

## REPRESENTATION OF DISABILITY IN SCHOOL ENGLISH TEXTBOOKS: AN INCLUSIVE PERSPECTIVE

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### Abstract

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*Literature plays an important role in developing attitudes of sensitivity towards and acceptance of diversity. A category of diversity, often overlooked in literature or subjected to biased and stereotypical representation is disability. This paper examines the portrayals of people with disabilities across English textbooks published by private publishers popularly used across Delhi for classes VI to VIII. It examines their capacity for developing attitudes of sensitivity towards people with disabilities. The rationale for selecting textbooks is that it is the mostly widely used reading material available to students across the state. Findings of the study suggest that while there are chapters on disability in almost all English textbooks, the range of disabilities included is limited. More realistic and inclusionary portrayals of people with disabilities is also required. Suggestions have also been provided for teachers teaching English textbooks on how to address the representation of disability in English textbooks.*

**Keywords:** *Disability, People with Disabilities, English Textbooks, Diversity, Inclusion*



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### Introduction

The 1994 Salamanca World Conference on Special Education played a crucial role in the development of inclusive education. While it led to children with disabilities being mainstreamed, it is important to recognize that inclusion is not a matter of physical inclusion alone but also a matter of changing the curriculum and other aspects of teaching and learning for inclusion to be truly successful (Arora and Sahu, 2015). According to Gray (2002), children with disabilities are at a greater risk of “bullying and teasing” in mainstream classrooms (as cited in Hodkinson, Ghajarieh, & Salami, 2018, p.27). Consequently, it is important that constructive steps be taken to ensure inclusion in its true spirit. The focus should not only be on making the children with disabilities feel welcome in the system but also to teach the children without disabilities to accept and accommodate the children who are different from them.

A step in the direction of inclusion will be to provide the right kind of English textbooks, with the right kind of literature selections, to school teachers. Two questions arise here-

“Why literature?” and “Why Textbooks?” The answer to the former is that literature acts both as “mirrors and windows” for the readers to see themselves and their lives reflected in it and also to learn about people and lives different from their own and develop empathy for them (Bishop, 1990). When it comes to disability we must understand that disability is often underrepresented or mis-represented in literature (Crow, 1990). Consequently, there is a grave danger of children internalising negative portrayals of disability in literature and adopting a negative attitude towards people with disabilities, in real life. Therefore, there is a need of literature which not only presents the entire range of disabilities including developmental and learning disabilities and not just physical disabilities, but also presents it in a positive and realistic manner. Brenna (2013) suggests that people with disabilities be supported in telling their own stories so that “we can improve the possibility of authentic mirrors and informative doors offered in children’s reading-helping our leaders of tomorrow see and actualize the world in a more complete way” (p.518). The second question of “Why Textbooks?” is best answered by Hopkins (1982) “If literature can be used to promote understanding and positive attitudes, educators ought to be able to attain similar results with instructional materials” (p. 30). This question will, however, be discussed in greater detail in the course of the paper.

### **Representation of Disability in Literature**

The representation of disability has changed vastly through the ages. Classics represented disability as a metaphor for inner deformity thus granting legitimacy to and perpetuating a negative portrayal of people with disabilities which limits the potential of people with disabilities (Rubin & Watson, 1987; Margolis & Shapiro, 1987). Bias and stereotypes in books “affects the reader’s self-image, philosophy of life, interpersonal sensitivity, and opinions towards different minority groups and social problems” (Rubin & Watson, 1987, p. 66). Hence, the need for sensitive and positive portrayals of disability in literature.

Another issue is that the representations privilege the medical model of disability wherein people with disabilities are defined by their disabilities and are recipients of social and medical services concomitant to which is their segregation from the rest of the society. Disability is seen as an individual’s problem. The social model of disability, on the other hand, “sees the person as disabled by society. It is the failure of society to recognize and address the different needs of disabled people, rather than impairment itself, that is the problem” (Hiles, 2006, p.5). Jaegar and Bowman (2005) have observed that “Disability is ordinary. Yet disability is rarely considered as a societal issue in a thoughtful and humane

manner” (as cited in Brenna, 2013, p. 515). The social model ensures that attention is paid to how differences are turned into discrimination embedded in social, cultural and professional practices.

