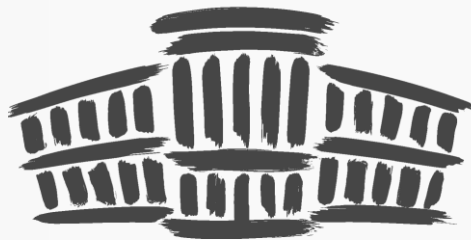


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REPRESENTATION OF CHARACTERS WITH DISABILITIES IN PICTURE BOOKS

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Abstract

Literature has the potential to familiarize readers with forms of diversity in society and develop inclusivity competencies. Picture books, in particular, have a significant potential to convey information and knowledge about the world to children from an early age, including issues of identity and diversity, which also include the representation of characters with physical and mental disabilities. This paper explored the portrayal of characters with disabilities in contemporary picture books and the representation of male and female characters within them.

The observed corpus of picture books published in Croatia during the period from 2001 to 2023 indicates that topics addressing characters with disabilities are present, with a higher prevalence in the second decade of the 21st century. Male characters are more frequently portrayed as the main characters in comparison to female characters. The sample also revealed that, with the exception of two disability, all represented disabilities are reflected in both male and female characters.

Keywords: *picture books, gender differences, inclusion, difficulties, stereotypes*

1. Introduction

Today, there is an increasing focus on social inclusion and the integration of individuals with various disabilities into the community from an early age. Kindergartens serve as the primary places of inclusion, where children encounter the heterogeneity of society and have the potential to develop inclusivity and embrace diversity. As children may encounter various forms of diversity in their daily lives, they can also engage with these themes through literature, which can similarly serve an inclusive function. Picture books are one of the first media through which children gain information about the world around them, including various forms of identity and diversity. Bishop (1990 according to Koss, 2015: 32) posited that children need to see themselves reflected in literature (i.e., look into a mirror), to see the lives of others (i.e., look into a window), and to see themselves as able to traverse between groups and worlds (i.e., pass through a sliding glass door). It is therefore essential to examine how characters with disabilities are represented in children's literature, whether they allow readers to identify themselves and facilitate the perception and understanding of others who are different.

Topics that were previously considered taboo became part of the corpus of contemporary children's literature, and such topics are entering picture books. Illnesses, disabilities, acceptance of different races, abuse, death, and many others are often thematized in picture books, frequently with an emphasized pedagogical function. The corpus of research in this study consists of picture books that address forms of physical and mental challenges.

The selected corpus in this study examined the gender representation of characters with disabilities in children's picture books. Depictions of characters with disabilities in literature play a crucial role in shaping children's attitudes towards disability, as well as their perceptions of gender roles and the development of stereotypes that may emerge in society. The aim of this research is to explore the representation of male and female characters as bearers of difficulties in picture books that address

physical or mental challenges, and to examine whether there is potential for developing or overcoming prejudices associated with linking challenges to a specific gender, as well as to assess whether picture books enable readers of both genders to identify with the characters presented in the texts.

2. Characters with Mental and Physical Disabilities in Picture Books

Characters with mental or physical disabilities belong to the spectrum of "otherness" into which Kammler (2003) include a wide range of characters, from members of other cultures, different races, characters with specific physical traits and challenges. Encountering the "other" requires appropriate treatment, and often results in insecurity, fear, rejection, or some other negative reaction. The otherness of individuals with mental or physical disabilities is maintained through their marginalization or rejection on one side, and through a relationship of pity towards them on the other side (cf. Mayer and Živković Zebec, 2011).

Fear is a natural and expected reaction when we encounter something unfamiliar or "other," especially if we have not learned how to behave in that situation (Kammler, 2003). For this reason, it is essential to introduce children from an early age to diversity, specifically to individuals who are considered "different," and one of the mediums for this can be literature, which can be helpful for better understanding, learning, and becoming acquainted with the different or foreign, as well as in developing empathy. Therefore, picture books can serve as a medium that successfully introduces children to the forms of diversity in society, enabling them to gain an understanding of the world around them and influencing their behavior.

Children's books that include characters with disabilities can be invaluable tools for educating young children about disability, promoting acceptance attitudes, and enhancing the perception of self-worth for both typically developing children and those with disabilities when presented in the context of appropriate instruction and related activities (Crawford, 2016: 5).

Sotirovska and Vaughn (2021) emphasize the importance of portraying characters who depict children with disabilities and individuals with disabilities as heroes who live full lives. It is essential that these characters are represented through their character traits rather than through their difficulties or disabilities. In this way, readers can more easily develop empathy and connect with them.

