Can Books Make a Difference? A Review on Book for Young People with Disabilities

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Abstract
The importance of the book as a communication tool in transferring ideas, attitudes, and images cannot be undermined. Although the book is not a basic need of human life, it is always used as a source of information, comfort, and pleasure to those who find refuge in it. In fact, books are often seen as a cultural product that plays an important role in the development of the human mind. Each book carries a message and a different perspective. By reading these books, a child can "break through" limitations and "enters" another world they had never known. However, not all young people can enjoy the fun that has been brought in regular books. Young people with disabilities need specially adapted books. And different disabilities require different types of adapted books, and these books ought to be of the same artistic quality and diversity as children’s books in general. Furthermore, children need to see disability as part of the natural landscape from an early age as well as deepen their awareness and understanding of disability issues and challenge their preconceptions. Therefore, books can play an important role in presenting positive images and messages for both disabled and non-disabled children. Even so, a suitable book among many publications available is difficult to find. Based on previous studies, this paper will discuss the need of books for these young people. Discussion includes the efforts that have been done by some organisations such as Booktrust and International Board on Books for Young People to fill the needs and promote the suitable books for this special young person.

Keywords: Children’s literature, book publishing, bibliotherapy, early childhood education, book reviews.

Introduction
"The more that you read, the more things you will know. The more that you learn, the more places you'll go." — Dr. Seuss

Literary product such as picture books, traditional literature, historical fiction, fantasy, and poetry always been seen as important means of entertainment and education for children. The role and influence of children’s books or literature, which doubles as a cultural product, in society should not be underestimated. From books, they get to know the basics and the imagined: animals, objects, peoples, letters, numbers, the way the universe works, figments of imagination and fantasy characters. From books too, they learn about their self, about their homes and the world. In fact, the book also helps them to live well, grow, and continue to develop as a person.

Although the book is not a basic need of human life, it is always used as a source of information, comfort, and pleasure to those who find refuge in it. In fact, books are often seen as a cultural product that plays an important role in the development of the human mind. Based on Falcon (cited in Riris 1983), "books are important elements of 'the industry of culture' as well as 'normative elements’ in art and cultural transmission."
Books and Young People

Reading to children is seen as the first step to help them acquire literacy. Books or appropriate reading materials help children in their struggles to meet their requirements for obtaining a balance between “personal happiness” and “social approval” (Arbuthnot & Sutherland 1972). For young people to access the enormous literary resources, they must learn to read. Reading is not just refer to decoding a text but it entails too the young people’s capability to understand what they have read, to integrated it in his own context and personal experiences by analysing it in a critical way so they are able to take a stand on what they have read. For von Stockar (n.d), learning to read is:

i. Learning to see – development of young people can make through visual reading of a picture book
ii. Learning to listen – storytelling has a privileged moments which the young people may discover the magic of literature and the story’s power.
iii. Learning to communicate – listening to stories, looking at and interpreting picture books that tell stories.

Reading is a prerequisite for almost all cultural and social activities (DCMS, 2003). In addition, for the community, reading—leading to literacy—is a prerequisite for success in life. Therefore, encouraging children to read is seen as an essential act by many groups as an effort to open the minds as well as making them creative and innovative. The reading culture is often promoted because knowledge is seen as a form of power in contemporary times. For Tordis Orjasaeter, a Norwegian literary critic,

Every child and every young person has a right to enjoy life with books… books can help stimulate language development, help identification and the process of socialisation. They can diminish loneliness and give artistic and cultural experiences and joy.

For von Stockar (n.d), young people use the book as a screen on which they can project their own experiences. Therefore pictures and the words of the story act as mirrors in which the children’s conflicts and feelings—fear, jealousy, aggressiveness, loneliness, and the need, the wish of being loved and accepted—are reflected while offering the child fictional alternatives and solutions to which he might perhaps never have found access any other way. Even though the books is only an object, through the book, children will learn to use it correctly and learns to behave like a reader, which is an important step to literacy.

