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Exploring the Effects of Reading Young Adult Literature that Portrays People with Disabilities  
in the Inclusion Classroom

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### Abstract

This intervention study examined the impact of reading young adult novels that portray people with disabilities on the attitudes of 229 eighth grade students. Students' beliefs and intentions to interact with peers with disabilities were measured on three occasions utilizing the Shared Activities Questionnaire (Morgan, Walker, Bieberich & Bell, 1996, Unpublished manuscript) and the Adjective Checklist (Siperstein, 1980; Siperstein & Bak, 1977). First, all students took the attitudinal surveys. Half of the students then read and responded to a book that portrays a character with a disability, while the other students read a novel without disability portrayals. All students then listened and responded to short stories portraying teens with disabilities. Afterwards, all students took the survey a third time. Repeated measures Analysis of Variance revealed no significant differences within or between subjects on either measure. Potential explanations for the results of this study as well as pedagogical implications are provided.

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In order to foster positive attitudes toward all people, as well as to accurately represent the diverse society in which we live, teachers must make intentional pedagogical and curricular choices. In the English classroom, multicultural literature that portrays characters of various races and ethnicities, socioeconomic statuses, genders and sexual orientations, language acquisition levels, as well as abilities may be a vehicle by which to achieve such goals. In the past ten to fifteen years, fully including students with disabilities in the general education classroom has become more and more prevalent (U.S. Department, 2015). While generally accepted as the most effective model for special education, there is conflicting research regarding the benefits of learning in an inclusion classroom (Hines, 2001; Wiener and Tardif, 2004). Students both with and without disabilities acknowledge that those with disabilities are more likely to struggle to fit in socially with their peers, which can manifest itself into emotional and academic challenges. Pedagogy and curriculum must continue to be explored in order to discover ways in which to foster understanding among all students. This study attempts to contribute to that goal.

The purpose of this study was to explore attitudinal changes that may occur when middle school students read and respond to young adult novels that portray characters with disabilities. Utilizing the intersection of various sociocultural theories and the concept of using literature as a vehicle for understanding oneself and others as a theoretical framework, the attitudes of 229 eighth grade students regarding their beliefs and intentions to interact with peers with disabilities were measured before and after reading and responding to literature. Survey data and students'

responses to writing prompts were analyzed in order to answer the following question: Can reading young adult literature that portrays characters with disabilities impact students' attitudes toward people with disabilities?

### **Theoretical perspective**

A variety of theories that all fall under the broad heading of *sociocultural theory* drove this research project, including works from Vygotsky (1993), Bourdieu (1986), Rosenblatt (1938, 1978) and Botelho and Rudman (2009). At its most basic level, socio-cultural theorists believe that both one's cultural and social background impact how one will learn (Walker & Bean, 2005). This theory clearly aligns with Bourdieu's (1986) concept of cultural capital. In the school setting the curriculum in general and literature in particular can contribute to a deficit in a student's cultural capital. When students do not see characters like themselves represented in the literature they read it may not only affect their enjoyment, but also their self-esteem, self concept, identity and sense of agency (Blasingame, 2007; Lewis, Enciso, and Moje, 2007). The intersection of these sociocultural theories with an emphasis on the concept that deeper learning occurs when personal experiences and background knowledge interact with the content being learned (Rosenblatt, 1938, 1978; Vygotsky, 1996) provided both a lens and a filter by which to analyze the potential for reading and responding to literature as a vehicle for changing attitudes.

### **Literature Review**

#### **The Inclusion Classroom**

Many researchers posit that inclusion classes are actually a detriment to students with disabilities because of the psychological, social and emotional stresses they may feel when interacting with their peers who are typically abled (e.g. Dore, Dion, Agner & Brunet, 2002;

Llewellyn, 1995 & 2000; Roberts and Smith, 1999; Smith & Tyler, 2010). Similarly, several studies revolving around the attitudes of students without disabilities have shown that often students have biases against and negative attitudes about people with disabilities, are not readily accepting of or even bully their peers with disabilities, and prefer to spend both in and out of class time with their classmates who do not have disabilities (e.g. Bell & Morgan, 2000; Bender, 2008; Campbell, Ferguson, Herzinger, Jackson, & Marino, 2004; Dore, Dion, Agner & Brunet, 2002; Fisher, 1999; Malian, 2012; McDougall, DeWit, King, Miller & Killip, 2004; Morton & Campbell, 2008; Roberts and Smith, 1999; Nowicki & Sandieson, 2002; Swaim & Morgan, 2001).

Research regarding students' attitudes is not all negative, however. Advantages of developing positive social relationships among students with and without disabilities, as well as benefits students without disabilities reap from developing relationships with their peers who have disabilities have been identified (Helmstetter, Peck & Giangreco, 1994; Hines, 2001; Kishi & Meyer, 1994; Peck, Donaldson & Pezzoli, 1990; Wiener & Tardif, 2004). Nonetheless, there is an on-going need to find new ways in which to develop positive academic and social experiences for all students. The English curriculum may be one vehicle by which to do so.

### **Using Literature about People with Disabilities in the English Classroom**

Choice of literature to be included in the curriculum can have broad effects on students' learning and engagement (Rosenblatt, 1938). Incorporating young adult literature that portrays people with disabilities into the language arts classroom may have the potential to yield dual benefits. First, students with disabilities may benefit from seeing themselves represented in the literature presented. This may, consequently, impact their self- concept and/or emotional well-

being (Cartledge, Gardner & Ford, 2009). Secondly, students without disabilities may better understand the challenges of being different through reading books portraying characters with these attributes. Understanding gained, in turn, may translate into positive social actions both in and out of the inclusion classroom (Friend & Bursuck, 2009; Hastings & Graham, 1995). Recent studies have investigated the potential for fiction reading to influence empathy and attitudes (Bal & Veltkamp, 2013; Kidd & Castano, 2013; Malo-Juvera, 2014), with varying results. Kidd and Castano (2013) found that reading literary fiction (as opposed to nonfiction or popular fiction) improved participants' Theory of Mind (ToM), "the capacity to identify and understand others' subjective states" (p. 377) and ability to maintain relationships through the use of empathy, as self-reported and in the short-term. Bal and Veltkamp (2013), also investigating the impact of reading on empathy, found that readers need to "become fully transported into the story (in order) to change as a consequence of reading, to become more empathetic. When a reader is not able to identify with a fictional narrative... they possibly become more self-centered and selfish in order to protect the sense of self in relation to others" (p. 8). They also posit that empathetic results from reading fiction, "do not present themselves immediately...but over the course of a week... because the process of transformation of an individual needs time to unfold" (p. 9).

