



Kaihilahti Silja Kiia Linnea

Children's Literature as a Method of Implementing Inclusion in Classrooms

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Kiia Linnea)

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Although the Salamanca Statement of 1994 states that all children all entitled to inclusive education despite exceptionalities or other obstacles, prejudices towards those with exceptionalities persist in society and in education. Individuals with exceptionalities are often negatively stereotyped and found "unworthy", reinforced by stigmatizing language and objectifying labels. Being exposed to these attitudes towards individuals with exceptionalities may cause a decrease in mental health, self-esteem, social skills, and educational successes. Furthermore, individuals with exceptionalities may struggle with normative practices in schools, which are often invalidated.

Research suggest that dismantling prejudices and uncomfortable situations would encourage solidarity and therefore help develop an inclusive environment. Dismantling prejudice is a complex and delicate mission, yet this research suggests teaching social and emotional capacities in order to combat these attitudes. Social emotional learning (SEL) promotes positive encounters with oneself and others, a beneficial tool for everyone in a classroom, both those with and without exceptionalities.

As a method of teaching of SEL, this research suggests bibliotherapeutic processes. Bibliotherapy can address both typical developmental issues, as well as clinical issues for students who need further support. Books are an accessible method to discuss difficult issues, and be therapeutic for those with exceptionalities, as they can act as a mirror for oneself and provide role models. However, most teachers feel they do not have the knowledge or capabilities to teach inclusive topics and are not aware of methods to do so. Therefore, this research will further analyze the need for inclusive literature and illustrate methods for teachers to use in classrooms in order to implement inclusion.

**Key words:** Children's literature, Social Emotional Learning, Dialogic Reading, Bibliotherapy, Inclusion.

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## **Introduction**

In 1994, the World Conference on Special Needs Education, in Salamanca, Spain, adopted a new statement which calls for inclusion within education to be the new norm ((UNESCO & Ministry of Education and Science Spain, 1994). Moreover, over the last decade, education systems have developed an increased awareness of students with exceptionalities (Baratz, 2015), with UNICEF (2021) estimating around 240 million children with exceptionalities worldwide. Therefore, the implementation of inclusive practices remains a high priority in education (Liu, 2020). In order to create inclusive classrooms, educators need to find ways or strategies to create an environment where all of their students feel safe and included (Baratz, 2015). However, individuals with exceptionalities remain a marginalized group (Andrews & al., 2019), and continue to face discrimination. Boyle (1997) argues that individuals with exceptionalities are continuously stigmatized negatively into their adult lives. Thereupon, although inclusion is a wide concept, this research focuses on inclusion of students with exceptionalities that may stigmatize learning in a traditional classroom.

Firstly, we must acknowledge the premise that these prejudices against these exceptionalities exist in our society and embrace the belief that prejudice can be eliminated through education, teachers being agents of change (Levison & St. Onge, 1999; Gabel & Connor, 2013). Educators are, after all, traditionally one of the three "most important" individuals in many students' perceptions (Koplewicz, 1996), and wield considerable power in the creation of the psychological and social milieu (Burke, 2002).

Understanding the limitations impeded on students with exceptionalities allows us to understand the need for inclusive literature and its benefits. Therefore, this research will firstly establish the concept of inclusion, exceptionalities, their representation and struggles to understand how we may strengthen the wellbeing of all students in classrooms.

The issue is, many educators are unaware of evidence- based strategies to meet the needs of their learners with exceptionalities (Friedlander, 2009), and there is a need for easily adaptable tools for instruction (Sigmon, Tacket & Azano, 2016). One possible answer to the issue is the unequivocal power of literature to transform lives and shape understandings (Pennell, Wollak & Koppenhaver, 2017), in this research, also known as children's literature, or bibliotherapy. Bibliotherapy, the use of books and stories to support emotional needs of

students (Heath, Smith & Young, 2017), allows educators to tackle complex issues with more ease.

This research will focus then on how bibliotherapy, and more distinctly children's literature, can affect our social emotional competences (SEC), and through those competences create an inclusive environment to learn. Social emotional learning (SEL) is a type of instruction that supports the inclusion of students with exceptionalities (Cavioni, Grazzani & Ornaghi, 2017), through the learning of one's own competences, such as empathy, self-awareness, and socialization. Empathy especially is an accredited tool for inclusion; Kuuluvainen & al. for PLAN International Finland (2017) encourages teaching empathy as a tool for eliminating issues of bullying and hate speech. Shady & Larson (2010) reinforce the notion that empathy is a tool for teaching inclusion, also known as being open and challenged by other's perspective. Empathy, along with other competences, are all part of a hidden curriculum of morals and social norms, which prepare students for life (Drew, 2020). Elias (2004) concludes that SEL interventions that are comprehensive and link academic and social-emotional learning have the greatest likelihood of helping students with exceptionalities.

Children's literature that is inclusive and/or has social-emotional content is an opportunity to develop certain pro-social skills that promote inclusion (Doyle & Bramwell, 2006). Moreover, educators are encouraged to use dialogic reading as a tool to further facilitate comprehension and learning (Fettig & al., 2018). Dialogic reading (DR) is an evidence-based practice for young children who are typically developing and at risk for developmental delays, with encouraging evidence for students with exceptionalities (Towson & al., 2017), although ssimilar DR outcomes for young children with and without exceptionalities have also been documented internationally (Opel et al., 2009).

Ultimately the goal is to imbue students with responsibility towards themselves and others (Ee, Zhou, & Wong, 2014), and creating an environment where every student feels welcome and safe. This research will illustrate the need for inclusion in classrooms and discuss the processes suggested in order to answer the question:

*How can educators benefit from diverse children's literature in order to implement inclusion in classrooms?*

# Inclusion and Social Emotional Learning

## 2.1 Inclusion

According to the Cambridge Dictionary, inclusion is ‘‘ the idea that everyone should be able to use the same facilities, take part in the same activities, and enjoy the same experiences, including individuals who have exceptionalities or other disadvantages (2021). This definition, whilst it covers the basics of inclusion, only touches the surface of inclusion, and what is required to make a student feel included. Inclusion is not only material experiences, although they are an important aspect.

McMaster (2012) argues that there is no one single definition of inclusion and that the term should be viewed like a spectrum rather than a measurable goal. They continue that inclusion has moved away from only the interests of those students categorized as exceptionalities but has become an umbrella term to support every student in the classroom to make sure that all feel as though they belong (McMaster, 2012). This research focuses not only how literature can benefit only those with exceptionalities, but every student and educator as well.

Therefore, in this context, I would refer to Murray-Everett & Schroeder’s (2021) description of an inclusive classroom as one that includes, represents, and affirms all identities and abilities.

## 2.2 Exceptionalities

The term *learners with exceptionalities* refers to individuals whose physical, behavioral, or cognitive performance is so different from the norm that additional services are required to meet the individual’s needs (Slavin, 2010). The term exceptionalities covers the terms commonly used; disability, impairments, and handicap.

