring characters with disabilities that are appropriate for bibliotherapy to teach in school settings about disabilities. The purpose of

bibliotherapy in schools is (a) to educate, (b) to empower students so they feel and act capable, and (c) to enhance the classroom experience by promoting learning and mutual benefit from individual differences (Riordan et al., 1996). It is important to identify and select books that achieve this purpose and that accurately and positively portray characters with disabilities (Dyches, Prater, & Jenson, 2006). In selecting books for the primary purpose of teaching about disabilities, it is important that the character matters in the story, the disability matters in the story, and a lesson is taught in the story.

### **Reflections on Findings**

While recommendations are essential for the practical purpose of this study, overall trends and themes of this sample are also interesting and informational elements to consider. These trends and themes provide an avenue to increase this study's application to the "here and now." In other words, though books in this sample were written years ago, the lessons that they teach still apply. Additionally, while it is necessary to consider the current application and usefulness of the books in this sample, it is also valuable to look ahead and determine future opportunities for research.

**Newbery characters and U.S. school population.** Discrepancies were noted when comparing Newbery characters to the U.S. public school population. In other words, the specific types of disabilities of students in public schools today are not what are portrayed in the Newbery books between 1922 and 1974. In Newbery books between 1922 and 1974, the top four disabilities represented included orthopedic impairment (43%), visual impairment (19%), emotional disturbance (14%), and mental retardation (9%). In schools, however, the top four disabilities represented include specific learning disability (39%), speech or language impairment (22%), other health impairment (10%), and mental retardation (8%). In Newbery

books between 1922 and 1974, other represented disabilities included multiple disabilities, other health impairment, and speech or language impairment. This leaves six of the disability categories (autism, deaf-blindness, developmental delay, hearing impairment, specific learning disability, and traumatic brain injury) unrepresented in Newbery books prior to 1975.

Additionally, the ethnic representation of characters with disabilities in Newbery books between 1922 and 1974 does not compare to the ethnic representation of students who receive special education services in schools. Caucasian and Native American characters with disabilities in Newbery books were overrepresented while Black characters were slightly underrepresented, and Hispanic and Asian/Pacific Islander characters with disabilities were not represented at all.

**Trends and themes.** Overall, the ratings of characters with disabilities were generally positive and followed no specific trend across time. Common themes that ran across the sample in relation to disabilities included overcoming, inspiring, and accepting. In many of the books, the disability was portrayed as an obstacle that the character was required to overcome. In the process of overcoming, then, the disability seemed to become a stepping stone to bring the character to where he or she needed to be. Additionally, characters with disabilities were often portrayed as catalysts to facilitate and inspire other characters' growth and learning. Characters without disabilities often learned from and appreciated the character with a disability making the best of his or her difficult situation. Finally, some characters without disabilities experienced a change in attitude toward the character with a disability as they spent time interacting and learning more about the person and stopped focusing on the disability.

### **Limitations**

A few limitations to this study should be noted. First, results of the study may be skewed due to the repeated representation of a single character. Mary, who is blind, appeared in three



different books in this sample, including *By the Shores of Silver Lake*, *Little Town on the Prairie*, and *These Happy Golden Years*. Her characterization was evaluated three times, and her disability (visual impairment), gender (female), and ethnicity (Caucasian) were counted three times. With such a small sample of Newbery books featuring characters with disabilities ( $n = 20$ ), the impact of Mary's repeated characterization skews the overall results of the sample.

Second, it is possible that not all characters with disabilities were identified. This could have been the case if the character with the disability was not included in the sources consulted by the researchers. To limit this possibility, the researchers consulted multiple sources in order to identify characters with disabilities, but some characters still may have been missed.

Third, there were areas of possible bias in determining which characters with disabilities were eligible for inclusion in the study. In order to be included in the study, the character's disability needed to be present to an extent that would warrant special education or related services according to IDEA standards. This limitation was addressed by consulting IDEA definitions of each disability as well as consulting with professionals who are knowledgeable in the field of special education.

Finally, each book was judged according to today's standards. For this reason, even if the book used language that was appropriate for the time period, if language was not appropriate according to today's standards, the book received a lower rating. (An example of this is the word *idiot* which was not always considered offensive but is considered offensive today.) One modern standard that guides how we refer to individuals with disabilities today is people-first language, where individuals with disabilities are referred to first as individuals, and their disability is referred to when necessary (Blaska, 1993). For example, instead of a "disabled adolescent," an individual is referred to as an "adolescent with a disability." Furthermore,

adjectives are not to be used as nouns, so instead of calling individuals “the retarded,” they would be referred to as “individuals who have mental retardation” (Blaska, 1993; Yell, 2006). Though the books may have featured language and practices that were considered appropriate according to the standards and customs of their time, when judged according to today’s standards, the portrayal may have been considered insensitive. These books can be useful, however, to facilitate discussion concerning the historical treatment of individuals with disabilities and how attitudes and perceptions of individuals with disabilities have changed.

