

On the same page

Alexandra Strick and Sean Stockdale

In this article, two newly published authors comment on the need for children's books which promote positive attitudes towards disability. Sean Stockdale, a former advanced skills teacher for ICT and English, is now working for the National Association for Special Educational Needs. Alexandra Strick is a consultant to Booktrust and co-founder of *Outside in World* and *Inclusive Minds*, and is also a former youth worker and teacher of English as a foreign language.

Select ten children's books at random, and if even one of them features a character with any form of disability, we would be very surprised indeed. Even where such characters do appear, the depiction of disability is not always wholly positive. Historically, books such as *Heidi* (Spyri 1872), *What Katy Did* (Woolsey 1872), *The Secret Garden* (Hodgson Burnett 1911) and *Pollyanna* (Porter 1913) all do little to challenge the preconception that people with disabilities are either bitter and twisted or in need of our pity and charity. Whilst things have improved, there is still a very long way to go before an adequate number of characters with disabilities appear naturally and positively alongside any other characters. While many publishers, libraries, bookshops and schools have taken great strides in improving the range of culturally diverse books they offer, inclusive books (by this we mean texts which in a natural way include characters with any form of disability or special educational need) have continued to remain largely off the radar.

The context

If we consider the fact that approximately 20 per cent of the school population has a special educational need and around six per cent of children in the UK have a disability, it does seem strange that we are not considering this more in the vast wealth of literature that we make available to children and young adults. The Crime Survey for England and Wales shows the number of people experiencing a disability hate crime in the year 2010-2011 exceeded 65,000, and we know that such crimes are consistently underreported. If we are to tackle the attitudes and stereotypes that lead to behaviour such as this, we need to ensure that children are exposed to 'naturally' inclusive books throughout their schooling and as part of a general programme of raising awareness of issues around disability, equality and acceptance.

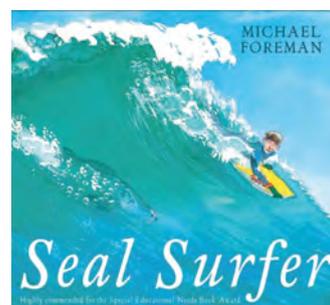
Natural inclusion

Children's books need to normalise or 'usualise' disability. They need to include people with disabilities alongside other characters, without always using the disability as a form of 'shorthand' to tell us something about the character, as an 'issue' to be addressed or as a hook, twist or punch line in the plot. Books that do this well include *Seal Surfer* (Foreman 2006), *The Great Big Book of Families* (Hoffman

2010) and many titles by the publisher Child's Play. All these books feature children with disabilities alongside non-disabled characters without any comment.

Disabled heroes and heroines

Of course, in addition to including disability naturally and subtly, children's books also need to show people with disabilities as protagonists. Books such as *Susan Laughs* (Willis 1999) succeed in reminding readers that children with disabilities like to do the same things as any other children, without the stories being specifically 'about' disability. Likewise, *Dan and Diesel* (Hudson 2006) focuses on the positive relationship between a child and his guide dog, as opposed to the subject of visual impairment. *Best Friends* (Chambers 2011) shows two friends (one of whom happens to use a wheelchair) engaging in all sorts of imaginative play, in a glorious pop-up celebration of friendship. As children reach the age of ten or eleven, the number of books featuring characters with disabilities increases with the likes of *Scribble Boy* (Ridley 1997), *The London Eye Mystery* (Dowd 2010) and the Percy Jackson books (Riordan), to name but a few.



Discussing disability

As well as ensuring that children are exposed to books that include disability without comment, there may of course also be appropriate opportunities to discuss disability issues more overtly.

In such cases, a good starting point may be the recent Olympics and Paralympics. Another route in can be that

of sharing examples of public figures and people to whom children can easily relate. Let's consider dyslexia as an example. It is a term with which many children will be familiar, and yet it is often completely misunderstood and even feared. It might well help children to develop more positive attitudes towards the condition if they were to know that a multitude of famous and successful people past and present in fact share the experience of dyslexia. The list includes Richard Branson, Steve Jobs, Keira Knightley, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Agatha Christie, John Lennon, Jamie Oliver, Steve Redgrave and Albert Einstein. All of these famous figures are examples of people whom author Sally Gardner (herself dyslexic) describes as 'outside the box' thinkers. Gardner believes that there has never been a better time for thinking differently and using different ways to cope and succeed.

