# TEACHING DISABILITY ACCEPTANCE

## DISABILITY FICTION AS A TOOL TO TEACH PERSPECTIVE-TAKING IN SECONDARY EDUCATION

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# Abstract

Lessons on diversity are an important part of education. For this purpose, fiction is often used in language classes to teach students new perspectives and promote empathy. Although this is common practice, the effects of this use of literature and the processes that are involved, require more research. This paper investigates how fiction could be used in language classes as a tool to teach students disability acceptance by encouraging perspective-taking. Existing literature on the link between stories and social cognition is combined with EFL didactics to present an approach for teaching disability in FL classes that focusses on both content and form. Because fiction does not often result in behavioural changes, I suggest this use of stories is best combined with other activities, for example class discussions.

# Samenvatting

Aandacht en lessen rond diversiteit op scholen worden steeds belangrijker. De Vlaamse Overheid heeft verschillende eindtermen rond burgerschap en diversiteit opgesteld die scholen dienen na te streven. Aangezien leraren naast begeleider van leerprocessen ook de functie leraar als opvoeder hebben, is het hun taak om dergelijke kwesties rond burgerschap te behandelen in hun lessen. Deze masterproef onderzoekt hoe verhalen over functiebeperkingen kunnen gebruikt worden in lessen Engels als deel van diversiteit in de onderwijsaanpak. Het doel van deze masterproef is om na te gaan of verhalen over beperkingen gebruikt kunnen worden om het perspectief van mensen met beperkingen beter te begrijpen. Zo wordt er onderzocht of fictie over beperkingen waardevol is binnen taallessen als een instrument om inclusie te bevorderen.

Voor de aanpak van taallessen rond functiebeperkingen verwijs ik naar de "comprehensive approach" van Bloemert et al., die toelaat om aandacht te geven aan de tekst, taal, context en lezer. Deze aanpak zorgt ervoor dat de gebruikte teksten maximaal benut worden binnen de taalles, met zowel voldoende focus voor taal als voor inhoud. Bij de lesdelen die focussen op context en lezer, kan de tekst worden gebruikt om leerlingen informatie bij te brengen over functiebeperkingen. Na het lezen kunnen er geleide klasdiscussies worden gehouden waarin leerlingen werken aan hun opvattingen rond beperkingen. Volgens onderzoek kan lezen leiden tot verbeterde sociale vaardigheden zoals empathie voelen of een beter begrip van het perspectief van anderen, vooral wanneer dit gecombineerd wordt met activiteiten als discussies. Het is belangrijk dat deze discussies op een constructieve manier gebeuren.

In het tweede hoofdstuk van de thesis wordt deze theorie getoetst aan een voorbeeld, namelijk *I Overcame My Autism* van Sarah Kurchak. Hoewel precieze resultaten niet kunnen worden voorspeld, toont een analyse van het boek toont aan dat er kan worden verondersteld dat *I Overcame My Autism* in staat is om lezers een beter begrip voor mensen met beperkingen aan te leren.

Deze masterproef verbindt onderzoek naar de impact van verhalen op sociale vaardigheden met vreemde talendidactiek. Daaruit wordt een lesvoorstel opgesteld waarin fictie wordt gebruikt om leerlingen te leren zich respectvol en tolerant op te stellen tegenover mensen met functiebeperkingen.

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# 0. Introduction

Secondary education teaches adolescents several valuable skills and attitudes. Aside from subjects such as languages, history, science etc., secondary education also teaches students skills and knowledge on e.g. civics, helps them develop social competences, and cultural awareness ("Council Recommendation" 7-8). These topics are often not considered to be specific to one subject or class, and are thus cross-curricular. Therefore, teachers of several different subjects are expected to integrate these cross-curricular skills in their classes. This is supported by for example the Flemish government's description of the 10 functions of teachers, that state that teaching subject matter is only one part of teachers' responsibilities ("Beroepsprofiel van de leraar"). Teachers are also partly responsible for the students' upbringing, and play a role as cultural participants ("Beroepsprofiel van de leraar").

This paper will focus mostly on secondary education in Flanders, although it will be possible to generalise many of my findings for other educational systems in other countries. For Flanders, the Flemish government has constructed a number of attainment targets that indicate the minimum skills that students are expected to acquire. There are also attitudinal targets, which should be aimed for, but do not have to be met. Attainment targets are evaluated for groups of students, not for students individually, and are therefore not necessarily criteria for passing or failing at school. In other words, these targets constitute guidelines for what skills and attitudes teachers should strive to teach their students ("Verklarende begrippenlijst"). The Flemish attainment targets have recently been revised, and those for the third and fourth form will be in use from 1 September 2021 onwards. Currently, no date has been set for the update of the fifth and sixth form ("Modernisering"). Nevertheless, I chose to refer to the revised attainment targets for the purpose of relevance in the future.

