Representations of Deaf Characters in Children’s Picture Books

Children’s literature has the potential to strongly affect children’s lives. It provides a source from which children acquire information about their own culture and language and even come to understand the culture and language of others. In these ways, literary characters can provide children with a “mirror” image of themselves and their own culture or a “window” into the cultural lives of others (Style, 1996). Traditionally, characters with diverse cultural backgrounds and characters with disabilities have been neglected in children’s literature, and when included, they often convey negative stereotypes and provide false cultural information (Kama, 2004; Menendez & Reese, 2001). Because deaf people have historically been characterized as disabled, deaf characters have been portrayed from a disability rather than cultural perspective (Lane, 2002).

However, with more and more attention being paid to multicultural issues, authors and publishers of children’s literature seem to have followed the trend of increasing the production of children’s books that include a diverse set of people, places, and events (Nilsson, 2005). Researchers, in turn, have examined how children’s books portray characters of different races, ethnicities, and cultures, as well as characters with disabil-
It is particularly important that children be exposed to positive role models and messages in print and nonprint materials from a young age. Children begin to develop a sense of self between the ages of 3 and 5 years (Bowles, 1993), and by the age of 3 they may be influenced by biases and stereotypes about gender, race, culture, physical abilities, and other aspects of individual identity (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010). However, if a particular book gives them the opportunity to see, read about, or hear about positive cultural role models from backgrounds similar to their own, they are much more likely to have an emotional connection with the book and become more engaged in discussions about it (Singer & Smith, 2003). This, in turn, can positively influence their self-esteem and social identity (Corenblum & Annis, 1993) and improve their social interactions with others.

The purpose of the present study was to analyze the portrayal of Deaf characters in picture books for children ages 4–8 years. Our goals were to investigate whether characters were portrayed from a cultural or a disability (pathological) perspective, and to provide a systematic look at the models and messages available to young children about deafness and Deaf culture.

**Theoretical Framework**

Researchers and theorists focus on two models of deafness, which also frame the present study: the disability and cultural models. The disability model of deafness focuses on fixing the problem of individuals without regard to their sociocultural needs (Phillips, 1990); in the Deaf community, this model is referred to as a pathological model of deafness. Deafness is viewed as a deficit, and the deaf person is viewed as having a disabling medical problem that needs to be fixed (Lane, 1992). The focus is on the ear rather than the person—the inability to hear, the inability to speak. Fixing the ear is critical, and hearing aids or surgery (i.e., cochlear implantation) is seen as a necessity. Proponents of this model generally focus on teaching deaf children to speak and speechread, and discourage them from signing. (Or, if children do sign, they are encouraged to sign and speak at the same time.) As applied to an educational setting, this means that, much as is the case for bilingual minorities, the first language (i.e., ASL) and/or culture (i.e., Deaf culture) is frequently minimized or even devalued (Parasnis, 1996).

In contrast, others view deafness from a cultural perspective (e.g., Lane et al., 1996). According to Lane (1992), a cultural perspective is one that recognizes Deaf with a capital “D” and Deaf people as being members of Deaf culture. Deaf culture embodies the existence of a community of people with their own values, beliefs, and traditions (e.g., ASL poetry, Deaf art, Deaf clubs) and, in the United States, recognizes ASL as the official language of this community. Proponents of the cultural model believe that Deaf people are bilingual and that ASL (and other signed languages) should be the language of instruction in schools for the Deaf, which would position printed English as the second language. However, they do argue that there should be a mutual respect between both languages (ASL/printed English) and both cultures (hearing/Deaf). In addition, Deaf culturalists typically believe that Deaf people can and do lead rich and full lives as they are, and do not believe they need to be fixed. Those who support a cultural model support Deaf children attending residential schools for the Deaf so that they can maximize their exposure to the Deaf community, Deaf
culture, and ASL (Lane et al., 1996). They encourage Deaf adults to be active members of society and take an active role in advocating respect for their language and culture.

**Review of the Literature**

Researchers and theorists argue for the importance of providing children from multicultural backgrounds with role models who have a similar language and cultural background (e.g., Snow, Tabor, & Dickinson, 2001). Stinson and Foster (2000) agree, stating that Deaf community members can serve as positive role models and may help both deaf and hearing children to identify positively with the Deaf community and Deaf culture. In looking at the kinds of models of deafness provided in children’s picture books and the research related to it, we found only three studies that examined deaf characters specifically. In order to broaden the scope of the literature review, we also examined the portrayal of deafness in the multicultural literature and in the disability literature.

