

Zuzana Stanislavová

University of Prešov in Prešov, Slovak Republic

The Disadvantaged Character in Literature for Young Readers and in Inclusive Education

Abstract

Inclusive education appraises the dialogue between the standard population and a population with some kind of handicap. Artistic literature might help, already at an early age, to remove the barriers that present various types of disadvantaged people in society. In the introduction, the author briefly explains the topicality of inclusive education and outlines the purpose and methodological aspects of the paper. The main part of the study analyses the portrayal of young protagonists with a somatic and social disadvantage in contemporary literature for pre-school and younger school age children (Alexandra Salmela: Mimi and Lisa, Gabriela Futová: About the Hairless, Peter Karpinský: Adela, Do Not Even Try It!). In the conclusion, the author confronts the selected texts in terms of: 1. authenticity level of psychological grip of the disadvantaged character; 2. presentation of attitudes of standard population towards the characters with some kind of disadvantage; 3. levels and methods of literary presented issues; 4. an educational text's potential relating to the formation of accepting educational environment in pre-primary and primary education.

Key words: inclusive education, literature for children, presentation of disadvantage, psychological art authenticity, literary work value, educational work value.

Introduction

Individuals who are distinguished from other members by certain features, physical or mental, have always existed in human society. The attitudes of society towards this group of people have varied over the course of history from the repressive-indifferent (Ancient Greece & Rome) to preventive-integrative and inclusive (end of the 20th and beginning of the 21st century). The relationship to people with disabilities has changed from abandonment, exclusion or the killing of the disabled through philanthropism and segregation to tolerance, respect for the individual and the admission of partnership with regard to diversity. The view of our society of a person with a disability now seeks to accept the well-known proposition of L. Vygotsky: "A child, whose development is complicated by disability, it is not simply less developed, but it is developed differently in comparison with non-disabled peers" (according to Požár, 2007, p. 72). The contemporary society, therefore, expects that every person, regardless of their differences, will be seen as a person with specific qualities (Vágnerová and Hadj-Mousová, 2003, p. 8–9).

Of course, the prejudices and stereotypes which existed in society towards the disabled²⁵ for thousands of years are difficult to break down and remove completely. The society (or individual) will not see a disabled person from the perspective of his divergence (meaning rejection or compassion), but only if they are truly removed. The situation changed in Slovakia after 1989, from this point of view, and the disabled have ceased to 'be hidden' from the sight of the public in isolated, disabled institutions, and society has gradually created the elementary conditions for them to satisfy their psychological needs at least; in that context, it was mainly about the need of self-realization and an open future.

The elimination process of prejudices and stereotypes is long and difficult. It is related to the integration of disabled children into main-

²⁵ Besides the term *disabled person*, the term *disadvantaged person* is also used synonymously in the current pedagogical and psychological literature. We accept this terminological duality in the study.

stream schools and inclusive education,²⁶ while necessary special educational assistance will be maintained.

Beside the direct contact of the intact population of children with the disabled, it is necessary to lead able-bodied children to an understanding of the essence that was quoted by L. Vygotsky: to accept the right to be different. The acceptance will only succeed if it is formed in a connection of cognition and emotionality – if a child (from the early education) has a chance to relive certain situations in the so-called “*skin of disabled person*”. The literary story offers just such an option and it is, in a way, an aestheticized adventure *life game*.

Of course, the manner of the issue of disability or disadvantage is literary theme-driven, and varies, inter alia, depending on the child’s age. A different approach (and generally a different genre, as well) is required for a story for pre-readers and younger school age children, and yet another for teenagers.

