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**Humor in Literature about Children with Disability: What are We Seeing in this Literature?**

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**Abstract**

Humor is part of the daily life of people with a disability, yet research on humor and literature about children with disability is limited. This article explores instances of humor in such literature. The prevalent message in the books reviewed is that children with disability not only appreciate humor but also can produce various types of humor. The article offers ways to help children and adolescents build an authentic understanding of disability and disability humor.

**Keywords:** humor, disability, literature, children, adolescents

### **Humor in Literature about Children with Disability: What are We Seeing in this Literature?**

Research in the field of disability (Altieri 2008; Blaska 2004; Kaiser 2007; Williams, Inkster, and Blaska, 2005) has already acknowledged the power of literature for easing fears and anxiety about disabilities and replacing negative stereotypes with positive attitudes (Andrews 1998), and in doing so aiding in “build[ing] a foundation for acceptance of people who may look or act differently” (Williams, Inkster, and Blaska, 2005, 71).

Humor has been found to be part of daily life for people with disability. Haller (2003) concurred, after having reviewed research on humor and disability for the Disability Studies Quarterly Symposium. In her report, Haller observed that disability humor was no longer rare; it could be found in TV, clubs, cartoons, theater, film, websites, advertising, and radio. Humor has also been recognized to be beneficial for individuals with disabilities. Specifically, humor may function to counteract stress (Jevnikar 2007), to build cohesion (Hassall, Rose, and McDonald, 2005) and to construct social and developmental connections (Semrud-Clikemen and Glass 2008). It may serve as a coping mechanism (Nezu, Nezu, and Blissett 1998), a communication strategy (Brooks, Guthrie, and Gaylord 1999), or a means to perceive and communicate to others the positive aspects of their lives (Baum 1998; Author 2004).

Yet despite the significance of humor in the lives of people with disability (Haller 2003; Author 2004) and the power of children’s literature to communicate authentic representations of disability, including a positive outlook on life among people with disability (Blaska 2004), research on humor in children’s and youth literature involving persons with disability is strangely limited. Studies have been conducted on the portrayal of disability in literature for children and youth (Blaska 2004; Prater 2003; Leininger, Dyches, Prater, and Heath 2010);

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however, absent from this body of research is an analysis of humor in the depictions of disability in the children and youth literature. The purpose of this study is to address this gap.

### Exploring Humor Related to Children's Disability

Literature in the field of disability that explores trends in topics, portrayal of characters, and ways to present disability as part of normal life has been growing (Altieri 2008; Blaska 2004; Kaiser 2007; Williams, Inkster, and Blaska 2005). Moreover, within this body of literature, authors often argue for an inclusive representation of disability (Gervay 2004), for the affirmation of internal qualities versus outside looks (Zeece 1995), and for the need to educate both children and adults about disability (Solis 2004). However, the fact that such an education is desirable before educators and others can feel comfortable using humor connected to persons with disabilities and the stakeholders in their lives has probably resulted in the current dearth of studies that make interconnections among these elements. Thus, while the connections between disability and children, disability and humor, or children and humor have seen some examination, too few studies have aimed to investigate all three components: humor, children, and disability.

In the previously mentioned study by Semrud-Clikemen and Glass (2008), the researchers studied children with nonverbal learning disabilities and their ability to comprehend humor. They tracked the relation of humor to areas of children's cognition, perception, and language, and found that for children, humor serves a social and a developmental purpose.

In a review of *Finding Nemo*, Millett and Chemers (2004, 148) analyzed the portrayal of a "visually and socially different, yet hardly inadequate" fish. Humor imbued Nemo's self-description of his deformed fin as a "lucky" fin. He motivated other sea creatures to share intimate life details that otherwise would not be tolerated, but once these details were presented

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with a sense of humor, they were accepted. Disability was thus shown to be a “socially constructed character quality” (Millett and Chemers, 149). The analysis also established a connection with mutation as the key to human survival.

Blaska (2004) identified more than 250 children’s picture books and analyzed them through the *Images and Encounters Profile* instrument, which contains ten criteria. The relation to humor was established through Criterion #2: “Depicts acceptance not ridicule.” She observed that humor in disability children’s literature does not always arise from the presence of disability.

Blazsk (2007) conducted a content analysis of three disability children’s books, *The Curious Incident*, *A Different Life*, and *Blabber Mouth*, but limited his focus to the ways these novels caught and maintained the reader’s attention. He also found that no particular attention was given to humor specific to disability. Instead, his analysis focused on humor that rises out of situations that are no different from situations with people without disabilities, and in which disability is taken as part of normativity.