**Deafness in Children’s Literature**

The three studies that examine deafness in children’s literature provided limited data applicable to the present study. Only one study examined the portrayal of deaf characters in children’s fictional picture books from a pathological versus cultural perspective. Bailes (2002) examined the picture book Mandy (Booth, 1991) for its portrayal of the main (Deaf) character. (Please note that all children’s books discussed in the present article are listed together in a separate reference list.) Bailes concluded that Mandy provided an inaccurate portrayal of a Deaf individual—as someone who was more attentive to sounds than to visual elements, and who should be pitied. This depiction is consistent with the stereotypical pathological portrayal of deaf characters perceived from a disability perspective. Brittain (2004) analyzed five children’s picture books: I Have a Sister—My Sister Is Deaf (Peterson & Ray, 1977), Dad and Me in the Morning (Larkin, 1994), Octopuses Are Farting: Signed Nonsense Verses (Guldberg & Lytting, 1996), Rikke Is Sweeping (Nederby, 2001), and The Handmade Alphabet (Rankin, 1991). Brittain found some cultural elements in the children’s books she analyzed; however, these books were quite varied as to genre and other characteristics. For example, two had been published prior to 1990, one was an alphabet book, one was a play on language, and one was a fictional story with deaf characters. The cultural elements discussed were related to visual aspects of the text or sign language on the page; none of the books included key cultural elements such as Deaf characters, the Deaf community, and other aspects of Deaf culture.

Picture books for young children lack representation of the Deaf population in general, but specifically lack deaf characters portrayed from a cultural perspective. It appears that books targeted toward adolescents may provide a more cultural perspective on deaf characters. Pajka-West (2010) examined 102 books with a possible adolescent readership that included the following criteria: main characters who were deaf and human, realistic fiction, availability of the book to the public, and a post-1995 publication date. She ultimately selected 6 books, and found mixed representations of deaf characters. Although there were still some stereotypes of characters from a disability perspective, there were also some positive cultural portrayals, including characters who had Deaf parents, used ASL, and attended residential schools. These findings may be attributable to the fact that there are, in general, more deaf characters in juvenile fiction than in picture books for younger children (Pajka-West, 2010).

With respect to the number of characters from nondominant cultures or backgrounds more broadly (not just including Deaf culture and Deaf characters), Micklos (1996) found that there had been an increase in the number of books incorporating minority characters, but it did not parallel the percentage of minority individuals in the U.S. population. Research indicates that some of these books do portray positive images—more so for African Americans than Native Americans (Couse, 1998)—but some still reinforce negative stereotypes related to race and ethnicity (e.g., depicting Mexican Americans who are lazy or who lie in order to get work) and gender (e.g., upholding gender-based stereotypes about work; Couse, 1998; Mendoza & Reese, 2001).

Although there was no mention of Deaf culture or Deaf characters in the research on multicultural literature, this body of work recognizes the paucity of diverse characters and the lack of accurate representation of marginalized populations. In addition, it supports the notion that children’s literature should continually be examined for its messages and content regarding different cultures and people.

**Deafness as a Disability in Children’s Literature**

Deafness is an uncommon topic in research related to children’s literature. However, when it is present in the research, it is more prevalent in children’s literature depicting characters with disabilities than in children’s literature that includes multicultural themes. Of those researchers who have studied deafness as it is repre-
sent in children’s literature, most have considered it primarily as a type of disability. Ayala (1999) analyzed 59 children’s books portraying characters with disabilities from 1974 to 1996, examining both picture books for beginning readers and books for intermediate readers. While books with deaf characters were analyzed, there was no specific mention of deafness or deaf characters in the results. In addition, deaf characters are also nonexistent in award-winning literature. Dyches, Prater, and Jensen (2006) examined all of the Caldecott Medal and Honor books between 1938 and 2005. Only 11 had a character with a disability, and none of these characters were deaf.

Carlisle (1988) examined portrayals of characters with disabilities in children’s literature from the 1940s through the 1980s and found that, while there was an increase in books that included characters with disabilities in general, deafness was represented the least frequently within the growing literature.

