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## Attitudes Toward and Images of Children with Special Needs

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# Attitudes Toward and Images of Children with Special Needs

## **Cover Page Footnote**

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## Attitudes Toward and Images of Children with Special Needs

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### Abstract:

The media and literature play significant roles in shaping children's attitudes toward children with special needs. Indeed, several research studies indicate that people with special needs were often portrayed negatively and inaccurately in children's literature books. To date, no study has been found that investigated the available Arabic and/or English children's literature books in the UAE to see how people with special needs are portrayed. The aim of this study, therefore, was twofold: a) to analyse children's literature which feature books with special needs characters, and b) to examine the differences between Arabic and English children's literature portrayal of people with special needs. One hundred and nine children's literature books were reviewed. Findings of this study indicate that people with special needs were portrayed negatively in English and Arabic children's literature books.

**Keywords:** attitudes, images, children literature, individuals with special needs, UAE

## Introduction

Attitudes Toward and Images of Children with Special Needs With the inclusion movement, today many United Arab Emirates (UAE) students with special needs are included in the general education classrooms. The UAE Federal Law No. (29) of 2006 law defines a person with special needs as every person suffering from a temporary or permanent, full or partial deficiency or infirmity in his physical, sensory, mental, communicational, educational or psychological abilities to an extent that limits his possibility of performing the ordinary requirements as people without special needs” (Federal Law No. 29).

Since students without disabilities or special needs have no prior experience or direct contact with students with special needs, they usually fear the individual with special needs (e.g., Bryant & Bryant, 2003). Much of the discomfort people feel about disability may stem from a lack of direct contact and from the media. Although the media plays a significant role in shaping children without special needs’ attitudes toward children with special needs, the media’s information about people with special needs usually consists of images distributed by negative attitudes, myths and stereotypes (e.g., Biklen and Bogdan, 1977; Blaska & Lynch, 1994).

Reading and listening to books is one way that children can learn to respect and become comfortable around children with special needs. Certainly, children’s collections in libraries need to reflect the diversity in their communities. Historically, children with special needs are mostly excluded from children’s literature, and when they are included, they are portrayed in literature as either the "brave little soul" or the "poor little thing” (Campbell, 2006).

Recently with the enactment of the international laws that call for including children with special needs into the regular education classrooms, there has been an increased interest in children’s books about special needs. In 2006, the United Nations adopted the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Special needs (CRPD) that intends to achieve equality for people with special needs in all areas of life, including inclusive education. In 2013, 134 countries around the world have adopted the CRPD (Kanter, Damiani & Ferri , 2014). Although several countries around the world support the CRPD and have passed laws (e.g., IDEA, UAE Federal Law no. 29) to protect the right

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of individual with special needs in education, children's literature continues to portray children with special needs in a negative way.

Riley (2005) indicated that little has changed in the portrayals of individuals with special needs in the media since the 1920s. He found that people with special needs are represented as "the medical miracle" and "the object of pity" in various forms of media. According to Riley (2005), the portrayal of people with special needs in the media is usually negative. In 1977, Biklen and Bogdan surveyed a range of classic literature to determine how individuals with special needs are portrayed. They have identified ten major stereotypes that are commonly used in the media to portray people with special needs. In a study that examined how people with special needs are portrayed in graphic novels for young adults, Irwin and Moeller (2010) found that the portrayals of people with special needs in graphic novels mostly fit a negative stereotypical image.

Since literature tends to reflect the values of society, more books are being published with characters who are disabled throughout the years. According to a study undertaken by Ayala (1999) that analysed books published between 1974 and 1996, it has been found that there is a rise in the overall number of books being published during this period and a greater diversity of special needs being portrayed in various publications. But, many research studies indicated that people with special needs were often portrayed negatively in children's literature (Kendrick, 2004; Riley, 2005). Those researchers indicated that this group of people were often negatively and erroneously presented in children's literature books. For instance, many negative stereotypes prevailed in children's literature books such as pitiful, pathetic, or a burden and incapable of fully participating in the events of everyday life. Additionally, Dyches, Prater, and Cramer (2001) examined books published in 1997 and 1998, and found that characters with mental retardation or autism were used primarily as catalysts for change in characters without a disability. The most common disabilities portrayed in children's literature are either orthopaedic, autism or visual impairments (e.g., Ayala, 1999).