The World Health Organization (1980) provides the following definitions:

- **Impairment** – any loss or abnormality of psychological, physiological or anatomical structure or function.

- **Disability** – any restriction or lack of ability to perform an activity in the manner or within the range considered normal for a human being.
- **Handicap** – the result when an individual with an impairment cannot fulfill a normal life role.

These terms have been used interchangeably in education, media, and counseling, but they convey different meanings and should be addressed so (Falvo, 2005; Cook & Hussey, 2002). Furthermore, the term handicapped is considered by some to be degrading, since it probably derived from a term for beggars, "cap in hand" (Levison & St. Onge, 1999),

Correct labeling is an important issue of respect towards learners with exceptionalities, as stereotyping is an ongoing issue with students identified with exceptionalities (Slavin, 2010). Therefore, this research will use the term exceptionalities.

### **2.3 Exceptionalities in Education**

There are multiple types of exceptionalities which are categorized. Visible exceptionalities are objectively observed and measured by others (Smart, 2000), such as missing a limb. They are more often portrayed by media, and lead to development of stereotypes or marginalization. (Iowa center for Assistive Technology, 2006). Invisible exceptionalities are exceptionalities whose manifestations do not evoke outward signs that may alert casual observers of a person's condition (Falvo, 2005), such as ADHD.

It should also be noted that exceptionalities vary on a spectrum. For example, autism is described as a spectrum disorder with varying degrees of severity; some are nonverbal, but many are communicative, although their speech is often limited to a specific topic of interest (Sigmon, Tacket & Azano, 2016). They often also exhibit stimming, such as rocking back and forth, which many find disrupting in class. Many students with autism have heightened sensitivity to loud noises, such as ringing school bells, which may be upsetting (Sigmon, Tacket & Azano, 2016). Thus, learning in a traditional classroom can be a challenge for the student with autism, their classmates, and educator.

ADHD is another example of a spectrum disorder, and like autism, has stereotyped symptoms, such as hyperactivity. However, often ADHD presents itself differently based on gender; for example, hyperactivity is found on lower rates compared to boys, and rather exhibit lower levels of inattention and aggression (Gaub & Carlson, 1997). The stereotypical

symptoms are more noticeable, and such behavior is seen as negative to educators and peers (Cornett-Ruiz & Hendricks, 2010). Therefore, any discussion of students with exceptionalities must acknowledge the significant diversity of characteristics, needs and experiences between and within disability types (McMillan & Jarvis, 2013).

The Salamanca Statement (1994) reaffirms that education is a right guaranteed by the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights; meaning, all ordinary schools must accommodate all children, regardless of conditions. Participation and inclusion are necessary for dignity and enjoyment, both an exercise of human rights, meaning students should learn together despite obstacles. The Salamanca Statement further indicate that the most effective means of effective schooling and solidarity between children is implementing inclusion in classrooms (UNESCO & Ministry of Education and Science Spain , 1994).

As students with exceptionalities of all forms are becoming more and more visible in our schools (Levinson & St. Onge, 1999), the terms of the statement are crucial in aiding the wellbeing of all students. Implementing inclusion however, is no easy task, and general education educators are often expected to demonstrate sensitivity, consideration, empathy and to be able to cope with students with special needs, to convey they believe in their ability to succeed both academically and socially (Talmor, Asia, & Kayam, 2010). However, most educators feel they do not have the support or guidance to do so (Baratz, 2015), and it is well documented that many educators feel unprepared and without tools to effectively differentiate their teaching for diverse students in mainstream classrooms (Forlin, 2001).

## **2.4 The Need for Inclusion**

The sociometric status of children with exceptionalities is one characterized by isolation and social rejection across time (Magalit & Al-Yagon; 2002). One of the obstacles individuals with exceptionalities encounter most often is stereotyping. Stereotyping is defined as theories that organize our mental representation of group differences (Smart, 2000). Stereotyping separates the ‘other’ because they are seen as different, and often unworthy.

Ableism is another common issue. Ableism is a form of oppression that emphasizes abilities and favors able-bodied individuals over individuals with exceptionalities (Robinson,



2005). Ableism is often seen in education, and later in life, during job search (Iowa center for Assistive Technology, 2006). Ableism stems from stereotyping and negative attitudes.

Attitudes are a feeling or opinion about something or someone, or a way of behaving that is caused by this (Cambridge Dictionary, 2022). Attitudes towards exceptionalities are often negative, formulated by reflections on popular media, and especially how individuals with exceptionalities on television and literature are portrayed (Iowa center for Assistive Technology, 2006). At best, ableism causes societal limitations, such as not having access with a wheelchair, but in worst cases, it may result in discrimination and violence.

Individuals with exceptionalities have a long history of facing discrimination. Historically, individuals with exceptionalities have been kept hidden from the mainstream of society: "out of sight, out of mind (Levinson & St. Onge, 1999). After the development of asylums around the 18th century, individuals with exceptionalities were kept in institutions if not at home (Levinson & St. Onge, 1999). Parents of the children with exceptionalities were also victims of the shame and stigma attached to their children's conditions (Levinson & St. Onge, 1999).

Perceptions of individuals with exceptionalities was further influenced by terminology, the use of stigmatizing language and objectifying labels (Gouvier & Coon, 2002). The moral model towards exceptionalities was especially negative, demonstrated by dehumanizing terminology which reflected pity and shame, such as "cripple" (Andrews, 2016). Perception did not begin to change until the 1970's, when many countries, such as the United States, included discrimination into federal law (Levinson & St. Onge, 1999). Even today, UNICEF (2021) estimates that children with exceptionalities are 41% more likely to feel discriminated against.

These attitudes and perceptions can easily lead to a litany of issues amongst individuals with exceptionalities. There is evidence that students with exceptionalities are at a great risk to be involved in bullying- either as the victim or the bully itself (Rose, Monda-Amaya, & Espelage, 2011; Swearer, Wang, Maag, Siebecker, & Frerichs, 2012). Students with exceptionalities are firstly at a high risk of peer victimization (Saylor & Leach, 2009), as many may be passive in relating to their peers (Rose, Monda-Amaya, and Espelage, 2011). Furthermore, Kaukiainen & al. (2002) found evidence that students with exceptionalities were also at a high risk in being involved in the perpetration of bullying. Since students with exceptionalities may have difficulties interpreting the verbal and nonverbal cues of their peers,

the frustration of one's poor social skills might contribute to aggressive behaviour towards others (Kaukiainen & al., 2002).

Additionally, students with exceptionalities are at increased risk of experiencing mental health difficulties (McMillan & Jarvis, 2013). The World Health Organization (2022) defines mental health as ‘ ‘ Mental health is a state of mental well-being that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realize their abilities, learn well and work well, and contribute to their community’’. UNICEF (2021) estimates that 1 in 10 children with exceptionalities are deprived of their well-being and are 51% more likely to feel unhappy than those without exceptionalities.

