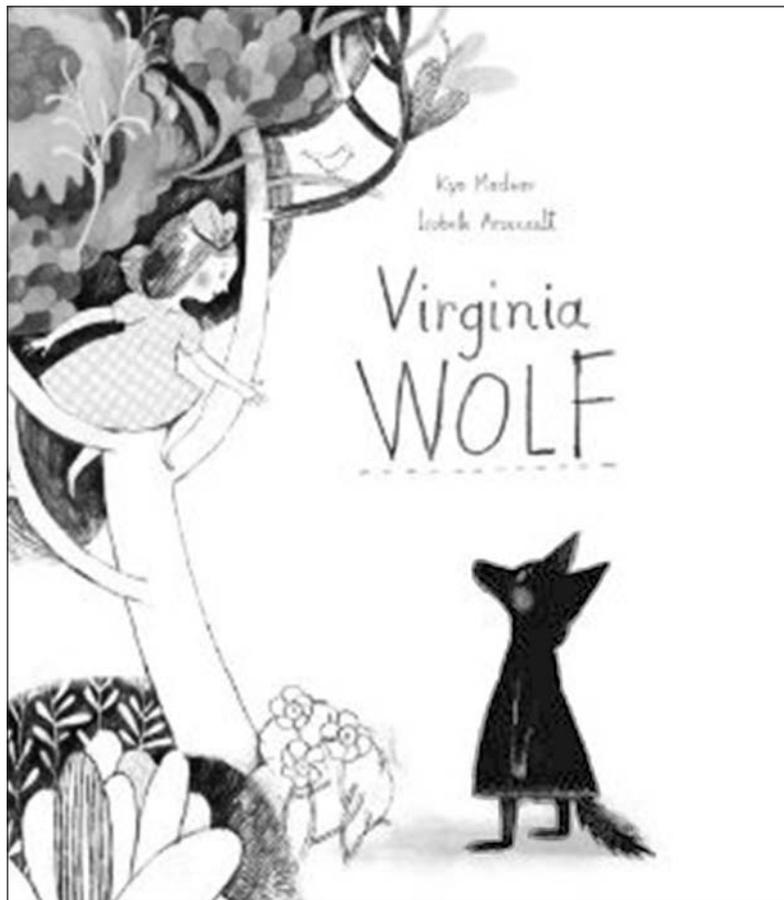


# Picture Book Characters with Disabilities: Patterns and Trends in a Context of Radical Change

by JEAN EMMERSON



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*This study, framed through a lens of Radical Change, examines selected Canadian and American picture books featuring characters with disabilities. While aspects of diversity such as cultural difference are consciously included in contemporary children's books, differences related to disability are often absent. In this study, qualitative content analysis identifies patterns, trends, and themes related to characterizations that involve disabilities, proposing critical literacy as a framework through which children may interrogate messages in text and illustration.*

This qualitative content analysis framed by “Radical Change” theory (Dresang) explores selected Canadian and American picturebooks containing characters with disabilities. Radical Change conceptualizes changes over time with respect to

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by BEVERLEY BRENNAN

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textual forms and formats, perspectives, and boundaries. Research on classic fiction involving characters with disabilities has uncovered intriguing patterns, including the trend that characters with disabilities are either “cured” or “killed” during the course of a story (Keith), a tendency that suggests authors have not been able to envision a happy future for someone with a disability. An exploration of a contemporary study sample, such as the sample collected for this study, offers a viewpoint from which to approach critical literacy—the interrogation of texts—in educational settings. Based on earlier work related to the limited research on disability in American books for young people (Dyches and Prater; Dyches, Prater, and Cramer; Dyches, Prater and Jenson; Greenwell; Leininger, Dyches, Prater, and Heath; Mills; Pajka-West), this study extends previous samples of books to include both Canadian and American literature. The specific objectives of this article include:

- identification of trends and themes in representations of North American picture book characters with disabilities;
- provision of a bibliography of award-winning North American English children's picture books, published in 1994 or later, that contain characters with disabilities.

We collected picture books published since 1994 in order to obtain a large, yet not unwieldy contemporary sample. A similar timeframe was utilized in a Canadian study of children's novels (Brenna), allowing an opportunity to make some cross-study comparisons.