### **Future Research**

Given that Newbery books between 1922 and 2009 have been evaluated for their portrayal of characters with disabilities, future research can be conducted to compare and contrast the two parts of the study (1922–1974 and 1975–2009). This research could examine the portrayal of characters with disabilities over time and how language and customs have changed in relation to the depiction of individuals with disabilities.

An evaluation of the portrayal of characters with disabilities in Caldecott books up to year 2005 has been completed (Dyches et al., 2006). Future research can be conducted to compare Newbery books to Caldecott books. Since Newbery books are typically chapter books for children and Caldecott books are picture books for younger children, this research could explore how disabilities are depicted for audiences of different ages. Additionally, the analyses of Newbery and Caldecott books can provide information to researchers on which books are best for conducting bibliotherapy regarding disabilities. The next step would be to evaluate the effectiveness of using these books to teach about disabilities through bibliotherapy. Future research can also be done to compare Newbery books to other award-winning books, including

the Boston Globe-Horn Book Award or the American Library Association Notable Books for Children Award.

### **Practical Implications**

Results from this study are important to discriminate which books are appropriate for use in bibliotherapy in school settings. These results, combined with the results from the 1975–2009 analysis, can be utilized to compile a guide for teachers and other school personnel who need to be aware of appropriate literature that teaches about disabilities. In books that are appropriate for use in bibliotherapy to teach about disabilities, it is important that the character matters in the story, the disability matters in the story, and a lesson is taught in the story.

Overall, the earlier Newbery books (1922–1974) would not be recommended for bibliotherapy to teach about disabilities, although some books would be recommended with caution. Such cautioned recommendations include *The Wheel on the School*, *Up a Road Slowly*, and *The Summer of the Swans*. When using these three books to teach about disabilities, educators are encouraged to monitor and guide the discussion. If students are not given guidance, they may misinterpret the messages that are being communicated in these books. Some language and practices that are portrayed in these books are not completely positive toward characters with disabilities, but the overall messages are positive and could potentially facilitate healthy discussion about individuals with disabilities and disabilities in general.

Though the rest of the books in the sample received generally positive ratings, they do not emphasize the disabilities or the characters with disabilities enough to actually teach about disabilities. These books, however, would be recommended for general use in schools. In conjunction with their general use in school settings, many books could generate appropriate side discussions about disabilities, including *By the Shores of Silver Lake*, *Little Town on the Prairie*,

*Johnny Tremain, The Hidden Treasure of Glaston, King of the Wind, and Our Eddie.*

Additionally, some books, including *Queer Person* and *Young Walter Scott*, would be recommended to teach historically about the portrayal of disabilities and to compare to current portrayals and practices. Such a historical discussion may help students recognize developments and positive changes that have occurred in society over the past century.

If an educator's purpose is primarily to teach about disabilities, he or she would be encouraged to select from the sample of Newbery books featuring characters with disabilities that were published between 1975 and 2009. Books from that sample seem to more specifically and purposely teach about disabilities. Additionally, many of the books from that sample include characters with disabilities where the character matters in the story, the disability matters in the story, and a lesson is taught in the story. Each of these factors is essential when the primary focus is to teach about disabilities. Put simply, if an educator is aiming to teach about disabilities, he or she should use Newbery books published between 1975 and 2009 before using Newbery books published between 1922 and 1974.

## **Conclusion**

Teachers and other school personnel need various methods to target their students' unique individual needs. One such method is bibliotherapy, which can be particularly useful to teach about disabilities. By identifying with characters with disabilities, as well as learning from their unique experiences, students with disabilities can understand themselves and develop life skills to work through their own challenges, and students without disabilities can increase their understanding, empathy, and acceptance of those with disabilities. With awareness of appropriate literature, educators are better equipped to educate and empower students and to enhance the classroom experience (Riordan et al., 1996), which is what bibliotherapy is all about.

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## **Appendix A: Literature Review**

### **Bibliotherapy**

Bibliotherapy has many definitions that range from the complex to the simple.

Definitions cited in the literature include the following: Bibliotherapy is (a) “the process by which teachers, as informed decision-makers, select appropriate reading materials and match them to the needs of individual students to assist in the development of self-awareness, problem-solving skills, perspective-taking, and understanding of problems” (Johnson, Wan, Templeton, Graham, & Sattler, 2000, p. 6); (b) “an attempt to help young people understand themselves and cope with problems by providing literature relevant to their personal situations and developmental needs at appropriate times” (Hébert & Kent, 2000, p. 2); (c) “the guided reading of written materials in gaining understanding or solving problems relevant to a person’s therapeutic needs” (Riordan & Wilson, 1989, p. 506); (d) “the use of reading to produce affective change and to promote personality growth and development” (Lenkowsky, 1987, p. 123); (e) “connecting literature to the emotions of the reader for therapeutic purposes” (Johnson et al., 2000, p. 5); (f) “the use of books to help solve problems” (Aiex, 1993, p. 1); and (g) “addressing problems through books” (Pardeck, 1995, p. 191).