When deaf characters were included, many of them still conveyed negative stereotypes of disabilities, as well as inaccurate portrayals of deafness. Some of the inaccuracies were that deafness can be cured with a hearing aid, that deaf people live in isolation, and that deaf people are angry or frustrated at their inability to hear (Carlisle, 1998). With Deaf culture only beginning to be recognized in the mainstream in the last several decades, it is not surprising that the studies of deaf characters in children’s literature remain within the disabilities literature, although it is noteworthy that deafness was not mentioned in the multicultural literature. As Bailes (2002) states, “Virtually absent in discussions of multicultural children’s books is the importance of including characters who are Deaf, that is, deaf people who consider themselves a member of a cultural minority” (p. 3).

Children gain knowledge about the world and individuals around them based, in part, on the books they are exposed to when they read or when others read to them. If children are exposed to deaf characters from a disability perspective, they will learn stereotypes and misconceptions, such as that deaf people are inadequate as they are and must be able to hear in order to be accepted. In contrast, if children are exposed to deaf characters portrayed from a cultural perspective, they will learn to recognize and value themselves (if they are deaf), the Deaf community, and Deaf culture.

**Purpose and Research Questions**

The purpose of the present study was to analyze the portrayal of deaf characters in picture books targeted toward children ages 4–8 years. Our research questions were

(a) In what ways and how frequently are deaf characters in children’s picture books portrayed from a pathological perspective? and

(b) In what ways and how frequently are deaf characters in children’s picture books portrayed from a cultural perspective? The texts of 20 children’s picture books were coded for themes related to cultural and pathological perspectives on deafness.

**Methods**

**Sampling**

In order to address our research questions, we first used Internet search engines of popular retail sites for bookselling (e.g., amazon.com, borders.com, barnesandnoble.com), as well as Deaf publishing companies (e.g., harrismcomm.com, dawnssign.com) and personal websites that contained lists of deaf characters in fiction (e.g., myshelf.com). We used keyword searches that included the terms deaf, hearing impaired, children’s literature, disability, portrayal, character, and cultural.

Initially, 70 texts were collected and reviewed. The sample was narrowed down to 25 books that met our selection criteria, and the final sample included 20 of these (see, below, discussion on establishing interrater reliability). The selection criteria included the following: published after 1990, had a deaf character as one of the central characters, was fictional, cost under $25, was a picture book, was targeted toward children ages 4–8 years, and had characters who did not have additional “disabilities.” We only found one book series that featured a deaf character (the Moses series, Millman, 2000, 2003, 2004); therefore, we randomly selected one book from the series (Moses Goes to the Circus, 2003) to represent it in the sample.

**Coding**

Texts from each book were typed into Microsoft Word documents and imported into NVivo. Following a directed approach (Hseih & Shannon, 2005), we coded each text on the basis of pre-established categories of deafness from both a cultural and a pathological perspective (Hoffmeister, 1996; Johnson & Nieto, 2007). The unit of analysis for coding was at the sentence level. Within the sentence level, multiple categories could be coded. Any data that did not fall within these pre-established codes were further analyzed to determine whether they represented a new category or a subcategory of an existing code. The codebook included three overarching categories: medical, Deaf culture and its characteristics (or, simply, cultural), and general. Several subcategories (e.g., general communication strategies) were present in all three of
PICTURE BOOK REPRESENTATIONS OF DEAF CHARACTERS

The main coding categories. We defined the overarching categories and their subcategories as follows:

- Medical: parents grieving about hearing loss, misconceptions, labeling as hearing impaired, focus on the deaf character’s inability to hear or speak, the deaf character functioning as if hearing, deafness as a disability, communication strategies (e.g., speaking)
- Deaf culture and its characteristics (cultural): Deaf adults or Deaf children interacting, technology for the Deaf, mentioning of Deaf community (e.g., Deaf theater, Deaf poetry), ASL, residential schools for the Deaf, communication strategies (e.g., using ASL), hearing parents accepting deafness
- General: general labeling, general communication strategies (e.g., signing), services for the deaf (e.g., interpretation)

The codebook also included “additional categories” involving codes that did not fit within the three overarching categories. These codes included hearing character being annoyed by the deaf character, hearing character ignoring the deaf character, magically learning to communicate, the benefit to signing or being deaf, and referring to deafness as “bearing in a different way.”