If books are, as Galda suggests, mirrors and windows into a deeper understanding of self and other, then picture books authentically portraying people who are differently abled have an important place in a collection of educational resources. As well as offering resources in which children see themselves in the text, authentic depiction of characters with disabilities can benefit children's interactions with peers who have disabilities, reciprocally affecting all students in a positive way (Dyches, Prater, and Cramer).

## Research Frameworks

In addition to the literary framework of Radical Change, this research is also theoretically connected to disability studies, a vibrant field of inquiry within the critical genre of identity studies (Garland-Thomson). In the context of disability studies, disability can be defined as a “social construct” (Sherry), contrasting with a medical model of the body which suggests that biological differences equate to impairment. While relating our study's findings to the idea of disability as a social construction, we have utilized a list of particular disabilities derived from Saskatchewan Education's 2012-2013 Impact Assessment in order to support a clear framework for book selection. Definitions of disability abound; we acknowledge that alternative perspectives exist and that the categories we have selected are not necessarily reflective of “disabling” conditions,

nor are these categories all-inclusive as far as disability is concerned. Our choice of study limitations seemed reasonable since our work was grounded in the field of education in Saskatchewan, and the parameters advanced by the Impact Assessment document has offered distinct descriptors that could be uniformly applied.

### Educational Importance of the Study

It is increasingly important for students to learn methods for critical reading rather than to simply accept given texts as appropriate representations of the world. Reading instruction can be considered a social practice that goes beyond coding into text-meaning, pragmatic understandings, and critical practices (Luke and Freebody). Notions about critical literacy have been emerging since Freire’s theoretical groundwork regarding the need for a critical stance with respect to literacy. Critical literacy informs students’ responses to texts in the manner in which texts may be interrogated on the basis of at least four dimensions: disrupting the commonplace, interrogating multiple viewpoints, focusing on socio-political issues and taking action towards the promotion of social justice (Lewison, Flint, and Van Sluys).

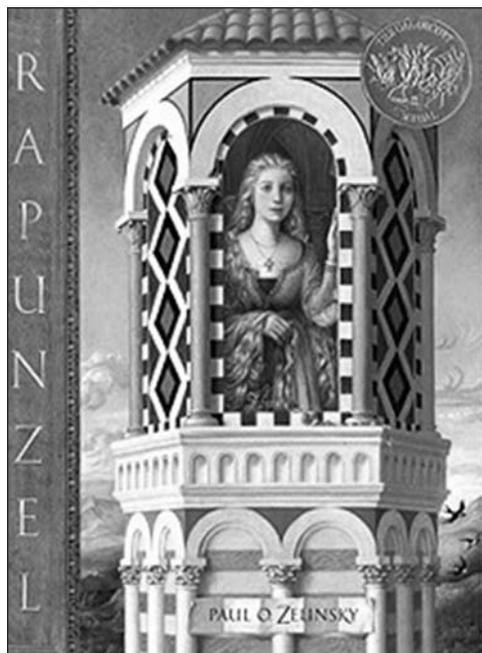
In order to support the development of critical literacy, teachers require a sound knowledge of potential classroom resources that will support and engage their students in critical literacy practices. This content analysis of select Canadian and American picture books allows comparisons to be made regarding situated patterns, trends, and themes, and offers a wide scope of titles to include in critical discussion regarding North American work. While

our conclusions are tentative and emergent rather than comprehensive, this research provides not only a resource base for educators but also a model for further research.

### Method

Content analysis (Berg; Merriam) of award-winning North American picture books was conducted through a qualitative interpretive stance (Seidman), allowing the development of conceptual categories alongside categories emerging from Dresang’s theory about the radical changes that have appeared in children’s literature. A content analysis chart developed for the purposes of this study (Appendix A) offers opportunities for the exploration of trends and themes within and among the books.

In terms of award-winning picture books, the study sample contained four winners of the Canadian Governor General’s Award (for text or illustration), one winner of the American Caldecott Medal and seven winners of American Schneider Awards, an honour bestowed on books that include characters with a disability. In addition, we collected an