Based upon these definitions, bibliotherapy is an interactive process between an individual and a piece of literature that promotes healing, comfort, problem solving, development, growth, change, or understanding through reading. To simplify further, Berns (2003) noted the common thread running throughout the multitude of definitions is the use of reading materials to produce affective or behavioral change.

The power associated with reading books is nothing new. Evidences of bibliotherapy can be traced back to ancient Greece, where literature was used to treat those with mental illness



(Cook et al., 2006; Johnson et al., 2000; Riordan, Mullis, & Nuchow, 1996). Exhibiting their regard for the healing power of books, the ancient Greeks inscribed a statement above the door of their library in Thebes: “The medicine chest of the soul” (Jones, 2006). Across the Mediterranean Sea in Egypt, the Alexandrians of 300 BC seemed to have the same idea, as an epigraph on their library read, “Medicine for the mind” (Heath, Sheen, Leavy, Young, & Money, 2005; Jack & Ronan, 2008). Other ancient buildings’ inscriptions boasted the library as “the healing place for the soul” and the library’s contents as “food for the soul” (Riordan & Wilson, 1989). Indeed, the potential influence of the written word has been recognized since early times.

Though origins of bibliotherapy date back to as early as 300 BC, the practice did not acquire its name until 1916, when Reverend Samuel McChord Crothers published an article in the *Atlantic Monthly* (Jack & Ronan, 2008; Jones, 2006; Myracle, 1995; Rubin, 1979). In his article, Crothers outlined a “bibliotherapeutic process,” coining the term “bibliotherapy,” that prescribed reading books to heal certain emotional ailments, including depression (Jack & Ronan, 2008).

### **The Why of Bibliotherapy: Purposes and Benefits**

Riordan, Mullis, and Nuchow (1996) outlined the purposes of the bibliotherapeutic process in terms of six E’s: (a) to *educate* by filling in basic knowledge and skill gaps, (b) to *encourage* through the reading of inspirational and motivational materials, (c) to *empower* through reading about goal formation and attainment, (d) to *enlighten* by reading materials which increase awareness about self and others, (e) to *engage* the client with the social world through fiction and other social mentoring materials, and (f) to *enhance* by reinforcing specific points and lifestyle changes being addressed in therapy. Education, encouragement, empowerment,

enlightenment, engagement, and enhancement (Riordan et al., 1996) are only the beginning of the potential benefits and advantages associated with bibliotherapy. According to Alston (1978),

For information, instruction, inspiration, understanding, and entertainment, an individual need not rely only upon his own experience nor upon that of those immediately around him. . . . In the world of literature there is plenty to meet every need and taste. (p. 166)

In other words, bibliotherapy can be adapted to the needs of each individual. Because books cover a vast array of topics, individuals are generally able to find literature that can relate to their personal situations or feelings. The diversity and availability of relevant literature makes bibliotherapy an accessible, and ultimately personalized, technique.

Bibliotherapy has the potential to become particularly personal because it is a noninvasive method of therapy that minimizes defensiveness (Sullivan & Strang, 2002). With bibliotherapy, individuals are given a channel through which they can discuss the problems and feelings of the characters, similar to their own, without actually referring to the problems and feelings as their own. This provides safe distance through which individuals can express their difficulties. This also increases the likelihood that individuals will open up and share (Alston, 1978; Cook et al., 2006; Pehrsson & McMillen, 2005; Rubin, 1979).

In discussing their problems, reading books may help individuals to acquire language and ideas to communicate (Alston, 1978). Individuals can gain a better understanding of themselves (Abdullah, 2002; Ford, 2000; Iaquina & Hipsky, 2006), their personal characteristics (Gladding & Gladding, 1991), and their reactions to antecedents and triggers (Cook et al., 2006). Such an understanding can promote greater self-awareness and personality growth and development (Lenkowsky, 1987) and can reduce feelings of anxiety, depression, isolation, and stress (Berns, 2003; Cook et al., 2006; Pehrsson & McMillen, 2005). Additionally, bibliotherapy can improve

reading fluency and comprehension (Friedman & Cataldo, 2002) and facilitate a love of literature in general and reading in particular (Abdullah, 2002; Gladding & Gladding, 1991).

