Characters with special needs in the contemporary children's books: The role of education in community building versus social stereotypes

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Abstract

Literary books for children and adolescents help promote certain attitudes, values and forms of behaviour; to all intents and purposes they constitute a very important form of social and cultural education. This paper studies the representations of characters with disabilities in 28 Children's Literature books and examines their ideological position with regard to contemporary depictions of infirmity. Indeed, children's books may well reinforce negative or inaccurate beliefs and stereotypes on disability, perpetuating any stigma against people with disabilities in the process. The methodology used is that of Roger Forster's 'typology of characters,' modified and supplemented by the more recent work of Maria Nikolajeva, Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, and Raymond Jones. Our results show that many of the books, dating from the first decade of the twenty-first century continue to reproduce stereotypes on disability instead of subverting them. The analysis is focused on the social context of these narrations in order to reveal the relation between the characters of people with Special Needs and educational citizenship.

Keywords: *special needs, character, children's literature, educational citizenship.*

Introduction

We can encounter images of disabled people in text - from Pindaros, Plato and Aristophanes - as individuals lagging behind in human nature. In the Old Testament the disabled person is "responsible" for their condition, while disease and physical abnormality are God's punishments for sins of the past; a view that also permeates the Christian tradition and ethics in which disease is consider to be the will of God and usually leads to purification. Disabled children were abused until the 19th century, an era where beating was a very well known "treatment" for any type of disability (Zoniou-Sideri, 1998, p. 22). But modern history's most inhuman attitude and conduct is recorded in the 3rd Rich's Germany, as since 1938, Hitler with the creation of special services, arranged for the extermination of thousands of disabled people as they did not conform to the ideal of the Aryan race. Today, the prevalence of new ideas and the progress of science has led to the revision and redefinition of a large number of obsolete views that made the disabled person incapable of being sufficiently and equivalently trained as the rest of the people and of participating in decision-making mechanisms and in social life in general.

Disability is hard to determine and delineate (Zaimakis & Kandilaki 2005), as it is associated with the social and productive relations, the institutions, the prevailing

standards and the historical and social conditions in which the disabled person lives and operates (Alevriadou & Lang, 2011, Zaimakis & Kandilaki, 2005). The sum of all conceptual specifications of disability results either from the medical model view (emphasizing on the pathology and the anatomy of the impairment) or the social model view (the prevailing trend in industrialized societies focusing on the sociocultural, economic and political system which is incapable of meeting the disabled people's needs)[1]. It should be added here that there is a holistic model which attempts a synthesis of the more positive aspects of these models and recognizes disability as a state of dynamic interaction between health status and other personal and environmental factors. Disability considers being any long-term impairment resulting in social and economic disadvantages, refutation of rights and restriction of opportunities for equal participation in the life of community (McEwan & Butler, 2007).

Disability in Literature

Disabled characters in 18th and 19th century literature are described as "sensitive", "pale", "thin", "small in size", "deformed", "weak". But these disadvantages bring them closer to God, make them continuously happy, willing, kind and unselfish. Even if the character is at the centre of the story, their role is usually passive, without agency or participation in what happens around them. There are a few exceptions to this, mainly found in biographical stories written in the 19th century, as exemplified by the well-known disabled American writer Hellen Keller (*The Story of My Life,* 1903). However, in general, the character of the disabled heroes is related to their physical condition, while very few of them have fully developed personalities (The blind child 1791, The deaf-mute child 1837, The blind child and his icons 1856, The blind Alice 1868 etc). In the 20th century books, children with disabilities are described in more positive terms (Dowker, 2004). Most of the modern writers use less descriptive adjectives than their predecessors, choosing instead verbs to portray disabled characters (Button on her ear 1976, Don't be sad about Paul etc). The emphasis is now placed on their abilities and not to their ontology. The disabled book heroes are rarely passive, while even when the story is focused on other members of their family, readers have the opportunity to know about their lives and their characters. The writers' didactic goal becomes obvious with the inclusion of the social and psychological impacts that the young disabled are faced with and without the strong religious tone of older works (Keith, 2004). It should be mentioned that despite the realism that distinguishes them, the role of these characters, in these narratives, is still determined by their disadvantages illustrating most of the writers' lack of knowledge on what it really means to be disabled; sometimes resulting in

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[1] Nowadays with the term impairment we determine "any loss or abnormality of psychological, physiological or anatomical structure or function" while the term disability refers to "any restriction or lack (resulting from an impairment) of ability to perform an activity in the manner or within the range considered normal for a human being" and the term handicap to "a disadvantage for a given individual that limits or prevents the fulfillment of a role that is normal" (Hughes & Paterson, 1997. Oliver, 1996).

gross inaccuracies (Biklen & Bogdan, 1977). For example, characters that had lost their feet in an accident can somehow walk by themselves in one week (Voight, 1986).