An additional set of codes were given at a global level, that is, one code was given to each book for a set of characteristics that would not have changed within the book (e.g., whether the author was hearing or Deaf). These global attributes included:

- Deaf characters interacting with other Deaf characters

If hearing status was not mentioned in the author’s notes, we conducted a search of the author’s name on the Internet to determine his or her hearing status. We only coded the author or illustrator as Deaf if we found that information mentioned in his or her biography; otherwise, “unknown” was entered.

We also examined the author’s notes to determine whether the author had a connection to deafness, and, if so, what kind. Finally, we assigned each book a code for the overall message of the story (e.g., parents or hearing people accepting deafness, deaf character overcoming deafness).

Data Analysis

Once the texts were coded, the frequency of key cultural and pathological codes was calculated across the 20 books as well as within each book. Calculations were conducted to look at the frequency of the three broad categories (cultural, medical, and general), the frequency of the subcategories (e.g., communication strategies, deafness as a disability) within these broader categories, and the frequency of the individual codes (e.g., signing, facial expressions) within each subcategory. Frequencies were also calculated for “additional codes” as well as the global attributes codes.

In addition, queries (in NVivo) were conducted to determine the relationship of cultural and pathological features within and between texts. Finally, authors’ notes were analyzed for the authors’ connection to deafness.

Interrater Reliability

The first author developed the codebook and practiced on 2 of the 25 picture books. She trained the second author in the coding scheme, and then both authors practiced using the initial codebook with three more picture books (that were not included in the final sample); we then discussed codes and coding strategies in order to finalize the codebook. Thus, the final sample included 20 picture books selected by means of the previously mentioned criteria. Once the codebook was finalized, we separately coded 25% of the sample to check for Interrater reliability. These books were compared, and we reached sufficient agreement on the subsample (agreement ranging from 83% to 100% on individual codes within each book; the average agreement, out of 576 codes that were double-coded, was 99.34%).

Results

Results Across the Sample of 20 Picture Books

Of the three broad coding categories, the medical model was portrayed the most in the 20 books sampled (518 references to this model, or 71% of the broad coding categories found). Less often, the picture books included references to general strategies or categories (110 references, or 15%). A nearly equal number of references were found to Deaf culture or deafness from a cultural perspective (101 references, or 14%). The distribution of portrayals is illustrated by Figure 1.

Within each broad coding category, certain subcategories were referenced much more than others (see Figure 2). Within the medical model category, the most frequently referenced codes were communication strategies characteristic of the medical model (e.g., the deaf character listening, speechreading, or speaking, or hearing characters speaking to deaf characters; 164 references, or 31.7% of codes related to the medical model), and showing deafness as a disability (167 references, or 32.2% of codes related to the medical model). One example of the depiction
of deafness as a disability is a deaf character’s inability to function in everyday life. In *The Spelling Window* (Watkins, 1993), the deaf character is a boy who appears to be around 9 years old. His class takes a field trip to a museum. While at the museum, the deaf boy wanders off into an elevator and others are worried because he “doesn’t know how to run an elevator.” He then gets stuck in the elevator, and he only calms down when a hearing child who knows how to fingerspell communicates with him through a window in the elevator door. Discussion of fixing the deafness (71 references, or 13.7% of the category) and depictions of deaf characters functioning like hearing individuals (64 references or 12.4% of the category) also occurred fairly frequently.

Less frequently depicted were parents grieving for their child’s loss of hearing (23 references, 4.4%), misconceptions about deafness and deaf individuals (16 references, 3.1%), deaf characters labeled as “deaf and dumb,” “hearing impaired,” “quiet or silent,” or “noisy” (11 references, 2.1%), or deaf characters attending mainstream schools (2 references, 0.4%).

Within the broad category of general strategies and categories, general communication strategies were referenced most across the 20 books (61 references, or 55% of codes related to general strategies and categories; see Figure 3). This was followed by general labeling (33 references, 30%), which included labeling deaf characters as “deaf” or “hard of hearing.” Least frequently referenced was services for the deaf (16 references, 15%).

