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# Dynamic Characters With Communication Disorders in Children's Literature

CAROLYN D. SOTTO AND ANGEL L. BALL



**Using quality children's literature with portrayals of characters that have communication impairments can be an effective teaching tool. Storybook characters with communication disorders can provide positive role models and promote understanding of diverse populations. Eighteen children's books were selected based on the following criteria: publication dates between 1994 and 2001, reading levels between preschool and eighth grade, and main characters with speech, language, or hearing disorders. Curriculum topics were summarized for integration into state academic content areas.**

**T**eachers are challenged with creating a learning environment for children with diverse language and cognitive levels. As society becomes more inclusive, so do our classrooms. Successful inclusion of children with communication disorders involves not only empowering the child but also providing an accepting environment. Interactions with children's literature in the classroom are an important vehicle by which children amass experience with and knowledge about character development. Using books that include strong, dynamic characters with communication

impairments can be an effective tool for teachers and students.

This article has two purposes:

1. Provide a listing of contemporary children's books that involve main characters with communication impairments who are actively involved in the plot. These books could easily be integrated into the general education curriculum.
2. Give suggestions to teachers on how to use children's literature to (a) provide positive role models for stu-

dents with communication disorders and (b) promote understanding of diverse populations.

Only a few bibliographic resources identify children's books that have main characters with communication impairments. Some guides and articles on special needs have small sections on speech and hearing issues (Baskin & Harris, 1984; Carlin, Laughlin, & Saniga, 1991; Landrum, 2001; Robertson, 1992; NICHCY, n.d.). Trotter and Silverman (1976) published a bibliography of literature with characters that stuttered, though it was not limited to children's books. Tatelbaum (1984) published a bibliographic study exclusive to juvenile literature with communication disorders, which included auditory, speech, or language impairments. A recent search of the literature indicates that Tatelbaum has been the only bibliographic review that was specific to communication impairments in children's literature. Other reviews have focused on a variety of disabilities, with a heavy emphasis on physical disabilities and mental retardation (Andrews, 1998; Crook & Plaskon, 1980; Doherty-Hale, 1984; Dyches, Cramer, & Prater, 2001; Greenbaum, Varas, & Markel, 1980; Gross & Ortiz, 1994; Heim, 1994; Higgins, Lewis, & Perryman, 1981; Huck, Hepler, Hickman, & Kiefer, 2001; Landrum, 2001; Lass & Bromfield, 1981; Orr et al., 1997; Prater, 2000; Wagoner, 1984).

In the current article, we provide a list of books that portray main characters with communication impairments and dynamic active roles in the stories (see Table 1). The criteria for books entailed date of publication post-1994; reading level of 4 to 14 years old (preschool to eighth grade); and a main character with a speech, language, or hearing disorder. The characters had communication impairments of mutism, oral and written language disorders (dyslexia), dysfluency or stuttering, and articulation disorders.

We have included dyslexia as a written language disorder, based on several published definitions. *Dyslexia* has been defined as a developmental language disorder with poor phonological processing skills (Catts & Kamhi, 1999; International Dyslexia Association, n.d.; Kamhi & Catts, 1991; Neuman & Dickinson, 2002). The American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA) has defined and described the roles and responsibilities of speech-language pathologists in reading and writing as it pertains to communication disorders in a technical report (ASHA, 2001).

One of the stories, *Russ and the Almost Perfect Day*, presents a character with Down syndrome. Individuals with Down syndrome present different patterns in language, yet language delays and disorders are prevalent in children with Down syndrome (Kumin, 1999; National Association for Down Syndrome, n.d.; National Down

**Table 1.** Recommended Children's Books About Main Characters With Communication Impairments

Title	Author	Publisher	Year
<i>Ben Has Something to Say: A Story About Stuttering</i>	Laurie Lears	Albert Whitman	2000
<i>Bird Boy</i>	Elizabeth Starr Hill	Farrar, Straus & Giroux	1999
<i>Blabbermouth</i>	Morris Gleitzman	Harcourt Brace	1995
<i>Circle of Wonder: A Native American Christmas</i>	N. Scott Momaday	Clear Light Publishers	1994
<i>Finn</i>	Katharine Jay Bacon	Margaret K. McElderry Books	1998
<i>The FlimFlam Man</i>	Darleen Bailey Bear	Farrar, Straus & Giroux	1998
<i>Hooway for Wodney Wat</i>	Helen Lester	Houghton Mifflin	1999
<i>How Dyslexia Benny Became a Star</i>	Joe Griffith	Yorktown Press	1999
<i>Jason's Secret</i>	Ellen-Marie Silverman	1st Books Library	2001
<i>Mary Marony Mummy Girl</i>	Suzy Kline	G. P. Putnam	1994
<i>Mary Marony and the Chocolate Surprise</i>	Suzy Kline	G. P. Putnam	1995
<i>Moses Goes to a Concert</i>	Isaac Millman	Farrar, Straus & Giroux	1998
<i>The Other Side of Silence</i>	Margaret Mahy	Viking	1995
<i>Patrick Gets Hearing Aids</i>	Maureen Cassidy Riski	Phonak	1994
<i>A Pony for Keeps</i>	Jeanne Betancourt	Scholastic	1995
<i>Russ and the Almost Perfect Day</i>	Janet Elizabeth Rickert	Woodbine House	2001
<i>The Secret Voice of Gina Zhang</i>	Dora Jones Yang	Pleasant Company Publications (American Girl)	2000
<i>Thank you, Mr. Falker</i>	Patricia Polacco	Philomel Books	1998