Until very recently the readers of children's books on disabled characters were very few (Beckett et al, 2010, Booktrust, 2006); as a result these books were published by small publishers (Favazza et al, 2000) making almost impossible the claiming of strong positions on the shelves of bookstores and libraries. Unlike the past (see Little, 1986 for a review) children's stories are now used as a tool of strategies aiming at a healthy social and emotional development of disabled children who recognize in them familiar situations and also as a means of understanding the issues related to these disabilities (Huck, 2001). It is certainly encouraging the fact that, in recent years, the idea that disabilities in children's books should be positively highlighted and not focused only on their stereotypical characteristics, is strongly supported through research (Blaska, 2003, Pirofski, 2001, Prater, 2003, Saunders, 2004). The small analogy of disabled characters in children's books is evidently revealed in research carried out by Blaska and Lynch (1998). In 500 awarded and popular children's (until the age of 8) books that were published between 1987 and 1991, only ten of them (2%) include disabled people in their plot or their pictures, and from them, only six have disabled people as an integral part of their story. The limited presence of disabled people underlines the need for more stories that will represent the society's diversity which includes people with different and diverse abilities. Nevertheless, the frequency of stereotypes used in the representation of disability in children's literature was significantly reduced after the introduction of the legislation on the rights of the disabled even though most of these books lack in literary quality (Harrill et al, 1993. Meekosha, 2004). Gradually, disability emerges as a small but considerable thematic field which includes some of the major children's book writers, like the awarded British authors, Jacqueline Wilson and Tim Bowler, the New Zealand Margaret Mahy, the American Cynthia Voigt, the Australians Colin Thiele, Patricia Wrightson, and John Marsden, who have included disability in their books, taking it away from the stereotypical representations and didactical teaching and bringing it to the sphere of substantial human experience by focusing on the individual character and its story.

In the domain of Greek research, works on the position of disability in literature and especially in children's books are scarce (Karakitsios, 2001, Rigatos, 1989, Stathatou, 2004, Tasiopoulos, 2006) and confirm in national scale the above mentioned results of international research i.e. the last few years there has been an increase in books concerned with disabilities and these approaches are gradually free from devalued and diminishing representations although prejudice and stereotypes are still there. However, as for example the children's ecology stories, even the possibility of a new narrative type, something like the *disabled child's novel*, is under no circumstances considered (Karakitsios, 2001).

Method, research data and goals

The term characters[2] is generally used to declare the sum of the special spiritual, emotional and social qualities, the inherent properties and forms of behavior that distinguish one person. Nevertheless, in literature the term designates one person or, in the case of Children's literature, often a personified animal or an animated object. Humans, fairies, dragons, witches, mermaids, animals, every living existence or inanimate object (anthropomorphism) in a poem, in a theatrical play, in a narrative are literature characters which can evolve (Kotopoulos & Papantonakis, 2011).

The literary hero as the subject of action with psychological characteristics (Aristotle in Poetics talks about praxis and ethos situating the two approaches on literature character as poetic reason without psychological characteristics and as psychological form with personality) is considered in modern international bibliography either as a "real" person (mimetic trend) or as a textual verbal construction (*semiotics*) or as a blending of these two theoretical schemata, but in any case necessary for the existence of literary text. The work of Nikolajeva *The Rhetoric of Character in Children's Literature* (2002), which investigates characters both on the narrative plane (thus giving a typology of literary characters) and on the plane of the storyline, remains monumental for the analysis of Children's literature.

In our research we have studied 28 purely children's books (see Appendix), which are the sum of the available Greek and foreign writers children's books with references on disabilities for the decade between 2000-2010 and of all publishers in the Greek market in late December 2010. The research questions which will allow us to explore the role and the functions of the disabled modern children's books characters in Greece are concerned with:

- 'quoting' disabled heroes' characteristics (name, age, description, clothing, habits etc.)
- the direct and indirect textual indexes of perceiving the disabled characters, as well as the narrative techniques (we are based on Genette's (1972, 1983) complete proposal)
- the typology of characters

Comments

In 8 books, disability is announced in their title (in several other is implied), although there are no language choices referring to medical terms and on the other, emphasis is placed on relationships, emotions and the interaction of the disabled with their social environment (it is not bad to be different, the midget and the little shrimp, I am special…, The bee with the broken wing, the mountain of midgets etc.). It is worth noting that in the majority of books, disability is presented right from the start of the story and is the main factor of its development. The type of disability that more

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[2] For the formation of a Children's literature theoretical researchers have been relied on the views of E.M. Forster (1963), which however have been modified or supplemented by newer researchers like Maria Nikolajeva, Shlomith Rimmon – Kenan, Raymond Jones etc.

frequently appears in these stories (often referring to second characters) is motor disorders (11) and body impairments (5), which most of the times creates movement barriers. Sensory disabilities follow with visual (7), hearing (2) and speech impairments (2), while in a smaller frequency we find references in intellectual disability (1), Down syndrome (2), learning difficulties (2), brain disorders (1), autism, mental disorder (1), and multiple disabilities (1).