With respect to codes related to Deaf culture (and characteristics related to a cultural perspective on deafness), mentions of the Deaf community—including name signs, the use of capital “D” for Deaf, and aspects of Deaf culture (e.g., Deaf theater or poetry)—occurred most often across the sample of picture books for young children (38 references, or 37.6% of codes related to the Deaf culture category; see Figure 4). Following this, books included references to communication strategies related to a cultural model of deafness, such as signing, using or referencing ASL, or using appropriate strategies for gaining a Deaf person’s attention (29 references, 28.7%). Other aspects of Deaf culture, such as feeling vibrations or experiencing the acceptance of deafness by hearing people, were referenced 23 times (22.8%). The least frequently occurring subcategory was technologies used by Deaf individuals, such as flashing doorbells, TTY or TDD, and captioning (11 references, 10.9%).
Additional Codes
Within the “additional codes” category, some negative portrayals of deafness involved hearing characters occasionally being annoyed or embarrassed by a deaf character (10 references) or ignoring a deaf character (4 references). In a few cases, the deaf character communicated by magically interacting with animals (4 references), or his or her deafness was referred to as “hearing in a different way” (2 references). Only on one occasion was deafness portrayed as beneficial because it is easy to communicate in sign language in noisy situations (see Figure 5).

Not all of the codes (within subcategories) were referenced across the sample as often as others. Table 1 shows the most referenced codes within each subcategory across the coded picture books, the percentage of the subcategory each code represented, and the number of books that contained that code. Of the top six most referenced codes, four were medical (including the top three), one was a general labeling category, and one was a Deaf culture category.

Global Attributes
The categories thus far were coded at the sentence level, and the total number of codes, subcategories, and broad categories varied across books. We also coded a set of characteristics (or attributes) at a global level (the level of the book). These codes related to characteristics of the author(s) and illustrator(s) as well as the overall messages conveyed to those who read or heard each picture book. Specifically, the vast majority of the authors and illustrators of these picture books were hearing (19 hearing authors, 1 Deaf author; 20 hearing illustrators, 0 Deaf illustrators). With respect to the overall messages, more often the message related to the medical model, (14 references). Three of these books resolved with the deaf character being fixed (i.e., gaining the ability to hear) by getting a hearing aid or a cochlear implant. The overall messages of 9 of the texts aligned with stereotypes of deaf people as disabled, with 4 of the texts including a deaf character depicted as a “brave little soul” who fights against bad weather, fire, darkness, or bad people. One text had the deaf character portrayed as angry. An additional four texts had a message of either the hearing character saving the deaf character or the deaf character needing help from an-
other character (person or dog) in order to function in everyday situations (see Figure 6).

There were also books that had positive overall messages throughout the text. Two books resolved with hearing parents learning to accept their child’s deafness, and two others resolved with a hearing character making friends with the deaf character (2 books). Two books portrayed a relationship of mutual acceptance between the deaf child and the child’s parents (or family) throughout the story. While this was not the prominent overall message, there were also three books that incorporated positive family relationships.

Results reported thus far—across as well as within picture books—provide an overall picture of the portrayals of deaf characters in picture books for young children. For the most part, if a child encounters a deaf character in a picture book, that child will likely be presented with an image of deafness drawn from the medical model, one in which deafness is a condition that inhibits individuals from doing everyday activities, or is something that should be treated and can be fixed. These messages occurred much more often in the sample than messages about deafness in general (general strategies and categories) or portrayals of a capital “D” Deaf character, Deaf culture and Deaf individuals as being part of an established community with its own lan-

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Subcategory</th>
<th>Code</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>% within subcategory</th>
<th>Books with code (n)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Medical</td>
<td>Communication strategies</td>
<td>Speaking to a deaf character</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medical</td>
<td>Deafness as disability</td>
<td>Inability to hear</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medical</td>
<td>Functioning like hearing</td>
<td>Discussion of music</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General categories</td>
<td>General labeling</td>
<td>Deaf</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>97%</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medical</td>
<td>Discussion of fixing the deafness</td>
<td>Hearing aids</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deaf culture</td>
<td>Other aspects</td>
<td>Mentioning of Deaf community</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General strategies</td>
<td>General communication strategies</td>
<td>Facial expression</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deaf culture</td>
<td>Communication strategies</td>
<td>Hearing family signs with deaf</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General categories</td>
<td>Services for the Deaf</td>
<td>Hearing dog</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medical</td>
<td>Parents grieving</td>
<td>Parents want to get their child help</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medical</td>
<td>Labeling of deaf characters</td>
<td>Deaf as noisy</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deaf culture</td>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>TTY or TTD</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medical</td>
<td>Misconceptions</td>
<td>Sign language isn’t a real language, just words</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medical</td>
<td>Misconceptions</td>
<td>Hearing aids or cochlear implants make you hear better</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medical</td>
<td>Mainstream school</td>
<td>Special school</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medical</td>
<td>Mainstream school</td>
<td>Mainstream school</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
guage, culture, and ways of functioning in everyday life.