In a review of John Calahan’s Pelswick cartoon (shown on the Nickelodeon television network in 2000), Haller (2003, 13) discussed the phases of humor related to disability in children’s literature. She named Phase One as using freak shows where “mentally disabled people were used as representative fools”; Phase Two as making fun of people with a disability wherein the fun made of them emphasized their limitations; and Phase Three, in which persons with a disability took “control of the humor message.” Haller considered Calahan’s cartoon to represent the fourth phase, in which all characters are susceptible to humorous characterization, and the normalizing effect comes from subjecting any character to it, including one with a disability, who might make fun of him/herself.

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### Images of Disability in Various Media

Research on the portrayals of disability in mainstream popular culture, especially film, television, graphic books, and comics, has reported consistently negative and stereotypical representations of disability (Connor and Bejoian 2006; Johnson 2008; Ostrow Seidler 2011; Ware 2002). For example, in a review of stuttering in film, television, and comic books, Johnson (2008, 245) reported that “stuttering is frequently used as visual shorthand to communicate humor, nervousness, weakness, or unheroic/villainous characters.” Black and Pretes (2007), who studied representations of physical disability in movies produced between 1975 and 2004, found that the characters in films such as *Theory of Flight* and *Freak City* used disability humor as a put-down and that humor in these pictures was directed at a disability itself, thus communicating to the viewers the negative perceptions of themselves by the individuals with disabilities. Irwin and Moeller’s (2010) review of graphic novels concluded that the majority of the characters with disabilities were presented as being either pitiable or their own worst enemy.

In summary, these mass media representations of disability are “a repository of bad associations and images” (Connor and Bejoian 2006, 52). As such, they maintain a pervasive stereotype that “disability can never be a good thing” and that disability is “a concept that people routinely look down on, devalue, and ridicule” (2006, 52). Unfortunately, humor use in these representations serves primarily to reinforce these negative perceptions that either disparage or provide amusement at the predicament of disability. Children and youth are particularly susceptible to such portrayals, because they may assume the images of characters with disabilities in films or books are real (Lawson and Fouts 2004). They may therefore believe that the individuals with disabilities they encounter in their lives are like the characters portrayed in these media.

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The findings from the studies mentioned above suggest that teaching about disability and humor from a very early age is necessary, because early-formed attitudes affect one's attitudes for life (Atunrase 2004; Campbell 2006; Solis 2004; Zeece 1995). This work contributes towards this goal, by exploring the ways disability literature employs humor in the portrayal of characters with disabilities, to aid in better understanding and acceptance of people who happen to have a disability.

### **Methods**

#### **Criteria for Reviewing Books**

Fifty-two books with characters with disabilities were identified with the help of teacher candidates in the researcher's methods course. The books were found in teacher candidates' local and community libraries. The criteria that the teacher candidates were given as they selected the literature included: a) that characters have a disability; b) that any disability could be included; c) that each teacher candidate submits a review of ten children's books.

Of fifty-two books, twenty-eight books (see Table 1 - Children's Literature About Disability with Humor Incidences) included humor incidences. These books (published between 1999 and 2004) were fiction and non-fiction literary works and included a range of disabilities from visual impairment through mental retardation, learning disability, ADD/ADHD to physical disabilities.

For each identified humor incidence that depicted a character with a disability, the teacher candidates were asked to provide the following information as part of their book reviews: a) a detailed description of the humor incidence; b) a Xerox-copy of the page containing each humor incidence, and c) general information about the reviewed books (e.g., author, title, year of publication, genre, target disability, and so on). The teacher candidates were also asked to

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evaluate each humor incidence, paying attention to the following: a) the affective domain (positive or negative humor); b) the manner in which a person with disability was depicted (inclusiveness versus exclusiveness of humor); c) the kind of humor present (e.g., a practical joke, a cartoon, or a teasing exchange), and d) the function and rationale for humor use, utilizing as a guide a typology of functions of humor that was developed by Graham, Papa, and Brooks (1992). See Table 2.

While the book selection criteria served as assurances that the books the candidates self-selected included characters with disabilities, the guidelines for composing of the book reviews ensured that there was a consistency in the data analysis and reporting processes across all data (i.e., book reviews). In addition, Graham, Papa, and Brooks' (1992) typology provided a theoretical framework for understanding and classifying the functions of humor the teacher candidates identified in the literature they reviewed for this research. Teacher book reviews served as a data set for this work. Martin's (2007) comprehensive review of the humor literature, particularly his discussion of theories of humor, social functions of humor, and humor in physical and mental health, provided the researchers with a larger context for interrogating teacher book reviews.