Researches on the representations of disability have some important directions for the present paper. Prater (1999) examined 68 children’s books featuring MR (mental retardation) published between 1965 and 1996. Findings suggested that few stories were told from the point of view of characters with MR who also didn’t grow in the course of the story but were rather used as catalysts for change in a character without disabilities. In a 2001 study, Dyches, Prater and Cramer examined books on autism and MR published between 1997-98 and found, amongst other things, that the characters were segregated from the rest of the society and suggested the need of characters who were contributors rather than mere receivers of care. Findings of the 2005 study by Dyches and Prater on children’s books suggested, among other things that there is a need for inclusionary literature (as cited in Dyches & Prater, 2005).

### **The Case of English Textbooks**

There aren’t too many public libraries in India and the financial means and interest in purchasing storybooks for children is limited to middle and upper classes only. The only literature that every school going child is definitely exposed to is the one which features in textbooks for teaching languages. The *Position Paper on Curriculum, Syllabus and Textbooks* (2006) attests to the fact that textbooks dominate classroom teaching in India, eclipsing the broader goals of the curriculum with the narrow aim of covering textbook content. At this point it is also important to recognise that textbooks carry selections of knowledge and are capable of perpetuating inequalities in society. Hence, the selections need to be examined for biases and stereotypes.

This forthcoming section will be focusing upon an examination of school English textbooks published by popular publications in India for classes VI to VIII and prescribed by schools across Delhi. Classes VI to VIII have been chosen since these are the formative years where the students are more likely to explore the world on their world, make friendships and also develop attitudes towards people different from them. Also, textbooks for classes VI to VIII are more likely to have a range of texts based on disability since the students are in the formal operational stage and much capable of grasping the complexities arising out of developmental and learning disabilities. Another reason for restricting the study to class VIII is that private publications publish English textbooks only for students till class VIII as after

that NCERT texts are mandatorily used for all subjects across all CBSE schools. Please note that the term textbooks in this paper refers to school English textbooks.

### Methodology

The focus of this study is on studying the nature of representation of disability in textbooks of English popularly used across schools in Delhi which are affiliated to CBSE. While the government schools necessarily use NCERT books, there are a number of private publications that publish textbooks for various subjects including English. Since a number of private schools prescribe textbooks by private publishers, there is a huge market for these textbooks.

For the purpose of selecting English textbooks, I reached out to school children, people in the neighbourhood as well as schoolteachers in order to know which English textbooks are popularly used in schools across Delhi. I also contacted editors and publishers and wholesale distributors of textbooks in order to make appropriate selection of English textbooks for the study. Consequently, the search was narrowed down to five publications and one series from each publication was selected for the purpose of this paper. **Table 1** provides the names of the series along with the number of chapters across the textbooks while **Table 2** provides the details of the texts representing disability.

<b>TABLE 1: Details of Textbooks and number of Chapters</b>				
S. No.	Name of the Publisher and Series	Total no. of Textbooks for classes VI to VIII including MCB* and LR**	Total No. of Chapters	Total no. of Chapters representing Disability
1.	The English Channel by Encyclopaedia Britannica	6	99	4
2.	New Gem's English reader: A Complete Graded Course in English by Ratna Sagar	3	63	1
3.	Maple Tree by Cambridge University Press	6	108	1
4.	New Oxford Modern English by Oxford University Press	3	63	4
5.	New Images by Pearson Longman	3	50	1
<b>Total</b>		<b>21</b>	<b>383</b>	<b>11</b>