In looking specifically at young adult (YA) literature, many articles (Landrum, 2001; Pirofski, 2001; Rhodes and Milby, 2007; Saad, 2004; Stelle, 1999) demonstrate the benefit of reading about characters who are similar to oneself and/or who have gone through similar challenges that one is facing. Landrum (1998-1999) cites several sources supporting the reading of young adult literature, all concurring that this is an "avenue by which students gain a more complex perception of themselves and others" (p. 252). She goes on to state that "multiple

studies have demonstrated that literature featuring characters with disabilities can spark a healthy acceptance of self and others in young readers” (Landrum, 2001, p. 252). Similarly, Stelle (1999) writes, “Children’s literature can be used to develop positive attitudes toward people with disabilities and to encourage positive peer relationships among children of differing abilities” (p. 123). Pirofski (2001), Saad (2004), and Rhodes and Milby (2007) take it one step further, offering that while students can gain a sense of pride and/or an understanding of others from reading of the inclusion genre, there is not enough quality literature portraying people with disabilities available. However, in a more recent study, Tsumoto and Black (2015) found that there is much more quality young adult literature portraying characters on the Autism Spectrum than in the past, perhaps due in part to awards like the Schneider Family Book Award and the Dolly Gray award- both awards that recognize achievement in representing disability in authentic ways.

In synthesizing information from the articles located that are specific to inclusion literature, similarities emerge. All of the articles support the notion that there are benefits to reading literature that portrays people with disabilities and that care must be taken when choosing particular titles (Altieri, 2006, 2008; Andrews, 1998; Kendrick, 2004; Landrum, 1998-1999, 2001; Prater, 2000, 2003, 2006; Rudman, 1984; Tu, 1999; Turner & Traxler, 1997). Many also focus on presenting criteria that should be followed when choosing titles, often offering rating scales and annotated bibliographies (Carroll & Rosenblum, 2000; Heim, 1994; Rosenblum & Carroll, 2000; Rudman, 1984). Overall, however, there seems to be a gap in the literature on this topic, specifically regarding research yielding empirical evidence.

### **Methods**



## **Participants**

The data from 229 eighth grade students in a middle school in the Midwestern United States were analyzed for this study. Students' ages ranged from 13 to 15 years old ( $M= 14$ ); 112 (48.9%) were male, 110 (48%) were female, and 7 students (3%) did not indicate their gender on the survey. Twenty-eight (12.2%) of the students who participated receive special education services for a documented disability, including 24 students with learning disabilities, 1 with deafness, and 3 with physical disabilities.

## **Instrumentation**

### **Survey**

The Shared Activities Questionnaire (SAQ; Morgan, Walker, Bieberich & Bell, 1996, Unpublished manuscript) and Adjective Checklist (ACL; Siperstein, 1980; Siperstein & Bak, 1977) were used for this experimental study. The SAQ was developed to measure behavioral intentions of students, utilizing Gottlieb and Gottlieb's (1977) premise that there are two different aspects to students' attitudes. The first is a cognitive attitude. This encompasses what students believe about people with disabilities. The second dimension is conative attitudes. This refers to students' behavioral intentions, or the likelihood that students will interact with a person who has a disability (Campbell, 2008).

The Shared Activities Questionnaire (Morgan et al., 1996) combines behavioral intentions with an Adjective Checklist (Siperstein, 1980; Siperstein & Bak, 1977) that measures cognitive attitudes. The SAQ also targets the social context of a situation and how that context will affect attitudes. This survey includes academic, in-school social and out-of-school recreational contexts (Campbell, 2008). Students are presented 25 questions regarding their

intentions to interact with a student (e.g., “Would you ask the student to come to your house to watch TV?”) and respond on a one to five Likert scale (1 = No, definitely not, 2 = Probably not, 3 = Maybe, 4 = Probably, 5 = Yes, definitely). Utilizing this five point scale, for this study scores could range from 25 to 125 with the higher score indicating the more positive attitude toward a person with a disability. The SAQ has been used in multiple studies (Bell and Morgan, 2000; Campbell, Ferguson, Herzinger, Jackson, & Marino, 2004; Greenleaf et al., 2006; Law et al., 2007; Morgan et al., 1998; Swaim and Morgan, 2001) with both elementary and middle school students to measure behavioral intentions and attitudes regarding people with physical disabilities, autism, attention deficit/ hyperactivity disorder, and obesity.

Similarly, the Adjective Checklist (Siperstein & Bak, 1977) has been used in numerous studies, commonly in conjunction with the SAQ (Bell & Morgan, 2000; Campbell, Ferguson, Herzinger, Jackson, & Marino, 2004; Greenleaf, Chambliss, Rhea, Martin, & Morrow, 2006; Law, Sinclair, & Fraser, 2007; Morton & Campbell, 2008; Swaim & Morgan, 2001). It is used as a measure of students’ cognitive attitudes and has been recognized as a tool to identify stereotypes. The instrument contains 32 adjectives. Half of the adjectives are positive in nature (e.g., smart, happy, friendly), and the other half are negative (e.g., stupid, lonely, ashamed). The students check each adjective that they think describes the students portrayed on the survey. A score for the checklist is determined by subtracting the total number of negative adjectives checked from the total number of positive attitudes checked, then adding a constant of 20 (Siperstein, 1980; Siperstein & Bak, 1977).

Minor revisions were made to the SAQ and ACL surveys in order to better suit the questions to the target audience. Students were read the directions and scenarios describing

different students (a student who is an athlete, a student who is an English Language Learner, a student with a disability, and a student who is obese). The surveys were taken in the school computer lab using Survey Monkey, and students had access to the directions and scenarios at all times. As this is an unpublished survey, permission was granted via email correspondence to use and modify this instrument. However, permission was not granted to publish this survey.

