

# Changing the Narrative: A Systematic Review on the Effectiveness of Using Children's Literature to Improve Peer Awareness of Additional Educational Needs in School-aged Children

Enduring barriers to meaningful inclusion and social exclusion experienced by students with Additional Educational Needs (AEN) may be partially linked to lack of peer awareness and understanding of AEN. Research suggests that using children's literature including character portrayals of AEN may be an effective way of developing children's understanding and acceptance, resulting in increased inclusion in educational settings. The aim of this systematic review is to explore the effectiveness of using children's literature as an intervention to increase peer understanding of AEN in school-aged children. The current review carried out a systematic search to identify eligible articles using pre-defined inclusion and exclusion criteria. Selected studies were assessed for quality and findings were synthesised to draw conclusions that may inform future practice, policy and research. Evidence of increased peer awareness of AEN was observed in four of the five studies following the use of children's literature as an intervention. Increased peer awareness was reflected in increased positivity of peer attitudes and intended behaviours towards children with AEN. The review also highlights recommendations for using children's literature as an intervention to increase peer awareness of AEN.

*Keywords:* Additional educational needs, inclusion, children's literature, special educational needs, educational intervention

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## INTRODUCTION

### **Inclusive Education for Children with AEN**

Children with Additional Educational Needs (AEN), widely referred to as Special Educational Needs, experience barriers to inclusion that impact meaningful participation in education (Subban et al., 2022; Woodcock & Woolfson, 2019; Woodgate et al., 2020). Inclusive education involves removing physical and social barriers to provide all children with an education that meets their needs (Tiernan, 2021). In this review, AEN is an inclusive term to represent the broad range of support needs evident in Irish classrooms. In recent decades, there has been an international policy focus on increasing inclusion of children with additional needs in mainstream schools (Merrigan & Senior, 2023). This has been linked to improved academic and social outcomes for students with additional needs, as well as either positive or neutral effects for their peers (Hehir et al., 2016). However, despite the perceived paradigm shift, students with additional educational needs continue to face obstacles to inclusion and endure social isolation in school. Herein, they experience more limited social interactions (Litvack, Ritchie & Shore, 2011; Louari, 2013), lower peer acceptance and fewer friendships than typically developing peers (Schwab, Lehofer, & Tanzer, 2021). Additionally, students with additional educational needs are more likely to be bullied than students without additional needs (Bates et al., 2015; Didaskalou, Andreou & Vlachou, 2009; Rose, Monda-Amaya & Espelage, 2010) leading to significant impact on academic, social and emotional development (Kidger et al., 2012).

Hampered social interactions experienced by children with additional educational needs may be partly attributed to lack of peer awareness and understanding of AEN, contributing to negative attitudes and avoidance (Bates et al., 2015; Litvack, Ritchie & Shore, 2011). In particular, there is a lack of peer awareness relating to ‘hidden disabilities’, including behavioural and learning difficulties (Van Mieghem et al., 2020). Research shows that negative attitudes towards AEN can form in children as young as four years old and emphasises the importance of fostering peer awareness of AEN from a young age (Bates et al., 2015). Notably, children respond to others’ needs based on their understanding and thus to increase advocacy for children with additional educational needs, we must enhance their peers’ understanding (Furuness et al., 2021). Evidence shows that knowledge of AEN and experiences of inclusive education positively impacts attitudes of typically developing peers (Van Mieghem et al., 2020). Despite this evidence, and the diversity of need in classrooms, AEN and disability are often not addressed by teaching methodologies and content (Adomat, 2014). As such, there is a need for AEN awareness programs and interventions to educate and nurture positive

attitudes in typically developing children towards peers with additional educational needs (Shamberger et al., 2014).

### **Children’s Literature as an Intervention**

Research suggests that using children’s literature that includes character portrayals of disability to explore AEN may be a more effective way of developing understanding and acceptance than employing explicit teaching methods alone (Maich & Belcher 2012; Morrison & Rude 2002; Prater, Dyches & Johnstun, 2006). Teachers can use children’s literature as a stimulus for meaningful conversations regarding representation of AEN (Prater, Dyches & Johnstun, 2006; Tondreau & Rabinowitz, 2021). Additionally, children’s literature is an accessible resource for all and can be used flexibly to cater for varying abilities, reading levels and contexts. Such exploration through a literary lens fosters empathy, encourages perspective-taking and allows children to connect ideas to lived experiences (Causarano, 2021; Furuness & Esteves, 2021). Engagement with literature that includes characters with additional educational needs affords children with opportunities to vicariously experience and learn about AEN in developmentally appropriate ways. One such intervention in Adomat (2014) describes whole-class read-aloud and independent reading sessions over a six month period in an elementary school with children from second to fifth grade. Twice per week, children listened to a story featuring a character with additional educational needs and were then encouraged to engage in open-ended discussion and reflection. Throughout the intervention, children’s concept of disability evolved and they began to view AEN beyond categories and definitions, instead developing a nuanced understanding and acceptance of difference. In this way, readers receive opportunities to question deficit-based perspectives of disability (Tondreau & Rabinowitz, 2021), thus challenging attitudes and dissecting stereotypes (Adomat, 2014). As such, children’s literature has immense power to communicate authentic representations of AEN (Rieger & McGrail, 2015) and ‘provides a lens for reflection and action’ (Artman-Meeker, Grant & Yang, 2016, p.158).