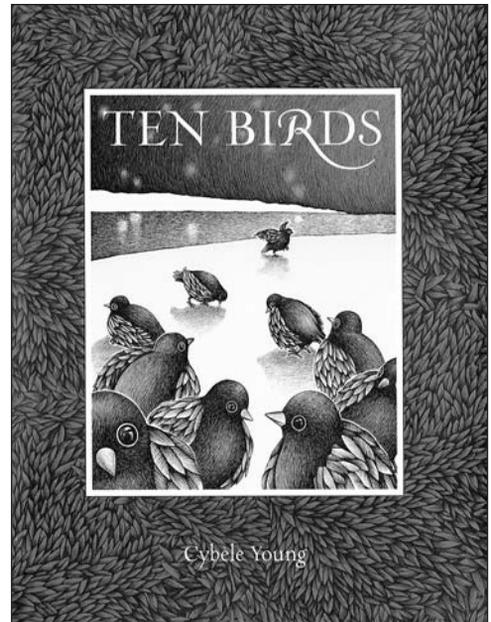


array of other Canadian titles published since 1994—basically, all of the Canadian picture books portraying a character with a disability that we could locate through direct contact with publishers and recommended titles from the Canadian Children’s Book Centre. In addition, we scrutinized the Canadian picture book collections available on the shelves of two local bookstores, querying which books were easily available to the Canadian public.

## Findings

### *Canadian Governor General’s Award for Illustration*

Two of the eighteen Canadian Governor General’s Award winners since 1995 (published in 1994) in the category of illustration contain representations of characters with disabilities. Cybele Young’s *Ten Birds* offers an abstract view of physical disability in a story of how seemingly flightless birds manage to use various innovative strategies to cross a river, with perhaps the most ingenious bird of all simply walking over a bridge. Kyo Maclear’s *Virginia Wolf* likely depicts a character with childhood depression, however the interpretation of this diagnosis remains relatively ambiguous within the context of the story.

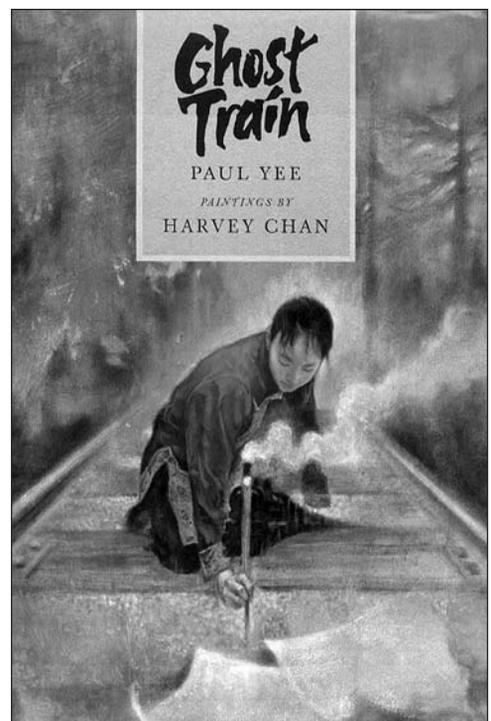


### *Canadian Governor General’s Award for Text*

Because the nature of books has generally advanced in this category, picture book titles are relatively rare. Two picture book award winners from the twenty winning titles (illustration and text) since 1995 have appeared, and both portray characters with disabilities. Paul Yee’s *Ghost Train* depicts a physical disability in the central character. Rachna Gilmore’s *A Screaming Kind of Day* provides a striking portrait of a little girl whose hearing impairment is just one aspect of her characterization. The fact that the only Governor General’s Award-winning picture books in the category for text present characters who are differently abled is a particularly interesting finding.

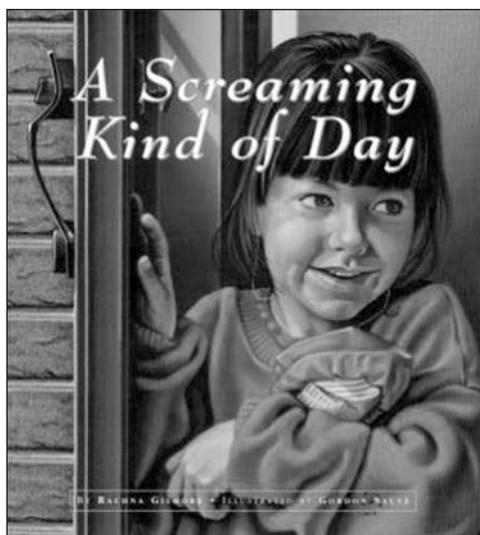
### *American Caldecott Medal Picture Books*

In comparison to Canadian award winners that include characters with disabilities, an exploration of the nineteen American picture book winners of the prestigious Caldecott medal for children’s illustration has turned up even fewer examples of characters who are differently abled. Only one book awarded since 1995 has depicted a character with a disability: P.O. Zelinsky’s *Rapunzel* offers a version of the fairy tale that includes a prince who is blind, albeit temporarily.