### **Data Analysis**

In terms of the data analysis, the major research approach used in this study was a qualitative analysis (Creswell 2003) of teacher candidates' book reviews of the children's literature for representations of disability and the role of humor in these representations. More specifically, the teacher candidates' reviews were read and re-read in order to code them for humor representations. Our next step was to cluster the emerging codes into larger units of analysis (Bogdan and Biklen 2007), which in this case were various kinds of humor and their

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functions. This process led to developing a typology of humor and humor functions for this study. A close review of humor instances within specific humor categories and across typologies of humor in teacher candidates' book reviews (Strauss and Corbin 1998) provided both a descriptive and explanatory framework (Ritchie and Lewis 2003) for presenting the results in this study. Characteristic of descriptive statistics in qualitative research (Given 2008), frequency counts served as another data reduction technique, and were applied to identify the number of humor incidences located in the teacher candidates' books under review and then to categorize and tabulate these data as representing particular types and functions of humor. The term "quantitizing" (Tashakkori and Teddlie 1998, 126) has been invented to describe this process, which is "the process of transforming coded qualitative data into quantitative data" (Driscoll, Appiah-Yeboah, Salib, and Rupert, 2007, 20).

An additional strategy that the researchers utilized to obtain interpretative validity in this study was the use of "low-inference descriptors" (Johnson and Christensen 2008, 277), which were the quotes from the reviewed books woven into the narrative of this report. The systematic analysis of both qualitative and quantitative data (Creswell 2003) produced the following findings.

### **The Tone and Manner of Humor**

Most of the humor incidences were positive (n = 44). A major theme related to positive use of humor focused on depicting a character with a disability as capable of dealing with life's adversities. For instance, when the main character with a physical disability, Susan, from the book *Susan Laughs* by Willis (1999), got the math problems incorrect on her worksheet, she is depicted as a spirited character who is capable of dealing with the math challenge using a touch of humor. She is shown utilizing the graded worksheet to make out of it a boat.

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Depicting a character with a disability as being able to generate humor directed at one's self was another frequently manifested theme in the books reviewed. This was evident when Bluish, a fragile character battling leukemia, from the book, *Bluish* authored by Hamilton (1999, 57), poked fun at herself for never having been first at anything, as the girls were discussing in what order they should write their names on their school project, “ ‘Tuli, let’s do it alphabetically, Dreenie said. ‘D, first. Then put N, for Natalie. Then Paula, then Tuli.’ ‘Putting me last,’ Tuli said. ‘Thank you very much, my homey!’ ‘Well, somebody has to be last,’ Paula said. ‘That’s nothing.’ ‘Somebody has to be first and second,’ Bluish said, with a faint smile. ‘I’ve never been first at anything!’ She managed a short, squeaky laugh. They grinned, and then they laughed.”

Still typical of positive humor usage is the character with a disability who is portrayed as being more alike than different compared to peers without disabilities; this is evident in the book by Willis (1999), *Susan Laughs*. In this book, it seems not merely coincidental to portray matter-of-factly a youngster with a disability in a succession of familiar daily activities that any child can relate to, and that the first of these activities includes being able to smile. Indeed in the book (Willis 1999, 1-2) “Susan laughs, Susan sings” and Susan expresses sadness. Interestingly but not surprisingly, the ability to laugh also is reflected in the title of the book; after all, the ability to laugh is a central attribute of the main character who has a disability.

The emotional tone of humor in the children’s literature reviewed is, on the other hand, negative (n = 11) if the character with a disability was portrayed as being made fun of, or was called names, or had to engage in offensive humor to deflect the cruel taunts of his or her classmates. This negative emotional tone can be noted in the character with ADHD from Zimmert’s (2001, 10) book, *Eddie Enough!* Eddie, who after a series of wrongdoing in a given

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day angers the teacher who, out of frustration, shouts, “I’ve had enough, Eddie, enough!” This event prompts his classmates to nickname Eddie, Eddie Enough. “The whole class thought it was funny. Neil yelled, ‘Eddie Enough, Eddie Enough,’ like that’s my name. Then some of the other kids said it, too,” explained the character from the discussed book, *Eddie* (Zimmet 2001, 12).

Regarding the manner of humor involving characters with disabilities, the overwhelming majority of the examples of humor were inclusive in the children’s books reviewed (n=36). Within this context, the theme of sharing humor with the characters utilizing humor emerged. Consider the following example. In Millman’s (2003) *Moses Goes to the Circus*, while Moses and his family are on their way to the circus, Renee who is learning to sign calls all animals 'Cat.' As she points to the giraffe and signs yet again the word 'Cat,' her brother and Renee look at each other and laugh; they both know she is only kidding. In short, a social situation that was shared by a character with a disability and his sibling facilitated the enjoyment of humor.

