

## Dis-Alternative Stories: Disability Awareness, Teacher Preparation, and the Writing Process

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### Abstract

*Quality children's literature may facilitate the development of positive self-images for students with disabilities, for English language learners (ELL), and help with the development of acceptance and awareness among peers. This article describes the outcomes of a writing assignment in a teacher education course in which 35 undergraduate preservice teachers, studying special education or ELL, were challenged to rewrite familiar stories with disability or language-sensitive slants. Though this process was originally developed for students majoring in special education, the reading class was expanded to include students studying how to teach English language learners. Approximately 5 out of 35 students were ELL majors. These innovative stories were coined dis-alternative stories. An emphasis was placed on the writing process as the undergraduates moved through stages of the writing workshop while integrating positive attributes of specific disabilities or language issues for ELLs within the main characters of their stories. The preservice teachers' post-assignment reflections indicated their growth and awareness in three categories: the power of children's literature to change disability/ELL perceptions and increase acceptance, the value of writing workshop, and the empowerment and agency they felt as change agents.*

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Students with disabilities need opportunities to see themselves in a positive light. Through accurate, realistic representations of disability, children's literature can facilitate changes in students' self-images. Wopperer (2011) stated, "Literature portraying characters with disabilities can help children and young adults develop the habit of reading for pleasure about characters like themselves, and it can support the development of personal power by portraying these characters as strong and believable" (p. 28). This mantra is also applicable to students who are English language learners as being a minority presents similar acceptance challenges. Additionally, accurate representations of disability in children's literature may develop other students' awareness, understanding, and ac-

ceptance of their peers with disabilities (Prater, Dyches, & Johnstun, 2006). Quality children's texts can serve as models to typically developing peers for how to interact with and understand the challenges of students with disabilities and those who have a language barrier.

This article describes an inventive writing task assigned to undergraduate preservice teachers enrolled in a special education literacy methods course. These disability-sensitive innovations on familiar stories are here called *dis-alternative stories*. The dis-alternative story assignment achieved many goals:

- To engage preservice teachers in critical examination of the representations of children with disabilities or language barriers in children's literature;
- To increase preservice teachers' empathy, critical consumption, and social awareness of disability representations;
- To engage preservice teachers in the writing process and writing workshop practice; and
- To unite preservice teachers' knowledge of disability with knowledge of effective teaching practices.

Before a description of the dis-alternative story assignment, a review of the power for children's literature to promote social change is needed.

### Children's Literature and Social Change

Heffernan (2004) stated, "Instead of simply recording life events, critically literate readers and writers use text to get something done in the world" (p. viii). Children's literature may serve as a vehicle for social change by highlighting and shaping the relationships between individuals and social structures. Litera-

cy, both reading and writing, can be used as a tool to promote social change.

Characterization of individuals with special needs can either confirm biases or eliminate negative perceptions (Prater, Dyches & Johnstun, 2006; Williams, Inkster & Blaska, 2005). For example, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (Littledale, 1980) may create or perpetuate inaccurate or negative images of little people with the portrayals of the characters Dopey, Sleepy and Bashful. But *My Friend with Autism* (Bishop, 2011) and *My Best Friend Will* (Lowell & Tuchel, 2005) promote awareness, understanding, and tolerance toward those who are different. By focusing on common experiences, both of these texts highlight similarities and explain differences between the two narrators and their friends with disabilities.

Stereotypes in children's literature can promote a misperception of reality for young minds. In reviews of texts that included characters with dyslexia and specific learning disabilities (LD), Altieri (2008) and Prater (2003) found most characters were portrayed as having low self-esteem and cognitive deficits. Characters with LD were often depicted with behavior issues, in non-inclusive classrooms, and as victims of teasing or bullying (Prater, 2003). In a review of children's books with characters with obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), Leininger, Dyches, Prater, Heath, and Bascom (2010) criticized seven out of seventeen bibliotherapy books due to static character development and negative depictions. These negative depictions could influence or reinforce readers' misperceptions toward individuals with OCD.