*American Schneider Family Book Awards*

The Schneider Family book awards, first awarded in 2004, contributed seven titles to our study sample. This award, recognizing the dearth of disability in characterizations, was developed by the American Library Association—in addition to the Caldecott—and the depiction of disability is part of the award criteria.



Of the seven Schneider titles, three are picture books portraying characters who are blind or visually impaired, three are picture books depicting characters who are deaf, and one is a picture book presenting a character with an orthopaedic disability. Characters with autism or developmental disabilities have not been included to date among the Schneider award winners, perhaps because another award category has been in operation since 2000. The Dolly Gray Award was introduced by the Division of Autism and Developmental Disabilities, a special interest group of the Council of Exceptional Children. Titles from the Dolly Gray Award categories have not been included as part of this study, because the explicit focus on autism and developmental disabilities would have skewed any comparison results about the prevalence of types of disabilities in the wider study sample.

**Wider Canadian Sample**

*Wider Study Sample*

In addition to the four Canadian award-winning

books, twenty-five other Canadian books were added to the sample for a total of twenty-nine books. While the publishers who responded with applicable titles did so within a week or two of initial contact, it is possible that other titles were missed due to communication breakdowns. Our local search of two major bookstores offered the following: out of the collection of 252 Canadian

*...out of the collection of 252 Canadian picture books sampled in one store on August 7, 2012, only one representation of characters other than “typical” was found.*

picture books sampled in one store on August 7, 2012, only one representation of characters other than “typical” was found. Epp’s *Hope and the Dragon* narrates the story of a boy who uses his imagination to help deal with a chronic illness. A survey of the second bookstore produced no results in terms of picture books presenting a character with a disability.

A consideration of the twenty-nine picture books in the Canadian study sample, including the governor general’s award-winning titles, offers some interesting patterns and trends. Eight of the books are narrative non-fiction produced by the same authors: Bobula and Bobula. The books by these authors are similar in that they observe childhood through narration rather than invoke the reader’s experience of childhood through active scenes. The teaching function in these titles seems to be overt, with a didactic tone that hints at the perspective of a “disability expert” and presents as narrative non-fiction. As part of a series, Bobula and Bobula’s books are unexceptional in terms of both literary merit and merit of illustrations; our team perceived them to be the lowest quality titles in the group. Five other books in the Canadian study sample as a whole are also narrative non-fiction, ten are realistic fiction, four are human fantasy, one of the books is an animal fantasy, and one is historical fiction. No books appeared from the mystery genre. It is important to note that of the ten realistic

fiction books, many contain exaggeration that approaches fantasy. Other than the Bobula and Bobula series, the twenty-one remaining books in the Canadian category received a positive response from our team in terms of literary merit and merit of illustrations.

### *Patterns and trends in the High Quality Canadian Sample*

It is these twenty-one Canadian books of higher quality that will be further explored in this section. There is evidence of Radical Change through changing forms and formats, where illustrations in some of the books go beyond the storyline, in some cases offering renderings of disability not present in the text. Examples of changing perspectives include books with adult protagonists and books that include ethnic diversity alongside disability. Changing boundaries can be seen in titles that depict non-traditional contexts for children's stories, such as group homes, as well as international settings (i.e. Pakistan). Male and female characters are well balanced in terms of number, mirroring a previous study with Canadian children's novels (Brenna). In all of the books within this study sample, disability is merely part of the plot, not central to it.

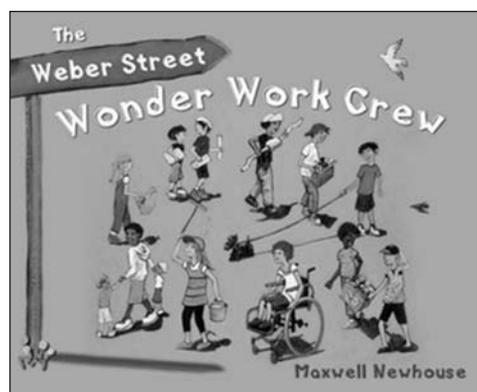
It is predicted that the following perspectives within the study sample will offer new opportunities for the radical changes of the future. In terms of characterization within the study sample, special gifts are abundant where a disability is present in characterization, including but not limited to: hockey playing ability, extra sensitive senses (perhaps to compensate for the disabled sense), artistic talent including painting ability and costume design, storytelling acumen, computer savvy, a particularly daring personality, and resilience. This sample of picture books generally depicts urban settings, with only one rural setting established. In contrast to the large number of single-parent families appearing in previous research on Canadian children's novels (Brenna), most of the picture books in our sample depict two-parent families.

