

# Characters with Exceptionalities Portrayed in Contemporary Canadian Children's Books

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## Abstract

This article examines the ways in which exceptionalism is addressed in Canadian children's literature, offering critical literacy as an avenue toward social justice. A content analysis (Berg, 2009) of 134 Canadian children's books offers a wide scope of contemporary titles to include in classrooms. We developed conceptual categories to explore patterns and trends through a qualitative interpretive stance (Seidman, 2006). Our findings include the following results:

- ethnically diverse characters with exceptionalities,
- authentic characters with real-world challenges,
- fantasy blended with other genres.

As narratives that include exceptionalities become more authentic and abundant, we can become more appreciative of diversity, further affecting inclusive schools and communities.

*Keywords:* children's literature, critical literacy, disability studies, children's book characters with exceptionalities

## **Résumé**

Cet article examine les façons dont l'exceptionnalité est traitée dans la littérature pour enfants canadiens, en utilisant la littéralité critique comme outil dans la quête de la justice sociale. Une analyse de contenu (Berg, 2009) de 134 livres canadiens pour enfants offre un large éventail de titres contemporains à inclure dans les salles de classe. Nous avons développé des catégories conceptuelles pour explorer des modèles et des tendances grâce à une position d'interprétation qualitative (Seidman, 2006). Notre bilan comprend les résultats suivants:

- des personnages d'ethnicités différentes avec des exceptionnalités,
- des personnages authentiques aux prises avec des défis de tous les jours,
- le fantastique mélangé avec d'autres genres.

À mesure que les schémas narratifs qui incluent des exceptionnalités deviennent plus authentiques et nombreux, nous pouvons devenir plus sensibles à la diversité. Ce qui, à son tour, a un impact sur les écoles et les communautés inclusives.

*Mots-clés :* la littérature pour enfants, littéralité critique, études sur les besoins particuliers, personnages de livre d'enfants aux exceptionnalités

## **Introduction**

Building on a previous study of Canadian and American award-winning picture books (Emmerson, Fu, & Brenna, 2013) related to the concept of Radical Change (Dresang, 1999), this article aims to extend scholarly debate on social justice in curriculum studies by examining representations of exceptionalities. Dresang (1999) established the concept of Radical Change as a lens on the many radical changes that occur in books for youth over time due to interactivity, connectivity, and access to the digital world, and the current study has adopted Radical Change as its theoretical framework. In this updated sequel to our original work, we examine and compare the different ways in which exceptionality is addressed at various levels of Canadian children's literature: from picture books (birth to seven years), junior novels (eight and up), and intermediate novels (11 and up), to young adult novels (14 and up).

### **Purpose**

This curriculum-related research examines representations of exceptionalities in literature for children and youth and compares portrayals across various age categories. A central goal of this study is to assist readers in finding and using books about characters with exceptionalities for the purposes of developing self-acceptance, empathy, imagination, and critical literacy skills. Our key research questions include:

- What disabilities are portrayed in available Canadian fiction for young people? How do these portrayals vary across age categories?
- What are the trends in characterizations of disability across age categories?
- What textual messages predominate that might fuel classroom critical literacy discussions within social justice frameworks?

While other aspects of diversity such as cultural difference have been robustly included in contemporary curricular resources, differences related to disability are lacking in terms of full and authentic representation based on incidence of these disabilities in real life. Current treatment of differences related to ability can be considered as a rhizome of Radical Change, Dresang's (1999) conceptualization of how children's literature evolves in isolated areas along the main root system. Attention in this study related to characterizations that involve disabilities examines patterns and trends across various age

categories, offering critical literacy as a lens through which teachers, students, researchers, and writers may interrogate textual messages toward social justice outcomes.