Books and Young People with Disabilities

“Nothing can fully replace the book as the fertile soil for imagination. Films, radio, television – are all experiences on the outer level. A book creates personal images in the secret rooms of the soul.” - Astrid Lindgren

However, some of them cannot enjoy the wonderful adventures found in books because their disability prevents them from reading. Young people with disabilities are different as anybody else in term of intellectual, age, experiences, and interests. Like all of us, they are individual with very different need and skills. Their nature and impact of impairments vary as does the ability to cope with them (Boiesen 2004). Even though this group material needs and rights have improved, their cultural needs and rights have been neglected as the UN’s
Standard rules about equal opportunities set out a strong ethical and political responsibility from each individual country to include persons with disabilities into society and to guarantee that they can participate in cultural activities on a par with others.

Based in World Health Organisation (WTO), around 15% of world’s population or estimated 1 billion people, live with disabilities. In Malaysia, disabilities has be categorised into seven types: visual, hearing, physical, learning problem, speaking, mental and others. Based on Department of Social Welfare, there are almost 500,000 people with disabilities registered in Malaysia as of 2013 and almost 14,000 are young people.

Some of this young people cannot read or enjoy a regular book, or they cannot find a suitable book among the books available. Thus, this group need specially adapted books or selected regular books of literary and artistic quality that meet their special needs regarding design, language, and pictures (IBBY 2013). For Boiesen (2004), different disabilities require different types of adapted books that have same artistic quality and diversity as children’s book in general. Furthermore, even though young people with disabilities should read what the normal young people reads, a carefully look at available children’s books is needed to ensure that they do not portray a lack of sensitivity to those who are disable physically or mentally (Mubarak 1990).

**Efforts on Accessible Publishing**

Access to books—and other published material or information—is an essential requirement for education as well as social inclusion. People with disabilities deserve equal access to it, including young people. This kind of rights has been emphasized and gets much attention in the United Nations (UN). They imply a strong moral and political commitment on behalf of the member countries to ensure equal access to information and cultural services, including literature.

However, this group of people usually have difficulties in finding a suitable book among the available publications. For Reidarson (2001: 6), “the loss or reduction of a functional ability may create communication problems and thus bar the way to language development and reading ability.” They need specially produced books based on a profound knowledge of special needs combined with literary and artistic competence in a wide range. This can provide them with better access to books. Traditionally, only visually impaired children had books produced especially for them. Children with speaking or reading difficulties seldom found books produced for their needs (Boiesen 2004).

Therefore, Torjis Orjasaeter (n.d) tried to give chance to them to meet with books and the right for normal young people to get to know the live of children with disability through books. This is because books have everything in them: our joys, our worries, our hopes, our sorrows, good and bad, true and false, nature and the universe. So, it should be shared with this special young people. International Board on Book for Young People (IBBY) with the cooperation of Norwegian Institute for Special Education presented catalogue Books and Disabled Children for Bologna Book fair 1981 which is lead to the establishment of IBBY Documentation Centre in 1985.

The Centre offer all books that has been presented in Bologna as well as ordinary picture books especially fit for children and young people with a language handicap, or simple easy-to-read books in different languages, rhymes and jingles, and books produced especially for various groups of children with disability from publishers from various countries. Start on
2005, new exhibition of Outstanding Books for Young People with Disabilities, and a catalogue with beautiful illustration were presented.

IBBY launched this project in order to give young people with disabilities the opportunity to enjoy books as other enjoy them as well as promote more understanding and knowledge and suggest ideas for the publications and promotion of new books in this field (www.ibby.org). The catalogue provides brief information on books for young people with disabilities based on these categories:

i. Book produce specially for young people with special needs:
   - Picture books with sign language illustrations
   - Story books with BLISS or pictograms
   - Books with tactile picture
   - Special “easy-to-read” books for young people with mental disabilities

ii. General picture books with consideration in combination with artistic and literary quality regarding to design, topic, illustrations, and texts.

iii. General children’s book portraying young people with disabilities that not only focus on their disabilities and the differences it makes to their lives, but also stress similarities between them and the world.

Another organisation that actively involve in this effort is Booktrust (www.booktrust.org.uk/), an organisation based in UK. Through Bookmark, Booktrust offers web resource for anyone seeking information, books, or advice relating to disability and children’s book. This organisation aim to support the development of positive attitude towards disability, both in the classroom and in the wider community through What’s the Story programme such as advice for writers, illustrators, and publishers on how to include more positive material in children’s books, and making books as genuinely inclusive as possible and provide resource for teachers including examples of children's books which offer positive images and storylines, and ways of using them in the classroom.