1. Methods

The subject of our interest are three selected prose works for pre-school and younger school age children that thematize the situation of a disabled child: the prose work of Alexandra Salmela *Mimi and Lisa* (2013) and Gabriela Futová *About the Hairless* (2016) that present the problem of somatic disability, and Peter Karpinský’s *Adela, Do Not Even Try It!* (2016) which looks at children from the disadvantaged environment. Within the framework of interpretive-analytical and comparative operation, our intention is to follow:

²⁶ Inclusion “(...), according to Kollárová E. (2015, p. 57), is an integration idea developed to the higher quality, integration transformation”. We then understand, congruently with Hrebeňárová L. (2013, p. 42), the inclusive education as “(...) time unlimited group membership of pupils with disabilities in the same peers group of the same age with the necessary measure of support and services (...). It should be a part of the social inclusion to promote it and thus prevent the social exclusion of pupils.”

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- Which stereotypes are reflected in the behaviour of the surrounding environment towards the disadvantaged person, and if so;
 - How does the disadvantaged literary hero accept his social role;
 - How is the role of a disadvantaged person reflected in the story concept (active, passive);
 - To what extent does the disadvantage become a handicap, and thus reflect in the social functioning and the character identity;
 - If so, and to what extent, is an effort stressed that serves as an alternative source of self-affirmation and self-esteem.

In the conclusion of the study, we offer a comparison of the particular concepts of the authors and their possible implementation in the educational arena in terms of: 1. level of authenticity of the disadvantaged character; 2. Presentation of attitudes of the standard population towards characters with some kind of disadvantage; 3. levels and methods of the literary presented issues; 4. an educational text's potential relating to the formation of an accepting educational environment in pre-primary and primary education.

2. Results

2.1. *The world of the blind as a fantasy story*

Alexandra Salmela's (1980) *Mimi and Lisa*²⁷ has an explicative subtitle: "One's eyes are always closed and the other's eyes are wide open. Each of them look, but they see together." The first sentence of the subtitle (and an appropriate title of the work) anticipates the fact that the story works with a so called contrastive figural couple²⁸ (the sighted man versus the blind).

²⁷ Alexandra Salmela (1980) is Slovak living in Finland, writing both in Finnish and Slovak. The interpreted prose originated according to the prestigious television series based on the theme of Katarína Kerekes and Katarína Maláková. The bookish episode *Mimi and Lisa II* (2015) was created on the basis of the second TV series.

²⁸ F. Všeticka (1986, p. 28) understands, under the term *figural pair*, a pair of characters who are based on parallel or contrast and they complement each other.

The subsequent warning on the semantic difference of expressions “to look” and “to see”²⁹ anticipates the fact that in order to perceive the essence, it is not enough to use sight as a sensory receptor.

Thus the subtitle indicates the story’s message, and at the same time, by the dense shortcut and without disrupting the poetic of the text, gives basic information that one of the girls is blind. This information, obtained at the beginning of the first chapter, is the specific form of the blind heroine’s self-witness. Through the “I”-narration, information about how blind people compensate for the lack of sense of seeing is also provided. This part of the chapter begins with a description of the space which is based on the tactile senses (a home’s roughness and smoothness, the building material from which they are built; bars on the windows; the world proportions: a dad’s big hand, a small Mimi’s hand; the sun’s heat) and the hearing senses (the house’s height discerned by the intensity of birdsong; a tram’s noise, the different steps’ sound based on the pavement material, etc.). The imaginative description of the space is enclosed by the straightforward naming of the senses that compensate for the absent sight: “But, I’ve never seen the sun. I just feel how it warms me. I do not even see my toys. (...) You know, I’m blind. I see by hands and ears, and even a little bit by nose and tongue” (p. 10). In the same way, the limitations to the autonomous movement of the blind is termed straightforwardly (“I cannot walk out alone”, p. 14) and an allusion of the necessary direct order of personal stuff (“I know exactly where everything is”, p. 14) in terms of the limitation of orientation in space. The term “*blind*” is not perceived as socially incorrect in the initial self-witness and later in Mimi’s replicas (the euphemistic expression *closed eyes* is used consistently by the author and is socially correct), which can be seen as a signal that the blind Mimi understands her social role and does not see the disability as a handicap.