### **Rationale for the Current Review**

As well as direct inclusionary benefits for students with additional educational needs, increasing peer awareness is significant from a policy standpoint. In the Irish context, following ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2018 (UNCRPD, 2006), a re-conceptualisation of inclusive education is emerging. Irish policymakers have reviewed a model of full inclusion implemented in New Brunswick, Canada, whereby all students, including those with additional educational needs, are educated in mainstream settings (Shevlin & Banks, 2021). This has prompted critique of current special

education provision. It appears that there is disparity between the model of inclusion stipulated in policy and the experience of children with additional educational needs in Irish schools (Merrigan & Senior, 2023; NCSE, 2015). To avoid tokenistic ideas of inclusion, an increase in peer awareness is warranted to facilitate meaningful inclusion of students with additional educational needs.

Aiming to address this need, this review explores ways to increase peer awareness of AEN using children's literature. At present, there is a gap in the research relating to the effectiveness of such an intervention (Causarano, 2021). Rather, much existing research investigates the nature of AEN portrayal in children's literature through content analysis (Tondreau & Rabinowitz, 2021). A systematic review on the topic has not been previously conducted, and there is a paucity of literature overviewing this research area within an educational context. Thus, the review questions are as follows:

- 'What empirical research surrounds the effectiveness of using children's literature as an intervention to increase peer understanding of AEN in school-aged children?'
- 'How rigorous is the existing research in this area?'
- 'What are the considerations for implementing an intervention using children's literature to increase peer understanding of AEN?'

## **METHOD**

### **Search Strategy**

In November 2022, a literature search was conducted using PsychInfo, Education Source and ERIC databases. These were chosen due to their relevance in educational psychology. Search terms were formulated based on consideration of the research question (Boland, Cherry & Dickson, 2017) and information derived from a pilot search carried out by the research team. Based on findings from the pilot search, the following terms appeared to garner all relevant literature in the area. This included "children's literature" OR "children's books" OR "picture books" OR "children's picture books" AND "special educational needs" OR "special needs" OR disabilities. Included articles were limited to full-text, peer-reviewed papers, written in English and published between 2000-2022. The initial search yielded 60 articles, with 39 papers remaining once duplicates were removed. Titles and abstracts were screened to eliminate articles that did not align with inclusion and exclusion criteria ( $n = 24$ ) (Table 1 in Appendix A).

Inclusion criteria pertained to empirical research articles, studies conducted with school-aged populations (i.e. children aged 5-18) and studies involving the use

of an intervention. Exclusion criteria related to systematic reviews or theoretical articles, research conducted with teacher populations, and studies evaluating children's literature without the use of children's books as an intervention. The research team independently reviewed and screened full-text versions of the remaining 15 articles and later met to review decision-making. This led to the removal of 12 articles which did not meet inclusion criteria. The remaining three papers were included in the review. An additional two papers were found through hand-searching bibliographies of included and excluded articles. A PRISMA Flowchart was used to provide an overview of the search strategy employed (Appendix B). The resulting five articles included in this review are listed in Table 2 (Appendix C).

### **Critical Appraisal**

The Gough (2007) 'Weight of Evidence (WoE)' framework was used by the research team to appraise the quality of the five included articles (Appendix D). This framework involved evaluating the methodological quality of studies (WoE A), the relevance of methodology to the review question (WoE B) and the relevance of evidence to the review question (WoE C). Weightings derived from the WoE A, B and C were later combined to provide an overall score (WoE D) that established the extent to which each study provided evidence to address the review question. Evaluation of the methodological quality of included studies (WoE A) was conducted using criteria based on the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) tool for qualitative and quantitative studies (CASP, 2018) and the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool for mixed methods studies (Hong et al. 2018). Methodological relevance (WoE B) was evaluated using the Petticrew and Roberts (2003) typology of evidence. Finally, the relevance of evidence to the current review question (WoE C) was evaluated using a revised version of the PICO framework (Richardson et al., 1995). These quality appraisal tools and frameworks were chosen as they align with the scope of the review and were deemed reliable ways of assessing the quality of included literature (Hong et al. 2018; Long, French & Brooks, 2020). Furthermore, the use of multiple appraisal tools allowed the research teams to assess varying components of included articles and enhanced critical analysis and evidence synthesis (Gough, 2021).

Using the aforementioned tools and frameworks, WoE A, B and C scores were assigned for each study and averaged to provide an overall quality indicator (WoE D). The possible range of scores for WoE D were divided into triads of 'high', 'medium' or 'low' with scores between 0-0.9 considered low, 1.0 – 1.9 considered medium and 2.1 – 3.0 considered high. The included studies were rated according to these quality descriptors (Appendix D). The WoE ratings influence the extent

to which the papers were subsequently integrated and discussed. This ensures that the findings of the current review are informed mostly by higher quality papers.