Children's literature presents world view for youngsters through which they construct, reconstruct and deconstruct their ideas about the world. Children's literature functions as a mirror of different realities for children (Blaska, 2004), therefore, all young children need to have the opportunity to learn about different types of disabilities. Although it is necessary for children to learn about individuals with special needs, individuals with special needs were often not included in literature. In 1994, Blaska and Lynch reviewed 500 award-winning and highly recommended books for children between 1987-1991. Of the books that were reviewed, ten books (2%) only included persons

with special needs in the storyline or illustrations (Blaska, 2004). In another study, Blaska (2000) reviewed 40 early childhood programs in Minnesota looking at the diversity of the children's literature books. She found that few books included characters with special needs, and 42% of the classrooms had one or two books with characters with special needs or illness (Blaska, 2004).

Since the inclusion model has been implemented in Western countries during the 1980s, it is expected that English literature would be more inclusive and diverse in comparison to Arabic children's literature.

It is apparent from the relevant literature review that previously people with special needs were often excluded from children's literature (e.g., Blaska, 2004). And, when they were included, people with special needs were often portrayed negatively or inaccurately in children's literature (e.g., Blaska, 2004; Riley, 2005). To date, no studies have been found that reviewed the Arabic and/or English children's literature for the inclusion and depiction of persons with special needs in the UAE. Since the role of media and literature in shaping children's attitudes toward students with special needs is significant, it is critical to analyse the available children's literature books in the United Arab Emirates University (UAEU) libraries for the inclusion and depiction of persons with special needs. This study, therefore, seeks to find answers for the following specific questions: 1) Is there any difference between how people with special needs are portrayed in Arabic and English children's literature?; 2) In what ways are these portrayals manifested in Arabic and English children's literature?, and 3) Do the illustrations promote positive or negative images of individuals with special needs?

## Method

### Sample:

The sample for this study was drawn from the available Arabic and English children's literature books in the United Arab Emirates University (UAEU) libraries during 2015/16 academic year. To select the sample, a random sample of the available children's literature books in the UAEU libraries were included in this study.

One hundred and nine children literature books (67 were Arabic children literature books & 42 were English children's literature books) were reviewed. The English children's literature books were published between 1900-2010, and the Arabic children's literature books were published between 1925-2010. Of the books that were reviewed, 33.94% (28 in Arabic

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language and 9 in English) only included characters with special needs in the storyline and/or illustrations (see Appendix C & D for the list of children literature books in the sample).

In the interest of trustworthiness, the disability was considered a disability when it is clearly illustrated, described, or stated by the authors of the stories.

A qualitative analysis was used using the ‘Images and Encounters Profile’, a tool developed by Blaska and Lynch (Blaska, 1996) with ten criteria for reviewing books with characters with special needs. The ‘Images and Encounters Profile’ checklist was adapted to suit the purpose of the study and the UAE culture. For instance, the word ‘illness’ was deleted from items 4, 5, and 6; ‘Judy’ was changed to ‘Ahmed’ in item 8; and one more item was added to focus on the pictures and images of the stories (see the modified version of the ‘Images and Encounters Profile’ in Appendix A & B). The checklist which includes the ten criteria developed by Blaska and Lynch was translated. To ensure the content validity of the instrument in the cultural context, the revised instrument was translated and back translated.