Children's books can play an important part in developing positive attitudes towards the condition. Books such as *Hudson Hates School* (Hudson 2011) demonstrate how challenging it can be to experience dyslexia but how dramatically things can change if children are given the right support.

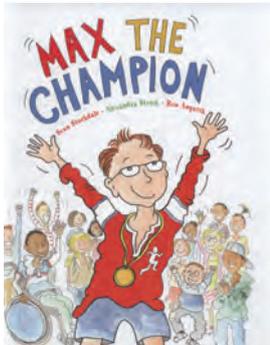
There is clearly a need for more books which help to offset the attitudes that reinforce the oversimplified or negative perceptions of dyslexia, and wider issues of disability.

Not just wheelchairs

Teachers and librarians will also no doubt want to look out for children's books which remind children that 'disability' does not always mean 'wheelchairs', but also other forms of physical disability, sensory impairment, learning disability and invisible conditions. Some of these forms of disability are better represented than others. For example, books featuring characters on the autistic spectrum or characters who are deaf are starting to appear more frequently, whilst characters who have complex needs or learning disabilities are rarely if ever included naturally and positively in books.

Thankfully there is a small but growing bank of inclusive books for teachers and school librarians to choose from. However such titles are still few and far between and there are some forms of disability which rarely if ever appear in the pages of a mainstream children's book.

Max the Champion



It was our work in this area, and our shared belief that every child should be able to see her or himself in books, that led us to develop our own picture book, *Max the Champion*, illustrated by Ros Asquith (Stockdale & Strick 2013).

Max the Champion is one of a number recent of books that seek to include a more diverse range of characters. Aimed at key stage 1, Max is a typical young

boy who is mad about sport; if you look a little closer you might notice that woven into the natural landscape of the book are all sorts of tiny inclusive details - a hearing aid, tactile paving, Makaton images in the classroom, a child with Cherubism, someone with an oxygen tube and much more. The characters are not defined by their disability. However they are children with forms of disability which have rarely if ever appeared within the pages of a children's book.

Finding inclusive books

Thankfully, sourcing the best inclusive books is easier than it used to be. The national charity Booktrust offers a website dedicated to the subject of disability and books (www.bookmark.org.uk) and includes a book of the month. Another source of inclusive picture books is the excellent 'In the Picture' resource, run by Scope (www.childreninthepicture.org.uk) which includes a library of positive images as well as book recommendations.

Books for Keeps online regularly reviews books showing children with disabilities (www.booksforkeeps.co.uk). Finally, don't miss www.healthybooks.org.uk and www.inclusiveminds.com for ideas and inspiration when choosing children's books showing diversity in a natural way.

Children's books

- Chambers, M. (2008) *Best Friends*. Tango Books. ISBN 9781857077117.
- Dowd, S. (2010) *The London Eye Mystery*. David Fickling Books. ISBN 9781849920445.
- Foreman, M. (1997) *Seal Surfer*. Random House. ISBN 9781842705780.
- Hodgson Burnett, F. (1911) *The Secret Garden*. Now available in a 1993 edition by Wordsworth Editions Ltd. ISBN 9781853261046.
- Hoffman, M. (2010, illus. Ros Asquith) *The Great Big Book of Families*. Frances Lincoln Books. ISBN 9781845079994.
- Hudson, C. (2006) *Dan and Diesel*. Red Fox. ISBN 0099475855.
- Hudson, E. (2011) *Hudson Hates School*. Frances Lincoln Books. ISBN 9781847803757.
- Porter, E. H. (1913) *Pollyanna*. Now available in a 2012 edition by Wordsworth Editions Ltd. ISBN 9781840226751.
- Ridley, P. (1997) *Scribble Boy*. Penguin Books. ISBN 9780140368949.
- Riordan, R. (2006) *Percy Jackson and the Lightning Thief*. Puffin Books. ISBN 9780141319131.
- Spyri, J. (1872) *Heidi*. Now available in a 2011 edition by Simon & Brown. ISBN 9781613820278.
- Stockdale, S. and Strick, A. (2013) *Max the Champion*. Frances Lincoln Books. ISBN 9781847803887.
- Willis, J. (1999, illus. Tony Ross) *Susan Laughs*. Andersen Press. ISBN 9780805065015.
- Woolsey, S. C. (1872) *What Katy Did*. Now available in a 1994 edition by Wordsworth Editions Ltd. ISBN 9781853261312.

Information about all aspects of disability is available from media sites, for example Children and Young People Now: www.cypnow.co.uk.