\* MCB refers to Main Course Books

\*\*LR refers to Literature Readers

<b>TABLE 2: Details of types of Disability represented across the textbooks selected for the paper</b>							
<b>S. No.</b>	<b>Grade</b>	<b>Name of the Publication</b>	<b>Name of the Series</b>	<b>MCB / LR</b>	<b>Genre</b>	<b>Name of the Chapter</b>	<b>Name of the Author</b>
<b>Text(s) Representing Physical Disability</b>							
1	VI	Encyclopaedia Britannica	The English Channel	MCB	Short Story	Sally's Shoes	Graeme King
2	VIII			MCB	Factual Narrative	The Power of Determination	Burt Dubin
3	VII	Ratna Sagar	New Gem's English reader	MCB	Short story	Bravo Manju!	Sigrun Srivastav
4	VIII	Cambridge University Press	Maple Tree	MCB	Short story	A Bonfire Night to Remember	Anonymous
<b>Text(s) Representing Visual Disability</b>							
5	VI	Oxford University Press	New Oxford Modern English	MCB	Short story	The Girl on the Train	Ruskin Bond
6	VII			MCB	Poetry	Blindness	Charles Lamb
7	VII			MCB	Factual Narrative	Seeing in the Mind	Nina Bawden
8	VIII	Britannica Learning	The English Channel	MCB	Short story	The Eyes Have It	Ruskin Bond
<b>Text(s) Representing Speech and/or Hearing Disability</b>							
9	VII	Encyclopaedia Britannica	The English Channel	LR	Factual Narrative	The Lonely Giant	Anonymous
10	VIII	Oxford University Press	New Oxford Modern English	MCB	Short Story	The Silver Lining	Chaman Nahal
<b>Texts(s) Representing Multiple Unnamed Disabilities</b>							
11	VII	Pearson Longman	New Aster	MCB	Poetry	Nine Gold Medals	David Ruth

### **Analysing Representation(s) of Disability across English Textbooks**

#### **Range of Disabilities**

As per the information from **Table 1** less than 3% chapters from the selected textbooks have portrayals of disability. **Table 2** informs us that the representations of disability are majorly restricted to physical and visual disability with only two texts representing hearing disability. There is not a single text representing any form of developmental or learning disability. Thus, there is a narrow range of disabilities which are portrayed, effectively denying any possibility for the students to build attitudes of sensitivity towards their peers who could possibly be having a learning disability. According to Keith (2001), as cited in Brenna (2013, p. 517), an examination of children's picture books reveals that particular disabilities are considered more "appropriate" for inclusion in books than others. From **Table 2**, this seems to be the case with textbooks as well. In terms of genres, there are several short stories, two poems and two factual narratives.

### **Characterisations of Individuals with Disability**

Bias and stereotyping in children's literature in the context of disability is damaging for the self-esteem of people with disabilities and also provides an erroneous and limited worldview to the young readers who grow up and perpetuate those stereotypes. Hence, it is important to identify stereotypical characterisations. Following two sets of parameters, separated by several decades are useful parameters to study the characterisations of disability in English textbooks.

Dyches and Prater (2005, p. 202) are of the view that the metaphorical portrayals of disability are outdated. In the context of Developmental Disabilities, they believed that positive and realistic portrayals of characters with disability need to be such that there are high expectations from the character with disability, the strengths of the character are highlighted and the character is shown to be making some contribution rather than just being a recipient of benefits from others. The character should be shown as acting upon choices and also having mutually reciprocal relationships with others (p. 202). Biklen and Bogdan (1977) as cited in Rubin in Watson (1987) came up with a list of 10 stereotypical portrayals of people with disabilities some of which are characters being portrayed as pitiable or evil, as an object of violence, a 'super cripp' or over achiever, as laughable, as a burden, as one's own enemy or as someone incapable of fully participating in everyday life.

### **Disability as the Defining Characteristic**

"Blindness" and "Sally's Shoes" have characters who are not entirely objects of pity but who do not have any other characteristics except their disability. Sally's temporarily deformed ankle makes her a butt of jokes at school and while she makes a choice of wearing cloggy

shoes to the annual class party, it serves to only highlight the kindness of the head boy who offers to dance with her thus marking a stamp of approval on Sally and her shoes. The fact that then on all the girls become friendly towards her and seek fashion advice from her is a convenient and unrealistic end of the story.