The bullying of individuals with exceptionalities experience may largely contribute to mental health, as being bullied and/or ostracised by peers was the strongest predictor of increased symptoms of depression and anxiety in youth, especially among children with exceptionalities (American Academy of Paediatrics, 2012). The risk of internalizing mental health issues can be six times higher in those with exceptionalities, and internalizing worry or sadness may contribute to poor social relationships (Fellinger & al., 2009; McMillan & Jarvis, 2013). Mental health issues can also increase externalizing their problems, mainly in the form of aggression, and later lead to victimization (Leadbeater & Hoglund, 2009), creating a vicious, never-ending cycle of bullying and poor mental health. Some individuals may also exhibit somatic symptoms, such as migraines or stomach pain (Mugnaini, Lassi, La Malfa, & Albertini, 2009), only increasing symptoms of anxiety and depression.

Moreover, discrimination and feelings of failure may lead to poorer self-esteem. Research has indicated that the self-efficacy and self-esteem of children with exceptionalities may be negatively influenced by classroom isolation, by the difficulties of dealing with school demands and by repeated experiences of school failure (Zelege, 2004). Children with exceptionalities tend to compare their performance with that of their peers and consider themselves different, less valued, and less skilled (Gadeyne, Ghesquière, & Onghena, 2004).

Children who are less chosen by peers at school, have fewer opportunities to interact and build friendships and tend to experience frequent states of loneliness (Mugnaini, Lassi, La Malfa & Albertini, 2009). They show poor prosocial behaviour and emotional distress, such as sadness, anxiety, and depression (Wentzel, Barry, & Caldwell, 2004; McMillan & Jarvis, 2013).

Furthermore, with poor self-esteem, individuals with exceptionalities are more vulnerable to becoming victims of physical or sexual abuse (Mitra, Mouradian, & Diamond, 2011). Poor self-esteem and ostracization may also result in a need to be effectively accepted

by peers (McNamara, Vervaeke, & Willoughby, 2008), which may emerge as willingness to conform to negative peer pressure. For example, engaging in risk-behaviours (e.g. delinquency, aggression, substance abuse, unprotected sexual activities) to avoid social isolation, wanting to support their friends' requests and wishes (Bryan, Pearl, & Fallon, 1989).

Nevertheless, modern models often would position exceptionalities as an aspect of identity, much like race, gender, or sexual orientation (Andrews & al., 2019), a much more humanizing take on exceptionalities. Individuals with exceptionalities, like any minority, just want [and deserve] the right to function and live independently, like the rest of the population (Levinson & St. Onge, 1999), and society must respond to that need. Building educators' capacity to effectively teach and support students with exceptionalities should not be considered solely in terms of academic outcomes, but also as an investment in mental health promotion (McMillan & Jarvis, 2013).

## **2.5 Social Emotional Learning (SEL)**

Weissberg (2015) defines SEL 'processes through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions'.

In other words, SEL in schools is educators addressing the growing dual nature of education, addressing not only academic achievement, but also taking care of students' social-emotional wellbeing (Darling-Hammond, Wilhoit, & Pittenger, 2014), with the purpose of developing students to become a community of engaged and productive citizens (Elias, 1997). Learning SEL is especially important for individuals with exceptionalities, as some of whom may have difficulty with self-regulation, impulsivity, social skills, communication, and other social and emotional competencies (Westwood, 2011).

Working with SEL is often divided into five social emotional competences, which are self-awareness (identifying and recognizing emotions, self-efficacy), self-management (impulse control and stress management, help seeking), social awareness (empathy, respect for others), relationship management (communication, relationship building), and responsible decision making (problem solving, personal, social, and ethical

responsibility) (Ahmed, Hamzah & Abdullah, 2020). Practicing each of these competences are incredibly important for supporting inclusion in classrooms.

## **2.6 Bibliotherapy**

The term bibliotherapy was first used in print by Crothers (1916), who recommended assigning reading materials in order to expand an individual's level of self-understanding and to expand the understanding of others' perceptions. However, bibliotherapy is not a new concept in history. Across time and cultures, stories have been used to teach important lessons (Kottler, 2015), such as not to cry wolf or not to trust strangers. One of the most known examples are Aesop's tales, told already in ancient Greece (Temple & Temple, 1998). Bibliotherapy is effective because stories are fun; they have survived through history because they are memorable, in addition to endorsing societal values (Heath & Heath, 2008). Children especially, are affected by emotional moments, such as being frightened or sad, and remember lessons which are emotional.

Bibliotherapy is a practice of cognitive behavioural therapy; what we think and how we feel impacts our behaviour (Butler, Chapman, Forman, & Beck, 2006). There exist two major types of bibliotherapy (Heath, Smith & Young, 2017). Developmental bibliotherapy is to aid with one's typical adjustment problems, such as friendship conflicts or bullying, whereas clinical bibliotherapy is needed for more severe mental health issues, such as abuse and trauma (Heath, Smith & Young, 2017). Both processes however work through the sharing of books and stories.

While the effects of bibliotherapy have been proven throughout the ages, a multitude of studies have also been conducted validating the effectiveness of the process. In the United Kingdom, Montgomery and Maunders (2015) reported positive outcomes of bibliotherapy addressing a wide range of children's internalizing and externalizing behaviour problems- whether it was aggression or anxiety. In Israel, bibliotherapy was proven to aid in reducing violence and aggression among children (Betzael & Shechtman, 2017). Zins, Weissberg, Wang, and Wallburg (2004) also noted that in schools that integrated SEL [for example, through bibliotherapy] into their practices, students exhibited more prosocial behaviours, reducing the amount of student aggression, suspension, and absences.

Heath, Smith & Young (2017) especially encourage to use of bibliotherapy for students using children's picture books in order to teach SEL, placing SEL skills equally alongside academic skills (Merrell & Gueldner, 2010).

## Defining Inclusive Literature

Reading inclusive literature concerning learning exceptionalities can have many benefits. Books provide a nonthreatening way to introduce students to the characteristics of students with learning exceptionalities (Sigmon, Tacket & Azano, 2016). However, books can also convey an image that could offend some students (Baratz, 2015), giving the wrong impression on students with learning exceptionalities.

Books can be written from multiple perspectives. Sigmon, Tacket & Azano (2016) and Beckett & al. (2010) both investigated manners in which pictures books concerning learning exceptionalities were written. Sigmon, Tacket & Azano (2016), who researched picture books about children with autism, discovered that a large majority of books were either written from a friend's, parent's, or sibling's perspectives. Those that were written from a friends' vantage point, often had an overall message of "were all different but alike" (Sigmon, Tacket & Azano, 2016). Many also focused on the experiences of parents and sibling trying to understand the peculiar behaviors of a child with learning exceptionalities (Sigmon, Tacket & Azano, 2016).