Syndrome Congress, n.d.). Kumin (1999) stated that expressive language is often more difficult than comprehension ability. Some children with Down syndrome use shorter phrases. We analyzed the speech output of the main character, Russ, who has Down syndrome, and the supporting character, Kevin, a typical child. Russ spoke 12 utterances and demonstrated a shorter mean length of utterance (MLU) of 3.3 words. Kevin, spoke 7 utterances with a MLU of 5.4. Russ had less grammatical complexity than Kevin. Therefore, we classified the character of this book into the oral language disorder category.

## Literature Selection

The sources of the books were library databases from Clermont County, Ohio (Innovative Millennium System), Hamilton County, Ohio (Computerized Information Network for Cincinnati and Hamilton County-CINCH), online bookstore Amazon.com, and general online Web searches. Local library databases were used to determine if books were easily accessible for educators. Database and online searches used the following key words: *juvenile literature* and/or *articulation, autism, communication, deafness, disability, disorders, dyslexia, hearing, language, mutism, and speech*.

We initially reviewed 30 children's books that had main or supporting characters with communication impairments. Several books portrayed the development of the character with a communication disability remaining static, whereas the other "typical" characters progressed. The character with communication problems was often depicted as weak, timid, withdrawn, and spineless. The main character without the disability was the one to save or protect the individual with a disability. A child with a communication disorder who reads a story where the main character is weak or static may unfortunately identify with that character and his self-esteem may diminish. However, if the main character is a capable, resourceful hero who happens to also have a communication disorder then the world becomes a more promising place. We decided to select only those books that portrayed dynamic characters. Judgment of dynamic characterization was based on our agreement that the characters were able to participate in an adventure, interact with others, and show personal growth regardless of their disability.

## Integrating Books With Curriculum

Primary and secondary education curriculum must be aligned to meet state academic content areas. Suggested content areas, plot summaries, and reading levels by age for each book are listed in Table 2. All of the books presented can be integrated into a language arts curriculum,

by discussion of character development and narrative point of view. The books can also be applied to developing skills in reading, writing, listening, and speaking.

Many of the books could be used in social studies and foreign language curriculums. For example, *Bird Boy* is a story about a Chinese family whose lifestyle depends on cormorants for fishing. Chang, the main character, who is mute, learns to take responsibility for the protection of a bird and stands up to a child bully. The book *Bird Boy* could be used to learn about geography, culture, people in societies, and civic responsibilities.

The selected books are more limited in application to the content areas of science and music. The book *Jason's Secret* is not only about a child who stutters but also tells the story of a class outing in which Jason's knowledge of the compass (science content area) saves the class. Jason learns to use strategic thinking to deal with problems. Although Jason has a communication disability, he still shares the same types of life experiences as his school-age peers. *Moses Goes to a Concert* involves appreciation for the fine arts. Even with a hearing loss, Moses and his friends can enjoy the experience of listening and feeling music together.

## Positive Role Modeling

These books can be used to help provide positive role models for students, as well as expose them to characters with communication impairments within the context of a well-written story. The characters in the books listed in Tables 1 and 2 are problem solvers, protectors, heroes, and friends. Russ, in *Russ and the Almost Perfect Day*, displays strong character traits of morality and responsibility to return lost money to a classmate. Finn, in the story of the same name, is hardened by the loss of his family and becomes mute. However, his internal social conscience comes forth, and he uncovers an illegal drug ring near his home.

The books in Table 1 may broaden the perspectives of student readers to diversity in the world. Stereotypes of communication impairments and cultures can be explored and discussed in classrooms as another avenue for teaching. Children can learn from these books about the struggles that the people with communication impairments face with everyday issues and attitudes. In addition, four of the books include children from other cultures: Gina Zhang (*The Secret Voice of Gina Zhang*) and Chang (*Bird Boy*) from China, Rowena (*Blabbermouth*) from Australia, and Tolo (*Circle of Wonder*), a Native American.