Other such as Accessible Books Consortium encourage publishers to make their publications as accessible as possible so that full access become the norm rather than being “special” in a way to provide access to content for people with print impairment such as people with visual impairment, dyslexia or with motor disabilities (www.accessiblebooksconsortium.org). They try to benefit the fundamental usability of digital publications to offer accessible product which offers the maximum flexibility of user experience for all readers and allows the content to be accessed and manipulated with ease by those with or without disabilities. This involves a combination of:

i. The technical nature of the product.
ii. The technical ability of assistive technologies (screen readers and magnifiers, e-book readers, DAISY players and playback software, refreshable Braille display, etc.)
iii. The skills of the users and their familiarity with using their mainstream and assistive technologies to interact with the “accessible” title.
iv. Simple, well designed interfaces tested with print-impaired users.

Among the accessibility features offers is the ability to increase the size of text and images. Furthermore, the current PDF production process adds structural tags to the files, which makes them easier to use with text-to-speech applications. There are also simplified "alt text"
tags for the illustrations. This offers greater flexibility for readers with print disabilities (www.elsevier.com).

Living Paintings one of publishing house in UK try to give enjoyment of book to blind and partially sighted children who always missing out on the special relationship between words and pictures. They aim to help these young people enjoy to the full the children’s literature that people cherish by publish “Touch to See” picture books. Living Painting makes tactile versions of the key characters and scenes from selected picture books which the child can feel and explore. They also record a lively audio description, which helps to guide the children in touching the raised images, but also provides a detailed explanation of the illustrations in the book (www.childrenslaureate.org.uk/). With their free postal library, the books are available to borrow for free via the post to members across Britain and Ireland.

**General Children’s Books**

Regular or general books can be source of reading and pleasant tool to young people with disabilities because it can form cultural meeting place that offer space for understanding and experience, for sharing and communication such as *Our Stripy Baby* (2007). Book also can give the readers opportunities to meet other young people with similar problems. Based on Boiesen (2004), with book, readers create their own inner space and les exposed to various changes in the “real world” which is seen as chaotic place.

With simple, accessible text and cartoon-like-illustration, books such as *The Great Big Book of Families* (2010) by Mary Hoffman and Ros Asquith take a look through children’s eyes at the diversity of modern families, from home, food, ways of celebrating, schools and holidays, jobs and housework. It is a book with detail, humour and interest and reminding the readers that there is no such thing as “normal” or “abnormal”—we are equal. This book show that every family is unique and special; as times has changed, families have changed too; from a mum and dad or single parent to two mums or two dads, from families with a disabled member to those with a mum or dad in prison. Subtle inclusive images of disability are scattered throughout including the use of wheelchair, leg braces, and a walker.

Although books featuring the characters of young people with disabilities have increased, the number is still small. For Christensen (2001), the representation of disable young people in books is often related to a specific social setting and conveys the particular image and attitude toward disabled persons that the author wants to transmit to children, both those who are disabled and those who are not. This can been seen in *Mandy Sue Day, Dan and Diesel, The Balck Book of Colour, A Picture Book of Helen Keller* (about blindness), *Susan Laughs, Just Because, Topsy and Tim: Make a New Friend, Best Friends* (physical disabilities), *Jump!, The Deaf Musician, I can’t Hear Like You, Noo-Noos* (deafness), *Catherine’s Story, The Animal Boogies, Collywoble and Maz the Champion* (differences and mental disabilities). These books may also use to promote awareness, understanding, and acceptance of those disabilities (Prater, Dyches & Johnstun 2006).

*Me, the Queen and Christopher* (2012) written by Giles Andreae and Tony Ross for instance, is a humorous story about a little’s girls day, Freya with the Queen. Her warm and genuine personality later goes out of her way to make sure that her disabled brother, Christopher, has an extra special day. Review by Booktrust state: “Warm, touching and very funny, the book achieves the right levels of irreverence and poignancy. Plus the text is short and sassy, and the illustrations exuberant, making it accessible to a wide range of ages and abilities.”
Carol Thompson in *One, Two, Three... Run!* (2014) include disabled children naturally and subtly in its images. This book featuring two high-spirited young children (one of them have Down syndrome) running up and down hills, chasing each other round and round in circles, running into puddles and speeding through the long swishy grass, before finally charging home to collapse in a happy but exhausted heap. It show joy of friendship whether your friend is normal or with disabilities.