**Results by Individual Picture Books**

Although results across the picture books provide a clear picture of how deafness and deaf characters are presented in children’s literature, variations existed between books. Table 2 displays the total number of codes under the cultural model and medical model by book. Many of the picture books included many references to some aspect of the deaf character and characteristics of deafness. Overall, there were 518 total references to the medical model versus 101 references to the cultural model. All of the books that had references to the cultural model also had references to the medical model. In some cases the books referenced both models, with the cultural references being more numerous (e.g., *My Heart Glow*, McCully, 2008); in others, the medical references were greater (e.g., *The Garden Wall*, Tildes, 2006). The messages with more cultural references tended to occur in books published after 2000; the texts with more medical references appeared across a wider range of years. However, 7 of the 10 of the texts with the most medical references were published post-2000. Eleven books had 0–1 references to the cultural model. All but 1 book had at least 9 references to the medical model.

**Author’s Connection to Deafness**

In addition to the coding categories, we also examined authors’ notes for additional information related to authors’ connection to deafness. Because some of the authors’ notes were longer than others and provided varied information, we focused only on whether an author acknowledged a connection with Deaf people or Deaf-related organizations. Half of the authors had some connection to deafness. The authors of four out of the five books with the most cultural references had a connection to the Deaf community. One author was Deaf (*Dina the Deaf Dinosaur*, Addabo, 2005; 12 cultural, 27 medical), and one had a Deaf parent (*The Printer*, Uhlberg, 2003; 6 cultural, 15 medical). The author of *Moses Goes to the Circus* (Millman, 2003; 13 cultural, 3 medical) had input from teachers at an ASL/English Deaf school in New York. The author of the *Garden Wall* (Tildes, 2006) had input from several Deaf adults (17 cultural, 34 medical). While she did not mention input from Deaf people, Riggio, the author of the
Table 2
Total Number of Codes Found, by Book, Within the Cultural and Medical Models of Deafness

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Picture book title</th>
<th>Number of codes found</th>
<th>Year range when published</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>My Heart Glow</td>
<td>34 Cultural, 22 Medical</td>
<td>2005–present</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Garden Wall</td>
<td>17 Cultural, 34 Medical</td>
<td>2005–present</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moses Goes to the Circus</td>
<td>13 Cultural, 3 Medical</td>
<td>2000–2004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dina the Deaf Dinosaur</td>
<td>12 Cultural, 27 Medical</td>
<td>2005–present</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Printer</td>
<td>6 Cultural, 15 Medical</td>
<td>2000–2004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mandy</td>
<td>5 Cultural, 46 Medical</td>
<td>1990–1994</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Place for Grace</td>
<td>3 Cultural, 9 Medical</td>
<td>1990–1994</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dad and Me in the Morning</td>
<td>3 Cultural, 12 Medical</td>
<td>1990–1994</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secret Signs Along the Underground Railroad</td>
<td>3 Cultural, 14 Medical</td>
<td>1995–2000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enrique Speaks With His Hands</td>
<td>1 Cultural, 20 Medical</td>
<td>2005–present</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kami and the Yaks</td>
<td>1 Cultural, 13 Medical</td>
<td>2005–present</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prudence Parker and a Sign of Friendship</td>
<td>1 Cultural, 9 Medical</td>
<td>2005–present</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Silent Lotus</td>
<td>1 Cultural, 27 Medical</td>
<td>1990–1994</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Deaf Musicians</td>
<td>1 Cultural, 23 Medical</td>
<td>2005–present</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Screaming Kind of Day</td>
<td>0 Cultural, 50 Medical</td>
<td>2000–2004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abby Gets a Cochlear Implant</td>
<td>0 Cultural, 51 Medical</td>
<td>2005–present</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elana’s Ears</td>
<td>0 Cultural, 42 Medical</td>
<td>2000–2004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moonbird</td>
<td>0 Cultural, 32 Medical</td>
<td>2005–present</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oliver Gets Hearing Aids</td>
<td>0 Cultural, 30 Medical</td>
<td>2000–2004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Spelling Window</td>
<td>0 Cultural, 39 Medical</td>
<td>1990–1994</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>101 Cultural, 518 Medical</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1997 book *Secret Signs Along the Underground Railroad* (3 cultural, 14 medical) described herself as being fluent in ASL and having taught at a school for the Deaf.