### **People with Disabilities making Choices and Contributing to Society**

“The Silver Lining” aptly represents the social model of disability. Promodini, the daughter of a guest house owners at a hill station can’t speak or hear (described as “deaf and dumb” in the story). She doesn’t go to school because there are none that cater to her. The loneliness, frustration stemming from the inability to communicate with people around her, along with the pitying gazes of the guests at the guest house make her a shy and vulnerable child prone to anguish and self-pity. To balance this depiction of a helpless character is the older Mr. David who is shown to have adapted himself to his disability to the extent that now he is in a position to set up an institution to help people with speech and hearing disabilities. “The Silver Lining”, thus, presents a character capable of forming mutually reciprocal relationships and also contributing to society. Larry Holmes from “A Bonfire Night to Remember” also contributes to society by saving a storekeeper from robbery, refusing to be constrained in his noble act by the fact that he uses a wheelchair.

“Nine Gold Medals” chronicles a race in Special Olympics wherein when one athlete fell down in the race and saw his dream being broken, the rest of the eight racers turned around one by one and helped him get up. They held hands and turned the hundred yard race into a walk to the finishing line that resulted in nine gold medals being rewarded, making the Olympics truly special. The focus of the poem is on the display of empathy and sportsmanship by people with disabilities who choose to keep these values above narrow goals of an individual win.

Manjula Parelkar in “Bravo Manju!” grows as a character, with the help of her mother and brother, as she learns to fight not just her disability (she has only two fingers on each hand) but also her father’s skepticism that she wouldn’t be able to become an artist with her disability. Sigrun Srivastav underscores the importance of a supportive home environment and positive role models for people with disabilities while presenting one with the figure of Manju herself.

### **People with Disabilities as Super achievers**

Any young reader of English textbooks would be familiar with the trope of “super crips” (Rubin & Watson, 1987, p. 61) or ‘overachievers.’ The people with disabilities, in such cases,

work hard to either overcome their disability or compensate by achieving in some other area in order to gain acceptance in the society. Such texts are also usually included in the textbooks in order to motivate the students to perform better in life. “The Lonely Giant” is a factual narrative about Beethoven the celebrated composer of ninth symphony. It highlights the achievements that Beethoven had to his credit in the field of music despite the deafness that gradually set in and left him completely deaf for the last ten years of his life. While the aim of the story seems to inspire its readers, the language of the text constricts the reader to adopt a pitiful gaze as it condescendingly declares that Beethoven couldn’t hear people applauding his music as “The poor composer was deaf” (p. 61).

Glenn Cunningham, famously known as the ‘Kansas Flyer’, the subject of “The Power of Determination” was also an over achiever. Burnt in a fire accident at school, Cunningham lost the use of his limbs waist down. Despite doctor’s misgivings about his survival, Cunningham not only survived but also learnt to stand, walk and eventually run with his sheer determination.

### **Inclusionary Portrayals of Disability**

Most often the literature on disability is instructional in nature, that is, it seeks to inform the readers about disability. However, inclusionary literature is one where a person with disability is included in the story just a like a person without it would be (Blaska & Lynch, 1998, p. 37) “The Girl on the Train” and “The Eyes Have It” is a story by Ruskin Bond with different names featuring in two different textbooks. Bond here creates two people with visual disabilities who are fellow travelers travelling independently on a train. The sensitive portrayal of the two individuals, an insight into the male character’s thoughts about the fellow lady and the game he played of concealing his blindness from her makes it an interesting story. It is a story of two travelers, enjoying each other’s’ company who just happen to be blind.