In 24 books the protagonist is disabled, while in several of these cases, besides the protagonist other disabled second characters (11) also appear. The literary disabled character has most of the cases human form (20), while in 6 stories is an animal, in 1 a plant and we can also find one case in which is an inanimate object. The disabled's external description is recorded in the two thirds of the books and is almost exclusively concerned with the disability status, which is usually conveyed with phrases like: "I, as you can see, have no hands nor legs", while in other cases the element of the inability to participate due to the disability exists and it is frequently accompanied by evaluative comments like: "the poor guy has no eyes". Clothing reflects their social and economic status. The role of the subject with disability appears most of the time dynamic and in some cases spherical (totally developed with most of his/her characteristics revealed through the storyline). Nevertheless, in one third of the books disabled heroes are presented flat (not sufficiently developed as characters) and stereotypical (consecrating specific characteristics with a determined cultural context).

In most stories, the characters with disabilities appear not to have any particular talents than the rest of the book's heroes. But in some cases they appear to be mentally gifted beyond the other heroes: "greatness of soul, tenderness, kindness," while 3 of them are presented with a good voice and a musical talent. In cases of sensory impairments, one other sense is distinguished by its greater development. Other gifts mentioned are the talent in sports (if intellectual disability) and a strong memory (if multiple disabilities). Thus, a substantial shift is recorded in the manner of presenting the skills of disabled characters. The attention now is focused on what the disabled can accomplish and not on what they cannot do because of their "deficiencies" and these accomplishments not because of special skills or talents given to them by God, as was customary in previous years, but mainly as a result of their personal effort. Quicke (1985), while investigating the representation of disability in children's books, emphatically notes that the authors could legitimately avoid the traditional "happy end". The content of the narrative seems to be unrealistic and in the limits of the impossible. Children's books by Greek publishers have, most of the time, a happy and optimistic end, following the traditional path of children's stories.

The literary characters finally face their disability positively in less than half the stories, while negatively are recorded in the daily lives of the subjects, especially in their social and interpersonal relations. In only 4 stories, in which characters play a secondary role, there are no positive or negative reports. Most of the time there is a positive image in the interaction of a disabled person within their family environment. Most families seem to overwhelmingly support the disabled person, even though in some, limited cases, acceptance is the final stage, as a result of the successive negative stages which include shame, rejection, isolation and finally a change of attitude. However, in several stories (11) there is no reference to the family of the hero with disabilities. In the wider social

field and in particular with regards to the rest of the storyline's characters' attitudes, we find that nearly one third of the stories deal with them positively, while only 3 have recorded having clearly a negative response. Finally, in the vast majority of books, the hero who appears with a disability is not just positive in his/her interaction with the social environment, but he/she intensively seeks joining it and participating in the activities that it entails. At the same time, the need to accept and develop ties of friendship that characterizes the disabled hero is highlighted. Amongst all the above, the central message is that disability is not an insurmountable obstacle in life, followed by a lower incidence of instructional messages, such as that disability should not be an element of discrimination, isolation, and social eviction, but must be respected and treated with understanding and love.

It is worth noting that in 18 of the 28 stories, references to doctors or special scientists are absent. We observe that the opinion of many researchers is here verified: writers should first research and come closer to the real facts of the disabilities they present in their books and not render approximate or totally false realities on them (Saunders, 2004). The results of our study do not support the element of realism as most of the books include non-realistic aspects, while at the same time totally unrealistic storylines can be found. Disability, together with its features and the situations that come with it, is being forged with many fictional elements or it is shown in a beautified manner that it is eventually presented with a corrupted image. Only in 2 books, there are sufficiently realistic data, having even references on the current legislative framework, the official stance of the state and the media towards people with disabilities, always accompanied by caustic comments. Today, it is claimed that an important element of inclusion is the information given through children's stories on disabilities, meet the real circumstances that the disabled are faced with (Matthew & Clow, 2007). The inclusion of disabled heroes should be natural without disability been directive or emphatic (Scope, 2006), while characters should have realistic personalities and not been portrayed in an obsolete and stereotypical manner (Booktrust, 2009).

In several stories (more than the one third), first person narration is chosen with an internal focus, where the narrator is dramatized and participates as a protagonist in the storyline, a not that common choice in children's literature. Thus, many writers of literature texts place the character-role with disability in the center of narration adopting his/her subjective view of family, school and friends. This gives readers the opportunity to penetrate more the world of disability, to feel their joy and pain and also to face their own prejudices and stereotypes. Unexpectedly, many children's stories move towards this direction, while the rest follow the third person protagonist narration.

The icon-representation of the disabled is structured by their own words and thoughts. Having little details and narrative signifiers, heroes confess the ways in which face themselves and mostly how others confront them. At the same time, the non realistic manner in which most of the time their situation is presented and the permanent optimism that exists as a message that allows for a melodramatic element to penetrate these stories. The trend of the past that needs the presence of accompanying objects as signifiers of disability is also detected in this dictate's books ie the wheelchair as a determinant of motor problems, the black glasses as characteristic of blindness – there is also a reference of a glass eye – all are there to strengthen the stereotypical image of

disability. Encouraging, however, is the fact that there references – even though minimum – on modern signifiers of disability like computers used as tools of reading by people faced with visual impairments.

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Appendix

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