## **Theoretical and Conceptual Framework**

This research, delineated from a social constructionist stance, incorporates disability studies and literary criticism and is qualitative in nature, with content analysis based on Berg's (2009) framework. Within the context of disability studies, disability can be defined as a social construct (Sherry, 2008), contrasting with a medical model of the body wherein biological differences equate to impairment. Disability, within the Canadian education system, usually refers to a specific category of difference, such as learning disability (Smith, Polloway, Patton, Dowdy, & McIntyre, 2012). Exceptionality, within the same context, describes an individual's strengths as well as needs (Smith et al., 2012), and for this reason is becoming a preferred term. Thus, in this article we use *exceptionality* as a general descriptor for those with diverse learning and other needs, and *disability* for a particular condition.

Research on classic fiction involving characters with exceptionalities has identified a trend that these characters are either cured or killed during the course of a story (Keith, 2001), a tendency that suggests authors have not been able to imagine a future for someone with an exceptionality. While this tendency has clearly changed in fiction for young people (Brenna, 2015), *Radical Change* (Dresang, 1999) offers an illuminative way to conceptualize the changes yet to come in children's literature regarding iterations of ability that appear in new textual forms and formats, new perspectives, and shifted boundaries. In this study, we suggest *Radical Change* as a viewpoint from which to approach in educational settings an interrogation of the four dimensions of critical literacy: disruption of the commonplace, multiple viewpoints, socio-political issues, and social justice (Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys, 2002). While included in a *Radical Change* model of textual evolution, the nuances of the ongoing development of characters with exceptionalities require further exploration. These nuances have clear potential for supporting critical literacy—an approach to reading that entails particular attention to content analysis. Based on previous research related to fiction that involved characters with disabilities (Brenna, 2010a; Dyches & Prater, 2000; Dyches, Prater, & Cramer, 2001; Greenwell,

2004; Mills, 2002; Pajka-West, 2007), this study extends previous samples in its focus on Canadian novels and picture books.

### **Educational Importance of the Study**

Contextualized in critical literacy, previous research identifies that students can be taught to apply strategies for critical reading, including interrogations of representations of the world in classroom resources (Brenna, 2014). Reading instruction can be considered as a social practice that necessitates coding, establishing text-meaning, pragmatic understanding, and critical practices (Luke & Freebody, 1997). Freire's (1983, 1991, 1998) theoretical groundwork has offered the need for a critical stance with respect to literacy, an idea extended by Lewison, Flint, and Van Sluys's (2002) representation of critical literacy in four dimensions: disrupting the commonplace, interrogating multiple viewpoints, focusing on socio-political issues, and taking action toward the promotion of social justice. A sound knowledge of potential classroom resources is required in order to support and engage children and youth in critical literacy practices. This content analysis of Canadian children's picture books and novels allows comparisons to be made regarding situated patterns and trends, as well as providing a model for further research.

### **Method**

We conducted content analysis (Berg, 2009; Merriam, 1998) of Canadian books for children and youth through a qualitative interpretive stance (Seidman, 2006), allowing the development of conceptual categories—within various age categories—that offer opportunities for the exploration and comparison of patterns and trends. We developed a content analysis framework (Emmerson, Fu, Lendsay, & Brenna, 2014) which the research team applied to each book. Categories of investigation included point of view, genre, and elements of Radical Change (Dresang, 1999).

The specific outcomes of this article include:

- the provision of a list of Canadian picture books and novels (in English) for children and youth, published in 1995 or later, that contain characters with exceptionalities;

- an identification of trends or themes in representations of characters with exceptionalities within and between categories related to reader age;
- an analysis of textual messages with respect to critical literacy and problematizing toward social justice;
- an illustration of further research suggested to extend the current findings.

Findings from the study relate to inclusive education by supporting the presence of people with exceptionalities on the school landscape, and connect to disability studies through considering books for children and youth as societal artifacts that reflect current responses to differing abilities.

## **Data Sources**

This study sample of children's fiction was derived through a variety of means, including contact with Canadian publishers, exploring Canadian book reviews and awards lists, word of mouth, and browsing through bookstores and libraries.