### **The When of Bibliotherapy: Change and Development**

“From didacticism to sentimentality to realism, perhaps it can be said that . . . literature has finally grown up” (Myracle, 1995, p. 36). According to Myracle (1995), children’s and young adult literature began by taking a didactic approach, explicitly instructing readers to steer clear of temptation. From didacticism, literature took a turn toward sentimentality, where books portrayed happy endings for characters that are honest, hardworking, and persistent. Then literature moved toward realism. During this transition, literature started presenting situations where things do not always end well. This evolution is necessary and timely as children and adolescents are growing up in a world that is increasingly troubled (Johnson et al., 2000). It is important for children and adolescents to have access to books that are realistic and not so geared toward the “happily ever after,” because they are well aware that the “happily ever after” does not always happen (Heath et al., 2005; Pardeck, 1994). Indeed, literature seems to be doing a better job of telling it like it is, and in that sense, children’s and young adult literature has “finally grown up” (Myracle, 1995, p. 36).

Since its first use in the 1930s, bibliotherapy took a reactive stance—presenting the written material, to be read independently, and inviting positive or negative reactions from readers (Abdullah, 2002; Riordan et al., 1996). While the bibliotherapeutic process is still inherently reactive, meaning it is essential that readers have something relevant to react to (Gladding & Gladding, 1991), more recent approaches assume that the process is more of an interactive one (Abdullah, 2002; Hynes & Hynes-Berry, 1986; Palmer, Biller, Rancourt, & Teets, 1997; Riordan et al., 1996).

## **The How of Bibliotherapy: Process and Components**

Bibliotherapy is inherently interactive because it involves a dynamic connection of an individual to literature (Hynes & Hynes-Berry, 1986). But bibliotherapy becomes especially interactive when the reader is encouraged to record thoughts and feelings in workbooks or journals, when the reader is guided by a facilitator to recognize parallels, or when multiple individuals experiencing similar problems read the same book (Riordan et al., 1996; Berns, 2003). Sharing a book provides a link between individuals, a sense of unity, and a common frame of reference (Berns, 2003). Such a group approach also facilitates opportunities for group discussion, role-playing, art, creative writing, letter writing, and journaling (Abdullah, 2002; Andrews, 1998; Myers, 1998; Palmer et al., Pardeck, 1995; Sridhar & Vaughn, 2000).

Gladding (1992) outlined the process of bibliotherapy in counseling settings as follows: First, readers make significant discoveries about themselves. Second, readers experience a feeling of relief and begin to experience resolution of their problems. Third, readers begin to learn about themselves, and they recognize their problems as universal, thus connecting them with others. And finally, readers are equipped to take more positive approaches toward coping and problem solving using the insights that they gained from reading. Gladding's sequence is analogous to identification, catharsis, and insight—the three main components of bibliotherapy (Lenkowsky, 1987).

Identification, or universalization, involves identifying and connecting with the character and/or the events that take place in the story (Berns, 2003; Pehrsson & McMillen, 2005; Sridhar & Vaughn, 2000). Connecting with the characters or events of the story can help readers review elements of their own experience and possibly view them in a new way (Olsen, 1975). Such identification often leads to catharsis, or abreaction, which occurs when the reader follows the

character through to a challenge's resolution (Stamps, 2003). This process invites the reader to become emotionally involved in the story and can promote a release of tension and an infusion of hope (Berns, 2003; Lenkowsky, 1987). Such emotional involvement gives place for insight, or integration, which occurs when a reader becomes aware that the problem he or she is experiencing is like that of the character (Lenkowsky, 1987; Pehrsson & McMillen, 2005). The reader, perhaps with help from a guide or group facilitator, can then apply the character's experience to his or her own life (Stamps, 2003) and address personal problems by recognizing possible solutions identified during reading (Berns, 2003).

### **The What of Bibliotherapy: Types and Targets**

Two types of bibliotherapy have been identified and discussed in the literature: clinical and developmental. Clinical bibliotherapy couples the use of literature with psychotherapeutic methods and helps individuals cope with emotional disturbances, mental illness, or changes in their lives (Hébert & Kent, 2000; Pehrsson, Allen, Folger, McMillen, & Lowe, 2007; Pardeck, 1994; Jack & Ronan, 2008). Developmental bibliotherapy, on the other hand, helps essentially healthy populations of children and adolescents to proceed through regular development (Hébert & Kent, 2000; Pehrsson & McMillen, 2005; Jack & Ronan, 2008). This type of bibliotherapy is commonly used in educational settings (Pehrsson et al., 2007) and is designed to be a proactive, anticipatory method of facilitating approaches and solutions to challenging issues, such as puberty and hormonal changes, peer pressure, stress management, and bullying, before they actually occur (Abdullah, 2002; Cook et al., 2006; Sullivan & Strang, 2002).

### **The Where of Bibliotherapy: Classrooms and School Settings**

In today's classrooms, individual students face a multitude of difficulties, and many of these difficulties forge a disconnect between students and their schooling (Pardeck, 1995).