Diversity education may lead to acceptance of individuals with differences in the classroom. Maich and Belcher (2015) suggested practical guidelines for using children's picture books to promote acceptance of students with autism spectrum disorders (ASD). These guidelines include 1) selecting picture books that depict contexts both in and out of school for acceptance and social awareness, 2) selecting picture books that inform peers about ASD without creating stereotypes, and 3) considering the books' pictorial representations and literary value. Maich and Blecher encouraged using picture books in the classroom to promote awareness and understanding for students with ASD among their peers. In this manner, children's literature is used to build awareness, understanding, and acceptance of others.

Bland and Gann (2013) also suggested evaluation guidelines for choosing inclusive picture books. They recommended choosing picture books that offer realistic and accurate portrayals of disability. Such depictions would not focus solely on a disability but rather present characters as well-rounded people. Further, Bland and Gann recommended that inclusive picture books portray multidimensional characters in typical everyday interactions honestly, positively, and respectfully.

Altieri (2008) also noted that educators choose high-quality fictional literature that portrays characters with special needs respectfully and inclusively. Interactions should be positive between the characters with and without special needs. Person-first language, which identifies the person as a person with a disability rather than a disabled person, is also desirable. According to *The Arc* (2014), "People with disabili-

ties are—first and foremost—people who have individual abilities, interests, and needs" (para.1). Phrasing reflects attitudes and may create prejudice when a diagnostic term precedes and therefore defines a person. Contrary to disability-first language, person-first language helps prevent generalizations that may lead to stereotypes.

Gillanders, Castro and Franco (2014) discussed using culturally relevant books or units for English language learners when introducing and encouraging new vocabulary. Rewriting a familiar story and making the character an ELL may allow the child to identify with characters.

### **Composing Dis-Alternative Stories in a Literacy for Special Populations Methods Course**

For the purpose of this article, *dis-alternative stories* are defined as familiar stories rewritten to include characters with disabilities or language barriers. A dis-alternative story project was assigned to undergraduate preservice teachers in a READ course titled: *Literacy for Special Populations*. Using a writer's workshop format, these preservice teachers reimagined familiar children's stories and composed *dis-alternative stories* by integrating characteristics of either language or disability in one or more characters. The primary purposes of the assignment were for undergraduate preservice teachers to apply knowledge of disabilities/language barriers and promote inclusion through children's literature. Another purpose was for them to experience writing workshop practices, including teacher demonstration, guided writing,

and independent writing, with the idea that these preservice teachers would apply these practices in their future classrooms.

First, the literacy class discussed the familiar story, *Goldilocks and the Three Bears* (Marshall, 1988). In groups, the preservice teachers analyzed the characters and story elements. The class then listened to the instructor read a mentor text, *Rolling Along with Goldilocks and the Three Bears* (Meyers, 1999), which is a dis-alternative story that features Baby Bear using a wheelchair. Throughout his house, Baby Bear uses assistive technologies that enable him to participate in everyday activities. Baby Bear befriends Goldilocks and explains to her how he uses his wheelchair and how physical therapy helps him gain strength. In class discussion, the preservice teachers compared the original story with the dis-alternative mentor text. They identified how the mentor text could be used to promote awareness, understanding, and acceptance of individuals with physical disabilities.

A writing workshop begins with teacher-led mini-lessons that directly teach the stylistic and conventional aspects of writing. Mini-lessons are followed by independent writing, peer revision, peer editing, and publishing/sharing (Roe & Ross, 2006). Using writer's workshop format, the undergraduate preservice teachers developed, drafted, and revised their dis-alternative stories. First, individual preservice teachers decided which familiar children's stories they were going to rewrite. Then each wrote a brief summary of the proposed dis-alternative story, including the title, main idea, characters, areas of need to be integrated into a character or characters, and possible resulting

modifications to the story. Preservice teachers shared their summaries in cooperative conferencing groups and generated and discussed further ideas (see Figure 1). As a group, the class discussed each proposal, providing additional feedback.