The criteria for disability in this study was determined by Smith, Polloway, Patton, Dowdy, and Heath (2001), who stated that in Canada the majority of jurisdictions in education include the following categories of exceptionality: "learning disabilities, speech or language impairments, intellectual disabilities, emotional/behavioral disorders, multiple disabilities, auditory impairments, orthopedic impairments, other health impairments, visual impairments, autism...and traumatic brain injury" (p. 7). This correlated with our local Saskatchewan Ministry of Education categories for support at the time of the study. Note that this definition does not include attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and we did not include it in our search for titles.

The study sample of Canadian fiction books meeting criteria for this study number 134: there are 21 picture books, 10 junior novels, 50 intermediate novels, and 53 young adult novels.

## **Patterns and Trends**

Previous research provides evidence to suggest that books that include characters with exceptionalities have discarded traditional formulas, evolving along with Radical Change in terms of Dresang's (1999) discussion related to the use of new literary forms and

formats, the employment of new perspectives, and changing boundaries for literature for children and youth as evident in the contemporary digital world (Brenna, 2010b; Dresang, 1999; Dresang & Kotrla, 2009). These new patterns reflect disability as a social construction alongside gender, sexual orientation, and race, and identify Radical Change as a way of illuminating the potential for new patterns that will continue to emerge in children's and young adult literature. The relatively small available Canadian sample indicates that picture books represent characters with disabilities less frequently than young adult and intermediate-age novels, while junior novels offer the fewest representations of characters with disabilities.

### **Canadian Picture Books**

The 21 picture books demonstrate a trend toward ethnically diverse characters who also have a disability, indicative of changing perspectives. This is strikingly different than the novels, in which disability and descriptions of ethnicity rarely accompany each other. Characters with multiple disabilities are also rare in any of the books studied.

In the picture book sample, almost half the titles portray characters with physical disabilities. Chronic illness is the next prevalent diagnosis in the sample: almost one-quarter of the books exemplify this feature. Other disabilities depicted are hearing impairment, learning disability, mental illness or emotional issues, vision impairment, intellectual disability, and autism spectrum disorder (ASD).

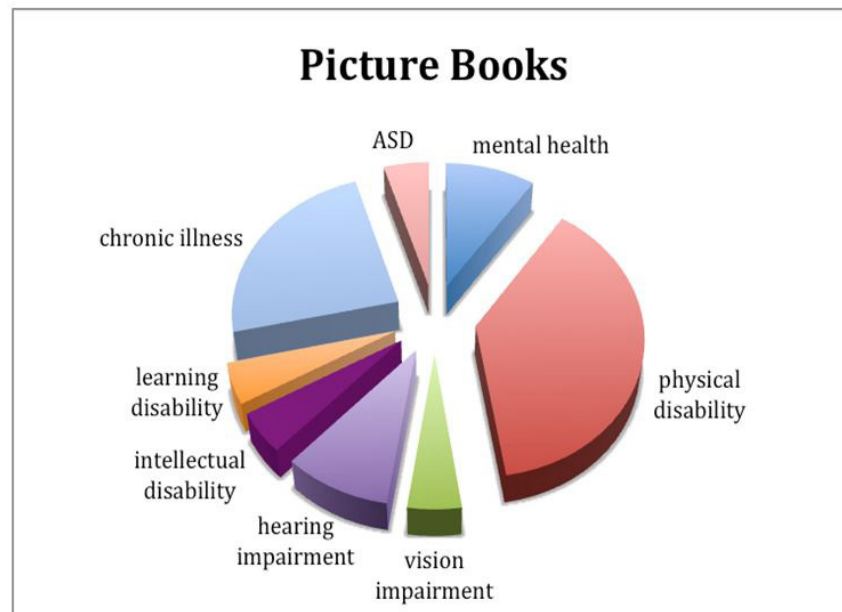


Figure 1. Prevalence of disabilities in picture book sample

Several of the picture books blur reality with fantasy, in contrast to findings from an earlier study in which fantasy rarely appeared as a host genre to characters with disabilities in favour of realistic fiction (Brenna, 2010b). The picture books that verge toward fantasy usually begin with a factual story and gradually—perhaps through a dream, or a stream-of-consciousness narrative—become phantasmagorical. This genre-bending indicates the changing formats of Radical Change.