### **Novels**

Efforts were made to read all available young adult novels that portray characters with disabilities published between 1980 to the time the study took place. Books were identified using the search term *disability* utilizing the library catalog, web searches, and recommendations from librarians, professors, colleagues, and speakers at conferences. Over 100 books were identified, read, and reviewed, using a critical multicultural analysis technique (Botelho & Rudman, 2009). In order to provide a variety of quality novels for the students, four guiding questions were tracked: 1) What are the gender, age, race, and class of the main characters? 2) What are the gender, age, race, and class of the character with a disability? 3) What disability is represented? 4) What awards, if any, has the novel won? After conferring with the teachers, analyzing the information gathered, and taking into consideration the reading level and preferences of the students as well as availability of the novels, six books were selected from which students in the treatment group chose to read (see Appendix A). In addition to the novels, two short stories taken from Gallo's (2008) collection *Owning it: Stories about teens with disabilities* were provided for the teachers to read aloud to all of their students.

### **Writing Prompts**

Three writing prompts were provided to the students (see Appendix C). The first prompt was given while students were reading their novel and was developed with the goal of helping students make a text-to-self connection with the book. The second prompt was presented after students completed their novel. Its purpose was to get feedback regarding the students' perception of the book they read. If the majority of students had strong negative opinions about the book they read, those feelings could impact their attitudes and what they were able to take from the novel. The final prompt was presented to all students after they listened to the two short story read-alouds.

#### **Data Collection Procedures**

The students took one pre-reading and two post-reading surveys. Eleven days after the students took the pre-reading survey, they began their "award winning novel" unit of study. Students were randomly assigned to groups; half of the students chose their book from a list with the titles of six award-winning novels that portray a character with a disability; the other half selected their book from a list of award winning novels that do not portray disability. . Because students were randomly assigned to groups, threats to internal validity were minimized.

After all students completed their novel, they took the survey for a second time. As a component of the proceeding unit of study on "Challenges," two short stories (Giles, 2008; Flinn, 2008) that portray teens with disabilities were read aloud by the teachers to all of their students. Afterward, the students took the survey one final time. Finally, students' written responses to the prompts and survey comments were used as a support or contradiction for the quantitative findings. The students spent a total of five weeks on this unit of study.

#### **Data Analysis Procedures**

To maximize information gained from the statistical findings, effect sizes were analyzed. Utilizing Cohen's (1992) effect size index, if alpha was set at .05 and a medium effect size was desired, 64 students would need to be in each group; 229 students participated, easily meeting this requirement. In addition, utilizing an effect size comparison offered the potential to report any changes that occurred in knowledge and/or attitudes, regardless of how statistically significant they happened to be (Wainer & Robinson, 2003).

### **Correlations**

Pearson correlations, utilizing SPSS 17 software, of the SAQ and ACL were implemented to determine concurrent and construct validity.

### **T-tests**

T-tests, utilizing SPSS 17 software were conducted in order to establish whether the means of the independent samples differed significantly (Field, 2005). An independent samples t-test was conducted to compare student attitudes for those who read a book that portrayed a character with a disability and those who read a book without a character with a disability. T-tests were run for both the ACL and for each area of the SAQ (recreational, social, academic). There was no significant difference in student attitudes for the ACL nor SAQ pre-reading surveys for students who read a book that portrays a character with a disability and those who did not. These results show that the initial groups held similar attitudes regarding their peers with disabilities (see Table 1).

### **ANOVA**

Because several independent variables and a total of three surveys were used, a repeated measures Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was employed. First, comparisons were made

between the experimental group and the control group as a whole, and then by gender, ability, teacher, and which disability novel was read. Within the treatment group, the data were analyzed to see if there was a change in individual students' attitudes (with regards to their intentions to interact with a peer with a disability) before and after reading a book of the disability genre. Comparisons of students' attitudes were also made between gender, ability, and which teacher students had. Finally, the treatment group was categorized by which individual novel was read, to determine whether one particular book statistically had more impact than another. After students listened to the two short stories that portrayed characters with disabilities and took the third survey, the same tests mentioned above were run again, and all results were compared.

Similarly, a repeated measures ANOVA was conducted on the total score from the Adjective Checklist, to determine whether or not reading a young adult novel that portrays a character with a disability impacted students' cognitive attitudes about a peer with a disability.

### **Results**

The purpose of this study was to explore the potential attitudinal effects of reading young adult literature that portrays people with disabilities. Each student took the combined Shared Activities Questionnaire (SAQ) and Adjective Checklist (ACL) survey three times, once before reading the novel, once after completing the novel, and once at the end of the unit of study (approximately two weeks after reading the novel). The SAQ is divided into three focus areas with regards to the respondent's intention to interact with a student with a disability: academically, socially, and recreationally. In addition, gender, teacher, whether or not the student receives special education services, and which individual novel was read were also analyzed. A summary of the means and standard deviations for the SAQ can be found in Table 2.

Likewise, for each survey administration, the averages for the ACL were calculated for the students described in the survey scenarios (athlete, student with a disability, English language learner, student who is overweight) (see Appendix B). For the ACL, scores can range from 4-36, with any score above 20 indicating a more positive attitude. The overall means were similar across survey administrations (survey 1:  $M = 19.6$ ; survey 2:  $M = 19.6$ ; survey 3:  $M = 18.6$ ). There was little difference among means for students who read the book versus those who didn't, male versus female, and students receiving disability services versus those who were not (see Table 3).

Additionally, in averaging the results from all three ACL survey administrations, the adjective that was most infrequently used to describe a student with a disability was "attractive" (7.4%), while the five adjectives most often used to describe a student with a disability were "slow" (72.0%), "weak" (62.1%), "female" (60.9%), "friendly" (57.8%), and "lonely" (56.1%) (see Table 4).

### **Correlations**

Correlations were run for each area of the SAQ (recreation, social, and academic) and for each time the survey was administered (pre-reading, post-reading, final survey). There was a strong positive correlation ( $p > .01$ ) between the SAQ and the ACL in all areas and for all administrations (See Table 5). These correlations suggest a strong relationship between students' cognitive and conative attitudes toward their peers with disabilities.

### **ANOVAS**

The repeated measures ANOVA for the SAQ intention to interact recreationally,  $F(1.87, 238.99) = 1.41, p > .05$ , socially,  $F(15.29, 246.68) = .594, p > .05$ , and academically,  $F(12.31, 235.59) = .733, p > .05$  demonstrated no statistically significant differences (see Table 6).

Similarly, a repeated measures ANOVA for the ACL demonstrated no statistically significant differences,  $F(1.81, 289.55) = 2.44, p > .05$  (see Table 7). In addition, ANOVAS were run for gender, whether or not the student was receiving special education services, which teacher the students had, and, if the student was in the experimental group, and which specific novel was read.