Similarly, Beckett & al. (2010) conducted a study in the United Kingdom examining 100 children's books portraying learning exceptionalities. Again, the majority of the books did not portray learning exceptionalities in a way the supports inclusiveness. 33 out of the 100 books supported a tragic view of exceptionalities, eliciting sympathy rather than empathy from the reader (Beckett & al. 2010). In addition, eight of the books in this study depicted an unrealistic happy ending, in which the character had a "miracle cure of their impairment", and their exceptionalities ceased to exist or be a problem (Beckett & al. 2010).

Both types of literature can be extremely harmful to children with exceptionalities. Alaya (1999), conducted a study on individuals with exceptionalities in children's literature, and found, similarly to Beckett & al. (2010), that many books elicited sympathy rather than empathy from the reader. In cases like these, the characters were viewed as a "poor little thing" or a "brave little soul" (Alaya, 1999), adding to the view of tragedy that is often associated with learning exceptionalities. These portrayals are extremely negative and disconnect the character from society (Sigmon, Tacket & Azano, 2016).

Books that are from someone else's perspective, can, when correctly written, positive. If the main character challenges their own internal attitudes and assumptions, it may encourage the reader without exceptionalities to do so as well, leading to a "deeper level of

transformational practice’’ (Chen, 2009). However, often they are from the ‘‘poor little thing’’ perspective, allowing the child to see themselves as a burden.

The types of books that include a miracle recovery, are mainly just fantasy and can be very upsetting (Beckett & al. 2010). The child may be upset that they will never recover, or that they are not trying hard enough to recover, and so they themselves are not good enough.

In the study conducted by Beckett & al. (2010), only 40 books viewed the character not as an outsider nor defined by their ‘‘otherness’’. In these books, they were full members of society and community. The only issue was that in many of these books the exceptionalities was not portrayed by anything else than illustrations (Beckett & al. 2010). Illustrations leave out mannerisms and feelings of the child with exceptionalities, which may cause the child to feel that they are not ‘‘normal’’.

As finding inclusive literature that does not cause the child with exceptionalities feel unheard and disrespected can be difficult, Harris & al () has collected a list of question in order to evaluate inclusive literature. This list was originally created to evaluate inclusive literature with a focus on multiculturalism, but with a few modifications, it serves well for this purpose as well.

### **Who and why are they writing the story?**

Is the author someone who themselves has learning exceptionalities? Or do they know someone, a family member or a friend who does? Perhaps they are academically well researched on the topic? The background of the author varies and may shift the perspective of the book. Furthermore, is the story’s purpose to educate, and educate on what? Are they trying express what it is like to ‘‘deal’’ with a person with exceptionalities, or is their purpose to educate on how a person with exceptionalities experiences the world around them?

### **What is the story saying?**

Is the story expressing that a person with exceptionalities is a burden, or a part of society? Do they suffer from impairments, and who are those impairments caused by? Themselves or society?

### **Who are the characters?**

What kind of exceptionalities are described, and how do they interact with others? Whose point of view is the book from; the person with exceptionalities, or someone who ‘deals’ with them?

### **How are they described?**

What kind of labels are used? Are there slurs? Or are they perhaps a kind of genius, with overwhelming brain capacity and processing?

### **How are they developed?**

Are their exceptionalities accepted by society? Or do the characters eventually overcome some sort of obstacle due to kindness and acceptance shown to them? They may even have a miracle recovery.

### **What is the setting of the story?**

Is it at home, and are they sheltered? At school? If reading a book with the purpose to teach inclusivity, in which time period should it be set in?

Although each of these questions can aid in selecting inclusive literature, perhaps the biggest indication of inclusive literature is how the character’s exceptionalities are portrayed. Wassermann (2014) argues that it is critical that children’s books portray exceptionalities positively rather than negatively, and only then is the portrayal appropriate of characters with exceptionalities. When characters are portrayed positively, their exceptionalities are normalised and therefore easier accepted by society.

Sigmon, Tacket & Azano’s (2016) research on characters with autism supports this notion. The research also encourages to teach the common characteristics of a exceptionalities,



whilst still maintaining the focus on the fact that each person with exceptionalities is still an individual. Literature that portrays characters with exceptionalities defined only by their exceptionalities can be extremely harmful, as this narrow set of characterization create and promote stereotypes of individuals with exceptionalities (Black & Tsumoto, 2018). Especially as the kind of literature to which young individuals are exposed is likely to influence their perceptions (Beckett et al., 2010).

For example, Irwin et al. (2015) found that 75% of the characters with autism in 100 books were described as having “splinter-savant abilities”. This portrayal of a book-smart genius with difficulty with social skills, is quite prevalent in media. However, studies show that only 46% of individuals with ASD have average or above average intellectual ability (Dawson & al., 2007). This stereotype may cause some students feel inferior. Telling stories depicting stereotypes do not represent the full range of strengths and weaknesses of those on the autism spectrum (Black & Tsumoto, 2018); portraying range would also give space to portraying individuality.

Similarly, Golos & Moses (2011) researched portrayal of deaf characters in media. Deafness is often portrayed from a medical perspective rather than a cultural one. Especially those who do not have a deaf role model, see deafness as a medical problem that is their fault and should be fixed in order to make them hearing, “normal” (Golos & Moses, 2011). Therefore, they feel they must rely on the communication standards of the hearing, and often feel isolated, angry, and unable to function in real life (Golos & Moses, 2011). This perspective supports an ableist view, that deafness or other exceptionalities are a burden, and the responsibility of the disabled to fit into the norms of society.

In conclusion, books selected to advance the conversation on inclusion are more difficult to find. They must portray characters as individuals with exceptionalities, whilst still teaching about common struggles of exceptionalities, without stereotyping the exceptionalities. Individuals with exceptionalities should not be considered a burden, a “poor little thing”, nor should they be expected to achieve a milestone because of someone else’s kindness.

## **The Impact of Inclusive Literature**

The implementation of culturally inclusive practices (in classrooms) remains a high priority for educators (Liu, 2020). This includes the culture of students with exceptionalities. However, most educators cite lack of knowledge and resources as not including diverse literature in their teaching (Schultz, 2010). Acknowledging the therapeutic effects of bibliotherapy and SEL, books can be used to help educators understand their students and their needs (Karen & Stephanie, 2011).

Picture books especially use illustrations and text to concurrently tell a story (Villareal & al., 2015). Prater & al. (2006) continue that books, especially picture books, allow "authors to connect with readers in ways that are new and exciting, and expand the reader's perspectives". There are multiple benefits to implementing inclusive literature into education, for educators and students with and without exceptionalities alike.