An interesting trend in picture books is the inclusion of adults as main characters. This has several implications in terms of activation of responses to characters with exceptionalities. Children may better understand adults with challenges, such as aging grandparents who live with dementia. In addition, adults with limited or declining reading abilities may find connections and more easily understandable text in particular picture books (Brenna, 2015). Radical Change is seen here as perspectives on picture books shift from child to intergenerational audiences.

## Junior Novels

The 10 junior novels—for ages eight and up—represent a range of disabilities. While seven of the books have protagonists with a disability, three feature a friend or parent



with a disability. Almost one-third of the characters have mental illness or emotional issues and another third have physical disabilities. In addition, visual impairment, chronic illness, learning disability, and intellectual disability add to the representation of disabilities.

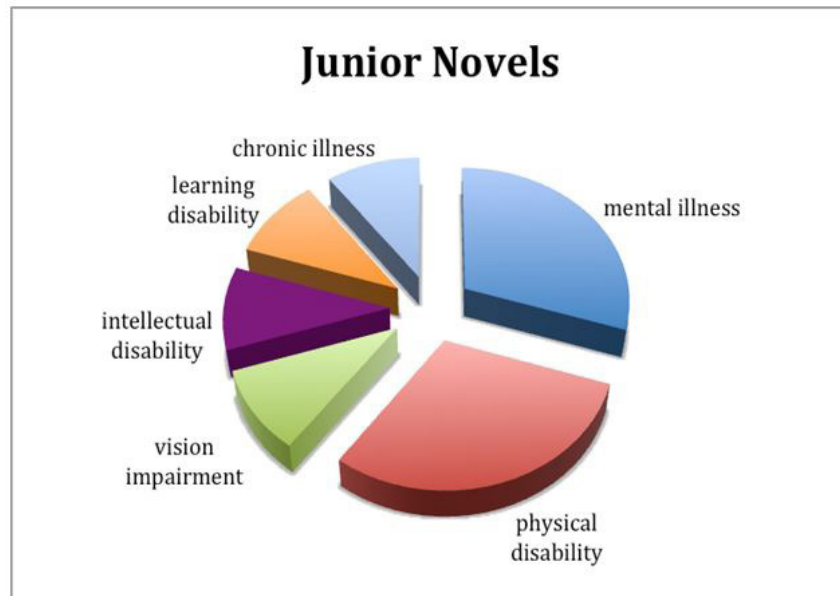


Figure 2. Prevalence of disabilities in junior novel sample

## Intermediate Novels

The 50 intermediate novels (for readers age 11 and up) present about one-third of the characters with disabilities as primary characters and two-thirds as secondary characters. These novels offer more serious themes than found in the books for younger readers: de Vries's (2011) *Somebody's Girl*, for example, deals with adoption and the intricate emotions that accompany a new family dynamic.

A range of disabilities is represented in these novels: about a third are physical disabilities, almost one-quarter involve chronic illness, and a fifth are related to mental illness issues. Three of the seven characters with mental health disabilities are mothers of the protagonists, while men with mental illness are not represented in the study sample at all—a potentially troubling pattern. Other disabilities represented are intellectual disabilities, learning disabilities, autism spectrum disorder (ASD), and hearing and vision

impairments. Characters with multiple disabilities are not represented in these titles, a trend to examine in the future.