As these attainment targets only specify a desired outcome, but do not instruct how this outcome should be achieved, schools and teachers have some liberty to decide where they integrate these cross-curricular skills into their curriculum (Valcke and Standaert 20-32). One possible

approach is to teach some of these skills in language classes. Language classes may be useful because they offer the possibility of class discussions, oral or written reflections, etc. (Barrette et al. 223; Bloemert et al. 175). This paper will explore the possibility of using EFL classes to teach students about diversity and inclusion, specifically on the topic of disability.

First, I will discuss some Flemish attainment targets that are relevant to the topic of this paper. I will cite the targets that apply to the last two years of secondary education, as younger students may lack English proficiency necessary to benefit from reading and discussing stories on disability, which will be discussed further in chapter 1. The following attainment targets address civics and social-relational skills. I have translated these goals as literally as possible.

> Social-relational competences:
> - 5.2° The students consider others' opinions, physical and mental boundaries, and emotions in interactions. (attitudinal)
>
> Civics:
> - 7.1 The students examine the interaction between different layers of identities.
> - 7.2° The students treat individuals and groups in a diverse society respectfully and constructively. (attitudinal)
> - 7.4 The students use strategies to handle prejudice, stereotypes, abuse of power, and peer pressure.
> - 7.6 The students give historical and current examples of underlying mechanisms of intolerance, discrimination, and racism.
> - 7.7° The students are prepared to develop and adjust their opinion in a dialogue. (attitudinal)
>
> ("Secundair onderwijs")

Targets 5.2, 7.2, and 7.7 are attitudinal targets. As discussed previously, that means the teachers should encourage students adopt these attitudes as much as possible. Attitudes 5.2 and 7.2 state that students should learn to be considerate and respectful of others ("Secundair onderwijs"). These attitudes apply to situations where students learn to take on the perspective and consider the feelings of disabled people. While discussing these subjects, students are expected to contribute their opinions and adjust them if necessary ("Secundair onderwijs" 7.7). The other targets are not attitudinal targets, but skills and processes that the students are expected to be able to do. 7.1 requires students to examine different layers of identities ("Secundair onderwijs"). In the context of this paper, this means that students will examine the effects disability has on someone's life, but also how disability affects people's sense of connection with other people, and the effects on their position in society. 7.6 requires students to be able to give examples of underlying mechanisms of discrimination, and 7.4 tells them to use

strategies to handle things like prejudice and stereotypes, for example by gathering information and discussing these issues ("Secundair onderwijs"). Arguably, reading a book about disability from the perspective of a disabled person might give the students concrete examples and can be a good incentive to discuss discrimination and ableism in class. Thus, these attainment targets can be taken up in literature education within an EFL class.

There are other reasons why it might be interesting to discuss disability in class. In an attempt to make Flemish education more inclusive, the M-decree was approved in 2014 and issued 1 September 2015, which allowed more Special Education Needs (SEN) students to go to regular schools ("Grote lijnen van het M-decreet"; Valcke and Standaert 124). Before that, many SEN students were sent to specialised schooling (Valcke and Standaert 124). The result of this decree is increasing diversity in schools, which arguably requires more attention for how an inclusive environment can be created. Hehir remarks that ableism is a problem in schools, and that inclusivity should become the norm (4, 22-28). Schools should aim to be more accessible in their infrastructure and accommodations (Hehir 22-28), and they should teach non-disabled students that "disability is a natural aspect of life" (22).

A third reason why the topics of disability and inclusivity might be suitable subject matter for language classes, is because studies have shown that there is a correlation between reading stories and readers' improved ability to understand other people's mental states (Keen 12-13; Kidd and Castano 380; Mar, "Stories" 258-260; Tamir et al. 7). This ability is also called theory of mind (ToM) or mentalising (Kidd and Castano 377; Mar, "Stories" 257). ToM is related to perspective-taking, or "seeing the world as another person sees it", which is a possible way of discovering people's mental states (Mar, "Evaluating Stories" 457). Raymond Mar suggests that "if stories promote social cognition, then story-based interventions might promote perspective taking between different groups" ("Stories" 260). In educational settings, these story-based interventions are often practised, as literature is often used to "help [students] consider alternative ways of seeing, feeling, and understanding things" (Modern Language Association). This paper will contain a brief review of research that has been done on this possible effect of reading, and a discussion of how this effect might be used in schools.