Children's literature thus becomes an educational tool for sharing the experiences of individuals with disabilities. It is essential that works depicting children with difficulties and individuals with disabilities address challenges, evolve, adapt, and mature throughout the narrative. According to Hughes (2012), research has shown that young readers find it easier to identify with characters in literary texts who face the same or similar obstacles as themselves. These shared experiences provide them with comfort and motivation to confront their own challenges.

When discussing the genre of picture books primarily aimed at younger implicit readers, characters with developmental difficulties are often part of the problem picture book category. In recent decades, both in publishing and reception, problem picture books that cover a range of topics, from everyday issues to taboo subjects and social problems, have become popular. On one hand, they help children cope with their own problems or difficulties more easily, but they also have an educational role that helps other children understand diversity and guides them towards appreciating those diversities and inclusive thinking.

Considering that the paper investigates the representation of characters with disabilities, previous research has focused on the types and ways of depicting disabilities. Dyches et al. (2006: 13) on a books' samples that have been awarded with Caldecott Medal and Honor status concluded that picturebooks portray the types of disabilities which children are not most likely to encounter; the characters with disabilities are unlike people with disabilities with whom young children are likely to associate; and some of the portrayals of the characters with disabilities are inaccurate, which includes temporary disability and miraculous occurred disability.

3. Gender Representation of Characters in Picture Books

In order to explore the occurrence of girls and/or boys with mental or physical disabilities in contemporary picture books, it is necessary to examine previous research that addressed the representation of male and female characters and their equality and/or the stereotypes that they may develop. A review of previous research on the gender representation of characters with disabilities in picture books reveals significant challenges and opportunities for improving their representation, inclusivity, and pedagogical value in children's literature. According to Šišanović (2011), there are numerous criteria that a picture book must meet in order to be considered developmentally appropriate. It is important to align the artistic and pedagogical value of picture books to ultimately have a positive impact on the development of early childhood. A similar significance of children's literature is emphasized by Hussein and Ali (2021), who state that children's literature is considered one of the most important sources for teaching children about concepts related to their lives, such as the differences between the roles of men and women. Texts have a powerful influence on us as they shape our identity, reflecting our political and moral values.

There has been more research during the 20th century, predominantly on a corpus of picture books published in the USA, indicating a lack of diversity, predominantly male characters, and the development of stereotypes. Starting with the first study by Weitzman et al. (1972), which showed a smaller number of female characters in picture books and their lesser representation in titles, as main characters, and in illustrations, other studies throughout the 20th century, conducted on different corpora, confirmed these results. More recent studies (Diekman & Murnen, 2004; Gooden & Gooden, 2001; Hamilton, Anderson, Broaddus, & Young, 2006; McCabe et al., 2011; Nair & Talif, 2010; Paynter, 2011) show that even in the 21st century, despite equality and diversity becoming central in education, children's books continue to represent genders in stereotypical ways and underrepresent females (Filipović, 2018: 310). Underrepresentation of female characters is confirmed by Lindsay (2023) on a sample of recent picturebooks (2010-2020).

Koss (2015) conducts a study on a sample of 450 picture books published in the United States, examining gender representation and diversity within these books. The findings indicate that there continues to be a lack of diversity. Although males and females were fairly evenly distributed when discussing main characters, boys still predominately prevail. In her research, she encompassed and depicted the challenges, concluding that picture books predominantly feature characters with physical disabilities, while those with mental disabilities are less represented, and characters with emotional difficulties are notably absent. She concludes that the representations of characters remain stereotypical.

4. Gender Representation of Characters with Disabilities

4.1. Methodology and Research Questions

In a selected corpus of contemporary picture books, the study will explore the gender representation in the depiction of characters with disabilities. It will investigate the proportion of male to female protagonists in the selected picture books. It is considered crucial to examine the prevalence of particular disabilities in relation to the gender of the character, specifically whether certain disabilities are associated with a specific gender and how this may contribute to the development of stereotypes surrounding disabilities. The study will explore whether difficulties arise alongside instances in picture books where characters of both genders are represented, and whether such representation facilitates readers' identification with the characters in these picture books.

The instrument used in this research is content analysis. The analyzed picture books will be categorized based on the difficulties faced by the main character. The results will be presented both quantitatively and descriptively.