### ***Participants***

A total of 253 participants were included in the reviewed literature. In line with inclusion criteria, all studies featured school-aged children ranging from five to 15 years. Two studies also garnered parent and teacher views (Adomat, 2014; Smith-D'Azerro & Moore-Thomas, 2010). Some studies provided limited descriptions of participant demographics, alluding only to age and gender (Wilkins et al., 2016). In contrast, other studies provided a comprehensive overview of participant characteristics including socio-economic background, ethnicity and experience with AEN (Adomat, 2014; Butler, 2016; Cameron & Rutland, 2006). Participants in all studies attended mainstream schools and most studies outlined that participants had students with additional needs in their class. Moreover, some studies included participants with additional educational needs (Adomat, 2014; Butler, 2016). The studies were conducted in the United States (Adomat 2014; Smith-D'Azerro & Moore-Thomas, 2010; Wilkins et al., 2016) and the United Kingdom (Butler, 2016; Cameron & Rutland, 2006). Notably, no research was found within an Irish context.

### ***Sampling***

Convenience sampling was used across all five studies. However, there was a dearth of detail regarding the sampling procedures used, with some studies providing no information on how they recruited participants (Adomat, 2014; Wilkins et al., 2016). Unstandardised recruitment processes were also observed, including differences recruiting participants with and without additional needs (Butler, 2016).

### ***Study Design***

All five studies described their research design, thus demonstrating good transparency. Three studies used qualitative design, including thematic analysis of coded audio and video-recordings of intervention sessions (Adomat, 2014; Butler, 2016; Wilkins et al., 2016). One study utilised quantitative design involving a modified version of the Multi-response Racial Attitude measure (Aboud, Mendleson & Purdy, 2003) to compare pre- and post-intervention effects (Cameron & Rutland, 2006). Smith D'Azerro and Moore-Thomas (2010) employed a mixed-methods approach, including thematic analysis of interviews and use of the Adjective Checklist (Gough, 2000). Importantly, the findings of four studies relate directly to the review question. Conversely, the findings of Wilkins et al. (2016) focus on factors influencing peer attitudes of AEN rather than evaluating the effectiveness

of the intervention itself on increasing peer awareness, thus reducing its relevance to the research question.

### ***Data Collection Measures***

The studies included in this review demonstrated measures to increase rigour and transparency. This includes the running of a pilot study (Butler, 2016), triangulation of data sources (Adomat, 2014) and declaration of researcher bias (Butler, 2016; Wilkins et al., 2016). All qualitative studies ensured that discussions and interviews were recorded and transcribed (Adomat, 2014; Butler, 2016; Wilkins et al., 2016). None of the studies used social validity measures, which is a limitation given the propensity for the findings to bear social significance for children with additional needs, as well as for their families, teachers and peers.

### ***Interventions***

Studies varied in type and duration of intervention used, as well as the range of AEN explored. Interventions consisted of weekly sessions over four to 12 week periods and consisted of learning about AEN through explicit teaching and interactive literary discussion. Interventions in three studies consisted of guided reading, small group or read-aloud sessions using chosen texts, followed by structured post-reading discussions and reflections about characters with additional educational needs (Adomat, 2014; Butler, 2016; Wilkins et al., 2016). One study adopted a similar approach combined with use of the Adjective Checklist (Gough, 2000) pre and post-intervention (Smith-D'Azerro & Moore-Thomas, 2010). Butler (2016) focused on motor impairments whereas other interventions included discussions about a range of AEN, including physical, cognitive and hidden disabilities (Adomat, 2014; Cameron & Rutland, 2006; Smith-D'Azerro & Moore-Thomas, 2010; Wilkins et al., 2016). For example, by reading stories that portrayed friendships between non-disabled and disabled children, Cameron and Rutland (2006), explored differences in peer attitudes when emphasis was placed on the character's identity versus their category of AEN. Moreover, criteria for selecting extracts from children's literature were outlined (Smith-D'Azerro & Moore-Thomas, 2010). Other studies ensured the use of high-quality literature by selecting award-winning books (Adomat, 2014; Smith-D'Azerro & Moore-Thomas, 2010). Two sample excerpts from 'Sleepovers' by Jacqueline Wilson and 'Saffy's Angel' by Hilary McKay were provided as examples of inclusive literature in one study (Adomat, 2014).

### ***Data Analysis***

Four studies provided detailed descriptions of data analysis and measures thus enhancing transparency, rigour and replicability (Adomat 2014; Cameron &

Rutland, 2006; Smith-D'Azerro & Moore-Thomas, 2010; Wilkins et al., 2016). Methods used included thematic analysis, open-coding and selective coding (Adomat, 2014; Wilkins et al., 2016). Some studies provided evidence of good reliability using Cronbach's alpha (Cameron & Rutland, 2006; Smith-D'Azerro & Moore-Thomas, 2010) and counter-balancing materials (Cameron & Rutland, 2006). In addition, blind-rating of the coded transcripts by researchers who did not conduct the intervention increased reliability (Wilkins et al., 2016). Other methods to enhance reliability and validity included discussion of codes and themes to reach consensus (Smith-D'Azerro & Moore-Thomas, 2010) as well as comparison of codes with reflective notes to increase triangulation of data (Adomat, 2014). All qualitative studies included verbatim quotes from participants to substantiate findings, thus increasing reliability (Adomat, 2014; Butler, 2016; Wilkins et al., 2016). Some studies obtained pre and post-intervention measures of students' attitudes towards AEN to evaluate the effectiveness of the intervention (Cameron & Rutland, 2006).