This MA paper examines this crossroads between the fields of literature and education and discusses how reading fiction about disabilities might be valuable in secondary education. I argue that stories about disability can be used in schools to teach perspective-taking. This

indicates that EFL classes offer an opportunity to establish and improve an inclusive environment. I will refer to fiction about disabilities as disability fiction in the rest of this paper for length and clarity.

First, I will discuss theories on EFL didactics and literature education. Then, I will review the literature on the link between stories and the development of social abilities. In the second chapter of this paper, I will apply these principles to a concrete example: Sarah Kurchak's *I Overcame My Autism and All I Got Was This Lousy Anxiety Disorder*. Kurchak has written this book about her autism in a satirical version of a self-help book format, or an "anti-instruction guide", and claims she wants to use it to challenge the narratives on disability (Kurchak 9-10). *I Overcame My Autism* will be analysed to determine the various strategies that Sarah Kurchak employs to achieve her mission. These strategies and their potential effectiveness will then be examined, using the theoretical background as discussed in chapter 1. The last part of this paper will discuss possible risks and benefits of this method, and suggest alternative methods of teaching disability acceptance.

# 1. Social benefits of literature in EFL education

## 1.1. EFL literature teaching

### 1.1.1. Target audience

According to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages or CEFR, one of the components of English language proficiency is reading proficiency (Council of Europe 47). The CEFR notes that there are different types of reading depending on the text type and the reason for reading. For example, reading a work of fiction for pleasure might require a different skillset than scanning a text for information or reading instructions (Council of Europe 53).

According to the CEFR framework, components of reading comprehension include that students are expected to be able to "[express] a personal response to creative texts" and perform "analysis and criticism of creative texts" (Council of Europe 105-107). The Council of Europe has split reactions to creative works into two categories, because it considers "expressing a personal response" a less complex task than analysing and criticising a text (105-107). Readers are expected to be able to "relate events in a story … to similar events they have experienced or heard about" from the B1 level onwards (Council of Europe 106-107). B1-level learners can also discuss characters' thoughts and emotions, as well as their own. B2-level learners and upwards can support their interpretation, reactions and feelings about a text with arguments and more detailed explanations (Council of Europe 106-107). The CEFR Companion Volume notes that analysing and criticising texts will be more suited for an "upper secondary and university level", as this process is more complicated than giving a personal response (Council of Europe 105-108). They expect that language learners can perform these tasks from a proficiency level of B2 onwards, with increasing complexity as the language learner becomes more proficient (Council of Europe 105-8). Language learners at lower levels will be able to describe, but evaluation of texts might be difficult for them (Council of Europe 105-108).

The Flemish attainment targets for language learning are based on the CEFR levels. For students in vocational education programmes, literature is not introduced in the curriculum until the fifth and sixth form, and these students are expected to reach an A2 level in receptive skills for their language classes by the end of the sixth form ("Uitgangspunten arbeidsmarktfinaliteit"). Students who follow double finality programmes will aim for a B1 level ("Uitgangspunten dubbele finaliteit"). In programmes that prepare students for higher education, students are expected to reach B1 levels at the end of the fourth form

("Uitgangspunten tweede graad doorstroomfinaliteit"). During the fifth and sixth form, they are expected to reach at least a B1+ level in foreign language proficiency ("Uitgangspunten derde graad doorstroomfinaliteit"). Of this last group, only students who study modern language programmes will engage much in discussions of their reading experience and reactions to literary works, and analysis of these works. The focus in other programmes, on the other hand, is more on establishing a positive attitude towards literature ("Uitgangspunten Moderne talen").

As discussed earlier, the CEFR suggests that a B1-B2 level is a minimum for reacting to and analysing texts adequately. When these language proficiency targets are compared to the Council of Europe's estimates for when readers can react to, discuss, and analyse texts, students in the last two years of preparation for higher education are best qualified as a possible target audience for my project. Therefore, I will focus mostly on that group in this paper. It is possible that teachers would be able to discuss stories on disabilities more extensively and in greater depth with modern language students, who will be trained more in these skills.