### **4.1 Impact of Social and Emotional Learning (Through Bibliotherapy)**

Teaching different worldviews and values is relatively futile, unless the students are capable of accepting the change. These values substantially connect to the social emotional (SEC) competence of students, an outcome of social and emotional learning (SEL). To reiterate, social emotional competence is the capacity to interact with others, monitor and control cognitive processes, regulate one's emotions and behaviour (Ahmed, Hamzah & Abdullah, 2020), promoting:

- understanding
- showing empathy for others,
- create and sustain positive relationships
- self-awareness
- self-management
- social awareness
- relationship management
- responsible decision making

SEL supports the learning of students with exceptionalities in mainstream classrooms (Cavioni, Grazzani & Ornaghi, 2017), as through SEL, children and youths learn and effectively utilize the acquired knowledge, attitudes, and abilities to comprehend and manage thoughts, set and accomplish positive goals, feel and demonstrate empathy for others; create and sustain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions (Weissberg, Durlak, Domitrovich, & Gullotta, 2015). Greenberg & al., (2003) agree that students taught by the SEL approach develop better communication and connection with others than students taught in a traditional setting. In addition, SEL programmes had a significant impact on positive attitudes towards the self, others and learning, and on the enhancement of prosocial behaviour and academic learning (Sklad, Diekstra, De Ritter, & Ben, 2012).

These competencies are critical to the efforts to build positive mental health amongst students (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011). Using SEL approaches, such as bibliography, is an example of a universal level of intervention for the whole class; a preventative method towards discrimination and a proactive method towards inclusion (McMillan & Jarvis, 2013). SEL programs have been found to decrease aggression and anti-social behaviours, emotional distress, depressive symptoms as well as at-risk behaviours (Wilson & Lipsey, 2007; Horowitz & Garber, 2007).

SEL programs teach showing empathy for (Ahmed, Hamzah & Abdullah, 2020), avoiding the potential risk of labelling and stigmatization (Cavioni, Grazzani & Ornaghi, 2017). Learning self-awareness on the other hand support recognizing expression of emotions (e.g., anger, sadness, fear, and joy), which students with exceptionalities tend to be less accurate in (Wiig & Harris, 1974). Learning to recognize these emotions decrease the difficulty in maintaining and sustaining positive social interactions and verbal and non-verbal aggressive behaviours toward peers (Cullinan, 2002). Furthermore, SEL supports good work habits and collaboration, as well as enhancing their equal valuing among mainstream peers (Cavioni & Zanetti, 2015).

This research recommends teaching SEL through the process of dialogic reading (see section *Dialogic Reading*).

## **4.2 Literature as an Introduction to Exceptionalities**

For the classmates of a student with exceptionalities, children's literature is a valuable practice in classrooms. For some, it may be the first real exposure to exceptionalities, which can be exciting and scary, as humans tend to be afraid of what is different (Parnell, 2015).

Levinson & St.Onge (1999) discuss the feelings of discomfort that often accompanies facing individuals with exceptionalities. As mentioned before, individuals with exceptionalities have often been seen as "other" (Smart, 2000), often accompanied with stigma, as well as feelings of pity and shame. Levinson & St.Onge (1999) argue that the discomfort stems from the lack of awareness, the larger silence that surrounds the acknowledgement of exceptionalities. That many individuals are completely inexperienced in relating to someone with a severe exceptionality, either physical or cognitive. It naturally feels uncomfortable to be around those who cannot act in the normal range of what is considered "socially acceptable."

Using literature can aid in explaining that there exist exceptionalities and help answer any questions due to children's natural curiosity (Schultz, 2010). Understanding, and presenting exceptionalities as nothing to be afraid of, allows the discomfort to subside, allowing new opportunities automatically emerge for support, communication, and friendship (Levinson & St.Onge 1999).

Stories can show an inside peek to the life with exceptionalities and explain why one student might need a hearing aid, or another must take a walk during class time, or someone sits in a wheelchair. Literature acts a non-threatening way to introduce these characteristics of individuals with exceptionalities, which can lead to positive impacts on student acceptance (Prater & al., 2006).

Reading teaches students vocabulary (Paribakht & Wesche, 1996), allowing them to fully express themselves. Having the vocabulary to talk about exceptionalities prevents using harmful labels (Schultz, 2010), as we mentioned previously, as using inappropriate labels such as "retard", or "brain dead", are insulting and promote stereotypes. It is important to discuss these stereotypes with students, as they can lead to erroneous perceptions (Black & Tsumoto, 2018), which can lead to exclusion. Literature raises the need to look at our own beliefs and practices, "recognition of one's internal attitudes, assumptions and history, leading to the deeper levels for transformational practice" (Chen, 2009).

Ultimately, the goal is to unpack the norms set by society and understand that exceptionalities are not “scary”. Therefore, a combination of understanding the exceptionalities, learning the correct vocabulary, and facing stereotypes create a safe space which respects differences.

### **4.3 Literature as a Socializing Agent**

Literature can also act as a socializing agent (Baratz, 2015). Stories allow students to understand the world around them, and shows that their actions have consequences (Hambleton, 2021). Students can ask themselves, if they have ever teased or made fun of students with exceptionalities, who needed help at school or acted “funny”? Or if they have ever stood up for those students? (Schultz, 2010).

The teaching of literature is effective as long as students feel that they have learnt something new about themselves they were not aware of previously (Baratz, 2015). Every valuable piece of literature expresses a worldview, calling readers to examine their own world views; sometimes even changing their worldviews and adopting new perceptions (Baratz & Kass, 2007).

Literature acts a “sneak peek” into the lives of students with exceptionalities. Students in the classroom learn to appreciate their classmates and the difficulties they experience, especially an insider view of being teased, which may promote empathy (Black & Tsumoto, 2018). Shach & Green-Shukrun (2009) add that the more students are exposed to a broad variety of age-appropriate literary works that correspond to their level of comprehension and to their internal emotional needs, the more their sociocultural world will expand, and they will be better able to internalize the experience.

Students’ internal emotional needs may be to understand their classmates with exceptionalities and make sense why they are different. Once they are understood, then celebrating, honouring, and respecting those differences of the characters in the books and through that, in the classroom, lays down the foundations for recognizing and respecting individual differences within the classroom community (Kent & Simpson, 2021).

Shady & Larson (2010) discuss the shift in perspective understanding creates. Unless we understand, students may view exceptionalities from an ‘‘I-it’’ perspective, which alienates the other. The ‘‘I-thou’’ perspective confirms the other as a partner [of the same value] and transcends the boundary of the objective distance that separates them (Shady & Larson, 2010). They continue that the majority of human life is experienced as ‘‘I-it’’, which is insufficient in terms of inclusivity, and that we need to change how the self relates to the other (Shady & Larson, 2010), humanizing the ‘‘other’’. Do we see the other as a valuable human with their own thoughts and feelings, or simply as the object of our own thoughts and actions?