In terms of an extension of Dresang's Radical Change theory, several themes appear in these

Canadian picture books that may flag evolving aspects of contemporary children's literature in general, or perhaps identify evolving aspects of books where disability is included. Many of the titles in the study sample invoke the reader's experience of childhood rather than simply observe childhood, which is a positive achievement. Some of the titles in this set appear to blur genres, with realistic fiction dominating, although the inclusion of exaggeration nudges the otherwise realistic titles towards fantasy. As well, the physical setting sometimes involves a shift from one large context or setting to another (i.e. urban to rural; city to city). In addition, stories within the sample do not appear to be attempting to teach a lesson, a noticeable difference from classic picture books, which are almost entirely didactic (Russell).

### *Prevalence of Particular Disabilities*

The data reflects a prevalence of particular disabilities within the larger set of twenty-nine Canadian picture books (Appendix B), generally realistic when compared to statistics offered by Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC). The proportions of those with disabilities in this set of picture books generally correspond to the prevalence of youth with various disabilities in Canada (HRSDC) with the exception of orthopaedic disabilities, which are over-represented in the study sample. Six book characters have orthopaedic disabilities, five have chronic illness, four have other differences (such as allergies), three have dyslexia, three have emotional disorders, two have attention deficits, another two have intellectual disabilities, two are deaf, one is blind, and one has autism.



*Disability Messages*

While the Bobula and Bobula series teaches about many of the disabilities experienced by schoolchildren, the other books vary in their intent. Some profile diversity through disability, such as Newhouse's *The Weber Street Wonder Work Crew*, in which the youth on an urban street—including one adolescent in a wheelchair—use their talents to improve their community. Other books focus on resilience and a character's strengths. For example, in Gilmore's *A Screaming Kind of Day*, a young girl with hearing aids must endure her brother's teasing and her mother's anger before her bad day comes to an end. Other titles have a social justice theme, such as *The Little Yellow Bottle* by Delaunois, in which a landmine formed as a tiny bottle injures two children. The remaining books infer disability through pictures rather than text, often invoking the experience for the reader. For example, Day's *Edward the "Crazy Man"* discloses a character's schizophrenia through illustration in addition to hints in the narration. Seven of the twenty-nine Canadian books visually infer disability rather than specifically mentioning it. This may be an example of how, through Radical Change, books in the digital age allow illustration to carry important aspects of the storyline beyond the written text.

*While positive experiences appear, portrayals include the idea that living with a disability or difference may involve ostracism and discomfort and often require perseverance and tenacity in terms of attainment of personal goals.*

In terms of what we learn about disability through these books, except for the Bobula and Bobula series, which is persistently positive, the message in most of the remaining books is realistic. While positive experiences appear, portrayals include the idea that living with a disability or difference may involve ostracism and discomfort and often require perseverance and tenacity in terms of attainment of personal goals.

### **Comparison between Canadian and American Award Winners Concerning Disability**

Of the award-winning books concerning disability, the four Canadian award winners range from two stories about children with disabilities, to a tale of flightless birds, to a book about the Chinese workers who died during the construction of the Canadian railroad as seen through the eyes of a daughter with a disability. Regarding the American books, there is only one Caldecott award winner involving disability—Zelinsky's version of *Rapunzel*. Of the seven Schneider books, three are about famous musicians with disabilities—one African-American, one gypsy, and one with multi-ethnic band members—and a fourth is about a famous baseball player. Another book is about a deaf boy in Nepal, another is about a girl who must wear a patch over one eye, and a final book is about a Latino boy in a wheelchair. Clearly, authors in the American sample, similar to the group of Canadian authors, are able to envision characters with disabilities that also have a variety of ethnicities. This is markedly different from a previous study of children's novels where ethnicity was rarely paired with disability (Brenna).