While females and students with disabilities tended to have slightly more positive attitudes about their peers with disabilities at the beginning of the study, reading the novel had no statistically significant impact. In fact, none of the independent variables resulted in findings that were statistically significant. In this study, there were no statistically significant differences in student attitudes after reading a book that portrays a character with a disability.

### Writing Prompts

#### Prompt 1

Students were given essay prompts three times during this study (See Appendix C). The first prompt was designed to help students make text-to-self connections. Of the 99 students who read a novel that portrays a character with a disability and responded to this prompt, 29 (29.3%) chose the character with a disability as the focus of their answer. Perhaps most interesting is that 50% ( $N = 18$ ) of the students who wrote about the novel *Stuck in Neutral* chose Shawn, the character who is non-communicative and immobile due to severe cerebral palsy, as the character on which to focus their response. Students were able to relate to Shawn and to see



how he is similar to them, despite his very different challenges. For example, one student remarked, “In my book, Shawn, the main character, is like me because we are both smart and... very nice. We also both are clever with ideas but are in different ways afraid or not able to share them.” In analyzing all essay responses, it appears that students had no trouble relating to the characters with disabilities in the novels that they read.

### **Prompt 2**

The second prompt evaluated students’ perceptions of the books they read. Overall, students enjoyed the novels (see Table 8). The majority (52%, N = 58) mentioned the plot and/or the pace of the novel as reason for their rating. For example, one student, writing about *Stuck in Neutral*, explained her rating of 8 this way, “It was sad but some was happy. It kept my attention and once I started, I didn’t want to stop. It had a bunch of cliffhangers, especially at the end.” In addition, 14% (N = 187) of students indicated character development as the reason for the rating provided. Said one student, regarding *Rules*, “I liked how Catherine was a normal girl in an abnormal situation. She wasn’t like kids now-a-days walking up and down the hallways cursing like sailors and judging people like it’s going out of style.” Liking the novel’s theme also was cited multiple times (13% (N = 187)) For example, one student wrote, “It [*Small Steps*] was not the genre I like, but it almost made up for that with the great parts in it that leave you with this all in all feel good sense that you can conquer anything if you try hard enough.” Another student simply remarked, “I liked it [*Things Not Seen*] because Bobby got the girl and that’s how it’s supposed to be.”

In looking at the varied responses, it is clear that students did not feel that the disability overwhelmed the storyline, though some students did mention it, weaving the development and/or portrayal of the character with a disability with other aspects of the book. For instance, one student wrote, in regard to *Small Steps*, “I would rate it this (9) because it has many good messages. It tells you not to judge people by what other people have judged them by. You should get to know the person before you judge them because they may be different from what others have classified them as.” Another student, who gave an eight rating for *Al Capone Does My Shirts* wrote:

I thought this book did a good job of explaining what it is like when you just move to a new place. I have done that and my feelings were almost the exact same... This book was a little unusual because it had Natalie in it, who had autism... This book did a great job of showing how it would be like to live in a new place with a special needs sister.

The fact that students responded so positively to the novels helps to eliminate questions of whether or not a dislike of the book contributed to students’ cognitive and conative attitudes as reported on the SAQ and ACL surveys.

### **Prompt 3**

The final prompt was given to all students after they had listened to two short stories about teens with disabilities. Only five students stated that they were unable to relate to any of the characters, a skill that is said to help students comprehend not only the text, but also others and themselves (Rosenblatt, 1938, 1978). Students most often mentioned that they shared the

challenge of having trouble remembering, like the character Courtney in the short story

“Brainiac.” A total of 8% of all responses revolved around this theme. One student explained:

Sometimes if I can't remember anything on a test, I feel really angry at myself for not remembering... It just seems like I can't think correctly or something, but it is just a wall in my mind, and I can get past it, unlike Courtney who does not remember anything she has just learned.

Feeling left out or not fitting in (6.4% of responses), struggling with schoolwork (3.2% of responses) and difficulties communicating and/or showing emotions (3.2% of responses) were the other challenges that emerged most frequently. Overall, students were able to relate their own lives to the lives of the characters with disabilities, and did so without specific prompting.

## Discussion

### Surveys

**SAQ.** T-tests were run in order to confirm that the treatment and control group were similar. Overall, while there were some large standard deviations, they were consistent among both the students who read the books that portray characters with disabilities and those who did not (see Table 1). Therefore, these standard deviations were not seen as a threat to the validity of the test.

In order to determine the relationship between the students' cognitive and conative attitudes as reported on the ACL and SAQ respectively, correlations were run for each area (i.e., recreation, social, and academic) of the SAQ as well as for each time the survey was administered (i.e., pre-reading, post-reading, final survey). There were strong correlations for all areas (see Table 5), indicating that the two instruments (SAQ and ACL) have strong construct

validity. Student comments further corroborated the validity of these instruments in measuring student attitudes.

Research shows that females are more likely to be accepting of their peers, regardless of differences, than males (Kishi & Meyer, 1994; Krajewski & Flaherty, 2000; Rosenbaum, Armstrong, & King, 1988; Safran, 1995). Because of this, correlations and an ANOVA were run for gender. However, though the female students had slightly higher initial attitudes on the SAQ (regarding a student with a disability), it was not statistically significant. Moreover, there were no statistically significant changes in the female nor the male students' attitudes in any of the areas (i.e., social, academic, recreational) upon reading a book that portrayed a character with a disability.

Likewise, while students currently receiving special education services had slightly higher baseline attitudinal scores regarding their intention to interact with peers with disabilities, these differences were not statistically significant. There also was no statistically significant change in either group's attitudes after reading a book that portrays a character with a disability.

The students' attitudes regarding peers with disabilities as reported in the SAQ portion of this study are aligned with those of previous investigations (Bender, 2008; McDougall, DeWit, King, Miller & Killip, 2004; Malian, 2012; Nowicki & Sandieson, 2002; Roberts & Smith, 1999). That is, attitudes were negative across all domains. Students did not distinguish between in-school academic activities, such as studying together, in-school social activities like eating lunch together, or recreational activities, like playing soccer. They showed little intention to interact with students with disabilities regardless of setting or activity. This corroborates other studies that found that while students with disabilities are often fully included in the classroom

on a physical and academic level, socially a large gap remains (Bender, 2008; Bryan, 2005; Dore, Dion, Agner & Brunet, 2002; Friend & Bursuck, 2009; Gresham & MacMillan, 1997; Jorgensen, 1998; Smith, 2004; Smith & Tyler, 2010; Stichter, Conroy, & Kauffman, 2008).