Four UAEU undergraduate students were responsible for reviewing 109 English and Arabic children’s literature books during 2015/16 academic year. UAEU undergraduate students were asked to review all the stories that were included in the sample to identify the literature books that include characters with special needs. All participating undergraduate students were hired and trained by the researcher to use the ‘Images and Encounters Profile’ checklist. Different children’s literature genres were explored in this study including fiction and nonfiction books. The participating undergraduate students were asked to check “YES” if the book includes individuals with disability and to check “NO” if the story does not include characters with special needs. Then the participating undergraduate students were divided into two groups (Group A & B). Each group includes two undergraduate students. Group A students were asked to review the English children literature stories and Group B students were asked to review the Arabic children literature books that include characters with special needs by using the modified version of the ‘Images and Encounters Profiles’ that was developed by Blaska and Lynch in 1996 (Blaska, 2004; See Appendix A & B). The participating undergraduate students were asked to check “YES” if the criterion was addressed positively, “NO” if the criterion was addressed negatively, and “NP” (Not Present) if the criterion was not present. If the students check “NO”, supporting evidence should be presented. Finally, UAEU undergraduate students were asked to review each other’s work to determine the inter-rater agreement. The inter-rater agreement was high (94%) in the current study.

## Results

This study aims to answer the following research questions:

- 1) Is there any difference between how people with special needs portrayed in Arabic and English Children Literature?;
- 2) In what ways are this portrayals manifested in Arabic and English Children Literature?;
- 3) Do the illustrations promote positive or negative images of individuals with special needs?. Each question will be analysed separately below.

- 1) Is there any difference between how people with special needs are portrayed in Arabic and English children's literature? A total of 109 children literature books published between 1900-2010 were reviewed to answer this question. Of these books, 67 (61.5%) were in Arabic and 42 (38.5%) were in English language. The Arabic and English children's literature books were also reviewed for the inclusion of disability. Of the 67 Arabic children's literature books, 29 (43%) included individuals with special needs, and of the 42 English children's literature books, 9 (21.4%) included people with special needs. So, findings of this study indicated that more books contained individual with special needs in the Arabic children's literature books than in the English literature books. Overall, 34.5% (38 out of 110) of children's books represented characters with special needs (38 out of 110). The most common special needs portrayed in the English and Arabic children's literature books were the about autism special needs. Lists of the books including the title, author, year published, and publisher are provided in Appendix C and D.

With regard to how people with special needs are portrayed in English and Arabic children's literature books, no differences were found between how people with special needs are portrayed in English and Arabic literature books. Overall, people with special needs were portrayed negatively in the Arabic and ENGLISH children's literature books based on the "Images and Encounter Profile" checklist.

- 2) In what ways are these portrayals manifested in Arabic and English children's literature? To answer this question, the Arabic and English children's literature books including characters with special needs were reviewed using the "Images and Encounter Profile" checklist. Findings of this study indicated that people with special needs were portrayed negatively in English and Arabic children's literature books. More

specifically, seventy percent of the Arabic children's literature books presented students with special needs negatively. The stories do not promote the attitudes of "one of us," but it promotes the "one of them" attitude. In Arabic and English literature, children were labelled according to their special needs and they were portrayed negatively and stereotypically as 'sad,' 'incompetent,' 'failure,' 'sick', 'idiot,' and 'helpless'. For instance, one of the stories presents a girl with special needs as tired and incapable of walking on her own. Her friends have to help her to walk. Additionally, 30% of the Arabic literature books portrayed individuals with special needs not in a realistic manner. They were portrayed as having unusual emotional or physical characteristics and superior intellectual abilities. A limited number of books demonstrate respect for and acceptance of people with special needs in the Arabic children's literature books. Sixty-five percent of the English children's literature books promote empathy toward individuals with special needs. More specifically, characters with special needs were portrayed in the storylines negatively as 'weak,' 'helpless,' and 'unhappy from life'. The remaining stories represent the actions and achievements of the people with special needs as heroic.