**Books with Sign Language**

Children with listening difficulties due to hearing loss or auditory processing problems use eyes rather than ears to receive information. Their vocabulary development more slowly and the gap with normal young people widens with age. For Boiesen (2004), difficulties in imitating the spoken word and associating written symbols with sounds make them difficult to pick up a good knowledge of the written and spoken language. Therefore, this group of young people often lack adequate reading skills. However, children with listening difficulties who are brought up with signing develop language by playing signs.

In term of books, there are books where sign language is reproduced, but limited. These type of books also can potentially inspiring normal young people to play with signs decrease the gap of communication between them and their deaf friends. Signed video versions of regular children's books also can be used to stimulate signing and language in general and give deaf children access to popular books told in their first language. A video is a suitable medium for visualising the various elements of sign language. This also suit for young people with language deficiencies who use sign supported language (Reidarson, 2001; Boiesen 2004).

One of it is *Gabaren met Lotte & Max (Sign with Lotte & Max)* by Renske Douwes Dekker. This picture book is in Dutch Sign Language and has lift-up-pull-out flips that can be enjoyed by both children with disabilities and without disabilities. Dekker develops a website with more information and suggestions of how to work with the books. Besides books, it also has games and DVD’s with Sign Language for children. *Meal Time* (Anthony Lewis), *First Signing ABC* (Wow Kid Series), and *Baby Signs Feelings* (Wow Babies Series) are other example books that specially adapted for young people with listening or hearing difficulties.

**Tactile and Cloth Books**

Young people with visual impairment develop their language and picture of the world primarily by audible and tactile senses. Based on Reidarson (2001), many of them have insufficient understanding of the meaning of the words and concept they listen and learn to use because we live in a visual world where language usually based on codes relating to visual experiences. There are some young people with visual loss have some degree of sight.

Therefore, it is important to know whether a child with visual impairment is able to read regular print and picture and to what extent he or she needs alternative media based on sound and tactility, (e.g. Braille or raised print), tactile pictures (raised pictures), books-on-tape, or books with sound (audible) illustrations. Tactile books or touch and feel books provide opportunity to young people with visual impairments—and multiple disabilities of all ages—to enjoy picture books because it can stimulate the sense of touch and recognising and interpreting shape for preparing them to Braille later on. Legible raise illustrations and Braille text need high quality print and paper.

For instance, one of the popular Swedish picture book, *Good Night Alfie Atkins or God natt, Alfonz Aberg* (2012) has Braille and large print. In this book, Alfie keeps pestering his father
with demands of a story, water, potty, using every kind of stalling tactic until his father is the one who fall asleep. This book can be read by a visually-impaired parent while the child enjoys the tactile elements that follow the original illustration. *Tohoupi Goes Gardening* (2011) is another tactile book with a playful presentation of a character adapted from a picture book first published in 1997. Tahoupi wants to garden but does not have any gardening tools. Detachable figure of Tahoupi and her father are provided so they can be moved throughout the story. This book provides text in Braille and large print.

According to Tactile Book Advancement Group, tactile books should have:

i. A variety of textures and touchable elements, which convey the essence of ideas, objects, and characters.

ii. A simple and easy to follow story line

iii. Clear spacing between elements

iv. Meaningful references based on a blind’s child’s experience of the world.

v. Simple 2-D or 3-D viewpoint

A cloth book is another sort of tactile book that can furnish a different experience compared paper picture books, and which can be enjoyed by all children. Such books can encourage children with mental disabilities or multiple disabilities to play with the tactile elements and thus take an interest in books (Boiesen 2004). Unfortunately tactile books are not cheap, as most of them need to be handmade. However, tactile or cloth books is needed and will engage young people with this disabilities in the reading experience as well as sharing a book with others such as *10 Little Ladybugs*, *Old Mother Hubbard*, *That’s not my Monster* and *Hairy Monkey*..