These suggested books can be integrated into the general education curriculum. Teachers can use literature that includes characters with communication disorders that have active, dynamic, and believable roles to facilitate positive role models and peer relationships. Imagina-

**Table 2.** Brief Plot Synopsis and Suggested Academic Content Areas

<b>Title</b>	<b>Reading level by age</b>	<b>Communication impairment</b>	<b>Plot</b>	<b>Academic content area</b>
<i>Ben Has Something to Say: A Story About Stuttering</i>	4–8	Dysfluency	Ben does not like to communicate due to his stuttering. He overcomes his fear in order to save a dog.	Language arts
<i>Bird Boy</i>	9–12	Mutism	Chang is a Chinese boy, born mute but can make sounds that birds can understand. He stands up to a bully to take responsibility for the life of a baby bird.	Language arts Social studies Foreign language
<i>Blabbermouth</i>	9–12	Mutism	Rowena has a problem with her throat but can write and sign. She has a lot to say and teaches the townspeople about respecting those with problems.	Language arts Social studies
<i>Circle of Wonder: A Native American Christmas</i>	9–12	Mutism	Tolo is a lonely boy who is mute and goes to the mountains to be closer to the spirituality of his grandfather. He shares something special with other wild animals.	Language arts Social studies
<i>Finn</i>	10–14	Mutism	Finn is a 15-year-old boy who survives a plane crash that killed his family. He gets involved in uncovering a ring of drug dealers. He overcomes his mutism to save a friend.	Social studies (civil responsibility)
<i>The FlimFlam Man</i>	9–12	Dysfluency	Bobbi Jo is a 10-year-old girl who tries to help the town and winds up befriendng a conman. She also learns about trust and friendship.	Social studies (civil responsibility)
<i>Hooway for Wodney Wat</i>	4–8	Articulation disorder	Rodney is a shy rodent who deals with teasing from classmates. His articulation difficulty with /r/ winds up helping outwit a bully.	Language arts
<i>How Dyslexia Benny Became a Star</i>	9–12	Dyslexia	Benny, a 5th grader, has reading difficulties. He deals with emotional responses to his problem from his family and friends. He's able to overcome obstacles with a supportive reading teacher and football coach.	Language arts
<i>Jason's Secret</i>	9–12	Dysfluency	Jason is a 5th grader whose severe dysfluency makes him feel excluded. On an adventure in a school outing, he uses his science skills to save the class. He learns speech strategies with the help of his speech pathologist.	Science
<i>Mary Marony Mummy Girl</i>	4–8	Dysfluency	Mary learns a lesson about responsibility and honesty in a Halloween story. Her speech difficulty never stops her from interacting with others. Although a classmate teases her, she stands up for her beliefs.	Social studies (civil responsibility)
<i>Mary Marony and the Chocolate Surprise</i>	9–12	Dysfluency	Mary, a 2nd grader, gets involved in a class contest to win a pizza party with her favorite teacher. She learns the hard way about cheating.	Social studies (civil responsibility)
<i>Moses Goes to a Concert</i>		Hearing loss	Moses, who is a successful user of American Sign Language, helps the other children enjoy different aspects of a concert. Hearing loss doesn't prevent the musical experience.	Music—Fine arts Foreign language

*(Table continues)*

Title	Reading level by age	Communication impairment	Plot	Academic content area
<i>The Other Side of Silence</i>	12+	Elective mutism	Hero, a 12-year-old girl chooses only to speak to her brother. She gets involved with a secluded neighbor and uncovers a mystery.	Language arts Social studies (civil responsibility)
<i>Patrick Gets Hearing Aids</i>	4–	Hearing loss	Patrick, a rabbit, sees an ear doctor and is fitted with hearing aids. He improves his communication with his classmates.	Language arts
<i>A Pony for Keeps</i>	9–12	Dyslexia	Anna is having difficulty in school and her parents blame the time spent with her pony. Her pony pal friends help her with her reading.	Language arts
<i>Russ and the Almost Perfect Day</i>	4–8	Language disorder	Russ experiences a day at school where he has to make some decisions. Although never mentioned, Down syndrome is implied by illustrations. Russ is shown as a thoughtful, concerned, and responsible child.	Social studies (civil responsibility)
<i>The Secret Voice of Gina Zhang</i>	10+	Elective mutism	Gina, a shy Chinese girl, begins attending an U.S. school and won't speak. She develops her English, writes a story, and makes a true friend.	Foreign language Social studies
<i>Thank you, Mr. Falker</i>	4–8	Dyslexia	Trisha has difficulty in school due to dyslexia and nonsupportive parents. In 5th grade, she finds a teacher who helps her to read.	Language arts

tively participating in the life of another person helps the student better understand that all children, even those with a disability, share similar feelings and interests.

### ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Carolyn D. Sotto**, PhD is a visiting clinical assistant professor in the Department of Communication Sciences & Disorders, in the College of Allied Health Sciences at the University of Cincinnati. She is also a speech-language pathologist. Her current research interests include language and literacy and early speech production. **Angel L. Ball**, PhD is an adjunct assistant professor in the Department of Communication Sciences & Disorders, in the College of Allied Health Sciences at the University of Cincinnati. She is also a speech-language pathologist and supervises student training. Her research interests include reading and writing disorders of children and adults. Address: Carolyn D. Sotto, Department of Communication Sciences & Disorders, University of Cincinnati, PO Box 670379, Cincinnati, OH 45267-0379.

### AUTHORS' NOTE

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