- 3) Do the illustrations promote positive or negative images of individuals with special needs? Findings of this study indicated that the pictures and images in the English and Arabic children's literature books help to develop negative images about individuals with special needs. More specifically, characters with special needs were portrayed in the illustration as either "sad", "lonely", "helpless", "incapable of doing things" or "sick". For instance, in one story the image of a child with disability was presented as thin, sad, and laying down in his bed. These pictures create sad emotions in the readers. Very few illustrations portrayed individuals with special needs positively as "soldiers" and "heroes".

### Discussion

This study aims to explore the difference between how people with special needs are portrayed in English and Arabic literature, and the ways these portrayals are manifested. In addition to that, this study aims to answer the question of whether the illustrations promote positive or negative images of individuals with special needs.

A total of 109 children's literature books published between 1900-2010 were reviewed to answer the research questions. Of these books, 67 (61.5%) were in Arabic and 42 (38.5%) were in English language. Of the 67 Arabic children's literature books, 29 (43%) included individuals with special needs;

of the 42 English children's literature books, 9 (21.4%) included people with special needs. Overall, 34.5% (38 out of 109) of children's books represented characters with special needs (38 out of 110). So findings of this study revealed that few Arabic and English literature books include characters with special needs. This finding corroborates results of previous studies that found that individuals with special needs were mostly not included in children's literature (e.g., Blaska, 2004). In addition to that, based on the results of this study, it appears that when people with special needs are represented in storylines and/or images; those portrayals most frequently fit a negative stereotypical image. In the Arabic children's literature books, children were labelled according to their special needs and they were portrayed negatively and stereotypically as sad, incompetent, failures, sick, idiots, and helpless. Additionally, the English children's literature books portrayed individuals with special needs in the storylines negatively as weak, helpless and unhappy with life. This finding confirms findings of previous studies which indicated that people with special needs were often portrayed negatively in children's literature (e.g., Kendrick, 2004).

No differences were found between how people with special needs are portrayed in English and Arabic literature books. Overall, people with special needs were portrayed negatively in the Arabic and English? children's literature books. Negative attitudes toward individuals with special needs will only disappear if people with special needs are portrayed more accurately and positively in the children's literature books. Children's literature should support diversity and include a diverse group of characters. Media coverage of special needs also serves as an inspiration to children's authors to include characters with those special needs in their stories. Therefore, the use of positive language and images is critical and it can help in improving the public image of people with special needs.

Recently, children's books around the world include a diverse group of characters. While more books with characters with special needs are published today, it is essential to portray children with special needs in a more accurate and positive way. Indeed, children's literature books should focus on the people, rather than the disability.

In the current study few stories represent the actions and achievements of the people with special needs as heroic. But, portraying people with special needs as superstars or heroes raises unrealistic expectations that all people with special needs should achieve. Therefore, authors of children's literature

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books need to be more realistic and represent characters with special needs accurately.

The most common special needs portrayed in the literature were individuals with autism.

The results of this study are consistent with previous research studies (e.g., Ayala, 1999).

It is important that children learn about the different types of special needs throughout the curriculum so when children have the opportunity to interact with individuals with special needs, they have some previous knowledge and understanding (Blaska, 1996). Individuals with special needs should not be portrayed stereotypically, nor should they be used only as catalysts for change in characters without special needs (Blaska, 1996; 2003). However, individuals with special needs should have opportunities to participate in leadership roles in the stories. And children's stories should emphasize the success of individuals with special needs and not their failure.

The under-representation of people with special needs has large social implications. Therefore, children's collections in libraries need to reflect the diversity in their communities. Indeed, UAEU libraries need to select children's literature books with characters that have individuals with special needs portrayed in a positive way. When selecting books for the UAEU libraries it is critical to select books that demonstrate respect for persons with special needs.

Recommendations for further research are needed. Future researchers may need to examine or analyse the children's literature included in the UAE public schools libraries to determine what messages are being sent to readers of children's literature that includes characters with special needs. This study examined a sample of children's literature books in one educational institution which may limit the generalization of this study to different contexts. Additionally, this study includes very old folk tales and children's literature books, more up to date books may change the results of this study.