Exclusive humor (n = 19), on the other hand, in the children’s books reviewed involves making fun of a character with a disability, thus, treating him or her stereotypically and prejudicially. A prime example of such humor can be noted in the context of Gifaldi’s (2001, 15-16) book titled *Ben, King of the River*. In an incidence from this book, a sibling describes how Ben, a character with autism, is the target of exclusive humor made by two passing boys, “I keep a close eye on Ben. When I come up from a dive I see him blowing bubbles with his face just atop the water. Then he uses his fists to splash himself. “Bang-Bang, water-water!” he shouts. Two boys paddle by on air mattresses. “Look at the weirdo,” the boy in the purple trunks says.”

### Types of Humor

Humor-based incidences in the reviewed children's books represent a spectrum of humor types that range from humorous stories, practical jokes, teasing exchanges, to playful banter. Humorous stories (n=23) have, however, received a disproportionately higher degree of attention relative to other identified types of humor, such as practical jokes (n=11); playful teasing exchange or teasing (n=11); playful banter (n=4); making fun of someone (n=2); and less familiar types of humor, such as irony (n=1); triumph over adversity (n=1); a serious, painful story (n=1); or the truth as one sees it (n=1).

Humorous stories were those that have an anecdotal nature and are firmly focused on an account of a particular story, description, and or situation that was humorous or amusing. This excerpt from McNamee's (2002, 5-6) book *Sparks* illustrates a humorous description of the main character's feelings related to his heartrending determination to follow directions and make his science project work. The main character says, "I followed all the instructions in the science workbook. But when I finished, my project looked nothing like the picture in the book. I still have no idea where I went wrong. The little red light bulb that was supposed to light up stayed dark. It didn't even blink for a second. Not a spark. It's like I killed electricity. It took a million years to invent and now it was dead because I touched it."

Practical jokes involve some form of a trick played on a person - but not necessarily on a character with a disability. The intentions of the joke in the books reviewed are usually to surprise the target of the joke and to have a good laugh together. An example of such a practical joke can be found in Millman's (2003) book, *Moses Goes to the Circus*. Moses, a character with a hearing impairment, is chosen to be a clown. When he returns to his seat, he keeps the clown nose on and sits back down next to his sister. His sister is not aware that he was one of the

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clowns in the center ring, and when she sees Moses wearing the clown nose, she laughs and signs “Moses, clown!” This example of a practical joke is a deviation from the most traditional sought after results of practical jokes, which typically employ humor to cause the target of the joke to experience embarrassment, indignity, or discomfort rather than just to surprise the target of the joke (Martin 2007).

The teasing incidences in the children’s books reviewed employed good-natured humor, especially when a character with a disability was involved in the teasing exchange. For instance, in *Otto is Different* by Brandenburg (2000, 7), the main character is depicted as an octopus missing arms. Sitting down to dinner with his family, he is engaged in the following playful conversation, “He sat at the table, and they sat down to eat. ‘Take your time,’ said Father. ‘Mother told me to use all my arms,’ said Otto. ‘But not when you are eating,’ said Mother. ‘After all, you have only one mouth.’”

Similarly, an exchange of good-natured humor is evident in McNamee’s (2002, 36) *Sparks*, when Todd, a character with a learning disability, is being teased by his friend, Eva, who is also a character with special needs. “‘Are my ears really that big?’ I asked when I saw her painting of me. ‘Bigger!’ She laughed. ‘And my head’s like one huge sparkler?’ Eva nodded. ‘But those aren’t just any sparks. They’re your smart sparks.’”

Such teasing serves as “an affirmation of the strength of the relationship between the two individuals, calling attention to the fact that they are close enough that they can say negative things and not take offense. The laughter of both the source [Eva] and the target [Todd] signals that the tease is not taken seriously by either, this can help to increase further the feelings of closeness,” argues Martin (2007, 125).

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Still, the theme of good-natured humor is found in a banter, which is often a kind of teasing exchange between female and male characters. Typical of such incidences is a passage from the book *Of Sound Mind* by Ferris's (2001, 76), in which the character with deafness engages in the following conversation. The signed conversation is printed in a different font from the rest of the passage so that it is clear when words are being spoken and when they are being signed, "I'm envious of you being an only child,' Theo said, and Ivy gave him one of her great smiles. **Have a seat**, she signed to Jeremy. **I doubt you like cookies. Hardly anybody does. But there's a plate of them on the table, and my feelings will be hurt if you don't have at least one.** Jeremy looked uncertainly at Theo. **She's kidding**, Theo signed. **Dig in.**"

Martin (2007, 125) maintains that "teasing can be used for a number of purposes, ranging from prosocial and friendly to hostile and malicious." The examples of teasing discussed above embrace a sort of prosocial and friendly repartee, rather than hostile and aggressive humor.