Societal problems have expanded in both quantity and intensity, and in turn, the lives of children in society have become increasingly complex (Johnson et al., 2000). Teachers, consequently, are presented with a number of students in their classrooms with each student facing a number of difficulties, and they are responsible not only for the educational needs of their students, but for their unique emotional and social concerns as well (Pardeck, 1995). Additionally, schools are charged with the responsibility of helping students learn tolerance and appreciation of individual differences (Rasinski & Padak, 1990). Unfortunately, financial resources are often limited, making it difficult to provide for the needs of each individual student (Marrs, 1995). With federal laws demanding higher proficiency and accountability in the teaching profession, it is important that school personnel find approaches that are accessible, affordable, and relevant to each student's unique needs (Cook et al., 2006; Pehrsson & McMillen, 2005).

Bibliotherapy can be used to address a myriad of childhood and adolescent issues. The purpose of bibliotherapy in the schools is three-fold: (a) to educate, (b) to empower, and (c) to enhance the classroom experience (Riordan et al., 1996). It has also been suggested that bibliotherapy can be used to teach about disabilities. When using bibliotherapy for the purposes of teaching about disabilities, students need to be taught using materials and activities that accurately and positively portray disabilities (Dyches et al., 2006). As appropriate materials and activities are selected, it increases the likelihood that students will feel and act capable and learn and mutually benefit from individual differences (Lenkowsky, 1987; Iaquina & Hipsky, 2006; Brenna, 2008; Pehrsson & McMillen, 2005).

### **Individuals with Disabilities Education Act**

In school settings, students are aware of disabilities, whether personally experiencing a disabling condition, interacting with someone who has a disability, or at very least, knowing of

individuals with disabilities. According to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), disabilities warranting special services in education are identified in one of 13 categories: autism, deaf-blindness, developmental delay, emotional disturbance, hearing impairment, mental retardation, multiple disabilities, orthopedic impairment, other health impairment, specific learning disability, speech or language impairment, traumatic brain injury, and visual impairment. Since the passing of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, as IDEA was originally named, in 1975, students with disabilities between the ages of 3 and 21 have been guaranteed a free and appropriate public education (Jacob & Hartshorne, 2007; Yell, 2006). Students with disabilities are also recommended to attend school in the least-restrictive environment appropriate for their individual needs. This means that to the maximum extent possible and appropriate, students with disabilities should be educated in general education settings (Jacob & Hartshorne, 2007; Yell, 2006). For many students, the least-restrictive environment is a general education classroom. Additionally, individuals with disabilities are to be referred to using people-first language (Jacob & Hartshorne, 2007; Yell, 2006).

**People-first language.** Both the words that people speak and the ordering in which those words are spoken influence the impressions and imagery that are formed. The philosophy of people-first language is that people with disabilities are referred to first as individuals, and their disability is referred to when necessary (Blaska, 1993). Instead of a “disabled adolescent,” an individual is referred to as an “adolescent with a disability.” Furthermore, adjectives are not to be used as nouns, so instead of calling individuals “the retarded,” they would be referred to as “individuals who have mental retardation” (Blaska, 1993; Yell, 2006). Words suggesting that an individual is sick or dependent are avoided, including “suffers from,” “is a victim of,” “is crippled by,” or “is afflicted with” (Blaska, 1993).

## **Forming Accurate Images**

Practicing bibliotherapy with carefully selected books can give students a more accurate and complete portrayal of individuals with disabilities, as opposed to the often inaccurate and incomplete image depicted by the media (Dyches et al., 2006). Unfortunately, there seems to be a dearth of children's and young adult literature titles that illuminate characters with disabilities in anything beyond a secondary position. "In books, as in society, people with challenges have been passed over for the role of hero in favor of someone whom popular culture perceives as more able to get the job done" (Brenna, 2008, p. 100). This absence of characters with special needs in literature perhaps contributes to the marginalization and stereotyping of individuals with disabilities (Brenna, 2008).

**Inaccurate images and stereotypes.** Common stereotypes include the idea that individuals with disabilities are generally not capable, productive, persistent, or independent; have communication difficulties; lack a sense of humor; are a burden on society; or are victims doomed to an unsatisfying life (Biklen & Bogdan, 1977; Brenna, 2008; Lynch & Thomas, 1999; Nelson, 2000). Another common misconception is apparent when individuals with disabilities are treated as though their disability is all-encompassing. This is demonstrated when "someone speaks louder to a new acquaintance in a wheelchair, assuming that somehow because they are on wheels their hearing is also affected" (Brenna, 2008, p. 100). Providing literature that has been evaluated and recommended for its portrayal of characters with disabilities can be a wise approach in the classroom, as it can potentially provide a more appropriate, accurate, and complete image of individuals with disabilities. Because students with and without disabilities are interacting in today's classrooms on a daily basis, children and adolescents need structured



opportunities to learn about disabilities. For this purpose, bibliotherapy can be a useful teaching tool in the classroom. According to Brenna (2008),

There is no time better than the present for utilizing books which sensitively depict characters with special needs, educating children with typical needs toward a fuller understanding of others who share their classrooms and communities, and allowing children who have exceptionalities to see characters with similar challenges to themselves in print—something we hope all young readers will experience, whether they have special needs or not. (p. 102)

### **The Who of Bibliotherapy: Students with and without Disabilities**

All students, whether or not they have a disability, can benefit from bibliotherapy that teaches about disabilities. Discussions about disabilities that are facilitated through bibliotherapy can help all students to become more accepting and appreciative of individual differences (Jaquinta & Hipsky, 2006) and can encourage empathy (Pehrsson & McMillen, 2005). Bibliotherapy can also open opportunities for discussion of individual experiences, from which all students can learn and benefit.