When the means from all three survey administrations were compiled, they clearly indicated that students demonstrated little intention to interact with peers with disabilities regardless of setting (see Table 2). Although attitudes fell into the “probably not” category across settings, they were lowest in the academic area (e.g., willingness to interact with students with a disability in classroom activities such as working on a science project or studying vocabulary words). This contrasts to previous research that states that while students positively interact with peers with disabilities within the school setting, they are much less likely to interact with peers out of school and in social and recreational activities (Fisher, 1999; Dore, Dion, Agner and Brunet, 2002).

More research is needed to determine if how students reported their intentions to interact matches their actual behavior. The low scores from this study, do, however, suggest that even though this school district implements the inclusion model starting with kindergarten, students with disabilities are still not fully accepted in academic, social and recreational settings.

**ACL.** Correspondingly, students’ cognitive attitudes regarding peers with disabilities were overall negative. As the ACL survey reveals stereotypical attitudes that the survey respondents may hold, a look at the most commonly identified adjectives to describe a student with a disability indicate that more knowledge regarding and experiences with people with disabilities is needed in order to combat such negative stereotypes. These negative attitudes are especially obvious when contrasted to the adjectives chosen to describe the students identified as

an athlete or an English language learner. For example, the top five adjectives used to describe the person with a disability (slow, weak, female, friendly, lonely) greatly contrast to the top five adjectives chosen for the athlete (healthy, friendly, male, happy, attractive) and the English language learner (smart, friendly, bright, male, honest). While there were minor fluctuations in the adjectives chosen to describe the students in the survey scenarios, the majority of the descriptors for the student with a disability were negative for all three survey administrations (see Appendix B).

Interestingly, on the ACL, when students were asked to identify the gender of the student described in the survey scenarios, the majority of respondents marked “male” for the students described as an athlete (74.4%), English language learner (56.2%), and overweight (54.6%). However, the majority of respondents (60.9%) identified the individual described as having a disability as female (see Table 4). This could be due to the fact that the students have a female classmate who is in a wheelchair, or, as Saad (2004) hypothesized when she found that students were more likely to identify a character with a chronic illness as female, perhaps it is because females have traditionally been recognized as the weaker sex, and therefore in choosing the gender of a character who has a disability or illness, students first think of females.

### **Positive Impact on Individual Students**

Despite the fact that this study had no statistically significant findings to support the claim that reading young adult literature that portrays people with disabilities can improve student attitudes, there is some evidence to support the potential for literature to impact individual readers. For example, one student wrote in the comment section of the survey, “After

reading some stories about disabled people my eyes have opened up and I have a whole new (sic) perspective of those things.” Another student, who didn’t read a disability novel commented, “The last story (“Brainiac”) affected my answers.”

When the survey data for the students who responded positively to the literature were individually analyzed, it became apparent that these students did report a significant change in attitude upon reading literature that portrays a person with a disability. For example, the student who claimed, “the last story affected my answers,” went from a score of 30 to 55 on “intention to interact recreationally,” and from 14 to 35 for “intention to interact socially” with a student with a disability. Similarly, her total ACL score went from 13 (negative) to 22 (positive).

Another student who made significant changes on both measures, explained the impact the novel made on him:

I would rate the book Stuck in Neutral a nine (9). This book greatly changed my perspective on how I see people with C.P. Shawn, the main character, has C.P. People think that he is mentally retarded, but he is very smart. He can remember almost everything. The main thing though is that I have a much greater respect for anyone with C.P. I used to think that they didn’t understand anything when really I should get to know them first. This book really opened my eyes.

In looking at this student’s survey results, he went from a score of 7 (negative) to a score of 20 (positive) on the ACL, from 23 (Probably not) to 55 (Yes, definitely) on the SAQ intention to interact recreationally, and from 13 (Probably not) to 35 (Yes, definitely) on the SAQ intention to interact socially. It appears that his perspective, indeed, was altered upon reading the novel.

Similarly, a student whose survey results showed minor changes in attitude (SAQ recreation = 27-30, SAQ social = 22-26) shared her thoughts on the novel *Stuck in Neutral* (Trueman, 2000):

“...I am so glad I read the book. I do not know very many disabled people: either mentally or physically. It was extremely interesting to think about what goes on in the mind of someone who had absolutely (sic) no way to express how they are feeling, or what they are thinking...The experience of reading the book really made me more sympathetic to disabled people. I have always felt sorry for them, but before the book I never really thought about what they think of me.

It appears that while for the majority of the students, the books did not statistically impact attitudes, the right piece of literature given to the right individual at the right time does have the potential to enact attitudinal change. It is now important to investigate how teachers can make curricular and pedagogical choices that will raise this impact from a select few to the majority.

### **Pedagogical Implications**

This study showed that many students have negative and often stereotypical opinions of peers who are different from them, and very few students interact with or have intentions to interact with people with disabilities. These attitudes play out both in academic and non-academic settings and can have severe impacts on the over 12% of all students who are currently receiving special education services (United States, 2015). However, this study also provides a place in which to further explore YA literature as a vehicle to impact student attitudes. The students in this study enjoyed the books they read and were able to make text- to- self connections to the characters, regardless of ability. As Bal and Veltkam’s (2013) study shows



that being emotionally involved with the characters in a fictional work is key in impacting empathy, this is a place to start.

Though this study revealed that simply reading and responding in writing to novels that portray characters with disabilities does not significantly impact students' attitudes about people with disabilities, that does not mean that inclusion literature should be left out of the middle school classroom. Conversely, a curriculum that spans content areas and emphasizes valuing the unique differences in all people should be introduced at an early age and be continued and reinforced throughout students' education.

For example, recent studies (Cauglan, Juzwik, Borsheim-Black, Kelly, & Fine, 2013, Malo-Juvera, 2014) show the effectiveness of using reader-response dialogic discussion as an instructional practice to help students unpack their beliefs about challenging topics. Perhaps this pedagogical tool and/or an intentional incorporation of disability studies into the English classroom can help students to evaluate what it means to live as a person with a disability in the world today and to begin to increase their empathy regarding those who are different. Similarly, further research should be done on the possibilities of Restorative English Education (Winn, 2013) "a pedagogy of possibilities that employs literature and writing to seek justice and restore... peace that reaches beyond classroom walls" (p. 127) as a model for helping students accept all of their classmates, regardless of differences.