### Functions of Humor

Most of the identified humor incidences in the reviewed children's books served to entertain others (function #3; n=10) and to show a sense of humor (function #4; n=10). Some other functions of humor assigned to the humor incidences in the reviewed children's books included: allowing others' insight into one's state of mind (function #6; n=8); demeaning others (function #2; n= 6); helping others relax and feel comfortable (function #13; n= 4); playing with others (function #8; n=3); minimizing anxiety (function #10; n=3); reducing boredom (function #11; n=3); expressing feelings (function #20; n=3); and defending one's ego against possible damage (function #21; n=3). Only a couple of the identified humor incidences in the reviewed children's books served the following functions: helping one adjust to a new role (function #7; n=2); facilitating relationship patterns (function #12; n=2); easing tension wrought by new or

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novel stimuli, such as new information (function #14; n=2); and controlling others (function #19; n=2). A single occurrence of the following humor functions was noted: letting others know what I like and dislike (function #16; n= 1); and putting others in their place (function #22; n=1). It is critical to note, though, sometimes more than one plausible function was assigned to a given humor incidence. This approach is consistent with Martin's (2007, 117) finding of multiple functions of humor, in which it is asserted that any number of different functions may be associated with one particular humorous event and that "these are not mutually exclusive, since any given instance of humor may serve more than one function at the same time."

Using humor to entertain others was one of the most frequently identified functions of humor in the in the books reviewed. This function is perhaps best illustrated in the characterization of Hank Zipzer, the main character with a learning disability from the book *Niagara Falls, or Does It?* by Winkler and Oliver (2003, 53-55), who struggles with writing an essay, as is evident in the following scenario, "I sat down at my desk and took out a piece of lined paper. Let's not forget that I'm allergic to lined paper. But I was determined to concentrate and get some of my essay done. Cheerio ran into my room. He started to spin around in a circle. Now let me ask you this: How can a guy concentrate when his dog spends most of his waking hours chasing his tail? ..." This humorous incidence demonstrates that humor can not only entertain the reader but that it also allows others insight into someone's state of mind, another most frequently identified function of humor.

A different common function of humor demonstrated by characters with disabilities is an ability to show a sense of humor. That very ability often includes a talent for creating humor rather than being able to be only amused by something funny. In context of the book *Sparks* by McNamee (2002, 48), the main character, Todd, engages in humor production when he shares

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the following humorous thoughts about his friend, Harvey, “‘Hi, Harvey.’ He sits down beside me. I look around to make sure nobody’s watching. Harvey’s okay, but he always has these stains on his shirt, and his pants are way too short. He’s lucky they can’t assassinate you for being a slob.”

An example of a less frequently identified humor function that serves to help others feel relaxed and comfortable is portrayed through the characters from the book *Hooway for Wodney Wat* by Lestern (1999). More specifically, the main character, Wodney, is portrayed as a shy rat having difficulties with pronouncing his Rs due to speech impairment. This shy character’s disability actually turns into a gift for the benefit of his classmates when it leads to a humorous situation in which Wodney inadvertently drives away the class’s bully, Camilla, who terrorizes the classroom. As a result of this incidence his classmates feel more relaxed and comfortable. That is, Wodney, while playing “Simon Says,” tells everyone to “wake the leaves.” What Wodney really means to say is “rake the leaves,” which is what everyone in the class does except for Camilla who busies herself with “waking up the leaves” instead of raking them:

While Hairy, Minifeet, and Grizzlefriz and the others busied themselves raking, Camilla Capybara grabbed one leaf. “Wake up!” she yelled. She snatched another. “Come on, you. Up, up, up!” ... By now all the other rodents were squealing with laughter. All but Camilla, who frowned. “Stupid leaves. They won’t wake up!” (Lestern 1999, 24-31)

### **What do These Books Teach about Humor in the Context of Disability? Discussion and**

#### **Implications**

The prevalent message in the books reviewed is that children with disability not only appreciate humor but also are capable of producing various types of humor. Considering the fact that individuals with disabilities are often perceived as having a limited ability to appreciate and

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or produce humor (Bruno, Johnson, and Simon 1987; Lyons and Fitzgerald 2004; Reddy, Williams, and Vaughan 2002), this alternative message is especially important for children and adolescents, whether they have or do not have a disability, to hear. Reading about characters with disabilities, who like their able-bodied peers can appreciate and produce humor, can help children and adolescents to see individuals with disabilities as complete people; that is, primarily perceiving individuals with disability as having a potential for humor and perceiving their disability as a secondary issue. Children and adolescents often have limited or misconstrued perceptions of individuals with disability as people, of their condition, and of their lives; they may be either uncomfortable or unwilling to be around them (Andrews 1998). At times, they may even show negative and stereotypical attitudes toward peers with disabilities (Ramseyer 2002).