Five authors of texts with a large number of medical references described their connection to deafness by using the term *hearing impaired*. The author of *The Spelling Window* (Watkins, 1993; 39 medical, 0 cultural) mentioned that she “knew hearing-impaired people.” The author of *Abby Gets a Cochlear Implant* (Riski, 2008; 0 cultural, 51 medical) is an audiologist who “works with hearing impaired children and their families.” The author of *Mandy* (Booth, 1991; 5 cultural, 46 medical) worked at deaf schools and taught sign language to “hearing and hearing impaired children,” and the lead author of *Oliver Gets Hearing Aids* (Riski & Klakow, 2001; 0 cultural, 30 medical) mentioned that the book was written for her hearing impaired brother. The author of *A Screaming Kind of Day* (Gilmore, 1999; 0 cultural, 50 medical) acknowledged the Canadian Hard of Hearing Association.

Finally, the author of *A Place for Grace* (Okimoto, 1993; 3 cultural, 9 medical) thanked the Hearing Dog Association, and the author of *Enrique Speaks With His Hands* (Fudge, 2008; 1 cultural, 20 medical) described the book as “a work of fiction, but based on a real Enrique and a real group of people who are bringing language and hope to deaf children of Honduras.”

**Discussion**

It is crucial to provide deaf children access to the Deaf community and Deaf culture during their early years to help them develop a positive identity as Deaf persons (Holcomb, 1997). Because only 5% of deaf children have Deaf parents, those caring for and educating young deaf children need other avenues for providing positive Deaf role models, such as having Deaf mentors or Deaf teachers. Doing so has been correlated with higher self-esteem (Bat-Chava, 1993). Children’s literature, in addition to “live” models, can provide positive role models if Deaf characters are portrayed culturally and with accuracy.

The results of the present study indicate that children’s books continue to portray deaf characters more from a medical than a cultural perspective. This suggests that children (both deaf and hearing) who are reading the books will see deaf children portrayed as disabled and having a medical problem that can and should be fixed in order to make them hearing, that they can rely on communication strategies that hearing people typically use (e.g., listening, speaking, or speechreading), and that, without these interventions, deaf individuals will be (or will be perceived as) angry, isolated, and/or unable to function in everyday life.

In addition, nearly all of the picture books failed to show Deaf characters interacting with other Deaf characters or communicating with anyone through ASL. Furthermore, when characters signed in the texts, they communicated primarily through fingerspelling or by signing individual English words rather than using full and grammatically correct sentences in ASL. This gives the false impression that deaf people only interact with hearing people in a hearing world where they are primarily spoken to and must attempt to use their hearing or speechreading in order to communicate. It also fails to recognize ASL as a language with its own grammatical
structure and complexities. These portrayals do not align with the knowledge and research related to Deaf culture and ASL (e.g., Lane et al., 1996). And misconceptions persist, which can perpetuate stereotypes.

Far fewer codes were found across the 20 picture books that represented deafness and Deaf individuals from a cultural model. Instead of acknowledging the rich lives and language within the Deaf world—including the Deaf community, Deaf schools, and ASL—picture books presented deaf children as valuing the ability to hear and focusing on aspects of the hearing world, such as speaking and listening to music. This is not to say that Deaf people do not appreciate music, but rather that it is more of a prominent feature of hearing culture than Deaf culture. Focusing on music rather than ASL poetry, for example, sends the message that Deaf people can function like hearing people instead of conveying an appreciation of Deaf culture and ASL as a key aspect of Deaf culture.

All of these portrayals do not teach deaf children to value themselves as Deaf individuals; rather, they suggest to deaf children that they may not be accepted or appreciated unless they can acquire devices and communication strategies that enable them to “fit” into a hearing world. In addition, such depictions (re)emphasize to readers the messages and positive role models, messages which may be overlooked by the everyday reader.