Literature has a significant impact on the development of the individual child’s personality, as they reflect ideologies, values, norms, and acceptable behavior patterns (Rosenthal, 2006). Literature has the ability to provide students with multiple points of view, which in turn helps build toward the idea of equality and acceptance (Schultz, 2010). Those students, who belong to the dominant ‘‘norm’’, are taught they are without the need to feel superior to others [with exceptionalities] (Schultz, 2010). Once we accept the other, we value their worth.

As students grow, the values they follow will impact their actions in society. The primary goal of culturally relevant teaching is to empower students to examine critically the society in which they live and to work for social change (Billings, 2000). Teaching students critical thinking will also slowly help remove the invisible barriers in society (Schultz, 2010). Morowski’s study (1997) also provides support for the importance of the bibliotherapeutic process. She claims that educators are responsible for students developing into mature and mentally healthy individuals, who have an appropriate set of social skills and a clearly defined, value-based worldview.

#### **4.4 Literature as a Therapeutic Tool**

Furthermore, literature can be a therapeutic tool (Baratz, 2015); the book facilitates a nonconventional type of learning, which occurs through the experience of identifying with the character. For students with exceptionalities, literature can act as a security blanket, and provides the message that they are not alone in this world with exceptionalities (Schultz, 2010).

A metaphor of books as mirrors, windows, and doors is found in discussions about diverse children's literature, with implications both for identity development and social practice (Botelho & Rudman, 2009). As mirrors, books can provide students with reflections of their own thoughts, feelings, and experiences (Pennell, Wollak & Koppenhaver, 2017). They may encounter difficult and emotional events, some of which are already familiar to the child and others which are less so (Baratz, 2015), which may increase their sense of belonging and self-affirmation (Botelho & Rudman, 2009).

Levinson & St. Onge (1999) argues that oppression stems from [the values of] both parties, when an individual without exceptionalities often feels superior and more capable, which leads to feelings of pity, guilt, obligation, and even revulsion. In response, the person with exceptionalities feels inferior, lacking, and oddly different, which causes shame, anger, resentment, and blame creating a cycle of victimization (Levinson & St. Onge, 1999). Thus, whilst literature can create understanding for those without exceptionalities, it should also increase the self-worth of those with exceptionalities. They need books that tell them that they deserve everything able-bodied peers do as well, such as books that proclaim the territory of childhood belongs to all children (Alam, 2016). [Every] child should be able to deeply and personally connect with books, to have books that mirror their own lives in meaningful and authentic ways (Pennell, Wollak & Koppenhaver, 2017).

So how does a book represent oneself? As mentioned beforehand, inclusive classrooms represent and affirm all identities (Murray-Everett & Schroeder, 2021), and therefore every young person should have representation of themselves. An important way of seeing oneself represented in having role models, someone to look up to.

Ochman (1996), researched the importance of having role models to boost the self-esteem of young children. Role models are often found in media, but even more so, in literature. Students reading about adventures following individuals like them feel empowering and remind students they can achieve greatness or happiness just like their literary heroes.

In addition, literature allows the students with exceptionalities to believe in their ability to succeed both academically and socially (Talmor, Asia, & Kayam, 2010). Reading literature can increase self-awareness and encourage processes significant for personal development (Marlowe & Maycock, 2000), as students identify with characters with difficulties, and the sense of identification may help the students with their own difficulties (Baratz, 2015). Baratz's

(2015) research found that reading causes an emotional process, that causes a shift in self-image and a sense of identification with the other.



## **The Internalization of Literature**

The use of a book facilitates the teaching of any topic and allows for the discussion of issues, which without the mediation of the book would be inaccessible (Catalano, 2008). Whilst reading a book may act as a catalyst, the students should also internalize the message of the text in order to reap the benefits. Therefore, this research will examine some practicalities and methods around mediation and promoting inclusion in classrooms.

The types of books you read to your student's places an importance in the minds of your students. They will value and find importance in [diverse] literature if you place an importance on it by reading it to the students (Schultz, 2010). Harris (1997) states "One essential strategy for eliciting meaningful engagement... is simply to share it.

### **5.1 In Preparation for Reading**

The class environment instructs through the materials, the language, and the attitudes in the classroom" (Dewitz & Jones, 2010). Therefore, it is important that students are able to continue reading on their own time and have reading materials available to them to read in class or take home with them.

Furthermore, it is important for the educator to establish a connection with the partnership of the families; the results are strengthened if the practice extends home (Doyle & Bramwell, 2006). Doyle & Bramwell (2006) suggest that educators discuss appropriate books with parents/caretakers beforehand, especially when the literature concerns the traits of the student with an exceptionality.

Sending books home or organizing a lending library could aid as well, allowing the family to continue reading similar literature at home, drawing on personal knowledge. Especially if primary intervention (immediate for a particular issue) is required (McMillan & Jarvis, 2013). Building a collaborative partnership with the families of students with exceptionalities on shared goals to support the students social and emotional development and

inclusion is another key process to support the social and emotional learning and inclusion of such students (Cefai & Cavioni, 2016).

## 5.2 Adult as a Mediator

According to Schultz (2010), following any type of reading, a discussion should follow. This discussion requires mediation, in the form of an adult (Baratz, 2015), due to the distance and time between the author's text and the reader, which makes it impossible for the writer to engage in direct discourse with the audience. Therefore, a mediator is necessary. The mediation becomes a reciprocal interaction between adult and child, leading to an enriching learning experience for the child (Klein, 1996).

The goal of mediation is to affect a child's range of needs, in this case, understanding exceptionalities and creating acceptance. Stimulating these needs will also develop motivation and skills for learning in the future (Baratz, 2015), furthering critical thinking.

However, like when choosing the literary works, one should carefully consider how mediation is executed. Feuerstein (1980), provides a list of criteria for mediation; although the research is rather old, are many of the criteria still relevant today:

- If mediation is the express intent of the adult and the adult conveys this intent to the child.
- Adult's actions correspond to the situation of the particular child, and that throughout the interaction; the adult provides emotional, ethical, and cultural interpretation of stimuli.
- Conveys a set of rules, regulations, and processes beyond those demanded by the immediate context that gave rise to the interaction.
- Mediator must draw children's attention to their own ability to monitor the pace and intensity of their conscious activity.
- Express satisfaction with the child's behavior, identify the components that led to the positive behavior or outcome, and provide the child with feedback regarding the successful performance.

To recapitulate, the aim is to create a positive interaction. Students know that they are discussing a certain text. The adult responds to the curiosity and wonderings of the child. The adult assists in finding deeper meaning and creating connections to personal experience. The

adult does not push the child beyond their capabilities but allows the child to discover connections. Positive feedback is given, students do not feel humiliated, and the adult identifies how to steer the conversation.

### **5.3 Steering the Discussion and Activities**

When acting as a mediator, it is important that certain rules are followed in order to create a positive experience.