Reading literature that includes characters with disability alone, however, will not produce change in these perceptions (Landrum 2001). Children and adolescents must be engaged in follow-up discussion and activities (Landrum 2001) that will help them process what they are learning about characters with disability through their reading and by observing the use of humor by their peers with disability in their daily lives. The underlying goal of such scaffolding is to help children and adolescents build an understanding of disability and characters with disability that is authentic, realistic, and affirming (Blaska 2004). A related goal for children and adolescents is to help them arrive at a better understanding of themselves and their relationship with individuals with disability. Rosenblatt's (1995) or Langer's (1992) approaches to reading literature can aid in working towards these goals. Both approaches provide theoretical and pedagogical frameworks that enable readers to step into and out of the world of the characters of

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a given literary text, allowing them to “vicariously experience and learn about disabilities” (Prater 2003, 47).

Many of the books discussed in this article invite such conversations and learning opportunities. In particular, inclusive rather than exclusive representations of disability in the majority of these books move away from portraying a character with a disability in a way that suggests that disability is sufficient to define the character (Blaszczak 2007). That is, humor is considered a viable option in the process of defining and, hence, normalizing (Haller 2003; Rehm and Bradley 2005) the character among his/her able-bodied and able-minded peers. This normalizing effect is evident in these books in the sense that all characters are subject to humorous jabs, including the characters with disabilities who make fun of themselves or initiate and create humor.

Another important message for children and adolescents from this review of literature is that characters with disability are capable of creating humor that not only entertains others, but does so without targeting the disability itself. This understanding and use of humor as entertainment is embraced by comedians with disabilities. “To these comedians, being disabled is simply one possible feature of being human. By joking about their unique problems in terms of situations everyone encounters, they connect with the audiences,” argue Reid, Stoughton, and Smith (2006, 633). The books reviewed for this study provide children and adolescents with the opportunity to learn about many examples of such humor.

To deepen young readers’ understanding of humor in the context of disability, efforts must be made to help them develop knowledge about humor and its positive and negative functions as they read the literature featuring characters with disabilities who utilize various forms of humor (See Table 3. Selective Books with Examples of Types of Humor and Functions

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of Humor). This type of support is critical since humor is difficult to develop and appreciate for young readers from developmental, cognitive, and linguistic perspectives (Semrud-Clikemen and Glass 2008). Teachers, educators, and parents can facilitate such development and provide support by exposing children and adolescence without disabilities to the types of humor that are enjoyed by characters with disabilities as humorists, and by matching that humor with the humor preferences of the-age appropriate peers so that they can emotionally identify with the humor of characters with disabilities and share their perceived humorous intent. After all, humor is also a social process (Semrud-Clikemen and Glass 2008), and it is because of this that teachers, educators, and parents can help children in their “growth of social skills” (1) and “social intelligence” (3) that enable them not only to “identify and understand contextual cues of intent” (3) of the humorist, but that also enable children to engage in “emotional complicity” (3) with the humorist with a disability, that is, sharing a playful frame of mind with the humorist. Similarly, through teacher-led, educator-led, and parent-led conversations, children and adolescents with disabilities will learn about humorous intent common among their able-bodied peers. The following set of questions (See Figure 1, Questioning Disability Humor) developed by Smith and Sapon-Shevin (2008-2009, 12) may serve as a useful tool for teachers and parents to help their students and children to judge the humorous intent of a joke, that is, whether a joke is oppressive and offensive or not. These questions also afford students an opportunity to reflectively consider the ways in which their peers with disabilities are made to feel disliked and rejected or welcomed and included. This recognizing and relating to those with disabilities is critical for forming positive interactions with, and inclusive behaviors toward those with disabilities.