4.2. Corpus Description

The corpus of this study consists picture books published in Croatia between 2001 and 2023. The selected picture books are works by Croatian authors (20) or translations into the Croatian language (4). Translated picture books are included in the corpus due to the universality of children's literature, which integrates translated works into the national corpus (see Hameršak and Zima, 2015). The picture books feature characters with disabilities, including human characters and anthropomorphized animals.

The selected picture books can be categorized into two groups. The first group consists of functional problem-oriented picture books, which often have a therapeutic role. The purpose of these picture books is to introduce readers to the issues they address in order to foster empathy and understand diversity, as well as to help implicit readers identify with characters who face challenges, thereby gaining a better understanding of their values and developing self-confidence. Such picture books often suggest the disability addressed merely through their titles (e.g., *My Brother is Autistic* and *My Friend has Down Syndrome*). Furthermore, there are several picture books analyzed in this study that are part of a series addressing various challenges. For instance, the series of picture books authored by Nataša Šunić Vargec and illustrated by Jelena Brezovec emerged as a result of the author's extensive practical experience as a speech therapist, with each book focusing on a specific theme challenge (autism, Down syndrome, stuttering, as well as dyslexia, dysgraphia, and dyscalculia). The narratives are presented from the perspective of a character experiencing the difficulty. The stated picture books are accompanied by additional educational materials located at the end of the books, intended for adult readers to better understand the challenges and, if necessary, seek assistance.

The second group of picture books consists of those in which difficulties are addressed in a less functional manner, with more artistic elements, thus contributing to inclusion and a better understanding of the issues. An example is the picture book *What Can I Do with My Six Legs*¹ by author Zoran Pongračić and illustrator Marijana Jelić, in which the protagonist is a girl who has a physical disability and uses a wheelchair. The depiction of a character with disabilities is non-stereotypical; she embraces her disability and throughout the entire picture book narrates her strengths and the activities she engages in. Rather than invoking a sense of pity regarding her disability, her strength and uniqueness are emphasized. The picture book fulfills an inclusive function by dispelling fears of the unknown and challenging the prejudice that children with physical disabilities are incapable of certain activities. The female character is depicted as active and optimistic, which supports a more contemporary representation of characters and can serve as a role model for implicit readers.

The observation of the publication timing of picture books indicates trends in publishing practices as well as societal phenomena. Namely, a significant portion of the corpus consists of picture books published after 2010, which can be correlated with the ideological state of society and the increasing openness of society towards inclusion and acceptance of diversity. Notably, the observed corpus encompasses six picture books published in 2010 and earlier, as well as 20 picture books published after 2010, indicating that issues pertaining to physical and mental challenges have begun to be more extensively addressed in the preceding decade.

The disabilities that have arisen regarding picture books pertain to sensory impairments (blindness and low vision²), language-speech-communication difficulties (dyslexia, dyscalculia, dysgraphia, and stuttering), developmental disorders (motor impairments and chronic illnesses such as physical disabilities and cerebral palsy), attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (hyperactivity, specifically ADHD), autism spectrum disorders, difficulties arising from genetic disorders (Down syndrome) and intellectual disabilities³.

¹ The titles were translated by Vedrana Živković Zebec.

² The corpus did not include picture books that address the challenges of visual impairment in contexts where the disability can be mitigated through the use of glasses. There are several such picture books aimed at helping children accept the need for wearing glasses, among other things. The corpus included picture books that discuss disabilities that cannot be resolved.

³ Classification of difficulties derived from the Guidelines for working with students with difficulties by the Ministry of Science and Education.

(<https://mzom.gov.hr/UserDocsImages/dokumenti/Obrazovanje/Smjernice%20za%20rad%20s%20ucenicima%20s%20tesko%20cama.pdf>)

4.3. Results

Table 1. Representation of Male and Female Characters and the Occurrence of Disability