### **Integrating the Findings**

In the current review, children's literature inspired depth and quality of reflection about AEN. Evidence of increased peer awareness of AEN was observed in four out of five studies (Adomat, 2014, Butler, 2016, Cameron & Rutland, 2006; Wilkins et al., 2016). This was reflected in increased positivity of peer attitudes and intended behaviours towards children with additional needs, such as playing with peers with additional needs in school and interacting during extra-curricular activities (Adomat, 2014; Cameron & Rutland, 2006). Contrarily, one study found that despite positive trends in descriptive data and qualitative statements, there was no significant difference between students' perceptions of AEN pre and post intervention (Smith-D'Azerro & Moore-Thomas, 2010).

### ***Social Constructivism***

Social Learning Theory (Bandura & Walters, 1977) and Social Constructivism principles permeated the reviewed literature, as evidenced by children's shared understandings relating to AEN throughout included studies. Students influenced each other's understandings of AEN in a variety of ways. Adomat (2014) found that participants explored disability in a constructivist manner through the use of children's literature, as understandings were enriched through discussion including multiple perspectives and interpretations of the stories. Children had the propensity to influence one another's responses as participants imitated their peers' responses, particularly whereby responses were perceived as correct (Wilkins et al., 2016). The contagious nature of negative comments also emerged in the findings, as one prejudicial remark led to increased expression of stigmatising language and ideas



(Butler, 2016). Along with agreeing and sharing opinions, participants expressed diverse and constructive views of AEN, with differing perspectives promoting new understandings (Butler, 2016).

### ***Conceptualisation of Disability***

In the early stages of interventions, participants struggled to move beyond rigid definitions and categorisations of disability to form deeper understandings of difference (Adomat, 2014; Cameron & Rutland, 2006). Starkly, Smith-D'Azerro and Moore-Thomas (2010) postulate that participants viewed AEN as a negative construct characterised by limitations and attribution of blame to the character with additional needs and their parents. The language and examples used tended to reflect a medical model focusing on deficits and definitions of disability as 'continuum of abilities within society' (Adomat, 2014, p.7). Similarly, participants illustrated views of AEN as something that needed to be ameliorated and posited that individuals need to compensate for their difficulties using other senses and capabilities (Adomat, 2014; Butler, 2016; Cameron & Rutland, 2006). Some studies found that when the books did not explicitly show how characters' behaviours related to their additional needs, students demonstrated reduced understanding and awareness (Cameron & Rutland, 2006; Wilkins et al., 2016). Children showed greater interest and empathy when they understood characters' challenges (Cameron & Rutland, 2006). Similarly, students' background knowledge of AEN facilitated a deeper understanding of difference (Wilkins et al., 2016). Students who had additional needs or had family members with additional needs provided greater insights and understandings than those who did not (Butler, 2016; Smith-D'Azerro & Moore-Thomas, 2010). Notably, further discussions using children's literature as a stimulus led to participants forming deeper, more nuanced understandings of AEN in all studies. This included discussing typicality and critiquing labels, exclusionary practices and stigma, as well as developing stances towards advocacy (Adomat, 2014; Butler, 2016). Children also showed greater awareness of social isolation and challenges experienced by individuals with AEN (Adomat, 2014; Cameron & Rutland, 2006).

### ***Fostering Relatability***

In order to achieve this change in understanding, studies emphasised the importance of fostering connectedness between the children and the literary characters. This included encouraging children to identify commonalities between themselves and the characters (Adomat 2014, Butler, 2016, Cameron & Rutland, 2006; Smith-D'Azerro & Moore-Thomas, 2010; Wilkins et al., 2016). Cameron and Rutland (2006) found that emphasising individual characteristics while also increasing the salience of their additional educational needs was most effective, leading to the

greatest change in peer attitudes. However, de-categorizing the characters with additional needs and emphasising their individuality also significantly increased positive peer attitudes (Cameron & Rutland, 2006). Across the studies, children appeared to show interest in and develop empathy with the character before they could consider how additional needs impacted the characters' lives (Adomat, 2014, Butler, 2016; Cameron & Rutland, 2006). A sense of relatability allowed the children to form more nuanced views of AEN and recognise individuality, similarities and differences between themselves and disabled characters (Adomat, 2014; Cameron & Rutland, 2006). Conversely, an absence of connectedness and understanding appeared to impact children's ability to engage in critical discussions surrounding AEN representation in literature (Cameron & Rutland, 2006; Wilkins et al., 2016). Once participants could relate to characters, they began to focus on the social implications of their actions and treatment of individuals with additional needs (Adomat, 2014; Cameron & Rutland, 2006).

Following intervention, the children explored ways to counter-act stereotypes including use of inclusive practices and terminology within their own classroom. In this way, children's literature not only impacted attitudes towards AEN but also influenced behaviours (Adomat, 2014; Cameron & Rutland, 2006). Teachers and parents reported a change in how students interacted with children with additional needs, including increased understanding, compassion and patience, as well as higher-quality and more frequent interactions (Adomat, 2014). Children with AEN included in the studies also appreciated the representation of AEN within literature and increased awareness of their peers following intervention (Adomat, 2014; Butler, 2016).