Firstly, educators should avoid singling out any student with exceptionalities, and especially treating a student like a spokesperson for all students with exceptionalities (Sigmon, Tacket & Azano, 2016), as inclusive classrooms celebrate diversity, but not make a student feel self-conscious, or alone in their experiences.

Students should also not generalize from the experience of one or two classmates. Discuss how exceptionalities vary. Students are still individuals, even with common characteristics of a exceptionalities. The books should use respectful language and portray the characters with exceptionalities as rich and complex individuals who are defined by more than their exceptionalities. For example, educators can use poster paper to list all the characteristics of an exceptionalities portrayed in the book (Sigmon, Tacket & Azano, 2016), highlighting all the differences in [exceptional] behaviour, as a basis for democratic discussions about ability and exceptionalities (Adomat, 2014).

From there onward, educators should connect the discussion to respectful attitudes (Ostrosky et al., 2015). One aspect of respect is choosing language and vocabulary. As discussed before, some labels can be hurtful. Discuss why these labels are hurtful, and what to use instead. Pennell, Wollak & Koppenhaver (2017) remind that many books designed to explain exceptionalities to typically developing children often contain patronizing messages about the speciality of students with exceptionalities. Many also employ you/them language ((e.g., “*You* should help classmates with Down syndrome because *they* have learning difficulties”) (Pennell, Wollak & Koppenhaver 2017) alienating the child with exceptionalities.

Furthermore, educators must retain a focus on their own actions as well. Educators are important role models to students, and the attitudes and values [of the educators] are taken in by students even on a subliminal level (Levinson & St. Onge, 1999). An educator's casual, even well-meaning, remarks can impress students with the wrong message (Levinson & St. Onge, 1999), and therefore we must remember, as educators, to set an example of appropriate behaviour to students (Cohen, 2001).

Wassermann (2014) reminds us that the view of students with exceptionalities in education has most commonly been one of tragedy or pity, one of a "poor little thing" (Ayala, 1999) or a disruptive class clown. In order to create an inclusive classroom, educators must take a look at their own reflective capabilities; the way one interprets literary and historical texts, which in turn is related to the development of scientific reasoning and critical thinking (Astington, 1998). Our reflective capabilities influence how we tell stories, which in a sense is what educators do all day (Cohen, 2001).

An educator, who through their own reflection of their attitudes, are aware of their own behaviours and of the potential impact of their behaviours know how to use these for the child's benefit (Baratz, 2015). The values of the educator heavily influence the values of the students. Cohen (2001) uses as an example literacy itself; It is simply common sense that when both parents and educators value literacy (be it learning to read a book or learning to "read" ourselves and others) students are more likely to appreciate this mode of learning as well. Therefore, by using the proper terms and not alienating the child with exceptionalities, educators set an example for other students to follow, enhancing their social and emotional skills.

Educators should create opportunities for students to engage in literacy experiences that increase awareness of diversity and appreciation of difference (International Reading Association, 2010). Whilst simply reading an appropriate book is already progress, educators cannot assume that simply reading a text aloud makes it accessible (Adomat, 2014), nor will they automatically create respectful attitudes toward classmates with exceptionalities (Ostrosky et al., 2015).

Educators should continue the progress and make spaces for conversations that celebrate diverse abilities in the classroom, school, and community (Pennell, Wollak & Koppenhaver 2017). Children's books are a great way to enable democratic discussions about exceptionalities in an inclusive classroom (Adomat, 2014). Levinson & St. Onge (1999)

previously discussed the idea of bringing awareness to the topic and continue with possible topics of discussion.

Firstly, since the authors argue that often seeing exceptionalities cause a feeling of avoidance, we should unpack those feelings with students; in other words, talk about the feelings of shame, embarrassment, and guilt (Levinson & St. Onge, 1999). These are conflict words, which can be defined and analysed in order to facilitate comprehension (Doyle & Bramwell, 2006).

An accessible method of steering the reading is using the following **dialogic reading** practices.

#### **5.4 Dialogic readings**

Although there exist a multitude of methods to aid in internalizing literature, this research will focus on dialogic readings (DR), as according to Teale (2013), dialogic readings are a superb tool for educators, as the practice is easily learnt and implemented due to its formulaic structure. To reiterate, dialogic readings pose an interactive role with the story through an intentional scaffolding instructional sequence (Flynn, 2011). Like SEL, DR is a universal intervention practice (McMillan & Jarvis, 2013), that can tackle difficult subjects with ease through books. An opportunity for growth in social and emotional skills, which in turn promote inclusion, is made possible when there is appropriate book selection combining with the use of DR techniques (Fettig et al., 2016).

Books with social-emotional content display models of children and adults solving problems and interacting, which allows students to connect emotionally with characters in stories (Doyle and Bramwell, 2006). When a book with SEL or the educator is able to direct conversations on developing an understanding of pro-social skills; for example, if a student has a difficult time with sharing when playing games with others, the reader can select a book in which the main character deals with the dilemma of sharing (Fettig & al., 2018). In addition to specific problems, DR can also be used for social justice issues.

DR is based on interactive behaviours during reading, when adults help children comprehend and interpret the text based on their own experiences and background (Doyle &

Bramwell, 2006). The reading sessions are recommended to be held in safe, encouraging, small-group environments in order to encourage motivation among students. Furthermore, the reader's relationship with the audience highly affects the safety of the environment (Doyle & Bramwell, 2006). The practice focuses on scripting the piece of literature around the mnemonics **PEER** and **CROWD** (Whitehurst et al., 1988).

### **PEER stands for Prompt, Evaluate, Expand, Repeat.**

#### **Prompt**

The adult prompts children with questions and careful responses that encourage children to say more (Doyle & Bramwell, 2006). McKeown and Beck (2003) found that adults often did not prompt children to process and connect ideas or to express their understanding of the story, leaving the story's comprehension on a superficial level. Building comprehension on a deeper level through guiding children to uncover the story's complex social dynamics (Doyle & Bramwell, 2006).

#### **Evaluate**

Once the child responds to the adult prompt, the adult *evaluates* the accuracy of that response (Towson & al., 2017). For example, if the question was how the characters could solve a problem, the educator may evaluate whether the solution is safe and fair to all. Evaluation will then determine the follow-up questions. If the question gets little or no response from the students, teachers should consider breaking the question down into smaller pieces and using the illustrations to aid comprehension (Doyle & Bramwell, 2006; Towson & al., 2017).

#### **Expand**

The educator may ask follow-up questions (why, what, when, who, how, etc.). Furthermore, educators may use vocabulary to facilitate comprehension; the educator may take a moment to define a meaningful word, share an example, and discuss why it was used in the story (Doyle & Bramwell, 2006).

## **Repeat**

Finally, the adult *repeats* the prompt to allow the child another opportunity to recite the response (Towson & al., 2017).