## Conclusions

Previous research provides evidence to suggest that the inclusion of characters with disabilities in children’s literature has discarded traditional formulas, evolving along with Radical Change in terms of Dresang’s discussion related to the use of new literary forms and formats, the employment of new perspectives, and changing boundaries for children’s literature emerging with the advent of the digital world (Brenna; Dresang and Kotrla). New patterns are important in the manner in which they reflect disability as a social construction alongside gender, sexuality, and ethnicity. Radical Change theory leads us to believe that the presence of “unheard voices” in this regard is predicted to further change over time.

New aspects of radical changes in children’s literature (Dresang) may be observed in this sample of books, and these include the blurring of genres, the author’s invocation rather than observation of childhood, the physical movement of characters from one setting to another, and the propensity for instruction to be subtle instead of overt. Consistently positive representations of disability no longer prevail, although the addition of “special gifts” alongside disability seems prevalent.

In summary, we found that only a handful of books portray characters who are differently abled have appeared on the awards lists. During a period when most governor general’s award-winning picture books earn prizes in the illustration category, it is perhaps important to note that the only two picture books that earned a Canadian governor general’s award for children’s literature (text) presented characters with disabilities. This is possibly a sign that juries recognize and commend the originality of such portrayals, allowing these books to contend alongside longer chapter books.

American groups supporting the Schneider Family Book Award and the Dolly Gray Award seem to recognize that if books portraying characters with disabilities are going to make it to an awards list, the award needs to be tailored in order to spotlight unique content. As more authors take on the inclusion of characters who are differently abled, this imbalance in award winners should shift, further evidence of Radical Change in action.

While our sample is not an all-inclusive compilation of North American picture books portraying characters with disabilities, the majority of the books we analyzed was of high quality and would be a welcome addition to any school or personal collection. Other studies that explore a wider range of titles, as well as the response of readers with disabilities to texts portraying characters with disabilities, might have very worthy implications for classroom practice. The responses of families of children with disabilities to particular text samples would be another interesting data source.

Further research with a more comprehensive study sample is



suggested to consider future representations integrating various disabilities, as well as characters' vulnerability to social and economic differences. In light of globalization, consideration of these representations internationally—including picture books from other countries—is recommended. Similarly, further study is suggested regarding the special gifts with which picture book characters are endowed. We wonder if characters with disabilities are portrayed with special gifts beyond what is typical in other characters. Perhaps some authors are attempting to compensate for disability by also depicting extraordinary ability? As we construct and deconstruct societal resources with respect to diversity in characterization, we will be able to move towards a clearer understanding of how disability is currently envisioned on the North American landscape, as well as suggest more desirable future representations of characters who are differently abled.

When characters with disabilities are portrayed dynamically, with features of growth and change, embracing various aspects of difference alongside disability, they may be more reflective of multi-faceted, authentic members of society and worthy of inclusion in classrooms as mirrors and windows. Until that time, however, books in which there are discrepancies between characters with disabilities and real life can produce an environment for critical literacy discussions between children and teachers, and it is recommended that such books be invited into guided reading activities.

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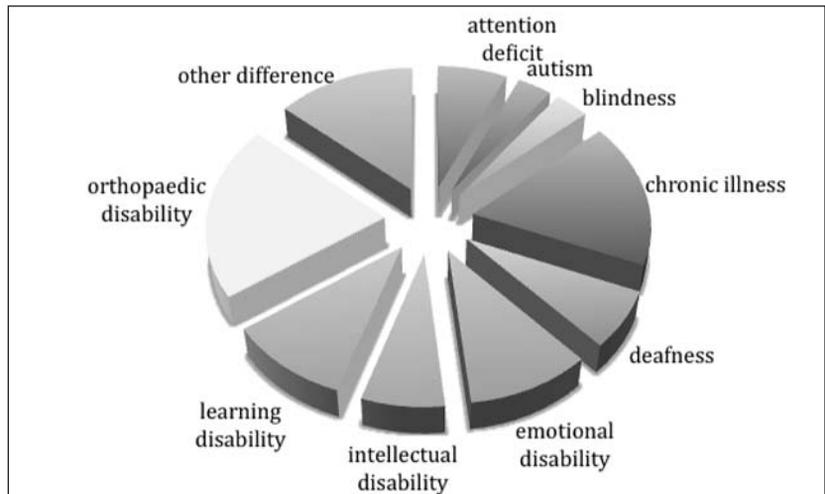
## Appendix A