Disability	Boy	Girl
intellectual disabilities	<i>The Story of Vedran</i> (Baričević, Cila; Milinović, Slavneka (il.) (2016): <i>Priča o Vedranu</i> . Zagreb: Udruga Korablja.)	
blindness and visual impairment	<i>Sea, Sky and Stars</i> (Jurić, Sonja; Bartulović, Anja (il.) (2016): <i>More, nebo i zvijezde</i> . In: <i>Na krilima ljubavi</i> . Zagreb: Alfa)	<i>The Girl and a Book</i> (Jelić, Ana Paula (2010): <i>Djevojčica i knjiga</i> . Karlovac: Centar za neohumanističke studije (CNS).)
	<i>I am so Lucky!</i> (Schimmel, Lawrence; Mayorga, Juan Camilo (il.) (2021): <i>Baš imam sreće!</i> . Zagreb: Kreativna mreža.)	
cerebral palsy / physical disabilities	<i>Petra and new friend</i> (de Petigny, Aline; Delvaux, Nanacy (il.) (2008). <i>Petra i novi prijatelj</i> . Zadar: Forum)	<i>My Sister's Smile</i> (Jurić, Sonja (2016): <i>Osmijeh moje sestre</i> . In: <i>Na krilima ljubavi</i> . Zagreb: Alfa)
	<i>Teddy Bear in Wheelchair</i> (Krizmanić, Mirjana; Biočić, Alem (il.) (2001): <i>Medo u kolicima</i> . Sisak: Aura)	<i>What Can I Do with my Six Legs</i> (Pongračić, Zoran; Jelić, Marijana (il.) (2021): <i>Što sve mogu sa svojih šest nogu</i> . Zagreb: Knjiga u centru.)
	<i>The Elephant Whose Legs Were not Obidient</i> (Bali, Nikol: Prilika, Antonia (il.) (2017): <i>Slon kojega nisu slušale noge</i> . Koprivnica: Udruga za pomoć djeci s teškoćama „Lattice“)	<i>Lana's school</i> (Brođanac, Mirna, Guljašević, Kuman Ivana (il.) (2022). <i>Lanina škola</i> . Zagreb: Naklada Ljevak)
autism	<i>My Brother is Autistic</i> (Moore-Mallinos, Jennifer; Faberga, Marta (il.) (2009): <i>Moj brat je autist</i> . Zagreb: Neretva.)	<i>Sunflower With a Bowed Head</i> (Jurić, Sonja (2016): <i>Suncokret pognute glave</i> . In: <i>Na krilima ljubavi</i> . Zagreb: Alfa)
	<i>The Beauty of Differences</i> (Šunić Vargec, Nataša; Brezovec, Jelena (il.) (2021): <i>Ljepota razlika</i> . Varaždin: Evenio.)	<i>Blue Day</i> (Tihi-Stepanić, Jasminka; Zlatić, Tomislav (il.) (2021): <i>Plavi dan</i> . Zagreb: Sipar.)
	<i>I am Lovoro: How to Explain Children What is Autism</i> (Tschirren, Barbara; Haechler, Pascale; Mambourg, Martine (il.) (2016). <i>Ja sam Lovro : kako djeci objasniti autizam</i> . Jastrebarsko: Naklada Slap.)	

	<i>How we Constructed the House</i> (Babić Višnjčić, Snježana; Kugler, Boris (il.) (2019): <i>Kako smo gradili kuću</i> . Zagreb: Semafora.)	
hyperactivity	<i>Jan the Windy</i> (Petrlík Huseinović, Andrea (2014): <i>Jan Vjetroviti</i> . Zagreb: Kašmir promet.)	<i>Marta Bear and Colorful Mountain Tea</i> (Katažić Kožić, Erika; Supanz Marinić, Valentina (il.) (2016): <i>Medvjedica Marta i šareni planinski čaj</i> . Zagreb: Ibis grafika.)
	<i>My Big Brother Matija: How to explain ADHD to children</i> (Freudiger, Anja (2016): <i>Moj veliki brat Matija</i> . Jastrebarsko: Naklada Slap.)	
	<i>A Bit more Lively</i> (Pongrašić, Zoran; Peroš Bannot, David (il.) (2020): <i>Malo više živ</i> . Zagreb: Naklada Semafora)	
Down syndrome	<i>My Brother and Me</i> (Jurić, Sonja; Jovanović, Boris (il.) (2017): <i>Moj brat i ja</i> . Mostar: Udruga za Down sindrom)	<i>My Friend has Down Syndrome</i> (Moore-Mallinos, Jennifer; Faberga, Marta (2009): <i>Moja prijateljica ima Downov sindrom</i> . Zagreb: Neretva.)
		<i>Lightness of the Sun</i> (Šunić Vargec, Nataša; Brezovec, Jelena (il.) (2021): <i>Vedrina sunca</i> . Varaždin: Evenio.)
stuttering	<i>Music of Words</i> (Šunić Vargec, Nataša; Brezovec, Jelena (il.) (2021): <i>Pjev riječi</i> . Varaždin: Evenio.)	<i>Stuttery</i> (Pribić, Sanja (2004). <i>Mucka</i> . Zagreb: Mozaik knjiga.)
dysgraphia / dyscalculia	<i>Dancing Letters</i> (Šunić Vargec, Nataša; Brezovec, Jelena (il.) (2021): <i>Ples slova</i> . Varaždin: Evenio.)	