Additionally, the technique involves multiple readings and conversations about books with children in small groups (Whitehurst et al., 1988). Children who had repeated exposure to a story elaborated on and engaged in more interpretations of text than children who did not (Doyle & Bramwell, 2006). Phillips and McNaughton (1990) also found that children's comments during initial readings focused on clarifying the text, but contributions in later readings focused on references and predictions, and children initiated comments and participated more.

The structure then follows the mnemonic **CROWD**- Completion, Recall, Open-ended, Wh-, and Distancing questions (Fettig & al., 2018). CROWD ensures that following the reading, there is a follow-up activity. Often, the activity is a role-play of a conflict situation or word, or a game can be played (Fettig & al., 2018; Doyle & Bramwell, 2006). Doyle & Bramwell (2006), followed a class through a DR session. After reading, a conflict word was chosen. For example, cooperation. The educator should demonstrate the skill and instruct the students further into demonstrating the skill themselves. The educator is also recommended to narrate the process (e.g. this individual does this whilst the other does that). Further Wh-questions (why, what, when etc.) can be used to expand the narration. However, the critical piece is children practicing and participating in cooperation. Fettig & al. (2018) further recommends that facilitator guides students in assessing whether each of the solutions was safe and fair for everyone involved and whether or not it solved the problem at hand. Another example is to make a poster of other possible solutions or thoughts.

Both Fettig & al. (2018) and Doyle & Bramwell (2006) remind educators of extension activities for each of the intervention sessions. Mainly, reminding students throughout the day of what had been discussed and encourage the students to translate skills learned from the DR session to other daily social interactions.



Learning inclusion and SEL through DR is crucial for mental health and overall wellbeing (Heller et al., 2012), as a recognised protective factor for mental health is the development of strong social connections, and this relies on well-developed social and emotional skills in addition to supportive environments (Resnick, 2008). They are some the most important abilities supporting school success later in life (Morgan et al., 2008). In a case study conducted by Fetting & al. (2018), parents described their children as having improved ability to manage frustrations and solve problems through verbalising needs, increased participation in group activities and discussions, improved problem-solving ability and the ability to reach out to an adult for help, and increased ability to articulate concerns.

Therefore, learning SEL and inclusion through DR SEL can both improve school climate and promote overall academic, social, and emotional benefits for all students (CASEL, 2017) those with and without exceptionalities.

## Discussion

Subsequently one can determine that individuals with exceptionalities are still a marginalized group that face discrimination and are stigmatized far into adulthood (Andrews & al., 2019; Sigmon, Tacket & Azano., 2016). These individuals face humiliating language (Gouvier & Coon, 2002), are at a higher risk of victimization as well as participating in bullying (e.g. Swearer, Wang, Maag, Siebecker, & Frerichs, 2012), as well as for at-risk behaviour (Bryan, Pearl, & Fallon, 1989). Individuals also have a tougher time trying to relate to others, have difficulty with social situations, and experience long periods on loneliness (e.g. Mugnaini, Lassi, La Malfa & Albertini, 2009, Schultz, 2010). Other students also tend to feel “weird” around individuals with exceptionalities, feel shame and pity, and therefore might not necessarily know how to act around them (Levison & St. Onge, 1999).

These factors affect their mental health, general wellbeing, and academic achievement (e.g. Rose, Monda-Amaya, and Espelage, 2011; McMillan & Jarvis, 2013; Gadeyne, Ghesquière, & Onghena, 2004). However, once we accept that these prejudices exist, we embrace the belief that prejudice can be eliminated through education (Levison & St. Onge, 1999; Gabel & Connor, 2013). Inclusion, along with other social skills, can be (Elliot & Gresham, 1993).

What we need to teach to create an inclusive environment is social emotional competences; self-awareness, self-management, social awareness (e.g., empathy), relationship management (e.g., cooperation) and problem solving (e.g., Ahmed, Hamzah & Abdullah, 2020). Learning these competences have a significant impact on positive attitudes towards the self, others and learning, and on the enhancement of prosocial behaviour and academic learning (Sklad, Diekstra, De Ritter, & Ben, 2012). These competences will aid both those without exceptionalities and those with them.

Literature can also be the first exposure to exceptionalities for some, and can aid in answering their natural curiosities (Schultz, 2010). Learning about exceptionalities, the terminology around the issue and how they deserve to be treated (with kindness and respect) promotes empathy and therefore, inclusion (e.g., Levinson & St. Onge, 1999; Prater & al., 2006; Black & Tsumoto, 2018).

Literature, along with SEL, can be both a socializing and therapeutic agent (e.g., Baratz, 2015). They allow students to understand the world around them, and shows that their actions have consequences (Hambleton, 2021). Literature may also cause a shift in perspective,

from ‘‘I-it’’, to ‘‘I-thou’’ (Shady & Larson, 2010), humanizing the other. Literature challenges the worldviews of students (e.g., Rosenthal, 2006), building toward the idea of equality and acceptance (Schultz, 2010).

Additionally, literature assures individuals with exceptionalities that they are not alone, acting as mirrors to their own struggle, their thoughts, and experiences (e.g., Schultz, 2010; Botelho & Rudman, 2009; Pennell, Wollak & Koppenhaver, 2017). This can be accomplished through the characters, which may even become role models, representing every child and affirming each identity (e.g. Ochman, 1996; Murray-Everett & Schroeder, 2021). However, one must be when choosing appropriate literature, as some specimens of literature can be offending to individuals with exceptionalities (Baratz, 2015; Sigmon, Tacket & Azano., 2016).

Lastly, reading the literature out loud is not enough; students must understand on a deeper level to induce change. Therefore, the session requires mediation and an extension (Catalano, 2008; Fettig & al., 2018; Doyle & Bramwell, 2006). Dialogic reading is a simple practice in order to teach SEL and other competences needed to create an inclusive environment. DR has proven to deepen comprehension and allow students to understand complex social dynamics and issues (Doyle & Bramwell, 2006). DR, along with SEL, has proven to increase positive mental health and overall wellbeing (Heller et al., 2012).

As a response to the question *how can educators benefit from diverse children’s literature in order to implement inclusion in classrooms*, this research hopes to demonstrate that children’s literature, through the use of SEC and DR as a form of bibliotherapy, can be a powerful tool to combat non-inclusion in educational environments. We as educators aim to create a safe, inclusive space where every student feel affirmed and welcome (Murray-Everett & Schroeder, 2021), in order to raise students that are socioemotionally balanced, and academically successful in the classroom (Weissberg, Durlak, Domitrovich, & Gullotta, 2015), and their education supports them later in life (Morgan et al., 2008), and children’s literature is one method to achieve that.

Future research could analyse empirically how teaching SEL through bibliotherapy would work in classrooms. It would be especially interesting to observe the practicalities of the method, for example if group size has effect on internalizing the topic, and how different age groups react to dialogic readings. Furthermore, another possibility would be researching the diagnostic possibilities of

bibliotherapy; if students are capable of connecting to the themes themselves and recognize similar expressions.

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