**Students with disabilities.** Through bibliotherapy, students with disabilities can benefit from identifying with literary characters who share similar challenges because it helps them recognize that they are not alone. This is essential, as young people often feel alone when experiencing a specific problem (Forgan, 2002). As their sense of isolation and loneliness decreases, their self-efficacy increases (Lenkowsky, 1987) and they gain the courage to face their own difficulties (Alston, 1978).

Reading about a character with similar difficulties may also facilitate problem solving (Berns, 2003; Forgan, 2002; Lenkowsky, 1987; Myracle, 1995; Pehrsson & McMillen, 2005;

Sridhar & Vaughn, 2000). Students with disabilities often depend on their teachers or parents to solve their problems because they have not learned how to do so independently. Reading about characters with disabilities, however, may help generate independence and confidence toward problem solving (Berns, 2003; Forgan, 2002), as students can learn vicariously how to approach their own difficulties by reflecting upon how characters in a book approach their difficulties (Hébert & Kent, 2000). Additionally, identification with characters similar to themselves may help students with disabilities acquire coping skills, release emotions, gain new insights and directions in life, learn decision-making skills, develop self-esteem, meet unique social and personal needs, increase interpersonal competence, and discover new ways of interacting with peers and adults (Cook, Earles-Vollrath, & Ganz, 2006; Friedman & Cataldo, 2002; Gladding & Gladding, 1991; Lenkowsky, 1987; Pardeck, 1991; Pehrsson & McMillen, 2005; Stamps, 2003).

**Students without disabilities.** Students without disabilities can also benefit from reading books that include characters with disabilities. Providing an introduction to the different types of disabilities that may be present in the classroom, school, or community can help students to become less fearful and more accepting and appreciative of individual differences (Jaquinta & Hipsky, 2006) and to develop an empathetic understanding of others (Pehrsson & McMillen, 2005).

### **Criteria for Selecting Appropriate Literature**

When evaluating and selecting appropriate literature, the story must be realistic, empathetic, and sensitive to the child with the disability, thereby encouraging a positive attitude (Derman-Sparks, 1993). Other elements to consider include multidimensional, believable, nonstereotyped characters (Andrews, 1998; O'Sullivan, 2004); problems and solutions that are realistic and feasible; and a focus on what characters *can* do, not on what they *cannot* do (Heath

et al., 2005). Maich and Kean (2004) suggest answering the following questions: (a) Is the story simple, clear, brief, non-repetitious, and believable? (b) Is it at an appropriate reading level and developmental level? (c) Does the story fit with relevant feelings, needs, interests, and goals? (d) Does it demonstrate cultural diversity, gender inclusivity, and sensitivity to aggression? (e) Do characters show coping skills? and (f) Does the problem situation show resolution?

When selecting literature to be used for bibliotherapy, certain elements should be avoided. Such elements include stories with stereotyped characters; extreme characters portrayed as victims or superheroes; simplistic answers to complex problems; band-aid solutions with “happily ever after” endings; and manipulative, emotionally charged-situations (Aiex, 1993; Andrews, 1998; Heath et al., 2005). In short, literature used for bibliotherapy should not include unrealistic plots or characters that do not provide an appropriate model (Heath et al., 2005).

**Selecting books based on individuals’ needs.** In order to optimize the bibliotherapeutic experience, book selection is essential. John Kendrick Bangs wrote, “If I were a doctor, I should make books a part of the materia medica, and prescribe them for my patients, according to their need” (Beatty, 1962, p. 107). Just as medical prescriptions require the matching of somatic symptoms with medication, the science and the art of bibliotherapy involves connecting the client to the character (Forgan, 2002) and the individual’s challenges to the content of the book (Alston, 1978). After an appropriate match between the individual and the reading material is made, the facilitator must then help the student see the similarities between him- or herself and the book character (Pardeck, 1995; Sridhar & Vaughn, 2000).