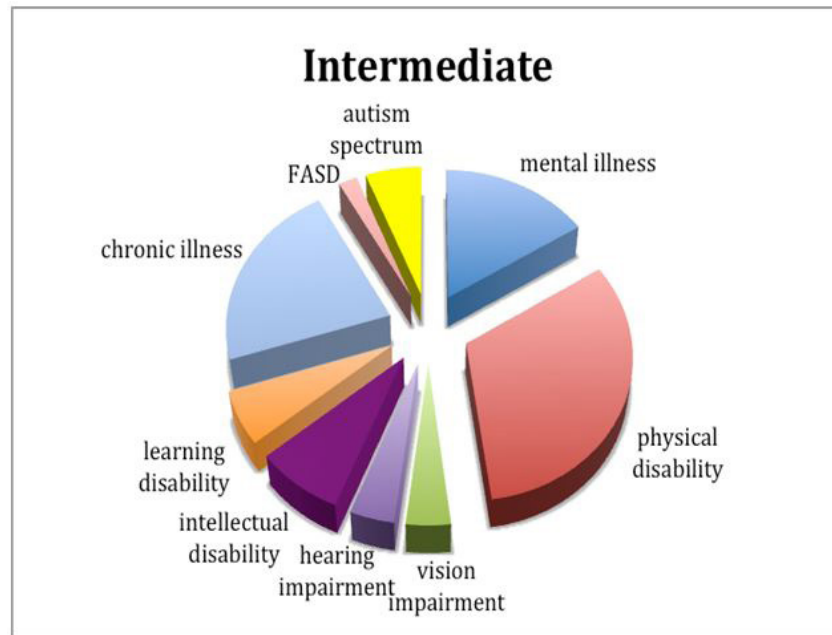


Figure 3. Prevalence of disabilities in intermediate novel sample

An emerging pattern in the intermediate novels involves blended genres. For example, Dyer's (2002) *Seeds of Time* combines historical fiction and fantasy, and Lawrence's (2006) *Gemini Summer* blends historical fiction with magic realism (Brenna, 2015). Blended genres are an example of the changing formats of Radical Change, as storylines offer unpredictable turns. Most of the 50 intermediate novels are realistic fiction (28, including a series of three titles), while eight are fantasy, seven are historical fiction, four are steampunk, and three are magic realism.

## Young Adult Novels

The young adult (YA) sample of 53 novels—for ages 14 and up—embraces even more sober subject matter with an overall darker tone than the titles for younger audiences. In the YA set, 12 teenagers are struggling with mental health issues, and at least eight characters have eating disorders. There are 15 teens with physical disabilities, nine with

intellectual disabilities, four with ASD, and several youths with visual or hearing impairments, chronic illness, or learning disabilities.

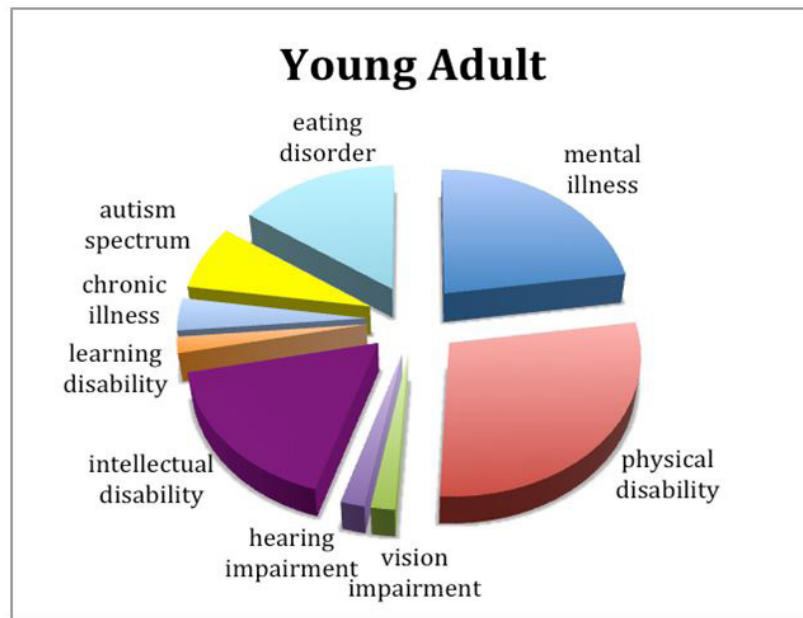


Figure 4. Prevalence of disabilities in young adult novel sample

The young adult characters face real-world challenges, and their stories do not always have happy endings. The content is mature, bridging youth and adult material, and the details are at times gritty. This uncompromising content represents the changing perspectives within definitions of Radical Change. The serious themes invoke reader sympathy, and, in cases of abuse, a shattering sense of hardship experienced by the characters. It is possible that this type of realism—also experienced through digital sources—is something young readers want, an example of Radical Change at work (Brenna, 2015). Alternatively, perhaps booksellers believe that these themes will sell to audiences hooked on realism they have encountered through other digital-age influences.