### ***Quality of Engagement***

Some studies highlighted that the quality of children's engagement impacted the quality of their understanding of AEN. Factors impacting quality of engagement included lack of clarity surrounding intervention objectives, whereby some children focused on literary constructs such as the plot rather than developing understandings of AEN (Adomat, 2014). Moreover, Butler (2016) noted that children often used imaginative powers to speculate beyond evidence in texts and made assumptions and predictions about characters with additional needs. In addition, students' perception of disability was sometimes limited by lack of prior knowledge of AEN and misconceptions surrounding what an individual with additional needs can achieve. In Smith-D'Azerro and Moore-Thomas (2010), one participant expressed the belief that a character with literacy difficulties was not capable of having a job. Similarly, Wilkins et al. (2016) propose that children's responses to the literature were influenced by external factors including

societal and teacher expectations. The children used common buzzwords and reiterated generic comments about AEN, inclusion and anti-bullying that they had previously learned rather than engaging in thoughtful discussion and critical thinking. Findings also suggest that children were holding back from voicing their own opinions and instead relied on patterns of responses which they felt would satisfy the researcher and their teacher (Wilkins et al., 2016). This highlights that children can be influenced by others' expectations, verbal and non-verbal behaviours (Wilkins et al., 2016), thus necessitating awareness of researcher bias and transference. Conversely, other studies reported that those implementing the intervention effectively facilitated discussions without imposing their own views once they had been given appropriate guidance (Butler, 2016; Cameron & Rutland, 2006).

## **DISCUSSION**

### ***Summary of Findings***

The current review provides valuable insights into the effectiveness of using children's literature to increase peer awareness of AEN. This is significant as it appears that enduring barriers to meaningful inclusion and social exclusion experienced by students with additional educational needs can be partially linked to lack of peer awareness and understanding of AEN (Adomat, 2014; Butler, 2016).

The review demonstrates the propensity of children's literature to promote understanding of AEN by drawing on children's contexts and experiences (Rosenbalt, 1994), as well as challenging and intentionally interrupting their beliefs (Tondreau & Rabinowitz, 2021). The review reinforces the constructivist nature of children's learning about AEN, whereby they share views and co-construct ideas through democratic and insightful discussions. The use of children's literature as a stimulus encouraged critical conceptualisation of AEN and fostered more nuanced understandings. Discussions on complex topics ensued, including critique of categorisation and stigma, as well as consideration of exclusionary practices and challenges related to AEN. Along with increases in awareness and positive attitudes, the interventions also influenced children's behaviours surrounding advocacy and interactions with their peers with additional needs. For example, in Adomat (2014), some participants decided to volunteer at a therapeutic horse-riding centre in the community following the intervention in order to help their classmate with additional needs who attended. Similarly, parents reported that their children were more accepting of children with additional educational needs

in their class receiving additional support and allowances from teachers, having previously perceived this as unfair at times (Adomat, 2014; Butler, 2016).

### ***Impact of the Findings***

The review findings have significant implications for all children, as well as educators and policymakers striving towards increased inclusion. It can inform teaching about AEN within school contexts, including through the SPHE curriculum (Butler, 2016). This includes outlining considerations when designing interventions to increase peer understanding of AEN using children's literature. In particular, the effectiveness of the intervention appears to be related to the quality of books used and the nature of the intervention itself. For example, increased peer understanding of AEN was noted when the literature chosen included inclusive representations of AEN and when discussions fostered connectedness between the children and the literary characters (Adomat 2014, Butler, 2016, Cameron & Rutland, 2006; Smith-D'Azerro & Moore-Thomas, 2010; Wilkins et al., 2016). Herein, it is important to consider the portrayal of AEN in children's literature and the subsequent impact on children's attitudes and understanding (Roshini & Rajasekaran, 2022). This review emphasises the pertinence of fostering relatedness when teaching children about AEN. Authentic representations of AEN depict both strengths and weaknesses of multi-dimensional characters, celebrating individuality. Such representations portray the complexities of life with additional needs whilst having high expectations for the character and affording them with opportunities to make important contributions to the story (Artman-Meeker, Grant & Yang, 2016). In accurately portraying disability in fictional characters, it is important to promote empathy rather than pity and to avoid depicting characters as victims or outsiders (Blaska & Lynch, 1998). In addition, awareness of implicit messages of inability, naïve and patronising perceptions and othering language in children's literature is critical in framing characters with additional needs as 'one of us' as opposed to 'one of them' (Pennell, Wollak & Koppenhaver, 2018; Tondreau & Rabinowitz, 2021). Moreover, those implementing interventions should be aware of variables that impact children's engagement. This includes students' reading level and the text accessibility and quality, as well as environmental factors such as family values and experience of AEN (Causarano, 2021). Teacher and societal expectations also appear to influence the depth of students' engagement with the intervention.

### ***Limitations and Future Research***

As well as highlighting the effectiveness of children's literature as an intervention to increase peer awareness of AEN, the review identifies some limitations in the chosen studies. Notably, there was insufficient clarity regarding the sampling

procedures used in all studies (Adomat 2014, Butler, 2016, Cameron & Rutland, 2006; Smith-D'Azerro & Moore-Thomas, 2010; Wilkins et al., 2016). In addition, a lack of methodological rigor and omission of details about participant demographics were observed in some studies (Butler, 2016; Wilkins et al., 2016). This may have impacted the generalisability, validity and reliability of the findings. Future research should enhance reliability and validity measures, particularly in relation to data analysis and fidelity of implementation.