“Seeing in the Mind” by Nina Bawden describes her meeting with a young girl on a vacation, who is on the verge of losing her eyesight completely and thus denied adventurous, in the mind of adults, dangerous activities. She requests Nina to write a book about a blind girl where she does something brave. The same night when lights go off, Nina discovers that Janey was the only one who could find her way around in the dark prompting Nina to sketch the character of a young girl with blindness who leads her friends out of dark caves to safety. Janey’s brother, who has glaucoma, plays a prank on Nina, chasing her with his glass eye in his hand, terrifying her. The representations of disability are quite inclusionary and sensitive



in nature as the young boy takes his disability in his stride and the young girl expresses her desire for vicarious heroism.

The fact that the film made on Nina's book, left out the blind girl is symptomatic of the unease that people have trouble coming to terms with portrayals of disability beyond the narrow construct of helpless and pitiful beings. On the other hand, negative and patronising portrayals become obstacles to people with disabilities being viewed as competent persons and for such people to strive for more "normal, productive, and satisfying lives" (Margolis & Shapiro, 1987, p. 21).

### **Suggestions for Publishers and Teachers**

Out of the 11 chapters from 21 textbooks examined, none of the chapters have negative portrayals of people with disabilities, although in few cases they are depicted as passive beings. The range of disabilities covered is quite narrow as they are all types of disability that are visible. There is a dearth of literature in textbooks that deals with disabilities such as learning or developmental disabilities. It is important for the publishers to widen the ambit so that young minds are exposed to a variety of texts that help build positive attitudes towards all people with disabilities and not just the ones whose disability is markedly visible.

The selection of texts by textbook publishers and selections made by teachers while planning their own curricula need to take into consideration the nature of characterisation of people with disabilities. The characters need to be positively and realistically portrayed, capable of making choices and contributing to the society. Positive portrayals do not mean that the characters be presented as uncharacteristically angelic or devoid of the common human emotions such as jealousy or anger though they shouldn't be presented as evil either.

This brings us to the question of classical literature. What should teachers do when presented with negative portrayals of disability such as the ones in classical literature, in their textbooks? Margolis & Shapiro (1987) are of the view that instead of censoring such literature, teachers must take it upon themselves to explain the symbolism in order to address the negative messages. "Those who teach literature have a wonderful opportunity to liberate young minds from an almost imperceptible prejudices and pave the way for those with handicaps to enjoy full citizenship" (p. 21-22).

"Literary style and language play a large role in perpetuating disability bias..." (Rubin & Watson, 1987, p. 62). Teachers must discuss excerpts particularly highlighting the use of language in order to describe people with disabilities since the use of terms such "deaf and dumb", "handicapped", "crippled" in texts produces a negative construct of disability.

Connor and Bejoian (2007) are of the view that teachers must discuss disability related language with students especially the pejorative use of disability to criticise people's actions such as "Are you blind?" or "Are you deaf?" and so on. They can discuss the acceptability or unacceptability of such use of language and how it must affect people with disabilities. Staging of role plays in the class where students take up roles of people with disabilities or staging of plays from stories they have read or staging a reader's tableau can help students feel first-hand the problems faced by people with disabilities and their state of mind in adverse circumstances such as facing discrimination or being judged or patronised.

Real life super-achievers deserve praise and acknowledgments. However, if there are too many chapters on them in school textbooks then students will again have a narrow world view and expect people with disabilities to over stretch themselves in a bid to compensate for their disability in some manner. The ordinary child with disability will be at a double disadvantage, one for not being able to "see" himself in school textbook and two by having peers who expect him to overachieve. Hence, the importance of multitude and range of texts so that the students don't get fixated on one image of people with disabilities in their mind.

Inclusionary portrayals of disability are important so that readers learn to see disability as only one of the characteristics of people with disabilities and not the defining characteristic. Importantly, Connor and Bejoian (2007) suggest that teachers must "introduce the notion differences are often perceived subjectively" (p. 4), adding that disability is a matter of difference which doesn't make a person better or worse. This awareness will be the first step in achieving inclusion in its true spirit.

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