Hare always boasts of his speed abilities. Tortoise accepts a challenge to race Hare (other animals laugh) but is warned by his friend Frog to bring his inhaler and listen to his body to know if he needs a break. As the race begins, Tortoise pushes himself hard but Hare quickly takes a large lead. Tortoise begins to feel tired so he takes a break next to a tree where Frog is sitting (knows he needs to rest when tired). Hare looks back to see Tortoise resting and decides to take a nap before crossing the finish line. Tortoise begins to feel well again and continues his race. Hare wakes moments before Tortoise crosses the finish line. (other animals cheer).

### Figure 1: Summary Example for Tortoise and the Hare

According to Essley, Rief, and Rocci (2008), storyboards "show students a clear path to text" (p. 11). Storyboards visually organize story elements; they trace the story's main events and signal the necessity for transitions. In class, the preservice teachers sketched and captioned events on sticky notes, which allowed the construction of storyboards with multiple sequence possibilities. Using the storyboards, the class conferred in small groups. Essley et al referred to these brainstorming, conferencing, and feedback

sessions using storyboards as telling-boards: “Using telling-boards as a visual focus for this group writing process, each writer tells his or her story and then shares it while listeners point out what they liked, ask questions, and offer suggestions” (Essley et al, 2008, p. 25). The listeners provided critical feedback to help improve each other’s dis-alternative stories. As the preservice teachers progressed through the writing process and developed their ideas, they referred back to their manipulative storyboards (see figure 2).

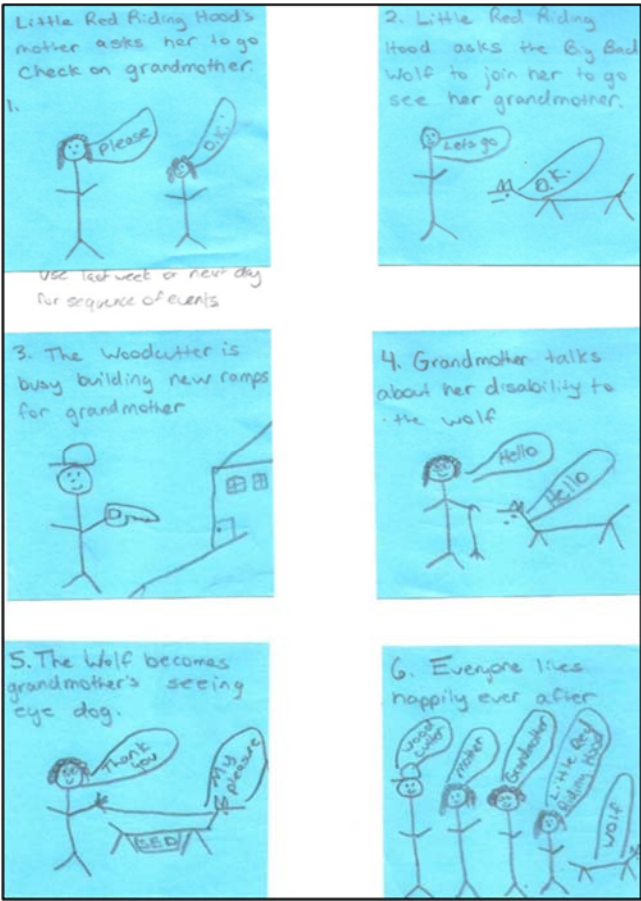


Figure 2: Sticky Note Storyboard Example for Peer Feedback

The preservice teachers shared their first drafts in one-on-one peer conference groups.

Peer conferencing enabled writers to identify what needed changing, “to tell what was good about the writing, and to get ideas and suggestions about the writing” (Roe & Ross, 2006, p. 321). The author read his/her story while the listener completed a response sheet detailing the following information: something I remember; something I did not expect or surprised me; a question I have or something that confused me; and a direct text-to-text connection to something I learned in my education courses (see Table 1). This response sheet was adapted from a critical reading response sheet developed by Heffernan (2004). The preservice teachers shared their stories in two separate one-on-one conference groups; this permitted multiple feedback opportunities.