On this note, there were a number of shortcomings in the interventions used, including insufficient duration, neglect in appropriately communicating the objective and focus of the intervention to the participants and use of children's literature which was not evidenced as high-quality or inclusive. The quality of the findings would be enhanced by employing checks to ensure interventions are of high quality and implemented with fidelity.

Moreover, in many studies it was difficult to evaluate the effectiveness of the intervention as measures of change in peer awareness were unstandardised or anecdotal in nature. Some studies did not track individual student changes or compare pre and post intervention attitudes (Adomat, 2014; Smith-D'Azerro & Moore-Thomas, 2010). Future research should focus on systematically measuring the effectiveness of using children's literature to increase peer awareness of AEN.

Finally, the voice of individuals with additional needs was only included in two of five studies (Adomat, 2014; Butler, 2016). These participants provided unique insights into the practicalities of daily life with additional needs, such as an understanding of the challenges characters faced when navigating wheelchair use (Butler, 2016). Notably, participants with additional needs appeared to be more willing to critique characters with additional needs whose actions or behaviour merited disapproval in the context of the story (Butler, 2016). Herein, participants with additional needs appeared to be more adept than other participants at separating the individual character from their additional needs. In addition, the views of participants with additional needs towards interventions enhanced the social validity of the research. In Adomat (2014), one autistic participant disclosed that he felt valued and represented having encountered an autistic character in one of the books. Similarly, participants with motor difficulties expressed enthusiasm towards others learning about AEN through literary interventions and felt this would increase other children's acceptance of AEN (Butler, 2016). Despite the value of including the voice of individuals with additional needs in this way, participants with additional needs may also risk biasing the data due to a unique and heightened awareness of AEN based on personal experiences. Future studies

should include the voice of children with additional needs without biasing the data. Butler (2016) suggested using children with additional needs' views to inform interventions through providing accounts of disability in the form of a video diary in conjunction with using children's literature. This would provide more dynamic, relatable insights into the experiences of individuals with additional needs and include their voice in the research without introducing confounding variables into the data.

As well as limitations within the included studies, there are some areas for improvement in the review itself. Firstly, although the search strategy employed was systematic, due to the scope of the review, a limited number of databases were consulted and literature within humanity journals were not considered. As a result, relevant papers relating to use of children's literature to increase peer awareness of AEN may have been unintentionally excluded. On a similar note, the term 'additional educational needs' is exceedingly broad. Although the researcher rationalised the use of this term to reduce categorisation and maximise inclusion on the basis that a wide range of AEN present in Irish classrooms, it is difficult to define and conceptualise such an expansive term. The lack of specificity may have impacted the effectiveness of interventions, as it may have been challenging to increase peer awareness of such a wide range of AEN in a short period. This may call for future studies to focus on teaching children about specific AEN to increase depth of understanding and awareness. In addition, there was little regard given to teacher and parent perceptions on the effectiveness of the interventions in this review. Future research may benefit from gaining these insights as well as the voice of the child.

## **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, it is evident that children's literature can be effective in increasing peer awareness of AEN in a developmentally appropriate way that is accessible within the classroom, regardless of context. Given the drive towards increasing inclusion in policy and practice within the Irish context, it is fundamental to dismantle the barriers that exist between students with additional needs and their peers by increasing awareness and understanding. Books can fulfil this purpose by acting as mirrors for self-reflection, windows to present a lens through which to view the world and doors to opportunities for attitudinal and behavioural change (Pennell et al., 2018). All of this is necessary if meaningful inclusion is to become a reality rather than an ideal.

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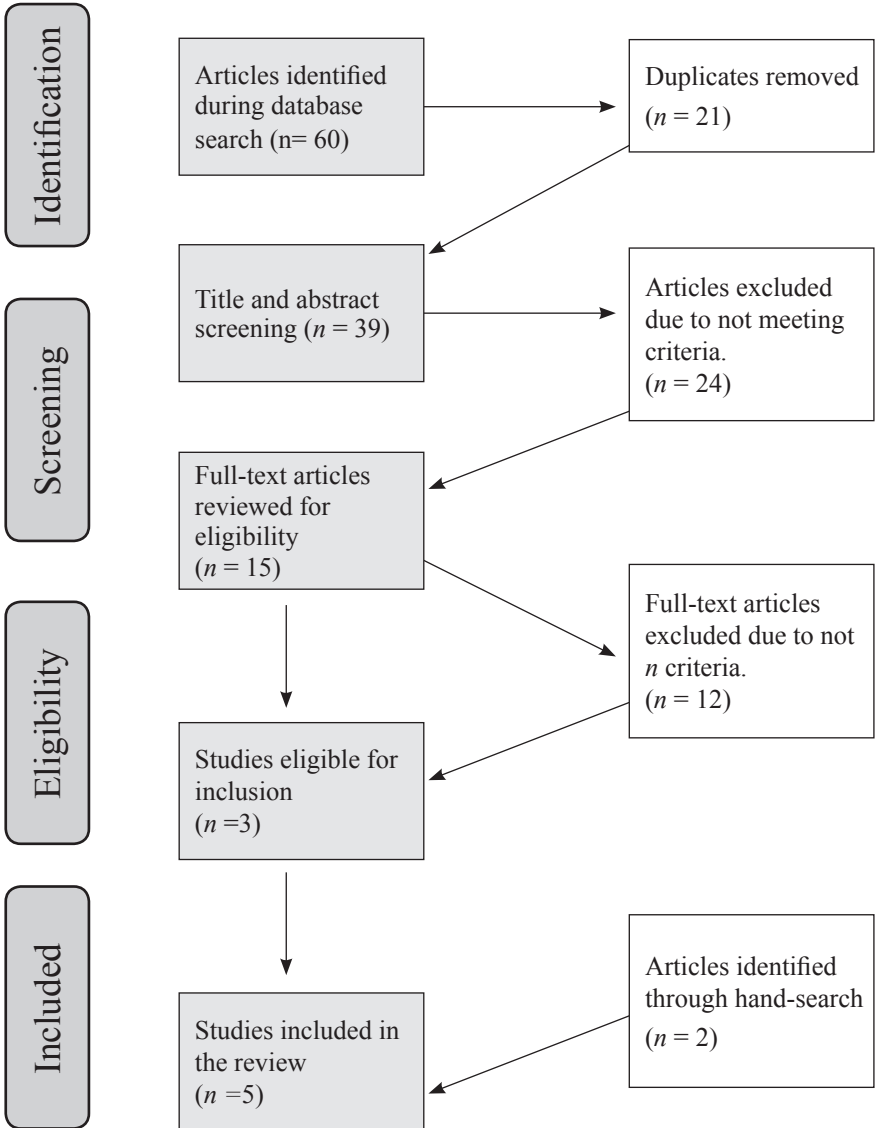
**APPENDIX A: INCLUSION AND EXCLUSION CRITERIA**