**Books with Pictorial Symbols**

For non-speaking people, books with pictogram or Blissymbol—international non-verbal pictorial symbol—will help them to communicate and share the pleasure of reading with others. Blissymbols can be used to form a system of meaning-based symbols which can be used by people with severe difficulties in speaking to communicate without speech. It is also can use by some young people with mental disability or those who have learning problems.

Those with mental disabilities find many words and basic concepts difficult to use, to understand, and not least, to read. Some of them have a deficiency in their visual perception ability, making it difficult to discriminate between shapes and complicating picture reading and letter recognition skills. Sometime pictorial symbols such as Bliss are use in combination with signing, single words, and regular illustration. With this approach, this book can reach readers with different needs and skills (Reidarson 2001).

*Pelle pa planetfard* (*Pelle in Space*) by Jan Loof that has been published in 2010, has been adapted using Bliss symbols in 2011. The book kept the original illustrations, but simplified the Swedish language version for children with reading or speech disabilities. The story is told in easy text printed under the Bliss symbols. Another one is board picture book from classic fairy tale of Goldilooks, *Goldilooks and the Three Bears* (2012) by Crivelli. It designed to give every young people the pleasure of reading and sharing it with other. The illustrations are printed on the right-hand side, while the story is structured in simple sentence accompanied by Picture Communication Symbols (PCS) on the left-hand side.
**Easy-to-Read Books**

Those with reading difficulties usually take more time and effort in reading to decode one word and on understanding the art of reading. Therefore, they need age- and interest-appropriate material at a low reading level that easy to read and can motivate them to read. This means, specially adapted book for them is crucial to avoid them be the reluctant readers. The book needs to contain several text levels and illustrations to support the texts as an aid for the poor readers and a means of explaining words and concepts. Usually, the story can be “read” by looking to the pictures.

According to Tordis Orjasaeter (1981):

> For those who struggle with the art of reading, we need a wide choice of books. As a matter of course, we need many easily read books which are tempting and amusing. We need them for the other children too, but we need them far more for those who strive very hard to read so that they will feel that their efforts are worthwhile. We must have easily read books for different interests and age groups, and we must use insight and knowledge of what makes a book easily read.

Young people with reading difficulties need a well-organised story with attractive topic and event, characters and emotions that are simply to identify with. Besides that, the book needs to have attractive cover, manageable size and volume, clear and a bit larger print than usual, and the illustration reflecting the style and story (Reidarson 2001). Books with doors to open, flap to lift and holes to explore can create an element of surprise, suspense, and great fun for those who are have difficulty and limited timed to focus such as children with autism and mental disabilities as well as helping them to start develop their motor skills.

With bold, eye-catching primary colour, simple rhythms and repetition, *Where is Maisy’s Panda?* (2010) by Lucy Cousins can create involvement from readers to lift the flap and help Maisy find her Panda. With the repetitive question, *Where’s Spot?*—first published in 1980 and written by Eric Hill is one of the always favourite classic in children’s book—encouraging communication and participation among children who read it to hunts for Spot as he hides around the house.

**Conclusion**

> “Give the children living materials [to read]! Give them newspapers—new and exciting every day. Give them fiction that shows humanity in all its unpredictable wealth and variation and the language in all its expressiveness. Fiction is not only the best, but also the only way to acquire language and insight. Pour books over the children.” - Sven Wernstrom

As a communication tool in transferring ideas, attitudes, and images, children’s books target the readers in many ways: some provide information and transfer of knowledge around us; others present images of children in daily life, or an image of their feelings, conflict and solutions; and there are also those that portray the differences in culture and custom. Each of these books carries message and a specific perspective. By reading these books, a child can "break through" limitations and "enters" another world they had never known.
Although not all books can be enjoyed by young people with disabilities, there is an effort to provide books that suit their needs. They also need for more books featuring positive images and particularly for books that include a full spectrum of different forms of disabilities. In this way, they can enjoy the pleasures offered by the book. In fact, they can meet other kids who are dealing with similar issues in the book. At the same time, this kind of books can provide an understanding of different forms of disabilities, and to reduce preconceptions and avoid making assumptions, so they can feel fully included and accepted.

References: