

# LITERARY WORKS INCLUDING CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

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**Abstract** Owing to their inclusion in the education system, teachers often encounter students with special needs during their work. When working with these students, the teacher's level of empathy is extremely important, however it is difficult to achieve if they are not familiar with how these students think and feel. One way of becoming acquainted with individuals with special needs is by becoming familiar with their thinking patterns, especially their emotional responses. The paper presents literary sources related to the topic, wherein the sources are evaluated, and the selected works are analysed. Besides the method of analysis (protagonists, supporting characters, literary space, literary time, subject, theme, motifs, narrator, structure, and plot), the descriptive method for presenting theoretical starting points and the method of synthesis in the conclusion are also used.

**Keywords:**

young adult  
literature,  
literary characters  
with special needs,  
understanding  
special needs,  
empathy,  
inclusive  
relationships

## 1 Introduction

This paper presents a few selected works of realistic young adult fiction. These cover the themes of various special needs in their literary characters. Adolescents as literary characters with special needs or literary characters close to them that act as narrators piques the interest of readers partly in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and particularly in the 3<sup>rd</sup> educational period of primary school (hereinafter referred to as: EP), and those in their early years of secondary education, which are the general focus groups of young adult literature. The selection of texts considers the quality of the texts at the cognitive, ethical and aesthetic level (Kos, 2001, p. 35), and at the same time draws attention to the emotional states and reactions of literary characters with special needs in various situations. The authors deliberately avoided texts belonging to children's literature, where the main literary characters are animals that represent one of the groups of special needs, e.g., Svetlana Makarovič's *A Special Kind of Squirrel* (1994) that is very optimistically oriented, as Čopko compensates for his motor disability by acquiring new knowledge; the cognitive deficit of Pooh Bear in A. A. Milne's collection of short stories of the same name (*Winnie the Pooh*, 1926), where he is affectionately described in several places as the "dumb old bear"; the visual impairment in Peter Svetina's *Little Walrus' New Glasses* (2003); or stuttering in the picture book by Mateja Gačnik and Lidija Križnar, *About Beaky that Overcame Fear and Saved His Friends* (2014), and the stuttering of the rooster Kokojevič in the fantasy story *Hanny Rattie* (2010) by Suzana Tratnik.

Texts that can help in the understanding of a certain special need can be useful for two groups of readers: teachers (and future teachers) and young readers. By raising awareness and consequently understanding the special needs of students with special needs or their classmates, the class community or the school, i.e., students and teachers, can develop sensitivity and empathy. In fact, through high-quality literary texts, containing literary characters with various disabilities, teachers and young readers can familiarise themselves with various emotional states. The theory and practice of inclusive pedagogy is based on the teacher's willingness to learn about the individual's needs and their positive attitude towards the student with special needs (Opara, 2003; Kovač, Ščuka in Čagran, 2017). Therefore, the teacher's attitude towards students with special needs and towards inclusion itself are important, and the teacher should be able to identify individuals with special needs in development and learning, and to master various approaches, methods, techniques, and strategies for working with children with special needs (Opara, 2012). However, a survey of

Slovenian primary school headmasters (96 headmasters and headmistresses took part) conducted by Kovač, Ščuka and Čagran (2017), showed that they believed that they lacked knowledge on special needs, however they supported pedagogical workers in their work. “Among the conditions related to those working with students with special needs, headmasters rate the highest the work of a mobile pedagogue at school, and the lowest the appropriate qualification of teachers that work with students with special needs.” (Kovač et al., 2017, p. 27).

Many authors find that literary texts are a good way of becoming acquainted with special needs in school. In her study, Adomat (2014) looked at how children build positive understandings of disability from children’s literature, but also how societal attitudes, beliefs, and stereotypes might play into their interpretations of the literature. Through guided reading and discussions about what they read, both teachers and students gained insights that are key to accepting people with special needs and living side by side with them; they developed empathy for diversity and changed their view of their classmates or students. At the same time, students with special needs also identified with the literary characters and thus developed a more positive self-image. “This study shows that classrooms could be democratic places where children explore, through children’s literature and the guidance of their teachers, real questions of disability” (Adomat, 2014). It is therefore important that in literary works special needs are presented realistically, in accordance with the actual functioning of persons with a particular disorder, and not based on stereotypes (Miller, 2012). Children (as well as adults) often have misconceptions (stereotypical) about people with special needs, and it is this kind of literature that can influence the formation of proper conceptions, better understanding, tolerance and empathy through thoughtfully and realistically presented literary characters and their way of thinking (Ostrosky et al. 2015). “Teachers who are preparing for inclusive classrooms could use children’s literature to help themselves and their students in developing empathy, acceptance, and understanding for individual differences. This is a way to share examples of how we all may or may not relate to individual differences. This can be especially true for understanding how disabilities impact the lives of individuals and their families and friends” (Kurtts & Gavigan, 2008, p. 23).

To identify the special needs in this paper, the *Criteria for defining the type and level of deficiencies, impairments or disorders of children with special needs* handbook (ed. Vovk-Ornik, 2015) was used, which lists nine special needs groups: mental disability, blindness

and low vision, deafness and hearing impairment, speech and language disorders (hereinafter referred to as: SLD), motor disability, long-term illness, children with deficits in individual areas of learning, emotional and behavioural disorders, and autism.

## 2 Method

The paper defines types of disorders in different groups of children with special needs. In addition, it defines literary works wherein the general theme is a special need. Based on argumentation for each special need, literary texts with a literary character with special needs were sought and compared the description of the special need with the description in the literary work. In searching through the Cobiss library system using the keywords “special needs” and “youth literature”, the authors obtained 514 results. Firstly, non-Slovene texts were excluded, then those unsuitable for 7th- to 9th- graders and finally texts without human characters. The remaining 37 literary texts were analysed in terms of the ethical, aesthetic and cognitive aspect of literary phenomenology. The texts with the highest quality are presented in the paper. Special attention was paid to the thematology, wherein the chosen high-quality texts include all nine special needs as established in education law (*Criteria for defining the type and level of deficiencies, impairments or disorders of children with special needs*, 2015).

After having selected quality texts that include the desired theme, the following methods were used to present the special need through the literary text:

- an analytical method for analysing individual literary works;
- a comparative method for comparing the characterisation of literary characters and their emotional states and behaviours with a description of the special need; and
- a comparative method for comparing literary characters with different special needs.

The basic premise was that through reading the young adult literary works, adults and children can recognise a special need, understand it better, and thus develop sensitivity for people with special needs.

In the study, two research questions were posed:

- Which special needs are described in quality young adult texts?
- How are the literary characters with special needs characterised?

The selection of texts is limited to those literary works whose main characters are children and adolescents, and the works belonging to young adult literature in terms of motif and theme (3rd educational period of primary school).

### 3 Results

#### Literary Works on Children or Adolescents with Special Needs

**3.1 Mental Disability** (Marinč et al., 2015, p. 6): “is a neurologically conditioned developmental disorder that occurs before the age of eighteen and is manifested in significantly lower intellectual abilities and significant deviations in adaptive skills.” A first-person narrator is characteristic of literary works about children with intellectual disabilities, and this is usually a family member or someone to whom the mentally disabled person is attached. The following are two quality examples: *My Nina* (2004) by Janja Vidmar and the novel *Whale on the Beach* (2015) by Vinko Möderndorfer. The first-person narrators are Nina’s younger brother and Igor’s older sister.

*My Nina* is a story of a girl with Down syndrome who is called a *downsy* owing to her illness (the nickname is always used affectionately). Tim, her younger brother, admires his sister, plays with her, loves her immensely, but when one day he finds out that he is developing faster than her and that he already understands many things that Nina never will, he also becomes protective towards her. Tim, who finds living with someone with Down syndrome normal, and who can see no problem with it, begins (when he has to write an essay about his family) to learn from other people’s perspectives the derogatory attitude of others towards everything that is different, including people with disabilities. At first, he does not understand it, and then it starts to anger him. He fights for his sister and tries to accommodate her needs. His biggest expression of his love towards Nina is when they go to the train station because Nina loves trains. In her narrative, Janja Vidmar creates a mirror that reflects the impatience of modern society towards people with disabilities who do not exhibit enough speed, capability, greed, rudeness, beauty, or insidiousness.

*Whale on the Beach* is a novel that describes the life of a family with a child with Down syndrome. At the forefront is the hardship of the first-person narrator Nika, who is ashamed of her brother Igor and seemingly denies his existence. She never mentions him to her classmates, and she skilfully eludes situations that could uncover her secret. At school, Nika is very popular and successful, and at times even too mature for her age. She takes part in many activities and is above average in all of them, which, in a way, is just an escape from her domestic reality. When her secret is revealed, she begins to get to know her brother's positive qualities. She ultimately accepts him and grows to love him, which has a positive effect on the entire family. Igor is also enthusiastically received by her classmates, and only then does Nika start to feel truly accepted and welcomed. Her previous above-average performance was only a sign of her distress and her perception that because of her parents she has to be "smart enough for two".

**3.2 Blindness and Low Vision** are defined by one's remaining vision, namely "the limit between them is set at 95% loss of visual acuity or a narrowed visible field around the fixation point to less than 10 degrees, regardless of visual acuity" (Zveza društev slepih in slabovidnih Slovenije, n. d.).

Most literary works for children and young adults on the topic of blindness and low vision in Slovenia were published by Aksinja Kermauner. They include *Darkness is not Black Coat* (2001), and *Berenice's Hair* (2006) and its sequel *Orion's Sword* (2008). In these realistic novels, the main literary character is the student Anina, who faces problems in a new environment (e.g., a new school, a new room layout, a new route home) because of albinism, since she experiences problems caused by vision impairment. Through conversations with her dead grandmother, Anina reveals her bitter realisations (Kermauner 2006, p. 118): "Granny, am I so different if I have a different colour of complexion and hair? And if my sight is poor? What does it even mean to be different? To stand out from the average?" In several places in both novels, through Anina's narrative, the author unobtrusively discusses blindness, to which the characters with fully functional senses fail to respond in a satisfactory manner. Throughout Anina's story, her feelings are depicted using colours, as Anina uses a colour scale to portray moods and actions, pitch and melody of the voice, and thus uses it to interpret her or the other person's speaking position. Anina says (Kermauner, 2008, p. 70): "Thank goodness those with good sight are completely blind to such obvious colours of voice, such as the colour of my lies. Only orange, a shiny orange?/... /The voices can also be: unpleasant, tensely orange; lies turn

from orange to a blindingly red; they can be gently purple; solid, bright red, guiding; interesting, slightly dimmed like the yellowish light of a candle; friendly and content as forget-me-nots with a hint of white; the voice can be full of crimson-red pride; a mixture of crystal blue excitement and astonishment; it can be greyish-black with furious red streaks. Occasionally, the author also compares voices to material reality: spiky icicles, cooled to absolute zero, filling someone's voice; a voice can also be painfully sharp.

**3.3 Deafness and Hearing** are defined by the extent of one's remaining hearing. "According to the World Health Organization (WHO) classification, deafness is one of the most severe disabilities. A deaf person is defined by hearing loss at frequencies of 500, 1000 and 2000Hz on average at the level of 91dB or more. Due to hearing impairment, people who are deaf and hard of hearing have great difficulties in communicating and integrating into the environment in which they live, study, create, work or spend their free time, which can result in various forms of social exclusion" (Zveza društev gluhih in naglušnih Slovenije, n. d.). Large individual differences can exist between deaf persons. Their functioning is influenced by several factors: type and degree of hearing loss, time of onset, appropriate and early treatment or rehabilitation, and cognitive, personality and other characteristics (Battelino et al., 2015, p. 11).

Some of the issues faced by deaf adolescents are presented by Aksinja Kermauner in her stories depicting the deaf main character David in *David: Mission Possible* (2019) and *David: Mission Beethoven* (2020). They are short stories about a deaf boy, David, that include elements of fantasy and they are also accompanied with a translation into Slovenian Sign Language (SZJ). Below the illustrations of the gestures, a literal translation of the gesture is noted, which follows the characteristics of the Slovenian Sign Language (without declinations, etc.). In this way, readers with no hearing impairment can become acquainted with the first language of the deaf. Each page is also equipped with a QR code, with which one can view the open text of that page with a video application. Such types of texts are a very good method of familiarising the general public with the peculiarities of Slovenian Sign Language, which is the first language of the deaf.

David is a well-adjusted deaf teenager, a child of hearing parents. He communicates in Slovenian Sign Language and partially by lip reading. He finds it difficult when he has to communicate in a hearing social environment that is unaware of his

impairment and is not familiar with Slovenian Sign Language. In the first story, *David: Mission Possible*, reality is intertwined with motifs of science fiction. Throughout the story of meeting Zmeljan (a creature from the parallel planet of Zmelj), who communicates in sign language alone, the reader faces the distress experienced by the deaf, as only a handful of people understand them. The creature comes to warn Earthlings of imminent danger. With the help of David and his understanding parents, who know sign language, the Earth avoids destruction. The second book, *David: Mission Beethoven*, is set in 2020, which was marked by a pandemic, while also being dedicated to the composer Ludwig van Beethoven. David, like all schoolchildren, finds himself facing the challenge of distance learning, which does not pose any major problems for him, as he is very computer-savvy. A bigger problem for him are masks that make it impossible for him to read lips. To his great delight, he has a computer game about Beethoven that they have to play as an assignment in art class. He gets to know the deaf composer and his music through visualization and vibration. In this way, he is introduced into the world of music, which until then had been inaccessible to him.

**3.4 Speech and Language Disorders** (hereinafter referred to as: SLD) affect “the ability to acquire, understand, express and/or make meaningful use of speech, language and communication. Deviations in these areas have a significant impact on the child's daily communication and learning” (Skamlič et al., 2015, p. 15).

According to incidence, experts distinguish between mild, moderate, severe and very severe SLD. These disorders often occur in conjunction with other disorders, e.g., with intellectual disabilities. The speech of a child with severe SLD in connection with a mental development disorder is well illustrated through the character of Nika's brother Igor in Vinko Möderndorfer's *Whale on the Beach* (2015). Igor speaks in incomplete sentences, he repeats words, and the sounds he makes are described as “a speaking with a burr that is supposed to mimic words” (Möderndorfer, 2015, p. 69). In the same novel, there is also a character named Barbka, who could be recognised as a girl with selective mutism, as she never speaks. She communicates with her classmates and teachers via text messages. Although selective mutism is not directly related to SLD, it is difficult to categorise because of its many different causes, therefore the authors chose to include it here.

The suffering of a child who is ostracised by her peers because of a speech disorder (stuttering) is presented in Beta Akerman's Isabella: *The Story of the Princess Who*



***Stuttered*** (2010). For her birthday, Isabella wished everyone stuttered, so that they could see the challenges she has to deal with in her situation. Her wish was granted, and at the end of the festivities, she wrote down rules for everyone to follow: “if you hear someone stuttering, do not make fun of them because they will be sad. Instead listen to them, do not drive them away just because they stutter, do not interrupt them, do not try to guess the words they are trying to say because you do not know what they want to say, if you scold them to stop stuttering, it will not get any better, they will still stutter. It is a game for everyone, therefore everyone can join in” (Akerman, 2010, p. 13).

**3.5. Motor Disability** is defined as (Logar et al., 2015, p. 19): “Children with motor disability or children with reduced mobility have congenital or acquired defects of the locomotor system, central or peripheral nervous system. As a result, they have difficulty engaging and taking part in activities. According to their mobility impairment, we distinguish between children with mild, moderate, severe and very severe motor disability.”

This disability is the main theme in Janja Vidmar’s novel ***Shooters*** (2009). It is a distinctly two-part novel, consisting of the inner life of the main literary character, seventeen-year-old Torki, and his real life. The inner life is actually Torkar’s hallucination, a parallel world that he creates in complete isolation, wherein he can do anything. The real-life events are set in the Soča training centre and later at his home, and only there does a retrospective story about the teenager’s car accident that resulted in his disability begin to reveal itself. Torki needs to re-establish his own value system, experience his surroundings, accept himself as a paraplegic, and find the meaning of existence. The book is written using slang, and its title is the nickname used for boys in wheelchairs who play basketball. Vulgarity is associated with Torki’s sexual fantasies that are his escape, and in some parts, it is also expressed in his dislike for the outside world or his withdrawal from everyone and everything. The end of the novel shows at least a little optimism, although Torki’s life is very limited due to his disability.

In the novel by David Hill, ***See Ya, Simon***, Simon is wheelchair-bound because of muscular dystrophy, while the emotional and social relationships between peers, parents and teachers intertwine around him. Despite knowing his life is going to end soon, Simon is a confident and witty teenager who radiates optimism and joy, although he often experiences a crushing feeling in his chest because he is aware of

the finality of his life: he will never go on a real date and kiss a girl, he will never go to prom, etc. The first-person narrator is Simon's best friend Nathan, and Simon's world, marked by illness and death, is depicted through his eyes. Nathan finishes the novel on an optimistic note: "My life goes on without Simon, but with all sorts of memories of him. He was bad tempered and funny. He was fierce-tongued and brave. He was my friend. I'm proud I knew him, and I'll never forget him. See ya, Simon!" (Hill, 1994, p. 153)

**3.6 Long-Term Disease** is the main theme of the novels *Wonder* (2014<sup>1</sup>) by J. R. Palacio, *See Ya, Simon* (1st edition 1992<sup>2</sup>) by David Hill (described in the Motor disability section), and *The Fault in Our Stars* (2012) by John Green. According to the *Criteria for defining the type and level of deficiencies, impairments or disorders in children with special needs*, the group of children with long-term diseases includes those "whose disease does not resolve in at least three months. A long-term disease may be in remission for a certain period of time, but it can flare up again (until the child's condition worsens again)" (Zavrl et al., 2015, p. 21).

In his novel *The Fault in Our Stars*, John Green brings up the topic of long-term disease, as Hazel and Gus are teenagers with cancer. Their world is limited to hospitals; therefore, they wish to bring at least a little normality into their relationship. They experience it on their trip to Amsterdam, where they are only two teenagers in love. Although it constantly seems that Gus is cured and Hazel is permanently on her deathbed, it is Gus who dies in the end. The novel depicts many reflections on passing and death; each of the young people who meet has an (incurable) disease. At the beginning of the novel, Hazel mentions that whenever she reads anything about cancer, the side effects always include depression (Green, 2012, p. 3): "But, in fact, depression is not a side effect of cancer. Depression is a side effect of dying. (Cancer is also a side effect of dying. Almost everything is, really.)" The subtle reflections on the disease sometimes include hints of irony, e.g., the cancer only wishes to survive, or shock when e.g., Hazel begins to count the days after Gus' death (the eleventh day after A. W., Gus's full name is Augustus Waters), or when she talks to him in her mind and utters that she loves him using the present tense.

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<sup>1</sup> Translated in Slovene in 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Translated in Slovene in 2003.

*Wonder* is a novel about social and family relations that encourages empathy, or, as principal Tushman says in his end-of-the-year speech, the effort to be a bit nicer than is necessary (Haramija, 2020). The main character is ten-year-old August Pullman. Everyone calls him Auggie. He is a very intelligent boy who loves natural sciences and space, and he is a big fan of George Lucas' *Star Wars*. This iconic series of films is referred to throughout the novel, establishing an intermedial relation between the novel and the films (especially with the fifth part of the series, *The Empire Strikes Back*). At the beginning of the novel, he explains his appearance as: "I won't describe what I look like. Whatever you're thinking, it's probably worse" (Palacio 2014, p. 3). In *Wonder*, Auggie's teacher Mr. Browne presents a monthly precept, the first (in September) is the thought by Wayne W. Dyer about the choice between "right" and "kind". August Pullman is presented at a crucial time in his life, when he first enters regular schooling, which isn't easy. Despite being a very gifted child, he (mostly) isn't well-accepted among his peers because of his appearance. On the contrary, most of his schoolmates participate in a game called *the plague*. The meanest of all his schoolmates is Julian, though he loses all his friends by the end of the narrative (and transfers to another school). The bullying is mostly verbal (Julian's comments on August's looks, nasty messages that he writes to August and Jack), but it also includes rejection and ignoring (the boys' war). Twice, physical violence erupts: when Jack hits Julian for calling August a freak, and at nature camp, when the older boys attack August and Jack but are stopped by August's schoolmates. This last fight is the key event after which August is accepted as an equal: "When I went back to school the next day, the first thing I noticed was that there was a big shift in the way things were. A monumental shift. A seismic shift. Maybe even a cosmic shift" (Palacio, 2014, p. 282). This refers to the acceptance of August into the school environment.

**3.7 Emotional and Behavioural Disorders** are defined according to the *Criteria for defining the type and level of deficiencies, impairments or disorders of children with special needs* (2015) as a spectrum of disorders that typically occur together with other disorders. These types of disorders are perfectly described in the literary work *Angie* (2007) by Janja Vidmar. It is a socio-psychological novel about a teenager with special needs who suffers from obsessive-compulsive disorder, agoraphobia, panic attacks and speech disorders; the author notes that: "No one understands that patients who suffer from mental illness are not integrated into the matrix scheme." (Vidmar, 2007, p. 182). Angie is always betrayed by her brilliant mind, when the patterns of life are not repetitive, known, or common, and this occurs quite often: "Then she went to

the kitchen full of determination. But at the doorstep, she ran out of steps. This keeps happening to her. She puts double the energy into everything she does to get at least as much shit done as others can do in their sleep.” The author depicts the moods and inner conflicts the main character faces with conscious shifts in language from literary Slovenian to the use of vulgar terms. In fact, only a fraction of the events is focused on the external visual aspect of Angie’s life, which is shown as an internal landscape, while all the fears and hardships arise from the disease.

**3.8 Autism** “is a developmental disorder with the largest deficit in the fields of social communication and interaction and with a pronounced stereotypical nature/inflexibility in the fields of activities and interests” (*Zveza za avtizem Slovenije*, n. d.). The way a person with autism functions is very clearly depicted in the novel by Mark Haddon, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (2004<sup>3</sup>), and the novel by Siobhan Dowd, *The London Eye Mystery* (2016). Both novels are first-person narratives about boys with Asperger’s syndrome. This is a form of autism in which a person functions relatively well in terms of language and cognitive skills. The common characteristics of the main characters can be observed in both novels. Both are enthusiastic about scientific theories, space, and mathematics. They both have a distinct sense for details, they always speak the truth because for both the concept of lying is foreign. In *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, the first-person narrator, fifteen-year-old Christopher, writes the following (Haddon, 2004, p. 25): “This is another reason why I don’t like proper novels, because they are lies about things which didn’t happen and they make me feel shaky and scared. And this is why everything I have written here is true.” The novel is conceived as a book written by the character himself. He uses it to meticulously record all the events following him seeing a murdered dog in the neighbour’s garden. While searching for the dog’s murderer, he uncovers many family secrets, while accurately describing his own experiences and functioning in various situations that he also illustrates with drawings and charts depicting his mental functions. Throughout the unfolding of the events, the family dynamics are revealed, which result from Christopher’s disorder and lead to his parents’ divorce.

*The London Eye Mystery* centres around the first-person narrator Ted, a twelve-year-old boy with autism. It is a suspenseful detective story about the disappearance of Ted’s cousin Salim, and the story has a happy ending due to the boy’s unusual

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<sup>3</sup> Translated in Slovene in 2006.

abilities. The first-person narrative very clearly mimics the streams of thought of a child with highly functional autism. It is a form of autistic disorder where the individual's intellectual abilities are above average, while his social functioning is impaired or limited. When external events are described, the author uses short and very concise sentences. The descriptions are accurate and contain great attention to detail, which such children notice but which usually elude the typical observer. The entire story is built on Ted's "unusual" abilities. The emotional states or hardships experienced by Ted are also very well portrayed. In such situations, the narrative is entangled in a mesh of feelings and thoughts that directly follow each other. The events take place in the centre of modern-day London, where Ted lives with his parents and sister Kat. Ted's Aunt Gloria and her son Salim from Manchester visit Ted's family in London. For Ted, any change in routine is stressful. He is aware of his peculiar character features, and he is familiar with the syndrome he suffers from and knows how to partially correct his behaviour using the thought processes he has learned. Any such correction of behaviour requires considerable mental effort from him, therefore in certain situations he loses his composure; for example, when he realised that he was lost, his hand waved uncontrollably, but he did not even try to steady it (Dowd, 2016, p. 56).

#### 4 Discussion

Themes relating to literary characters with special needs touch upon individual issues that are also social problems or even taboos. At the principal level, the society at large acts inclusively towards deficiencies, impairment or disorders of persons (children) with special needs; but on an individual level, while social exclusion is by no means acceptable, it is more comfortable for all to keep it hidden.

In novels belonging to young adult literature, all the listed deficiencies, impairments, and disorders (*Table 1*) appear as a topic, apart from deficits in individual areas of learning. This group includes children "with a more severe form of specific learning difficulties, who due to known or unknown disorders or differences in the functioning of the central nervous system and despite average or above average intellectual abilities exhibit pronounced issues with reading, writing, spelling and/or arithmetic" (Magajna et al., 2015, p. 23). In the analysis of literary works, it has been shown that such disorders in literary characters are related to other deficiencies, but in young adult literature, they are not discussed as a standalone disorder. There is a decline in learning success caused by a deteriorating family situation or social

relations, addiction, unrequited love or illness. The side literary characters have proven to be mostly tolerant to impairments or special needs, but almost all the novels feature characters that act impatiently and exclude the child with disabilities, as well as characters who possess a lot of empathy and tolerance.

**Table 1: The deficiencies, impairments, or disorders of children with special needs in selected literary works**

The deficiencies, impairments, or disorders of children with special needs	Selected literary works with themes related to the deficiencies, impairments, or disorders of children with special needs	Positive responses of the environment	Pronounced negative responses of the environment
Mental disabilities	Möderndorfer, <i>Whale on the Beach</i>	Nika’s classmates.	First Nika, who later changes her attitude towards her brother.
	Vidmar, <i>My Nina</i>	Nina’s brother Tim.	Some participants in games in the Primary School with an adapted school curriculum.
Blindness and low vision	Kermauner, <i>Berenice’s Hair</i> and <i>Orion’s Sword</i>	Family, Nik (who is a negative character at first).	Some of Anina’s classmates.
Deafness and hearing impairment	Kermauner, <i>David: Mission Possible</i> and <i>David: Mission Beethoven</i>	Parents, teachers, and classmates act in an inclusive manner.	The guard and director of the museum, as representatives of the uneducated hearing public, who respond improperly to David’s deafness.
Speech and language disorders (SLD)	Möderndorfer, <i>Whale on the Beach</i>	Everybody tries to understand Igor.	There are no negative SLD-associated characters.
	Akerman, <i>Isabella: The Story of the Princess Who Stuttered</i>	Isabella’s parents and eventually peers.	Isabella’s peers.
Motor disability	Vidmar, <i>Shooters</i>	Torki’s loved ones try to help him, but he does not respond.	The main character of Torki completely isolates himself.
	Hill, <i>See Ya, Simon</i>	Students; in fact, all supporting characters, because they are aware of Simon’s mortality.	There are no distinctly negative characters.

The deficiencies, impairments, or disorders of children with special needs	Selected literary works with themes related to the deficiencies, impairments, or disorders of children with special needs	Positive responses of the environment	Pronounced negative responses of the environment
Long-term illness	Green, <i>The Fault in Our Stars</i>	Support group, relatives, the best friend.	Author Peter van Houten.
	Palacio, <i>Wonder</i>	Headmaster, teachers, some classmates since the beginning of the school year.	At the beginning, most of the classmates, ultimately only Julian.
Emotional and behavioural disorders	Vidmar, <i>Angie</i>	The outside world is described from the perspective of her inner world, presenting the subjective opinion of the titular character.	Angie has the most trouble living with herself; she blames the father who left the family.
Autism	Dowd, <i>The London Eye Mystery</i>	Parents and Professor Shepherd, about whom Ted says that beside his parents is his only friend.	In the beginning, Kat acts dismissively, but in the end, she and her brother grow closer. At the beginning, Aunt Gloria feels uneasiness.
	Haddon, <i>The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time</i>	It is difficult for his parents, but they try to be supportive. Therapists, teachers, and many strangers offer their help to Christopher.	The officer that touches Christopher and takes him to the police station.

Source: own

Literary characters with special needs are separated from the average by external (direct) or internal (indirect) characterisation:

- In terms of external characterisation, literary characters in the works in question separate themselves by appearance or by visible medical aids. In terms of appearance of the literary character, Down syndrome in people with mental development deficiencies, weight loss and other physical signs of long-term illness in adolescents, and mutated genes that cause facial deformity are all visually apparent. Another variant of external

characterisation refers to the use of medical devices, e.g., a mobility-impaired person in a wheelchair, a cochlear implant in persons with a hearing impairment, or an orientation white stick in the blind and partially sighted. Some special needs have no pronounced external signs.

- According to the internal characterisation, persons with special needs are presented through descriptions of actions and reactions, or through their thinking, expressed in (internal) monologues or dialogues, including their manner of speaking.

The reader's attention should also be focused on language use, especially in the naming of literary characters with deficiencies, impairments or disorders. The language code used for a certain literary character – also true in characterising people in real life – can indeed easily drop to the level of offensive and exclusive discourse.

By understanding the special need that a reader (teacher, student) can gain by reading quality (young adult) novels featuring characters with special needs, the social inclusion of children could improve and their future would be *brighter*, or as Janja Vidmar wrote in *Angie* (2007, pp. 70, 71): “*Angie was sitting in the twilight of her soul. /.../ Thomas Edison was afraid of the dark, therefore he invented the light bulb. But what should she do? Invent the future?*”

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