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## Appendix A The Research Instrument

The modified version of the “Images & Encounters Profile “in English:

1. Promotes empathy not pity.
2. Depicts acceptance not ridicule.
3. Emphasizes success rather than failure.
4. Promotes positive images of persons with special needs.
5. Assists children in gaining accurate understanding of the disability.
6. Demonstrates respect for persons with special needs.
7. Promotes attitude of "one of us" not "one of them."
8. Uses language which stresses person first, disability second philosophy, i.e. ‘Ahmed who is blind’ and not ‘the blind Ahmed.’
9. Describes the disability or person with special needs as realistic (i.e., not subhuman or superhuman.)
10. Illustrates characters in a realistic manner.
11. The pictures/images in the story help to develop positive images not negative about individuals with special needs

## Appendix B

### The modified version of the "Images & Encounters Profile" in Arabic

#### اداة البحث

اسم الكتاب:

سنة النشر:

الناشر:

اسم الكاتب:

نوعية القصة:

- 1) خيالية (2) غير خيالية (3) شبه خيالية
1. تساهم القصة في تعاطف القارئ مع ذوي الإحتياجات لا الشفقة عليهم
2. تظهر القصة الإحترام لذوي الإحتياجات لا السخرية عليهم
3. تركز القصة على نجاح ذوي الإحتياجات لا على فشلهم
4. تعمل القصة على عكس صورة إيجابية لذوي الإحتياجات الخاصة
5. تساعد القصة على تكوين فهم دقيق وصحيح عن ذوي الإحتياجات الخاصة
6. تظهر الإحترام لذوي الإحتياجات الخاصة
7. تعبر عن الطفل من ذوي الإحتياجات على أنه واحد منا وليس كقئة مختلفة
8. تستخدم القصة اللغة التي تركز على أن الطفل من ذوي الإحتياجات انسان أولاً ثم عن صفته ثانياً مثلاً "أحمد الأعمى" ولست "الأعمى أحمد"
9. تصف العجز أو الأشخاص من ذوي الإحتياجات الخاصة على حقيقتهم دون مبالغة في قدراتهم أو التقليل منها (مثلاً كانسان منحط أو كالانسان الخارق)
10. تصور الشخصيات بطريقة واقعية
11. الصور و الرسومات في القصة تسهم في تطويرصورة إيجابية لا سلبية عن الاطفال من ذوي الإحتياجات الخاصة

### Appendix C

English Children Literature Books included in the Sample

1. Mashall, A. I can jump Puddles. 1980.
2. Zick, A. Snow White. 1998.
3. Rosalind, A. Lulu Loves the Library. 2009.
4. Eyer, A. Green Island. 1966.
5. Potter, B. The Tage of Mr. Tiggy-Winkle. 2004.
6. Randell, R. Nelson, The Baby Elephant. 1997.
7. Moore, C. Absulum the Reindeer Elf.
8. Crol, C. Albert on School. 2004.
9. White, C. The Lion & The Mouse. 2008.
10. Johnson, C. Harolds Fairy Tail. 1956.
11. Torrens, D.G. Amelia. 2001.
12. Hodgson, F. The Secret Garden. 2000.
13. Brothers, G. The Eleves and The shoe Maker. 1996.
14. Anderson, H, C. Mermaid. 1999.
15. Spyri, J. Heidi. 1991.
16. Escott, J. Newspaper Boy. 1979.
17. Loy, J. The Lucky Pearl. 2009.
18. Mandres, J. Anger and Love has no Limits. 2001.
19. Mandres, J. The Fox and The Crow. 2009.
20. Mandres, J. The Small Butterfly. 2003.
21. Milne, J. Lucky Number. 1989.
22. Hamilton, J. First Steps Well Done. 2001.
23. Fontes, K. Tarazan. 1999.
24. Montgomery, L. M. Anne Green of Gables. 1925.
25. Baur, M. D. Rain. 2004.
26. Cattnach, M. The Three Billy Goats Gruff. 2001.
27. Wright, N. Misha Disappears. 2010.
28. Avril, N. Dick Whittington. 1996.
29. Lok, P. Apresent For Our Teacher.
30. M, Rosel. Strange Boys. 2009.
31. Hazem, S. Glory Team. 2004.
32. Hazem, S. Glory Team. 2001.
33. Simon and Schuster. The Little Autism Artist. 2006.
34. Rabley, S. Billy and the Queen. 1996.
35. Rabley, S. The Fire Boy. 1991.
36. Rabley, S. Thinkers Island. 1996.
37. Alister, S. Zoo. 1958.