The results regarding the representation of boys and girls, examined through quantitative analysis, indicate that boys predominate as the main characters in the analyzed corpus. The table 1. reveals that in 16 picture books, or 61.53 %, the characters experiencing disabilities are boys, or male characters, while in 10 picture books, or 38.46 %, the characters experiencing disabilities are girls, or female characters. The results confirm the findings of previous studies that in children's picture books, male characters predominantly serve as the main protagonists. Although contemporary children's literature strives for equality and inclusivity, with female characters increasingly appearing in roles that challenge stereotypes, the examined corpus still reveals that male characters continue to prevail, at least concerning the issues covered by this research.

The second research question was focused on the connection between specific disability and gender, as well as the potential for stereotyping such disabilities. All disabilities, except for intellectual disabilities, encompassed both male and female characters. This approach not only helps avoid the stereotyping of disabilities and the association of disability with a single gender, but also enables children of both genders to identify with characters experiencing disabilities. De León (2002) emphasizes that children are interested in reading about themselves, in terms of characters, settings, and

experiences and the portrayal of characters with whom they can identify may also serve as a motivational role in promoting reading.

The most prevalent challenges are those related to the autism spectrum and cerebral palsy / physical disabilities appearing in six picture books. Cerebral palsy, which is the most frequent cause of neurological disability in childhood (Smithers-Sheedy et al. 2014), has various manifestations and encompasses motor difficulties that are associated with sensory, cognitive, communication, behavioral impairments, and more (Rosenbaum et al. 2007). Research examining the relationship between cerebral palsy and sex has also shown that boys have a higher risk factor for developing cerebral palsy and for both mild and severe forms of the disease (Romeo et al. 2023)⁴.

Also as CP, and the autism spectrum is broad and the picture books portray specific challenges and experiences of the characters. In addition to autism, disabilities associated with attention deficit have also emerged as very prominent themes in the picture books. Our research shows that these two disabilities are presented with male characters being more prevalent than female characters (6:3). The predominance of male characters in conjunction with the aforementioned disabilities can be linked to data from research regarding the diagnosis of these disabilities and their association with gender. There is a substantial body of research on these disabilities, and an extensive discussion would exceed the scope of this work; therefore, we will refer only to a few selected studies. The two aforementioned disabilities, autism and disabilities associated with attention deficit, in research indicate that they manifest differently in girls and boys, hence the path to diagnosis is also distinct. Both disabilities are more frequently diagnosed in males than in females. One of the major studies on ADHD conducted by Nøvik et al. (2006) encompassed ten European countries and demonstrated that boys are diagnosed with ADHD at a ratio of 5:1 compared to girls. Research on autism has shown a higher frequency of diagnosis in males (boys) compared to females (Loomes et al., 2017; Mandy & Lay, 2017). Like autism, we can conclude that the prevalence of these themes is related to extraliterary reality and research data on the frequency of the disorder.

5. Conclusion

Picture books that address physical and mental challenges have, over the past decades, integrated various themes into children's literature, thereby becoming a significant part of the corpus of children's literature accessible to young readers. These texts can play an inclusive role as they serve as tools for education and raising awareness, fostering empathy and understanding among children. Characters with disabilities exemplify diversity and underscore the importance of accepting all individuals regardless of their differences.

In a study involving 26 picture books, research was conducted on the representation of male and female characters with disabilities in these literary texts. The results indicated that patterns, which have been present in children's literature since earlier periods, particularly the predominance of male characters, persist in contemporary children's literature, even in the context of individuals with disabilities. Furthermore, the research indicates that picture books, at least in the context of the examined issues, do not develop gender stereotypes related to disabilities. It is crucial to raise awareness of the importance of gender equality in such cases, as children are very sensitive, not only at an early age but also when they themselves face disabilities that are depicted in picture books. Girls and boys are equally represented among characters with various disabilities, meaning that each disability is represented by both genders, with the exception of intellectual disabilities and dysgraphia / dyscalculia, which reflects a fair and balanced approach. Such representation allows children, regardless of gender, to identify with characters who undergo similar experiences and challenges, as well as to learn to accept differences in society from an early age.

⁴ In their paper, Romeo et al. (2023) reached the conclusion that presents a literature review which included 53 studies that dealt with the relationship between cerebral palsy and gender.

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