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Finally, even though the portrayals of characters with disabilities are not flattering in the incidences designated as exclusive humor, they still may have some educational value in defusing negative stereotyping of individuals with disabilities. These unflattering portrayals provide material to critically examine prejudices and purported humor generated at the expense of characters with disabilities. We concur with Anderson's admonition (1988, 83), "Students need to be taught to think and read critically. Prejudices and injustice in the world need to be examined and rejected; pretending that prejudice does not exist only leaves our students to face those problems without adult guidance." He also makes the following observation, "Humorous stories involving the trials of the disabled at least bring the humanness of the handicapped to the reader, a reader who otherwise might be moved to pity, or even boredom, by a morality play. In the end, becoming a more tolerant society means exorcising prejudice by examining the things we laugh at, as well as the things we fear (Anderson 1988, 86).

We recommend two samples of material to support such a critical examination. One is Sapon-Shevin's (1999). *Because we can change the world: A practical guide to building cooperative, inclusive classroom communities*. This resource offers anti-bias teaching curricula, including activities such as role-playing, simulation activities, class discussions, games, and songs for the teacher's and parent's use. These activities are designed to help students challenge prejudicial and stereotypical behaviors, such as teasing and sharing offensive jokes that target individuals with disabilities. They also learn how to replace those negative behaviors with positive ones in order to build inclusive classrooms and communities. The second source is Cooper's (2005) text, *Speak up and get along!: Learn the Mighty Might, Thought Chop, and more tools to make friends, stop teasing, and feel good about yourself*. This guide offers

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additional positive-behavior reinforcement strategies for dealing with negative behaviors such as teasing, bullying, and other forms of verbal abuse.

The thrust of this message is that children's literature containing humor about and by persons with disabilities may lend itself not only to teaching about sensitive topics at school and at home, but also influencing affect. Ultimately, characters in these books whose actions are portrayed for humorous effect can be used beneficially and effectively to “challenge our assumptions, [and] to force us to laugh at ourselves rather than at others” (Anderson 1988, 86). The findings from this study can aid teachers, parents, and professionals in selecting such literature and developing constructive discussions about the way humor is utilized by children with disability in this literature.

### **Suggestions for Further Research**

Portrayals of disability, especially those that use humor to make a point, even in literature and other media about children with disabilities, deserve further investigation. Exploring the impact of these images on the notions of disability among children and youth without disability has the potential to better inform teachers, teacher educators, and parents, as they design instruction that critically analyzes these representations on film and in literature. Hopefully, children and youth will learn from this instruction, and compare positive portrayals to the perceptions that they hold about individuals with disabilities. Following this, studies that look at perceptions and behaviors among children and youth before and after exposure to the intervention will serve the goal of attitudinal change. In addition, seeking the voices of both children and youth with and without disabilities, as well as their family members, will enrich these studies. Within this context, reading literature that includes a character's “with disability” viewpoint along with the perspective of their sibling or a close family member, will offer

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alternate angles from which the reader can view outlooks on disability from different stakeholders (Andrews 1998). Such explorations promote dialogue in the classroom and at home that “can begin to deconstruct preconceived notions of disability, which have been deeply ingrained up until this point” (Phelan 2011, 170). Eventually, our viewpoints on disability will themselves recover from the long-standing disability of bias.

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Table 1 Children's Literature About Disability with Humor Incidences

Alexander, S. H. (2000). <i>Do you remember the color blue?</i> New York, NY: Viking.	Libal, A. (2004). <i>My name is not slow.</i> Broomall, PA: Mason Crest Publishers.
Best, C. (2002). <i>Goose's Story.</i> New York, NY: Melanie Kroupa Books.	Lowry, L. (2003). <i>The Silent Boy.</i> Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Books.
Brandenberg, F. (2000). <i>Otto is different.</i> New York, NY: William Morrow & Co.	Martin, A.M. (2002). <i>A Corner of the Universe.</i> New York, NY: Scholastic.
Clements, A. (2002). <i>Things not seen.</i> New York, NY: Philomel Books.	McNamee, G. (2002). <i>Sparks.</i> New York, NY: Wendy Lamb Books.
Creech, S. (2003). <i>Granny Torrelli Makes Soup.</i> New York, NY: Harper Collins.	Millman, I. (2003). <i>Moses goes to the circus.</i> New York, NY: Frances Foster Books.
Davis, P. A. (2000). <i>Brian's Bird.</i> Morton Grove, IL: Albert Whitman & Co.	O'Connor, B. (1999). <i>Me and Rupert Goody.</i> Buffalo, NY: Douglas & McIntyre.
Ferris, J. (2001). <i>Of sound mind.</i> New York, NY: Farrar, Straus & Giroux.	Rodriguez, B. (2000). <i>Sarah's Sleepover.</i> New York, NY: Viking.
Gantos, J. (2000). <i>Joey Pigza loses control.</i> New York, NY: Farrar, Straus & Giroux.	Ross, S. (2001). <i>The Gypsies Never Came.</i> New York, NY: Simon & Schuster
Gavada, A.(2003), <i>95 Pounds of Hope,</i> New York, NY, Viking.	Shriver, M (2001). <i>What's Wrong With Timmy?</i> Boston, MA: Warner Books.
Gifaldi, D. (2001). <i>Ben, king of the river.</i> Morton Grove, IL: Albert Whitman & Co.	Skurzynski, G. (1999). <i>Spider's Voice.</i> New York, NY: Simon & Schuster/Athenaeum.
Hamilton, V. (1999). <i>Bluish.</i> New York, NY: Blue Sky Press.	Willis, J. (1999). <i>Susan laughs.</i> New York, NY: Henry Holt & Company.
Kinsey-Warnock, N. (2002). <i>Lumber Camp Library.</i> New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers.	Wiltshire, P. (2003). <i>Dyslexia.</i> Austin, TX: Raintree Steck-Vaughn.
Korman, C. (2002). <i>Simon's Special Sneeze Test.</i> Bayside, N Y: TSA Publication.	Winkler, H., & Oliver, L. (2003). <i>Niagara Falls, or Does It?</i> New York, NY: Grossett & Dunlap.
Lestern, H. (1999). <i>Hooway for Wodney Wat.</i> New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin Company.	Zimmett, D. (2001). <i>Eddie Enough!</i> Rockville, MD: Woodbine House.