38. Jupp, T. C. Winning and Losing. 1986.
39. Grimm, T. Cinderella. 1996.
40. Holmes, T. B. The Gingerbread Man. 2001.
41. Depaola, T. Legend Poinsettia. 2001.
42. Johne, T. Gabi. (Not found)

## Appendix D

### Arabic Children Literature Books included in the Sample

1. إبراهيم مرزوق . لوريل و هاردي . 2001 .
2. إديت ثابر سكينه إبراهيم . أمير الجمل الصغير . 1999 .
3. أستريد لندجرين . جنان ذات الجورب الطويل . 1999 .
4. إستريد لينجرين منى زريقات . الربيع في القرى الصاخبة . 1990 .
5. إلزا بسكوف وليد سيف . بيضة الشمس . 1995 .
6. إلزا بيكسوف سكينه إبراهيم . أطفال حارس الغابة . 2008 .
7. إليزابيث نيومان . العنديل . 2000 .
8. إنغماري افاندر . فطائر جدتي المدوية . 2006 .
9. إستريد ليندجرين . جنان في بيت يا ليت . 1996 .
10. أستريد لندجرين . ميو يا ولدي . 1995 .
11. أستريد لندجرين وليد سيف . الأخوان . 1995 .
12. أستريد ليندجرين وليد سيف . دراجة ليلي . 1993 .
13. أسماء الزرعوني . حكيمة . 1992 .
14. أمل الجندل . الألعاب الشعبية . 2001 .
15. أميرلي بيرمس . تزعجني الإصابة بالمرض . 2004 .
16. أنطوان الخوري . كيلوباترا و بليوس . 2003 .
17. أولف ولينا لاندستروم . سعد و قبعته الجديدة . 1992 .
18. أولف ولينا لاندستروم . سعد يقص شعره . 1993 .
19. أولف و لينا لاندستروم . سعد يذهب إلى البريد . 1995 .
20. أوليف ستارك . هل تستطيعين التصفير يا جوانا . 1992 .
21. أوليف ستارك وليد سيف . أخي الكبير . 2013 .
22. بابا واغيه دياكتيته . الصياد و التمساح . 1997 .
23. باربر ولندجرين . الأم و طفلها الشقي . 1995 .
24. بان ليف وليد سيف . حكاية التفاحة الحمراء . 1982 .
25. برينس كارديت ماكارون . أفضل معلمة في الدنيا . 1990 .
26. تورد نيغرين سكينه إبراهيم . بحيرة الأوزة البرية . 1998 .

27. جوانان كول . رحلة إلى قرية النمل . 1996 .
28. جونيليا بيرجسترم منى زريقات . إحذر المنشار يا برهان . 1973 .
29. جونيليا بيرجسترم منى زريقات . أسرع يا برهان . 1999 .
30. جونيليا بيرجسترم . برهان و الحيوان الغريب .
31. جونيليا بيرجسترم منى زريقات . تصبح على خير يا برهان . 2014 .
32. جونيليا بيرجسترم منى زريقات . ذكاء برهان . 1990 .
33. جونيليا بيرجسترم منى زريقات . لماذا تغير برهان .
34. جونيليا بيرجسترم منى زريقات . من يجد برهان . 1996 .
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