**Table 1: Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria**

<b>Criteria</b>	<b>Inclusion</b>	<b>Exclusion</b>	<b>Rationale</b>
Language	Papers written in English	Papers not written in English.	The researcher speaks English and translation services were not available.
Timeframe	Papers published between 2000-2022.	Papers published before 2000.	Relevant research on the topic exists within this timeframe.
Type of Publication	Peer reviewed articles. Journal articles.	Non-peer reviewed articles. Meta-analyses, systematic reviews, grey literature.	Peer reviewed papers have been independently assessed for quality. Systematic reviews and meta-analyses are outside the scope of the review.
Participants	Papers involving school-aged populations.	Papers based on teacher perceptions or adult populations.	The review is situated within research with school-aged children to focus on early intervention.
Intervention	Papers involving use of children’s literature that includes character portrayals of AEN as an intervention.	Papers involving content analysis of AEN in children’s literature.  Papers that do not relate to children’s literature and its use as an intervention.	The review approaches the topic through an educational psychology rather than a literary lens.  It aims to evaluate the effectiveness of children’s literature on peer awareness of AEN.

**APPENDIX B: PRISMA Flowchart**

Databases consulted: ERIC, PsychInfo, Education Source



**APPENDIX C: DETAILS OF INCLUDED STUDIES**

**Table 2: References for studies included in the systematic review**

1. Adomat, D. S. (2014). Exploring issues of disability in children’s literature discussions. *Disability Studies Quarterly*, 34(3).
2. Butler, R. R. (2016). Motor Impairment in Children’s Literature: Asking the Children. *Children’s Literature in Education*, 47(3), 242-256.
3. Cameron, L., & Rutland, A. (2006). Extended contact through story reading in school: Reducing children’s prejudice toward the disabled. *Journal of Social Issues*, 62(3), 469-488.
4. Smith-D’Arezzo, W. M., & Moore-Thomas, C. (2010). Children’s Perceptions of Peers with Disabilities. *Teaching exceptional children plus*, 6(3), n3.
5. Wilkins, J., Howe, K., Seiloff, M., Rowan, S., & Lilly, E. (2016). Exploring elementary students’ perceptions of disabilities using children’s literature. *British Journal of Special Education*, 43(3), 233-249.

**Table 3: Overview of Included Studies**

Study	Design	Participants	Data Collection	Findings
Adomat (2014)	Qualitative	n = 52	Interviews and Observation	Findings revealed a positive change in student understandings of disability and in their interactions with disabled peers.
Butler (2016)	Qualitative	n = 37	Focus Group	Findings showed children’s awareness of the social isolation felt by disabled people. Participants with motor impairments demonstrated heightened awareness to the disabled characters challenges.
Cameron & Rutland (2006)	Mixed-Method	n = 67	Interviews and Questionnaires	Extended contact led to increased positivity towards disabled students.

<b>Study</b>	<b>Design</b>	<b>Participants</b>	<b>Data Collection</b>	<b>Findings</b>
Smith D'Azerro & Moore-Thomas (2010)	Mixed-Method	<i>n</i> = 14	Interviews, Observation and Questionnaires	There was no significant increase in positive attitudes towards peers with disabilities following intervention.
Wilkins et al. (2016)	Qualitative	<i>n</i> = 83	Observation	Themes emerged relating to the importance of societal messages, teacher influence and quality of portrayal of disability in influencing students' attitudes towards disability.