²⁹ The Slovak Synonymous Dictionary (1995, p. 515, 813) explains the terms as follows: a verb *to look* – 1. track something, someone by the sight, to underpin the sight somewhere; 2. thoroughly investigate by the sight, to detect something; 3. exhibit an interest in someone, about something; 4. catch one’s notice, taking into consideration; 5. to be seen, to be visible. The verb *to see* – 1. perceive by the sight; 2. recall in the mind, to imagine; 3. understand, to notice.

The particular stories take the form of an imaginative play based on thematic elements that allow one to specify the peculiarities of sensory perception in a sighted and blind person. A motif is, for example, darkness as a sign of the world that every sighted and blind person needs for the orientation by other senses than visual. In another story, colours are the key thematic element. The author smartly used the synesthetic principle to reflect the particularities of their perception in the world of the blind (the crossing of the perceptions from different sensory areas in one image): absent visual perception is expressed by tactile or hearing perception, for example the concrete wall is grey; tea in winter is red; yellow is the hot summer; green is the smell of grass, blue is "the one I hear when it rains" (p. 54). The games of two children imagined by fantasy, children's curiosity and imagination work regardless of the visual (dis)function in the stories of others. They specify the peculiarities of sensual perception by a sighted and a blind person, but also both have strengths and limitations, and life and the world are becoming richer and more interesting if we can understand and complement each other in our diversity. Alexandra Salmela thus managed to express the very essence of social inclusion purely by aesthetic means – by dynamic stories that are close to a joyful fantasy story.

If we would look for stereotypes in the attitudes in the book towards a disadvantage, certainly we could not find them in the two heroines. Blind Mimi is satisfied with her social status, obviously accepting herself in her own differences. Sighted Liza sees her friend as an equal partner for common games and fantasy, in which the initiative is taken spontaneously once by Mimi and another time by Lisa. She sees her disability as a difference in which it is necessary to seek inspiration for new views of the world and new discoveries (for example, she invents a plastic memory game with sewn animal figures).

2.2. Physical difference as fabulously imaginative stigma

For the prose work of Gabriela Futová,³⁰ the emphasis on story is characteristic and this was also reflected in the prose *About the Hairless* where

³⁰ Gabriela Futová (1971) is a successful Slovak author of nearly twenty books for young and teenage readers.

the problem of otherness was presented. The protagonist is born and experiences her life without hair. The archetype of a folk-tale is obvious in the storyline scheme. It manifests itself in its incipit ("Once Upon a Time, there was one really good and happy Kingdom", p. 7). There is an ideal state at the beginning: a happy royal couple who had daughter called Elenka. The problem of deflection occurs by means of the appearance of "insufficiency" (Propp, 1969), which is the absence of hair on the girl's head, and thus the otherness from others. The name Hairless that she receives is thus a nomen omen. She perceives otherness as a handicap against the background of gender stereotype diversity: a girl should have long hair so they can be decorated and tied in braids. A bald head thus becomes stigmatic for the princess.³¹

The awareness of her own difference as the handicap (supported by several reactions of surroundings – laughing, embarrassing silence while looking at her bald head) reduces the self-esteem of the protagonist and influences the understanding of her own social role. The constant impulse to be compared with other "hairy" ones intensifies the feeling of otherness and results in the self-isolation of the protagonist: she is denied common games and contact with peers and the outside surroundings based on her own decision. This motive, against the background of the classic fairy-tale scheme, appears in the function of curse; due to the fairy-tale footprint, feelings of unhappiness for the handicapped man and his position in society might already be comprehensible for young reader.

The motif of the liberation of the princess is an obligatory subject element of classic fairy-tales; when we talk about Futova, then, it is about her liberation from self-isolation, and also about her internal conversion from the negative attitude to her own (bald) identity up to self-acceptance. The environs help her with it: the coachman Ďuro who is in love with her, friends, parents and vassals who appreciate her kindness and goodness, and therefore also cut their hair to make themselves bald.