The genre of most of these 53 titles is realistic fiction; a few titles are magic realism, historical fiction, and fantasy. This pattern is consistent with the other novels in the study where realistic fiction appears most often when characters with disabilities are concerned, except in the set of picture books where blurred genres that include fantasy were more common and the intermediate novels where blended genres were found.

## **New Patterns and Trends**

Titles portraying characters with disabilities are becoming more available in Canada than ever before (Brenna, 2015). Some are appearing on awards lists, such as the Dolly Gray award-winner, *Waiting for No One*, part two of a trilogy about a young woman with ASD (Brenna, 2010c). Characterizations involving more than one type of diversity are beginning to emerge, exemplified by Hopkinson's (2012) *The Chaos*, featuring a 16-year-old girl with a gay friend who uses a wheelchair. There are also more non-fiction titles on the market considering exceptionality, for example, the respected book *Downs: The History of a Disability* (Wright, 2011), a resource for fiction writers portraying characters with disabilities. Another influence in the area of exceptionality is the authorship of books by those with disabilities, such as *Born on a Blue Day* (Tammet, 2007), a memoir of ASD.

The number of titles portraying exceptionality is increasing, especially in the intermediate and young adult age categories; picture books and junior novels portraying exceptionality are fewer in number. As exceptionality becomes understood as a basic part of human experience, it seems to increase in terms of placement in writers' and publishers' critical consciousness. These stories are certainly a means for changing societal attitudes, where these texts authentically construct exceptionality as simply another aspect of diversity (Brenna, 2015).

Customarily, books on disability have often been written in a didactic tone as teaching aids (Emmerson, Fu, Lendsay, & Brenna, 2014). This is changing, as evidenced by the titles in our sample. While the picture books and junior novels portray characters with disabilities in a realistic manner—making exceptionality just a part of a person rather than a main characteristic—the intermediate and young adult novels reveal disability through more sober subject matter with a somber tone, and real-world challenges that do not always end happily. These stories are complex, and often have unresolved endings, far different from moralistic teaching tales.

An interesting trend appearing in our sample of Canadian books involves two or more characters with disabilities helping one another, as in *The Color of Silence* (Shaw, 2013) in which a teenager becomes electively mute after a car accident and adapts through meeting another girl with limited body control and no speech. Another trend incorporates a secondary character with a disability: a brother, friend, mother, or grandfather of the story protagonist.

Other trends involve sports books with a central character who learns to excel in a sport despite having a disability, at least 10 titles featuring eating disorders, and many high-interest low reading-level books—indicating author or publisher insight regarding the provision of age-appropriate material for students with reading challenges (Brenna, 2015).

### Textual Messages

In analyzing textual messages with respect to critical literacy, we consider the question, “What is exceptionality?” The answer varies. In the 21 picture books, it is depicted primarily as physical disability or chronic illness. In the 10 junior novels, almost one third of the characters have mental illness or emotional issues and another third have physical disabilities.