## APPENDIX D: CRITICAL APPRAISAL

**Table 4: Summary of WoE for each study**

<b>Study</b>	<b>WoE A</b>	<b>WoE B</b>	<b>WoE C</b>	<b>WoE D</b>	<b>Rating</b>
Adomat (2014)	2.1	2	2.25	2.11	High
Butler (2016)	1.95	2	2.25	2.066	High
Cameron and Rutland (2006)	2.4	3	2.5	2.63	High
Smith-D'Azerro and Moore-Thomas (2010)	1.5	2	2.0	1.83	Medium
Wilkins et al. (2016)	2.25	2	1.75	2.0	Medium

**Table 5: CASP Tool – Qualitative (CASP, 2018)**

Study	Clear statement of study aims.	Appropriate methodology	Research design addresses study aims	Recruitment strategy appropriate	Data collection addresses research question	Consideration of relationship between researcher and participants	Consideration of ethical issues	Rigorous data analysis	Clear statement of findings	Research valuable	Total Score
Adomat (2014)	2	2	2	0	2	0	0	2	2	2	14
Butler (2016)	2	1	2	1	1	2	2	0	1	1	13
Wilkins et al. (2016)	2	1	2	0	1	2	2	2	2	1	15

**Table 6: CASP Tool – Quantitative (CASP, 2018)**

Study	Clearly focused research question	Randomised assignment of participants	All participants accounted for at conclusion of study	Participants and assessors blind to intervention	Were groups similar	Were groups treated equally (fair test)	Were effects of intervention reported comprehensively	Do benefits of intervention outweigh harms and costs	Can results be applied to local population/context	Would intervention provide greater value than existing interventions	Total Score
Cameron & Rutland (2006)	2	2	2	0	2	2	2	2	1	1	16

**Table 7: Mixed Method Appraisal Tool (Hong et al., 2018)**

Study	Adequate rationale for using mixed methods	Different components of study effectively integrated	Qualitative and quantitative results adequately interpreted	Divergences and inconsistencies between qualitative and quantitative results addressed	Different components adhere to quality criteria of each tradition	Total Score
Smith-D'Azerro & Moore-Thomas (2010)	0	1	2	0	2	5

**Table 8: Calculation of WoE Scores**

Study	WoE A Score
Wilkins et al. (2016)	$15/20 = 0.75 \times 3 = 2.25$
Cameron & Rutland (2006)	$16/20 = 0.8 \times 3 = 2.4$
Butler (2016)	$13/20 = 0.65 \times 3 = 1.95$
Adomat (2014)	$14/20 = 0.7 \times 3 = 2.1$

**Table 9: WoE B Scoring Protocol (Petticrew & Roberts, 2003)**

Study Design	WoE Rating	Rationale
Randomised Controlled Trials	3	RCTs are high quality research designs to measure the effectiveness of an intervention.
Qualitative Research, Cohort Studies, Mixed-Methods	2	Qualitative research and cohort studies can provide nuanced, rich insights into the impact of an intervention. However, measures are not as standardised as RCTs in evaluating the effectiveness.
Case Studies, Quasi-Experimental and Non-Experimental Designs	1	The samples in case-studies, quasi-experimental and non-experimental designs are too limited to evaluate the effectiveness of an intervention.

**Table 10: WoE B Scores**

Study	WoE B Rating
Adomat (2014)	2
Butler (2016)	2
Cameron and Rutland (2006)	3
Smith-D'Azerro and Moore-Thomas (2010)	2
Wilkins et al. (2016)	2



**Table 11: WoE C Scoring Protocol**

<b>Criteria</b>	<b>Rating</b>	<b>Descriptor</b>	<b>Rationale</b>
<b>Population</b>	3	School-aged children are directly involved in the study as participants. The voice of the child with AEN is also included.	The research question focuses on the impact of children’s literature on peer attitudes of AEN. The researcher values including the voice of children with AEN in research about AEN.
	2	School-aged children are directly involved in the study as participants. The voice of the child with AEN is not included in the research.	
	1	School-aged children are not directly involved in the study as participants.	
<b>Intervention</b>	3	The intervention uses explicit teaching about AEN as well as children’s literature including characters with AEN.	Interventions using both explicit methods and children’s literature were found to be most effective (Maich & Belcher 2012; Morrison & Rude 2002; Prater, Dyches & Johnstun, 2006).
	2	The intervention uses children’s literature involving characters with AEN without explicitly teaching about AEN.	
	1	Children’s literature is used in an unstructured way, not as an intervention.	
<b>Context</b>	3	In schools in United Kingdom/Ireland	The research will be more generalisable to EP practice and schools within the Irish context if studies are based in countries that are similar to Ireland culturally and socially..
	2	In schools in OECD countries	
	1	In schools in non-OECD countries	
<b>Outcome</b>	3	Pre and post-intervention measures are compared to evaluate the effectiveness of the intervention on peer attitudes of AEN.	The research will be highly relevant to the review question if it uses standardised measures to evaluate the effectiveness of using children’s literature as an intervention to influence peer attitudes of AEN.
	2	The study considers the effectiveness the intervention on peer attitudes but does not include pre and post-intervention measures.	
	1	The study does not consider effectiveness of the intervention on peer attitudes.	

**Table 12: WoE C Scores**

<b>Study</b>	<b>Population</b>	<b>Intervention</b>	<b>Context</b>	<b>Outcome</b>
Adomat (2014)	2	3	2	2
Butler (2016)	3	2	2	2
Cameron and Rutland (2006)	2	2	3	3
Smith-D'Azerro and Moore-Thomas (2010)	2	2	2	2
Wilkins et al. (2016)	2	2	2	1