³¹ The connotation cannot be excluded with the disease that treatment has been associated with hair loss (cancer), although the evidences of such link is directly not very discreet. An explicit reference to the bald head and cancer appears only in the epilogue in the information about the writer (Why the Hairless created The Hairless?)

Afterwards the Hairless does not seem different and comes out among the people. The readable signal of the abolition of an internal barrier is her appeal to others to let their hair grow again (due to their love to her, not all of them do so). The second signal of the acceptance of her own difference is her relaxed, joyful relationship with the equally bald daughter born to her³².

The concluding symbolism expresses the need to accept diversity and to seek human values elsewhere. The story itself appears as a symbolic image of a thorny road that precedes the process of someone dealing with their own handicap. Based on the attitude of the royal family and the environment towards the child's otherness, the importance of love, family support and the understanding of society is highlighted in the process.

The author does not look for a cheesy happy ending, in which the protagonist's deficit would be removed. The difference remains permanent, it is also passed onto the descendants, but it is not presented as something that stigmatizes a different man in his eyes and in the society's eyes, but as something that helps one to live a valuable life.

2.3. Disadvantaged backgrounds as a children's story background

The motif of children from disadvantaged backgrounds resonates in the prose of Peter Karpinský³³ *Adela, Do Not Even Try It!* (2016). The focus is on the girl protagonist who, after her mother's mental illness, ends up in a crisis centre led by nuns with her two younger brothers.

The social background of Adela's life with her brothers in the "Yellow House", creates a discreet secondary storyline to the funny episodes from her life. The author uncovers this issue only in fragments, which maybe present constantly, but emerges only through their associations with events in the "Yellow House."

An experienced reader will read in this fragmented thematic storyline the critical situation of the family which influenced all of the three

³² The Hairless draws various ornaments on her head until a new fashion has arisen.

³³ Peter Karpinský (1971) is one of the most remarkable contemporary Slovak writers for children.

children – but particularly Adela and the younger of the brothers. Adela is a girl with boyish manners (she can beat people up, uses “juicy” words), with boyish interests (she likes the most to play football and refuses to wear skirts), and with a developed sense of justice and fairness. Since her mother was unable to take care of her children due to her mental illness, Adela (although not yet mature enough) took the mother’s role on herself very often. She became a wild individual who is used to deciding freely, which, in terms of the social institution, may be seen as a rebellion. The impaired speech ability is visible in both of the two brothers. The older brother suffers from the dysorthographia and he endures much suffering until it is revealed. Symptoms of psychological vulnerability³⁴ are manifested in the younger of the brothers. They are connected with lower language sensitivity and perhaps with some functional changes in the brain. The speech of the protagonist is disordered – she changes, deletes sounds in the testimony, she deforms them as well as the sentence construction, she expresses higher level of naivety in the responses and actions than it is common for a six year old child. The impaired communication skills of these protagonists are evaluated not only by children against the stereotypical background: someone who cannot talk well, does not know the right spelling, is therefore stupid. The signal of Adela’s psychological trauma is her bedwetting, but it remains discreetly indicated. In the foreground is rather her desire for her mother, expressed for example by looking at the housing estate, at the house they lived in and from where they had to move, “(...) because the mother quitted taking drugs and started smashing plates and thrown out all sorts of things over the balcony” (p. 7). Apropos, it is like outlining the past life at home in suggestions – its bright sides, as well. Fragmentary memories are triggered by events in the “Yellow House”, and these events create the dominant and funny storyline, in which humour and hope has its place. Therefore, the disadvantaged backgrounds remain phlegmatic, and thus

³⁴ The vulnerability is understood, as interpreted by K. Paulík, as increased sensitivity and reduced tolerance for disturbances that arose “(...) under the influence of negative experiences (...) commencing in early childhood, which can also cause functional changes in the brain” (Paulík, 2010, p. 40)

disturbing in the story's background, but it is balanced out by the optimism of the protagonist. Through various child protagonists, a child reader also perceives how difficult it is for those from disadvantaged backgrounds to identify with his/her social role. The character of Adela is, in this context, an image of an active human being who does not accept her social status as a handicap.