### **Award-winning Literature**

For teachers or school personnel to most appropriately match students with relevant material, they must be aware of the materials that are available. Some of the most available and

popular books are those that have won literary awards. With escalating interest in literature-based learning, award-winning books are becoming even more prized, recognized, and utilized (Leal & Chamberlain-Solecki, 1998). The most prestigious award for children's literature is the Newbery Medal (ALA, n.d.). Named after British publisher John Newbery, the medal is awarded annually to the most distinguished contribution to children's literature by a citizen or resident of the United States (Friedman & Cataldo, 2002). The Newbery Medal is important for several reasons. Most school media centers and public libraries have many of the Newbery Medal books, making them available and accessible (Hegel, 2007). Books that have won the Newbery Medal are among the most widely read in and out of school—in other words, Newbery Medal books tend to be popular, partially due to their good exposure, and are expected to have a wider influence than that of other books (Friedman & Cataldo, 2002; Peterson & Karnes, 1976). Educators and school personnel are encouraged to incorporate award-winning literature into their classrooms, offices, and libraries (Ouzts et al., 2003; Prater, 2000), so not only are they available, they are also recommended. Award-winning books get published and are more likely to stay in circulation (Hill et al., 2001). Because Newbery Medal books have been, and continue to be, read, they have a lasting effect on readers (Peterson & Karnes, 1976). Examining how disabilities are portrayed in Newbery Medal and Honor books can provide guidance to teachers and others engaged in bibliotherapy. With awareness of appropriate literature, school personnel are better equipped to educate and empower students and to enhance the classroom experience (Riordan et al., 1996), which is what bibliotherapy is all about.

## Appendix B: Rating Scale

### Newbery Rating Scale for Quality Characterizations of Individuals with Disabilities in Children's Literature

Rater's Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Book Title: \_\_\_\_\_

Author: \_\_\_\_\_ Publication Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Type of Book: Picture Book or Chapter Book Age Level: \_\_\_\_\_

#### A. Overall Reaction

1. Rate your overall reaction to the book:

1	2	3
Negative	Neutral	Positive

2. Would you recommend this book to be read to or by children/adolescents?

1	2	3
Not Recommend	Recommend	Highly Recommend

3. Please describe what you liked *most* about this book:

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---



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4. Please describe what you liked *least* about this book:

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## B. Personal Portrayal

	Disagree	Neutral	Agree
1. <b>Portrays characteristics of disabilities accurately</b> (e.g., abilities and disabilities are consistent with descriptions from IDEA, DSM IV, and/or ICD 10; abilities/disabilities are consistent throughout the story; if label is used, it is accurate and current).	1	2	3
2. <b>Describes the character(s) with disabilities as realistic</b> (e.g., not superhuman or subhuman; avoids miraculous cures).	1	2	3
3. <b>Character(s) with disabilities are fully developed</b> (e.g., credible, multidimensional, show change or development throughout the story).	1	2	3
4. <b>Does not portray only disabilities of the character(s), but portrays abilities, interests, and strengths of the character(s)</b> (e.g., avoids undue emphasis on the disability; characters have unique personalities, interests, and struggles that may not be related to the disability; characters experience success as well as failure).	1	2	3
5. <b>Emphasizes similarities, rather than differences, between characters with and without disabilities</b> (e.g., similar physical and personality characteristics are described with equal emphasis).	1	2	3
6. <b>Uses nondiscriminatory language that avoids stereotypic portrayals</b> (e.g., does not use language such as <i>suffers from</i> , <i>afflicted with</i> , <i>stricken with</i> , <i>confined to a wheelchair</i> ). <b>This criterion includes the use of person-first language</b> (e.g., uses language such as <i>person with mental retardation</i> rather than <i>retarded</i> ).	1	2	3

Comments:

## C. Social Interactions

1. <b>Depicts character(s) with disabilities engaging in socially and emotionally reciprocal relationships</b> (e.g., not always being cared for, but allowed to care for others; teaches and assists others) <b>with a wide variety of persons</b> (e.g., family, nondisabled peers, friends with disabilities, support personnel).	1	2	3
--	---	---	---

- |   |   |   |   |
|---|---|---|---|
| 2. <b>Depicts acceptance of the character(s) with disabilities</b> (e.g., character isn't helpless against ridicule, teasing, bullying, abuse; character is not just tolerated, but a valued member of a group; is part of the "in" group rather than on the fringe or on the outside). | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| 3. <b>Promotes empathy, not pity for the character(s) with disabilities</b> (e.g., other characters act on their feelings to help in appropriate ways rather than just feeling sorry for the character with disabilities).  | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| 4. <b>Portrays positive social contributions of person(s) with disabilities</b> (e.g., contributes to more than emotional growth of other characters).  | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| 5. <b>Promotes respect for the character(s) with disabilities</b> (e.g., treated similar to others of same age, as appropriate; not "babied;" avoids condescending language and actions).   | 1 | 2 | 3 |
6. **Depicts various relationships between character with a disability and others.**  
(Please circle all that apply.)
- a. Character with a disability has primary relationship with:  
Friend      Sibling      Paid Personnel      Other
  - b. Character with a disability is primarily:  
Victim      Perpetrator      Protector      None
  - c. Character with a disability is primarily:  
Dependent      Caregiver
  - d. Character with a disability is primarily:  
Pupil      Instructor
  - e. Do other characters fear associating with the character with a disability?  
Yes      No
  - f. Do other characters experience feelings of guilt related to the character with a disability?  
Yes      No
  - g. What changes take place in characters without disabilities as a result of their interaction with the character with a disability?  
Positive      Neutral      Negative