Moreover, as Cameron and Rutland (2006) found that extended contact with people with disabilities increased young children's attitudes about the disabled, and that literature that portrays characters with disabilities could be used as a form of contact when extended direct contact experiences are unavailable, consistent and frequent opportunities to interact with people

with disabilities, and not just in a “peer tutoring” capacity that may emphasize differences, should be provided to students starting at an early age, whenever available. Finally, including students with disabilities into the conversation regarding pedagogy, curriculum, and learning preferences can yield positive results for both students and teachers (Walters, 2015).

Finding ways to educate and help students value the unique differences in all people is not a new concept; it has been addressed in various aspects of education and society as a whole for the past two thousand years, by great educators and philosophers such as Plato, Aristotle, Freire, and Dewey. Though this study did not yield a simple tool by which to impact a large number of students, the search for such strategies must continue, a fact that is best explained by one of the students surveyed:

Appearance does get people things in life. This is obvious. The pretty people get more attention and are usually more well liked. But the otehr [*sic*] kids are equally as interesting if not more so. Everyone has something worth noticing and unique that should all be recognized.

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## EFFECTS OF READING

## Appendix A

Choldenko, Gennifer. (2004). *Al Capone does my shirts*. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons.

Clements, A. (2002). *Things not seen*. New York: Puffin Books.

Lord, C. (2006). *Rules*. New York: Scholastic.

Rorby, G. (2006). *Hurt go happy*. New York: Tom Doherty Associates.

Sachar, L. (2006). *Small steps*. New York: Random House.

Trueman, T. (2000). *Stuck in neutral*. New York: HarperCollins.

TITLE	AWARDS	DISABILITY PORTRAYED	GENDER OF PROTAGONIST	GENDER OF CHARACTER WITH DISABILITY
<i>Al Capone Does My Shirts</i>	Newbery Honor, Dolly Gray	autism	male	female
<i>Things Not Seen</i>	Schneider Family	blindness, invisibility	male	female, male
<i>Rules</i>	Newbery Honor, Schneider Family, Dolly Gray	autism, physical/ multiple	female	male
<i>Hurt Go Happy</i>	Schneider Family	deafness	female	female
<i>Small Steps</i>	Schneider Family	physical	male	female
<i>Stuck in Neutral</i>	ALA Best Book for Young Adults	physical/ multiple	male	male

## EFFECTS OF READING

## Appendix B

*Participants' responses to the ACL - Survey #1*

	Athlete	Disability	ELL	Overweight
<b>Positive Characteristics</b>				
Friendly	73.0%	57.7%	71.0%	43.7%
Smart	51.2	30.2	65.9	33.5
Nice	58.6	40.9	61.2	29.8
Happy	62.8	23.3	50.0	17.7
Kind	50.2	40.0	62.1	20.9
Healthy	82.8	6.5	36.9	4.7
Honest	35.3	45.1	47.2	29.8
Helpful	42.3	29.3	46.3	25.1
Cheerful	58.1	20.5	43.5	15.3
Bright	41.4	19.1	51.4	14.9
Glad	15.3	12.1	18.7	5.6
Clever	34.0	16.7	36.4	8.8
Neat	21.4	12.6	32.7	5.1
Careful	23.7	19.5	32.7	8.4
Alert	39.1	10.2	35.5	4.2
Attractive	60.9	3.7	17.3	3.7
<b>Negative Characteristics</b>				
Lonely	1.9	52.6	29.9	39.5
Slow	1.4	74.4	12.6	67.0
Lazy	5.6	14.0	5.1	60.0
Unhappy	1.4	31.2	10.3	41.4
Ashamed	0.9	23.7	7.0	40.9
Sad	1.4	34.9	10.7	32.6
Weak	1.9	62.3	5.1	45.1
Ugly	1.9	19.5	7.0	37.7
Careless	17.2	13.0	11.7	28.4
Sloppy	7.4	22.8	3.7	48.4
Dumb	7.9	31.2	11.2	21.4
Stupid	3.7	17.7	7.0	14.0
Foolish	7.0	12.1	6.5	19.1
Selfish	8.8	5.6	5.6	15.8
Greedy	7.4	4.2	7.0	21.9
Dirty	5.6	8.8	8.9	28.8
<b>Perceived Gender</b>				
Male	78.1	38.6	54.7	54.0
Female	33.0	57.7	42.1	36.7
<b>Top 5 Adjectives</b>				
1.	Friendly	Slow	Smart	Slow
2.	Male	Female	Friendly	Lazy
3.	Happy	Weak	Bright	Weak
4.	Smart	Lonely	Honest	Male
5.	Attractive	Friendly	Male	Sloppy

## EFFECTS OF READING

*Participants' responses to the ACL - Survey #2*

	Athlete	Disability	ELL	Overweight
<b>Positive Characteristics</b>				
Friendly	76.1%	62.6%	70.6%	50.8%
Smart	66.5	43.9	67.4	42.2
Nice	65.4	44.9	61.5	36.9
Happy	71.3	31.6	55.6	28.9
Kind	65.4	48.7	61.5	25.1
Healthy	87.8	13.9	51.3	12.3
Honest	50.0	55.1	53.5	39.6
Helpful	60.1	39.0	51.9	35.3
Cheerful	65.4	25.7	44.9	18.7
Bright	58.0	26.7	55.6	23.5
Glad	26.1	13.4	25.1	12.3
Clever	49.5	18.7	38.5	16.0
Neat	36.7	16.6	33.7	11.2
Careful	39.4	28.9	29.4	17.6
Alert	49.5	18.2	35.8	10.2
Attractive	72.9	8.6	28.3	7.5
<b>Negative Characteristics</b>				
Lonely	4.8	54.5	31.0	42.2
Slow	5.9	71.1	20.3	65.8
Lazy	3.7	25.7	10.2	64.7
Unhappy	2.7	40.6	12.3	40.6
Ashamed	2.7	29.9	11.2	42.8
Sad	2.7	42.2	12.8	36.4
Weak	2.1	62.6	9.6	50.8
Ugly	2.1	27.3	11.8	37.4
Careless	19.1	26.7	14.4	39.6
Sloppy	6.9	33.2	12.8	55.1
Dumb	10.1	30.5	14.4	28.3
Stupid	6.9	15.5	11.2	18.2
Foolish	10.6	20.3	14.4	23.0
Selfish	8.0	16.0	9.1	19.8
Greedy	9.0	10.7	12.8	24.6
Dirty	6.9	16.6	13.4	34.8
<b>Perceived Gender</b>				
Male	72.3	41.2	56.7	55.1
Female	41.5	62.0	41.7	42.2
<b>Top 5 Adjectives</b>				
	Athlete	Disability	ELL	Overweight
1.	Healthy	Slow	Friendly	Slow
2.	Friendly	Friendly/Weak	Smart	Lazy
3.	Attractive	Female	Kind/Nice	Male/Sloppy
4.	Male	Honest	Male	Friendly/Weak
5.	Happy	Lonely	Bright/Happy	Ashamed