Table 2 A Typology of Functions of Humor

- 
1. To transmit verbally aggressive messages
  2. To demean others
  3. To entertain others
  4. To show a sense of humor
  5. To disarm potentially aggressive others
  6. To allow others insight into another's state of mind
  7. To help one adjust to a new role
  8. To play with others
  9. To decrease another's aggressive behavior
  10. To minimize anxiety
  11. To reduce boredom
  12. To facilitate relationship patterns
  13. To help others relax and feel comfortable
  14. To ease tension wrought by new or novel stimuli, such as a new information
  15. To disclose difficult information
  16. To let others know what I like and dislike
  17. To increase liking by others
  18. To develop one's own sense of humor
  19. To control others
  20. To express feelings
  21. To defend my ego against possible damage
  22. To put others in their place
  23. To avoid telling personal information about myself
  24. To allow one to cope with a serious subject

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Abbreviated from Graham, Papa, and Brooks (1992, 167-168).

## Humor in Literature about Children with Disability

Table 3. Selective Books with Examples of Types of Humor and Functions of Humor

Book	Target Disability	Type (s) of Humor	Function(s) of Humor
Willis, J. (1999). <i>Susan laughs</i> . New York, NY: Henry Holt & Company.	Physical disability (wheelchair)	A humorous story	21 – To defend my ego against possible damage
McNamee, G. (2002). <i>Sparks</i> . New York, NY: Wendy Lamb Books.	Learning Disability	A humorous story/description  A playful banter	3 – To entertain others 20 – To express feelings  6 – To allow others insight into another’s state of mind  8 – To play with others  4 – To show a sense of humor
Millman, I. (2003). <i>Moses goes to the circus</i> . New York, NY: Frances Foster Books.	Deaf/Hearing Impairment	Practical Jokes	3 – To entertain others
Winkler, H., & Oliver, L. (2003). <i>Niagara Falls, or Does It?</i> New York, NY: Grossett & Dunlap.	Dyslexia	A humorous story	3 – To entertain others
Zimmet, D. (2001). <i>Eddie Enough!</i> Rockville, MD: Woodbine House.	ADHD	Teasing	2 To demean others.
Gifaldi, D. (2001). <i>Ben, king of the river</i> . Morton Grove, IL: Albert Whitman & Co.	Developmental disability	A teasing exchange	2 To demean others.
Gantos, J. (2000). <i>Joey Pigza loses control</i> . New York, NY: Farrar, Straus & Giroux.	ADHD	Jokes	4 – To show a sense of humor

## Humor in Literature about Children with Disability

Figure 1. Questioning Disability Humor

In the presence of a person with this disability, would you be comfortable sharing this joke? Hearing this joke?

Does this joke laugh AT or WITH?

Is there a cost? Is it exploitive? Who benefits?

Does this joke make you feel

empathy

closeness

understanding

more relaxed with . . .

Does it . . .

tell you "they" are irrevocably different

make you feel more distant from "them"

give the impression they are somehow less than human

provide/reinforce incorrect information about the disability

make you likely to be tense or awkward in the presence of a person with this disability.

From Smith and Sapon-Shevin (2008-2009, 12)