Comments:

## D. Exemplary Practices

- |   |   |   |   |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1. <b>Depicts character(s) with disabilities having full citizenship opportunities in integrated settings and/or activities</b> (e.g., school, church, neighborhood, work, recreation/leisure).   | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| 2. <b>Depicts character(s) with disabilities receiving services appropriate for their age, skill level, and interests</b> (e.g., teaching strategies depicted meet the needs of the character; therapies needed are provided).  | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| 3. <b>Depicts valued occupations for character(s) with disabilities</b> (if appropriate) (e.g., vocations of their own choice according to their abilities and interests; wages paid are comparable to those without disabilities in similar vocations).  | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| 4. <b>Promotes self-determination</b> (e.g., character(s) are allowed to make decisions that impact their lives, solve their own problems, choose their own friends and activities as appropriate to their age and developmental level), <b>where choices are similar to the types of choices given to nondisabled peers.</b> | 1 | 2 | 3 |

Comments:
-----------

## E. Sibling Relationships (if applicable)

- |   |   |   |   |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1. <b>Sibling(s) of the character(s) with disabilities experience a wide range of emotions, not just all positive or all negative emotions</b> (e.g., pride, joy, respect, love, embarrassment, frustration, over identification, guilt, isolation, resentment, anxiety regarding achievement, fear of future). | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| 2. <b>Sibling(s) of the character(s) with disabilities have opportunities for growth that are not typical for siblings of children without disabilities</b> (e.g., maturity, self-concept, insight, tolerance, pride, vocational choices, advocacy, loyalty).   | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| 3. <b>The sibling relationship is reciprocal, given the age and developmental differences between the siblings.</b>   | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| 4. <b>Sibling(s) are not given unusually burdensome household and family duties</b> (engage in family work that is typical for children of the same age and gender that do not have a sibling with disabilities).   | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| 5. <b>The sibling(s) appear aware of the nature of the disability and its effects on the character with disabilities.</b>   | 1 | 2 | 3 |



Comments:

## F. Impact of Disability on Plot

- |   |   |   |   |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1. <b>Main character with disability displays appropriate growth throughout the story</b> (e.g., character is not stagnant, but learns, changes, and grows as a result of life experiences).  | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| 2. <b>A main focus of the book appears to be to:</b> (a) teach about a disability, (b) include a character with a disability whose presence does not or minimally impacts the story, or (c) include a character with a disability whose presence and disability impacts the story, or (d) include a character with a disability whose presence impacts the story, but the disability is irrelevant. | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| 3. <b>Additional information is provided to help readers learn about the disability</b> (e.g., author's notes, internet addresses, professional organizations).   | 1 | 2 | 3 |

Comments:

## G. Impact of Setting on Disability

Setting: \_\_\_\_\_

- |   |   |   |   |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1. <b>The attitudes and practices portrayed are congruent with attitudes and practices for those with disabilities during that era</b> (e.g., services available, treatment by others, terminology used). | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| 2. <b>The place of the story affects the life of character(s) with disabilities</b> (e.g., rural/urban, developed/developing nations).  | 1 | 2 | 3 |

Comments:

- |  |   |   |   |
|--|---|---|---|
| 1. <b>The point of view, if told by the character with a disability, is realistic</b> (e.g., thought processes and language of a character with cognitive disabilities are realistic). | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| 2. <b>The point of view, if told from a character without a disability, is realistic</b> (e.g., a brother/sister's attitudes/perceptions about the sibling with disabilities).         | 1 | 2 | 3 |

Comments:

### **I. Illustrations** (if applicable)

- |   |   |   |   |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1. <b>Portrays characteristics of disabilities accurately in illustrations.</b>   | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| 2. <b>Portrays assistive/adaptive technology accurately, realistically, and contemporarily in the illustrations.</b>  | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| 3. <b>Illustrations interpret the story well.</b>   | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| 4. <b>Style of illustrations is appropriate to the story and age-level</b> (e.g., representational, expressionistic, surrealism, impressionistic, folk art, naive art, cartoon art, photography). | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| 5. <b>Plot, theme, characters, setting, mood, and information are enhanced through the illustrations.</b>   | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| 6. <b>Illustrations represent quality art</b> (rhythm, balance, variety, emphasis, spatial order, unity).   | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| 7. <b>Illustrations use color, line, shape, and texture artistically.</b>   | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| 8. <b>Layout and design of illustrations and text are visually appealing.</b>   | 1 | 2 | 3 |

Comments:

## Literature Review

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