Table 1: Peer Conference Response Sheet

|  |   |
|--|---|
| Something I remember:                            | Something I did not expect or surprised                       |
| A question I have or something that confused me: | Text-to-text connection to something I learned in my courses: |

\*Adapted from Heffernan (2004)

After some revision, the preservice teachers were given two more opportunities for feedback. To be sure they were presenting positive views of area of need, the writers were directed to share only those portions of their stories that they felt needed more critical evaluation. This was especially important



since a primary goal of the assignment was to build awareness, understanding, and acceptance of individuals with disabilities/language barriers. One-to-one peer conferencing was utilized in much the same manner as previously discussed. Additionally, peer conferencing was used to identify editing issues related to grammar, punctuation, and style. The final edited dis-alternative stories were read aloud to the class in the author's chair and submitted to the professor.

### **Promoting Social Awareness with Dis-Alternative Stories**

According to McLaughlin and DeVoogd (2004), critical literacy theory exposes the questionable features of texts, features such as the marginalization or the discounting of characters. By presenting alternative points of view and alternative voices in literature, critical literacy theorists assert that writers challenge readers' usual views and perspectives. In writing her dis-alternative story for *The Three Little Pigs*, Sarah chose to focus on the strength of each of the three little pigs. Keith, the youngest pig always wore a purple hat and red shoes and loved being outside in nature. Kevin, the middle brother, had trouble standing still and was active in sports. The oldest brother, Karl used a wheelchair and spent most of his time indoors studying. Karl was very smart; in fact his brothers called him "Pig Genius" and "Konald Krump." When the pigs' mother told the three brothers it was time to build their own homes she requested, Sarah wrote, "No matter what their houses looked like, they could be painted with flowers, the school mascot, or look like the Trump Towers in New York, she wanted them to all be wheelchair ac-

cessible and side by side." The three brothers followed their mother's request and used their skills to combat and defeat the big bad wolf. Each developed character dispelled helpless stereotypes for individuals with autism, ADHD and orthopedic disabilities. The pig brothers were self-sufficient yet relied on each other during difficult times. Readers can easily relate to the characters of this dis-alternative story.

Katie, another preservice teacher, rewrote *The Story of Ferdinand* (Leaf, 1964). In her dis-alternative story, she described Ferdinand as enjoying school especially science. The other cows and bulls did not know Ferdinand well because instead of playing with them during recess Ferdinand chose to sit and study flowers. Catalina, Ferdinand's friend, asked Ferdinand to help the other cows study for the science test on plants and flowers. When Ferdinand shared his passions with his classmates, they celebrated Ferdinand's unique gifts and qualities. With the school social setting, Katie was able to model social change within a community of learners toward a student with autism.

Two preservice students rewrote the familiar story, *Little Red Riding Hood* (Hyman, 1983). In one story, Little Red Riding Hood used a wheelchair and became stuck in the mud on her way to Grandmother's house. Jeremy, the wolf, came to her rescue. Jeremy explained he had no friends because of his appearance and all the children ran from him because they were scared. Little Red Riding Hood and Jeremy became close friends and helped each other to meet other friends. In the other story, Me-

gan's child came from Nicaragua to be closer to her Abuela (grandmother). In her story the lumberjack is bi-lingual and helps teach Poco Rojo (Little Red Riding Hood) English so she can speak the same language as the wolf.

Aleta rewrote the *Little Mermaid*. In her story the mermaid was from Denmark, arriving on the shores of Florida. She included both English and Danish words into the story such as: castle-slot; shoes-sko; Flounder-Skrubbe; and friendship- venskab!

Another rewrite was of the Ugly Duckling and entitled the Foreign Ducky. In this story Raj encounters other ducklings who are just like him, or so he thinks until he tries to communicate with them. Tommy, another duckling, is bi-lingual and teaches Raj all about the language and food in this new land.

Providing a positive representation of the characters, the writers were able to build understanding and acceptance for others. They also created opportunities for readers to relate to the story's characters by describing their everyday experiences and challenges.

### **Preservice Teachers' Perceptions of the Dis-Alternative Story Assignment**

At the end of the course, the preservice teachers were asked to respond to four questions regarding the dis-alternative story assignment via an open-ended, online questionnaire. Participation in the questionnaire was optional and no identifying information was obtained. The questions included:

1. How has this assignment impacted your awareness, understanding, and acceptance of disabilities?
2. How will this assignment shape the ways

you choose or use children's literature in your own classroom?