Conclusion

Findings from the three interpretations of selected texts confirm that the authenticity level of a protagonist with some kind of disadvantage is an important prerequisite in the literary story in order to be believed by a reader (and thus have the desired aesthetic knowledge from reading). The presented protagonist in all of the three stories retains a significant level of psychological persuasion. The stories talk to a young reader, particularly how a child lives with some kind of handicap. The answer to the question of how those with a handicap align with these situations remains, with respect to the ontogenesis of the anticipated recipient, either discreetly unsaid (A. Salmela), respectfully moved into intelligible fairy-tale speech (G. Futová), or expressed only by hints as a psychological issue (P. Karpinský).

In terms of the presented attitudes of the intact population towards the disadvantaged protagonists, the analysed proses are an example of the acceptance of otherness. This attitude is obvious from the very beginning in the story of A. Salmela. Particular episodes confirm and interpret it in finer nuances. Therefore, this work is suitable for inclusive education in pre-school institutions. The accepting attitude is developed and gradually visible through an image of overcoming the feeling of self-stigma and common stereotypes in the story of G. Futová. The shift from exclusion to the position of a modulated fairy-tale conflict also makes this principle comprehensible for young readers. The selected story genre and focus on the socially disadvantaged backgrounds have given, in the case of P. Karpinský, more controversy in the attitudes towards otherness and thus the text requires more experienced child reader.

Levels and methods of the presented issue and an educational text's potential are related both to the choice of literary genre and type of presented disadvantage which it talks about. If the types of somatic handicaps would be dressed (Salmela, Futová) in the fairy-tale metaphor,³⁵ they would accommodate receptive possibilities and a reader's preferences of pre-readers and first-readers: both disadvantages (to be blind, to be bald) are in a way glaring and we can imagine them very easily, respectively simulate them in reality. Through the fairy-tale, children easily understand the otherness of such people – and then it is only up to the adult facilitator to use this knowledge in inclusive education. For that reason, the first two books find a place in the education of children in pre-school and younger school age. For the social disadvantage issue, P. Karpinský has appropriately chosen the (realistic) genre that is imagined from the children's point of view and evaluation of reality. Due to the children's perspective, the witness to traumatic events is huskier, and thus the strenuousness and natural optimism of the children's world is more convex. The prose might be effectively used in inclusive education at higher grades of younger school age.

Within the frame of inclusive education, it seems that high-quality literary works could be used very well in pre-school and early school age already. As stated by T. Vráblová (2014, p. 2) in her works, "(...) that talk about the difficult life circumstances of diseases and disabilities, the life encouragement can be found in everyone without distinction, as healthy as well as sick people. Not in the problem itself because the illness or disability are not the positive factor in life, but in the attitude towards life."

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³⁵ The symbolic speech of a fairy-tale which includes the obligatory happy ending allows to draw many things in mercifully masked, fantasy imaginative form. Speech of fairy-tale metaphor and children imaginative story might (ironically) make the nature of abstract problem more precise and easier to understand than any other realistic interpretation.

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Information about the author:

Prof. Zuzana Stanislavová, PhD, CSc. is the pedagogical and research specialist at the Faculty of Education, University of Prešov in Prešov. In the research she focuses on the Slovak translation for children and youth published from 1960

to the present. In recent years, she also focuses on the literary work with an emphasis on a man with handicap. Her research is oriented to literary-historical, literary criticism and theory. She is the author of numerous book articles and scientific studies.

University of Prešov in Prešov, Faculty of Education

Centre of the Research on the Children Language and Culture

Ul. 17. novembra 15

080 01 Prešov, Slovakia

e-mail: zuzana.stanislavova@unipo.sk