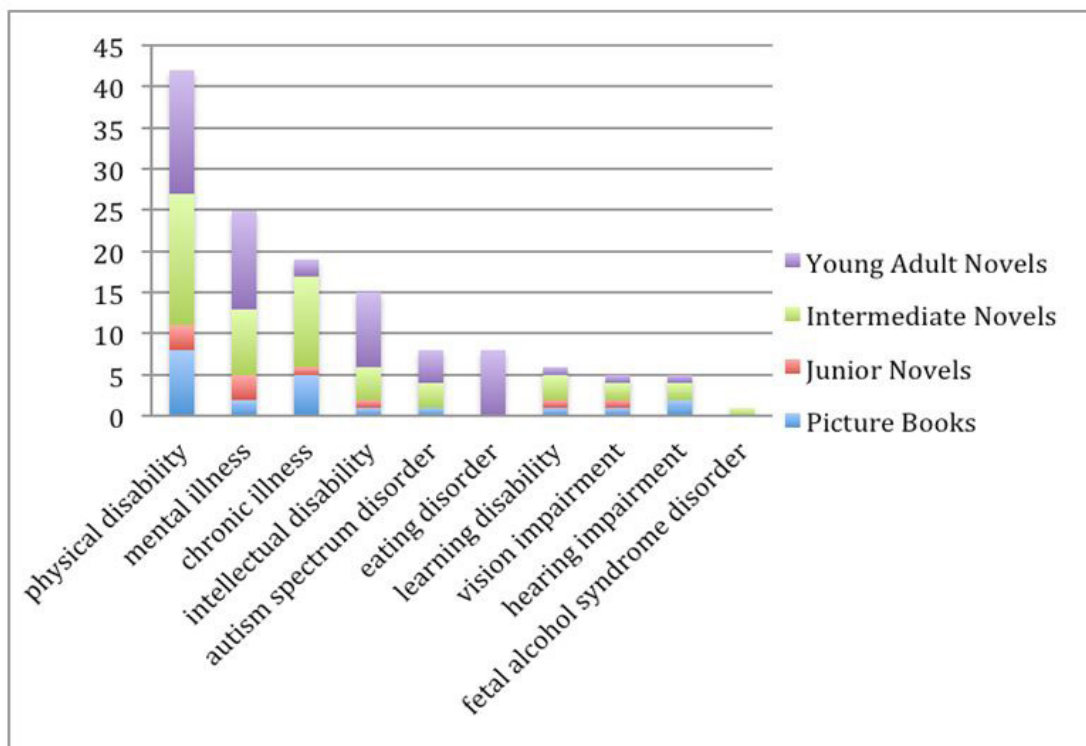


Figure 5. Prevalence of disabilities in Canadian children's book sample

The 50 intermediate novels highlight a wide range of disabilities, principally physical disabilities, chronic illness, and mental illness. The 53 young adult titles portray

the widest range of disabilities, highlighting physical disabilities, mental illness, intellectual disabilities, and eating disorders.

Overall, in our sample of picture books and junior, intermediate, and young adult novels, exceptionality is largely represented as physical disability, mental illness, chronic illness, and intellectual disability. In reality, the most common disabilities reported for Canadian children aged 5–14 are learning disabilities and chronic conditions (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2006). Canadians 15–24 years of age primarily experience mental or psychological disabilities, learning disabilities, and pain, while Canadians aged 45–64 report pain, mobility, and flexibility issues (Statistics Canada, 2013). The frequent depiction of physical disabilities and chronic illness in our sample of books may be proportionate to the abundance of pain, mobility and flexibility issues in older adults. Moreover, the prevalence of mental illness in the children's books in our sample may correspond to the incidence of mental or psychological disabilities in Canadian youth and young adults. However, the portrayal of intellectual disabilities in children's books appears to be over-represented, while learning disabilities are under-represented. Also under-represented in our books are disabilities that involve multiple disability traits—such as ASD and, even more rarely seen in books, Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD).

As well as lacking in characterization of people with multiple disabilities, character portrayal in this sample of books tends to rely on a single form of difference—disability—without referring to other facets of being, such as sexual orientation or economic disparity. We predict that the effects of Radical Change will continue to affect and change the blend of diversity in these stories.

Regarding Radical Change—Dresang's (1999) theory on the evolution of children's books—the titles in our sample show evidence of changing forms and formats (such as blurred genres), changing boundaries (such as inclusion of serious subject matter), and changing perspectives (such as those of older adults). The depth and variety of characterizations of exceptionality—with many first-person perspectives emerging from primary characters—confirm the presence of innovation in this collection of books published over the past 20 years. This indicates that edgy, realistic textual messages predominate and can fuel classroom critical literacy discussions within social justice frameworks, inspiring teachers to ask students (with and without exceptionalities): “What does this book suggest about acceptance of difference? Why might this message be given? Is it

appropriate? What messages would you like to see in books that perhaps you are not seeing now?" As with any classroom discussion, sensitivity to class members is paramount.