### Content Analysis Chart Derived from Dresang's (1999) Radical Change Theory

Able Texts: Content Analysis				
Genre	Character with disability	Disability	Context	Radical change
<input type="checkbox"/> Realistic fiction <input type="checkbox"/> Historical fiction  <input type="checkbox"/> Fantasy - animal <input type="checkbox"/> Fantasy - human  <input type="checkbox"/> Mystery  <input type="checkbox"/> Non-fiction <input type="checkbox"/> Narrative non-fiction  <input type="checkbox"/> Other <input type="checkbox"/> Series	Youth, age: Adult, age:  Male Female 3 <sup>rd</sup> gender  Primary Secondary 1 <sup>st</sup> person 3 <sup>rd</sup> person  <input type="checkbox"/> Disability central to plot <input type="checkbox"/> Disability part of plot  <input type="checkbox"/> Disability shown in pictures <input type="checkbox"/> Disability mentioned in text <input type="checkbox"/> Disability in pictures and text  <b>Self-image</b> <input type="checkbox"/> Positive <input type="checkbox"/> Negative <input type="checkbox"/> Unknown  <b>Image presented to others</b> <input type="checkbox"/> Special gift: <input type="checkbox"/> Other:  <input type="checkbox"/> Other character's with disability (complete other form's)	<input type="checkbox"/> ADD/ADHD <input type="checkbox"/> Blind or visual impairment* <input type="checkbox"/> Deaf or hard of hearing*  <input type="checkbox"/> Emotional/behavioural disorder <input type="checkbox"/> Intellectual disability* <input type="checkbox"/> Learning disability <input type="checkbox"/> Mental health impairment* <input type="checkbox"/> Multiple disability* <input type="checkbox"/> Orthopaedic disability* <input type="checkbox"/> Pervasive developmental disorder* (autism) <input type="checkbox"/> Physical health impairment* <input type="checkbox"/> Prenatal substance exposure* (FASD)  <input type="checkbox"/> Sensory integration disorder <input type="checkbox"/> Speech or language disorder <input type="checkbox"/> Substance related disorder* <input type="checkbox"/> Traumatic brain injury  <input type="checkbox"/> Other diagnosed condition* <input type="checkbox"/> Other undiagnosed condition*  <b>Disability specifics:</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> 1-parent, stated or implied <input type="checkbox"/> 2-parent, stated or implied <input type="checkbox"/> N/A  <b>Setting</b> <input type="checkbox"/> Urban <input type="checkbox"/> Rural <input type="checkbox"/> Unknown  <input type="checkbox"/> Canadian <input type="checkbox"/> Non-Canadian <input type="checkbox"/> Unknown  <b>Time period</b> <input type="checkbox"/> Contemporary <input type="checkbox"/> Past: <input type="checkbox"/> Unknown  <b>Story time frame</b> <input type="checkbox"/> Days <input type="checkbox"/> Weeks <input type="checkbox"/> Months <input type="checkbox"/> Years <input type="checkbox"/> Unknown	<b>Forms and formats</b> <input type="checkbox"/> Picture book for all ages <input type="checkbox"/> Non-sequential storyline <input type="checkbox"/> Non-linear format <input type="checkbox"/> Varying font size/shape <input type="checkbox"/> Illustration carries storyline <input type="checkbox"/> Non-traditional graphics: <input type="checkbox"/> Multiple layers of meaning <input type="checkbox"/> Interactive formats Other:  <b>Perspectives: unheard voices</b> <input type="checkbox"/> Sexual orientation/gender <input type="checkbox"/> Occupation <input type="checkbox"/> Ethnicity <input type="checkbox"/> Advantaged/disadvantaged (socio-economic) <input type="checkbox"/> Religion/spirituality <input type="checkbox"/> Perspective of youth <input type="checkbox"/> Multiple perspectives Other:  <b>Boundaries</b> <input type="checkbox"/> Subjects previously unheard <input type="checkbox"/> New types of communities <input type="checkbox"/> Unresolved endings <input type="checkbox"/> Setting previously overlooked <input type="checkbox"/> Characters portrayed in new, complex ways <input type="checkbox"/> Other:
		<small>* Saskatchewan Ministry of Education <i>Impact Assessment</i> 2012/2013</small>		

## Appendix B

### Prevalence of Particular Disabilities in Canadian Sample of Twenty-Nine Picture Books



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