Regardless of the portrayal of the deaf character from a cultural or medical perspective, three different types of positive relationships with the deaf character were found either in overall messages or in additional messages in the text: The parents learn to accept the child’s deafness (e.g., Dina the Deaf Dinosaur, Addabo, 2005, and Moonbird, Dunbar, 2007); hearing parents or a family member accepts deaf characters as they are without trying to change them (e.g., Mandy, Booth, 1991; Dad and Me in the Morning, Larkin, 1994; Moses Goes to the Circus, Millman, 2003, Secret Signs Along the Underground Railroad, Riggio, 1997; and The Garden Wall, Tildes, 2006); hearing children make friends with the deaf character (e.g., Prudence Parker and a Sign of Friendship, Burk, 2005; The Garden Wall, Tildes, 2006; and The Spelling Window, Watkins, 1993).

Overall, however, the results suggest that picture books for young children that include deaf characters tend not to serve as a “mirror” or “window” into the cultural lives of Deaf people. Based on the overall messages of some of the books, they may positively influence hearing children to befriend deaf children or hearing parents of deaf children to help understand and/or accept their child’s deafness. Yet this seems insufficient for providing the kinds of role models educators and parents might want to offer deaf and hearing children.

Limitations of the Study

The results revealed several themes about deafness and the deaf individual in picture books for young children. A few limitations of the present study should be considered along with these findings. One of the limitations involves the books used in the sample. Some of the books were out of print. They were included, however, because they were still available on popular websites (e.g., amazon.com) at a reasonable price. However these books may not be easily accessible to young children. It is also possible that there were other appropriate books that we were unable to locate. In addition, the sample of picture books included texts written in English and available on U.S. websites. Future research might extend the sampling to literature from different countries and in different languages.

A second limitation relates to the codebook. Three strategies were used to ensure a valid codebook: (a) careful consideration of past literature related to models of deafness, Deaf individuals’ identity development, and Deaf culture; (b) past research involving deaf characters in children’s literature, characters with a disability, and multicultural backgrounds; and (c) the opportunity to add codes to
the codebook as they emerged during practice coding. Even with these strategies in place, we may have missed codes related to either model of deafness or the general category; therefore, researchers may consider expanding on this codebook in the future.

Finally, the present study presents portrayals of deafness and deaf characters that are available to young readers. It cannot speak to the influence of these books on readers and their perceptions of deafness, deaf individuals, or Deaf culture. Future researchers should consider studying the influence that picture books with deaf characters have on deaf and hearing children’s perceptions of deafness, deaf individuals, and Deaf culture.

Conclusions and Implications for Future Research

Historically, deafness has been portrayed from a disability perspective in literature (Lane, 2002). The present study examined 20 picture books for children ages 4–8 years, and the results revealed a continued trend toward depicting deaf characters from a disability or pathological perspective. While there may be a place and audience for all types of books with deaf characters from all perspectives, there is a lack of books portraying Deaf characters culturally.

In addition, there is also seems to be a continued trend of children’s picture books with deaf characters being written and illustrated by hearing people. This contrasts with some evidence that juvenile literature portrays Deaf characters from a cultural perspective and that more Deaf authors tend to write for this population (Pajka-West, 2010). It suggests a gap available for authors, illustrators, and publishers to fill. Children’s picture books have the potential to provide positive cultural role models for deaf children, yet this is not happening with respect to deafness in picture books targeted to emergent and beginning readers. Although there are positive messages about the relationships between deaf and hearing characters, relationships between Deaf characters and other Deaf characters is almost nonexistent. Several of the texts also provide mixed messages to readers by both medical and cultural references. In order for children’s books to have a positive influence on deaf children’s self-esteem and identity development, more books are needed that portray deafness and Deaf characters from a cultural perspective. There also needs to be an increase in books that have no pathological references.

Having more culturally Deaf authors and illustrators involved in the creation of new picture books with Deaf characters may help; the results indicate that it may not be enough to have hearing authors and illustrators be connected to deaf people or even to the Deaf community and ASL. With more Deaf authors and illustrators and more positive cultural messages in texts, a greater knowledge and acceptance of Deaf culture would more likely occur among hearing individuals, and a greater sense of self, self-esteem, and sense of community would more likely occur within deaf children.

References


**References for Children’s Books**