Exceptionality as a basic human experience is gaining a place within literary artifacts, and through emphasizing critical consciousness in this regard, these stories can provide further means for changing societal perspectives about exceptionality.

## **Future Research**

One form of children's book not discussed in this study is the graphic novel, a picture-oriented story resembling a comic book. There is limited research on characters with exceptionalities in graphic novels. An American study examining 30 high-quality graphic novels found that characters with disabilities were negatively stereotyped; females were pitiable and males were evil (Irwin & Moeller, 2010). This indicates that even the best of graphic novels has yet to reflect a realistic representation of exceptionality. This is a form to watch in the future as the effects of Radical Change move the books into more authentic characterization.

An interesting element to watch is the propensity for authors in this study to characterize physical disability as related to wheelchair use. Perhaps this is a convenient visual strategy, but it may represent a character's lack of agency rather than a pathway to freedom. Again, this characterization will inevitably refine through Radical Change and its development will no doubt be intriguing.

Future research is also indicated regarding fetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD), one of the categories least represented across the titles we explored. The term FASD refers to the "range of effects that can occur in children, youth or adults prenatally exposed to alcohol. The spectrum of effects includes four categories of primary disabilities: cognitive, behavioural, physical, and sensory" (FASD Network of Saskatchewan, 2015, p. 6). FASD appears to be a major cause of cognitive and developmental disabilities in Canadian children. In addition, secondary disabilities such as mental health challenges occur more frequently in populations with FASD, possibly related in part to social obstacles, and in part to biological mothers who use alcohol to self-medicate for mental health challenges of their own during pregnancy. While diagnoses related to FASD have been cited as the number one preventable cause of intellectual disability in the Western

world, studies exist which show that the incidence of FASD is increasing (Eustace, Kang, & Coombs, 2003). Considering that literature might be used to support understanding and prevention of FASD and yet is not utilized in this way is a subject definitely worth pursuing in further research.

Another area of research relates to ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder)—a diagnosis not included in our search as it was not part of the initial list of categories—which might produce significant results.

We particularly support additional research on the topic of portrayals of exceptionality in books, for young people, that engage a stance of critical consciousness and consider education as transformative (Freire, 1983, 1991, 1998, 2005; Willis et al., 2008), and we encourage further attention to the nature of classroom resources and voices yet unheard in these resources.

## **Conclusions**

Reflecting on disability within an educational context in Canada, we return to the definition from Smith, Polloway, Patton, Dowdy, and Heath (2001) that includes the following categories of exceptionality: “learning disabilities, speech or language impairments, intellectual disabilities, emotional/behavioral disorders, multiple disabilities, auditory impairments, orthopedic impairments, other health impairments, visual impairments, autism...and traumatic brain injury” (p. 7). While this interpretation was necessary to us in the gathering of titles along specific categories—in a lens we initially evaluated as authentic and wide—it also restricted us since many authors choose to write about disabilities that are not clearly defined, just as many people are differently abled without a particular diagnosis. Such a clear-cut categorization system may apply less in the future, in which we predict a greater blurring of boundaries as books continue to evolve toward rich and authentic portrayals rather than didactic projects designed to teach a lesson about the characteristics of a particular disability. Perhaps we can extend this argument further: definitions of disability have ordered funding mechanisms between governments and school divisions, yet currently many school divisions are receiving funding that is formula-based, relying on numbers of students in total, rather than diagnosis-based. This is evidence that perceptions related to disability are changing.



Stories help us to understand ourselves and others. Educators must offer stories that matter to students. Researchers recognize and systematize the messages offered, forwarding thinking about contemporary titles. Writers create change—in others and themselves—from the inside out as they interrogate ways of being and communicate these through books and other types of texts (Brenna, 2015). As narratives that include exceptionalities become more authentic and abundant, we can become more appreciative of the diversity of lived lives, further affecting inclusive schools and communities.

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