## EFFECTS OF READING

*Participants' responses to the ACL - Survey #3*

	Athlete	Disability	ELL	Overweight
<b>Positive Characteristics</b>				
Friendly	80.3%	53.1%	66.4%	46.6%
Smart	71.4	40.8	71.1	40.9
Nice	62.0	39.4	54.5	30.8
Happy	72.8	25.4	53.1	30.3
Kind	62.4	40.4	54.0	31.3
Healthy	84.0	16.9	51.2	16.8
Honest	58.2	46.0	59.7	35.1
Helpful	59.2	33.8	55.5	34.1
Cheerful	66.2	29.1	46.4	20.2
Bright	64.3	28.2	58.3	24.5
Glad	33.8	15.5	27.5	18.3
Clever	46.9	18.3	40.8	20.7
Neat	37.1	16.9	36.0	15.9
Careful	36.6	26.8	35.5	19.7
Alert	53.1	22.5	37.4	15.9
Attractive	71.4	9.9	28.4	12.0
<b>Negative Characteristics</b>				
Lonely	7.50%	61%	31.8%	44.7%
Slow	7.0	70.4	19.9	67.3
Lazy	5.6	31.5	16.6	59.6
Unhappy	6.6	33.9	16.1	44.2
Ashamed	4.7	36.2	14.7	44.2
Sad	4.7	42.3	13.7	39.4
Weak	4.7	61.5	12.8	55.3
Ugly	5.2	34.7	14.7	38.0
Careless	24.4	31.0	18.0	39.9
Sloppy	9.9	38.0	13.7	51.4
Dumb	15.0	34.3	18.0	38.0
Stupid	10.8	20.7	13.3	26.9
Foolish	12.2	22.1	16.1	31.7
Selfish	13.1	25.4	10.9	31.3
Greedy	10.3	20.7	14.7	37.5
Dirty	6.6	20.7	15.6	40.9
<b>Perceived Gender</b>				
Male	72.8	44.1	57.3	54.8
Female	40.8	62.9	45.5	43.8
<b>Top 5 Adjectives</b>				
1.	Friendly	Slow	Smart	Slow
2.	Male	Female	Friendly	Lazy
3.	Happy	Weak	Bright	Weak
4.	Smart	Lonely	Honest	Male
5.	Attractive	Friendly	Male	Sloppy



Appendix C

Writing Prompts

PROMPT 1:

Choose one of the following to answer:

A. If you could be friends with a character in your book, who would you choose? Why? What might you do together?

OR

B. Choose a character in your book. In what ways is this character like you? In what ways is the character's life different from yours?

PROMPT 2: On a scale of 1-10 (1 = This is the worst book I have ever read in my life; 10 = This is the best book I have ever read in my life), what would you rate this book, and why?

PROMPT 3:

Everyone has challenges. What were some of the challenges for the characters in the short stories and novels you read? In what ways are these challenges similar and different from your own challenges?

## EFFECTS OF READING

Table 1  
*T-tests*

	N	M	SD	t	df	p
AC time 1				1.24	195	0.22
Disability Novel	99	19.08	5.73			
Other Novel	98	20.04	5.15			
SAQ Recreational time 1				0.58	184	0.56
Disability Novel	89	24.97	9.68			
Other Novel	97	25.81	10.23			
SAQ Social time 1				0.54	192	0.59
Disability Novel	98	18.68	7.12			
Other Novel	96	19.26	7.79			
SAQ Academic time 1				-0.73	174	0.47
Disability Novel	88	19.16	8.07			
Other Novel	88	18.22	9.00			

## EFFECTS OF READING

Table 2  
Means and Standard Deviations for SAQ

	Pre reading			Post reading			Final		
	N	M <sup>a</sup>	SD	N	M <sup>a</sup>	SD	N	M <sup>a</sup>	SD
<b>Recreation</b>									
Disability Novel	90	24.33	10.21	83	25.59	11.15	84	24.88	11.40
Other Novel	97	25.65	10.41	87	24.74	10.75	90	24.72	12.74
Male (DN)	25	23.44	12.33	25	24.96	13.63	25	23.12	13.02
Male (ON)	38	24.13	9.87	38	22.74	9.88	38	21.50	9.93
Female (DN)	33	25.00	8.40	33	26.06	9.03	33	26.21	10.00
Female (ON)	34	27.35	10.88	34	26.97	11.34	34	28.32	14.62
IEP	27	27.94	12.51	20	27.59	11.72	21	27.65	13.31
No IEP	159	24.63	9.92	149	24.74	10.77	153	24.36	11.93
<b>Social</b>									
Disability Novel	98	18.83	7.31	85	19.58	8.5	88	18.52	8.35
Other Novel	96	19.60	8.07	91	18.6	8.15	88	18.14	9.13
Male (DN)	30	17.07	7.45	30	16.33	8.89	30	16.37	9.22
Male (ON)	39	18.54	7.38	39	16.97	7.22	39	16.18	8.37
Female (DN)	35	20.34	6.94	35	22.37	7.17	35	20.37	7.15
Female (ON)	34	20.82	8.74	34	20.47	8.84	34	20.38	9.56
IEP	18	19.39	9.27	18	19.39	8.85	18	19.56	10.36
No IEP	120	19.22	7.49	120	19.02	8.25	120	18.13	8.51
<b>Academic</b>									
Disability Novel	88	16.63	6.84	84	17.32	7.13	88	16.29	7.90
Other Novel	88	17.61	6.73	94	16.45	6.58	90	16.29	7.69
Male (DN)	32	17.44	8.99	32	15.34	8.31	32	15.16	8.91
Male (ON)	41	16.54	8.33	41	15.07	6.11	41	14.54	6.98
Female (DN)	38	20.76	7.91	38	19.61	6.21	38	18.11	7.13
Female (ON)	38	20.84	9.57	38	17.79	7.14	38	18.24	8.46
IEP	20	17.20	7.91	20	16.10	6.53	20	16.00	8.03
No IEP	122	17.18	6.60	122	16.95	6.88	122	16.34	7.74