3. How does this assignment influence the way you will implement the writing process in your own classroom?
4. Is there anything else you would like to add regarding the dis-alternative story assignment or about representations of disability in children's literature?

Six undergraduate preservice teachers answered the on-line questionnaire and their responses were sorted into three general categories. These categories include: power of children's literature, writing workshop application, and teacher agency.

### **Power of Children's Literature**

A common theme among respondents was the idea that children's literature in general, and dis-alternative stories in particular, have extraordinary opportunity to change disability perceptions and increase acceptance. One preservice teacher discussed the power children's literature has to impact social change:

This assignment made me think of the lessons and virtues that literature can help me instill in my students to make them better individuals now and in the future.

In contrast, another respondent lamented the lack of positive representations of disability in children's literature:

I think that there is a need for more books aimed towards children regarding disabilities. Literature that looks

at the characteristics and aspects of a disability, but also emphasizes the strengths of the individual is hard to find.

One respondent commented specifically on the power of the dis-alternative story to promote peer acceptance:

I believe that if a teacher or another adult were to read these rewritten stories to a class it would promote overall peer acceptance, and it might also help the adult have a better understanding of how to be accepting and aware of the students/ individuals they come into contact with.

One of the primary purposes of the dis-alternative story assignment was the promotion of inclusive attitudes through children's literature. By their questionnaire responses, the pre-service teachers indicated that they understand and appreciate the power of children's literature to impact change.

### **Writing Workshop Application**

It was hypothesized that participation in the writing workshop format would prompt pre-service teachers to value the implementation of similar practices in their future classrooms. Comments from the respondents supported this hypothesis.

The writers' workshops we used helped me make my story the best it could be. I will probably use writers' workshops with my future students to help with their writing. I also liked how we had multiple peer reviews.

I would love to give my students the same opportunity to have ownership in their writing. I will let my students work in an environment that does not restrict them so that their writing can flourish.

A few respondents discussed the peer conferencing aspect of writing workshop:

This assignment made me aware of how important revisiting written components of text is and being open to suggestions and comments from outside sources. Working with students to create their own stories is not a one day task and should be carefully thought out and implemented in the classroom.

I like the process of several peer revisions before turning in a complete written assignment. This allows for a final product that has been read by multiple eyes with multiple backgrounds.

The role of creativity in writing was also discussed:

I hope to promote reading in my future classroom, but I also hope to promote creativity. I think that creative writing is a really important aspect to a child's education that sometimes goes overlooked. Through creative writing, such as this assignment, students are more apt to enjoy the writing process and practice it more fre-



quently.

Furthermore, this assignment has shown me that it's important to push students in their creativity; students can be encouraged to write about any and every uniqueness that people have. The old school storybooks don't include people who are different in any way. I want my students to know they can break the mold in their writing.

It is apparent the preservice teachers valued opportunities for creativity for both themselves and their future students.

### Teacher Agency

Perhaps the most satisfying comments were those that indicated the preservice teachers felt empowered or inspired to enact change in their classrooms.

I think it showed me that I can shape a story into whatever I want to use it for. I can add disabilities and themes of acceptance and understanding to the already existing stories.

I think that this assignment showed me that we are capable as teachers of adapting and rewriting a text to make it include aspects of disability.

I loved this assignment and it made me aware of how easily I can incorporate such components of awareness and acceptance in my classroom.

The preservice teachers' sense of agency and empowerment upon completion of the dis-alternative story assignment will no doubt extend to their work with children with special needs.

### Conclusion

According to McLaughlin and DeVogd (2004), "When we examine alternative perspectives, we explore the viewpoints of different characters in a story or different people in a real-life situation" (p. 49). Dis-alternative stories present alternative, disability/language-sensitive perspectives and viewpoints. The preservice teachers who wrote these stories gained experience and confidence in successful writing instruction methods. Likewise, the dis-alternative story assignment spurred the undergraduate preservice teachers to advocate for their future students. Dis-alternative stories have the power to impact social change in both the readers and the writers.

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