Note. DN = Disability Novel. ON = Other Novel

<sup>a</sup>Recreation: 0-11 = No, definitely not; 12-22 = Probably not; 23-33 = Maybe; 34-44 = Probably; 45-55 = Yes, definitely

<sup>a</sup>Social: 0-7 = No, definitely not; 8-14 = Probably not; 15-21 = Maybe; 22-28 = Probably; 29-35 = Yes, definitely

<sup>a</sup>Academic: 0-7 = No, definitely not; 8-14 = Probably not; 15-21 = Maybe; 22-28 = Probably; 29-35 = Yes, definitely

## EFFECTS OF READING

Table 3  
*Means and Standard Deviations for ACL*

	Pre reading			Post reading			Final		
	N	M <sup>a</sup>	SD	N	M <sup>a</sup>	SD	N	M <sup>a</sup>	SD
Disability Novel	81	20.2	5.4	81	19.4	5.8	81	18.0	6.6
Other Novel	81	19.1	6.0	81	19.2	6.0	81	18.6	6.4
Male (DN)	44	20.0	5.2	44	18.4	5.1	44	17.2	6.3
Male (ON)	39	18.9	5.8	39	19.0	7.0	39	18.8	7.1
Female (DN)	39	20.5	5.7	37	20.6	6.4	37	19.1	6.8
Female (ON)	42	19.3	6.2	42	19.4	5.1	42	18.5	5.8
IEP	23	21.0	5.4	23	19.6	5.3	23	18.0	7.3
No IEP	139	19.4	5.7	139	19.3	6.0	139	18.4	6.4

*Note.* DN = Disability Novel. ON = Other Novel

<sup>a</sup>Score range = 4-36;  $\leq 20$  = positive attitude

## EFFECTS OF READING

Table 4  
*Participants' responses to the ACL: Averages of all 3 Surveys*

	Athlete	Disability	ELL	Overweight
<b>Positive Characteristics</b>				
Friendly	76.5%	57.8%	69.3%	47.0%
Smart	63.0	38.3	68.1	38.9
Nice	62.0	41.7	59.1	32.5
Happy	69.0	26.8	52.9	25.6
Kind	59.3	43.0	59.2	25.8
Healthy	84.9	12.4	46.5	11.3
Honest	47.8	48.7	53.5	34.8
Helpful	53.9	34.0	51.2	31.5
Cheerful	63.2	25.1	44.9	18.1
Bright	54.6	24.7	55.1	21.0
Glad	25.1	13.7	23.8	12.1
Clever	43.5	17.9	38.6	15.2
Neat	31.7	15.4	34.1	10.7
Careful	33.2	25.1	32.5	15.2
Alert	47.2	17.0	36.2	10.1
Attractive	68.4	7.4	24.7	7.7
<b>Negative Characteristics</b>				
Lonely	4.7	56.0	30.9	42.1
Slow	4.8	72.0	17.6	66.7
Lazy	5.0	23.7	10.6	61.4
Unhappy	3.6	35.2	12.9	42.1
Ashamed	2.8	29.9	11.0	42.6
Sad	2.9	39.8	12.4	36.1
Weak	2.9	62.1	9.2	50.4
Ugly	3.1	27.2	11.2	37.7
Careless	20.2	23.6	14.7	36.0
Sloppy	8.1	31.3	10.1	51.6
Dumb	11.0	32.0	14.5	29.2
Stupid	7.1	18.0	10.5	19.7
Foolish	9.9	18.2	12.3	24.6
Selfish	10.0	15.7	8.5	23.3
Greedy	8.9	11.9	11.5	28.0
Dirty	6.4	15.4	12.6	34.8
<b>Perceived Gender</b>				
Male	74.4	41.3	56.2	54.6
Female	38.4	60.9	43.1	40.9
<b>Top 5 Adjectives</b>				
	Athlete	Disability	ELL	Overweight
1.	Healthy	Slow	Smart	Slow
2.	Friendly	Weak	Friendly	Lazy
3.	Male	Female	Bright	Weak
4.	Happy	Friendly	Male	Male
5.	Attractive	Lonely	Honest	Sloppy

Table 5

*Summary of Correlations for the ACL and SAQ (recreational, social, academic)*

Measure	pre-survey	post-survey	final-survey
SAQ/ACL (recreational)	.571**	.502**	.552**
SAQ/ACL (social)	.575**	.578**	.584**
SAQ/ACL (academic)	.379**	.534**	.578**

*Note.* \*\* $p > .01$

Table 6  
*Analysis of Variance for SAQ*

Source	<i>df</i>	F	$\eta$	p
Between subjects				
Recreation	1.0	0.003	0.000	0.95
Social	8.0	0.773	0.046	0.63
Academic	7.0	0.341	0.017	0.93
Within subjects				
Recreation	1.9	1.410	0.001	0.85
Social	15.3	0.594	0.036	0.88
Academic	12.3	0.733	0.002	0.73

## EFFECTS OF READING

Table 7  
*Analysis of Variance for ACL*

Source	<i>df</i>	F	$\eta$	p
Between subjects				
ACL	1.0	0.08	0.000	0.780
Within subjects				
ACL	1.8	2.44	0.015	0.094



## EFFECTS OF READING

Table 8  
*Book Averages*

Book Title	Range	Mean	Median	Mode
<i>Al Capone Does My Shirts</i>	3.5 – 8.0	6.21	6	8, 6
<i>Things Not Seen</i>	4.0 – 9.0	7.04	7	8
<i>Rules</i>	5.0 – 8.0	7.0	7	8
<i>Hurt Go Happy</i>	5.0 – 10.0	7.63	8	7
<i>Small Steps</i>	2.0 – 10.0	7.4	8	8
<i>Stuck in Neutral</i>	6.0 – 10.0	7.53	7	7