### 1.1.2. Comprehensive approach

Pupils are expected to read works of fiction, and teachers often use this opportunity to select books with socio-cultural topics, which can be discussed in the classroom (Modern Language Association). Thus, English fiction is currently being used to widen pupils' perspectives and to teach them new things (Bloemert et al. 170; Modern Language Association). This paper examines literature on this common practice of using fiction to teach perspective-taking, and focusses specifically on the potential outcomes for using disability fiction this way. First, I will discuss EFL didactics to establish possible methods of teaching disability fiction.

Literature can be used in an EFL classroom as to help students practice their reading strategies and improve their language proficiency. However, reading in an EFL classroom ideally focusses on more than reading comprehension and language focus alone. If teachers want to maximise the benefits of the texts they use in class, there should be focus on content as well as focus on form (Barrette et al. 218; Bloemert et al. 172). In 2007, the MLA proposed a more thorough integration of literature and culture within higher-education language curricula, with literature as cultural narratives. However, scholars have observed that, while many agree that literature plays an important and beneficial role within the foreign language classroom, clarity on the exact position literature holds, and how it is best approached, has been lacking (Bloemert et al. 169-170, 172-173). Additionally, much of the research on literature in language education

has been performed in higher-education settings (Bloemert et al. 170). As a response, Bloemert et al. have determined four distinct approaches to literature education in the FL classroom and have compiled these into one "comprehensive approach" (173-174, 176). Their point of departure was the Dutch secondary education system, but arguably these concepts are transferable to other EFL classes. Bloemert et al. claim that, as the four approaches each have their own educational value for the student, the combination of the four enables the FL teacher to maximise the benefits of literature education (176).

The four approaches are: the "text approach", the "context approach", the "reader approach", and the "language approach" (Bloemert et al. 174-176). First, the "text approach" indicates focus on formal aspects such as genre, text type, literary terminology, and the relationship between form and meaning. This approach is useful for students because it can improve reading comprehension and teach students how to interpret literary texts (Bloemert et al. 174). Second, "Context approach" is an approach to reading literature where the biographical, historical, and cultural context of the text is most important. In this scenario, literature gives the reader insight into the "culturally, historically, and socially rich diversities of our world" (Bloemert et al. 174). The "context approach" may improve cultural awareness and challenge the reader to reflect on their beliefs on culture and diversity (Bloemert et al. 174-175). Third, the "reader approach" encompasses the reader's interpretation and reading experiences (Bloemert et al. 175). Particularly relevant to this paper is Bloemert et al.'s claim that this approach invites readers to engage critically with the text, which may improve theory of mind: they write that classroom discussions of literary texts allow students to reflect on different mental states (175). The fourth approach is the "language approach", which is concerned with a focus on language and discourse. This approach allows literature to be used as an example of different types of authentic extended language use (Bloemert et al. 175-176). Bloemert et al. argue that the ideal way to teach literature in an EFL classroom would be to combine the four approaches into one "comprehensive approach". This allows the teacher to use the text to its fullest extent (Bloemert et al. 176).

Arguably, in the case of reading disability fiction in order to increase understanding of disabilities, the listed benefits of the "context approach" and the "reader approach" seem valuable. Using the context approach, the topics disability and ableism could be discussed. This could stimulate students to consider new and diverse perspectives, and potentially become aware of any prejudices, misconceptions they might have, or ableism they might engage in

themselves. The reader approach could then be used to have students think critically about the topics discussed in the text, and there could be room for discussion of reader response. The reader approach may help to explore if the students felt any empathy or sympathy with the characters in the story. The use of the combination of the four approaches, or the comprehensive approach, would allow the teacher to combine this focus on the topic of the text, i.e. disability, and the goal of teaching disability acceptance, with more skills that are more centred on language proficiency. The text approach and the language approach would centre more on text aspects and discourse used within the text, which would connect the lessons on disability with the rest of the EFL curriculum.

If teachers were to use disability fiction, for example *I Overcame My Autism*, to improve perspective-taking in their students, the lesson plan might look as follows. Pre-reading activities should include gathering or activating knowledge on the context of the book (Barrette et al. 218), e.g. what the disability (in this case autism) is and how it affects autistic people, the prevalence of the disability, ableism, etc. In this phase, words or concepts could be brainstormed or explained that students will need in order to understand the text. After this general conceptualisation, students read the text or fragments of the text, and the focus in this part of the lesson shifts to reading comprehension. Barrette et al. suggest that "while-reading tasks" should also "guide … interpretation" and that this is best done "global to detailed" (218). A possible guiding strategy could be guiding questions that let the students know what they need to find and reflect on. Post-reading activities will implement the four approaches: text, language, context, and reader, as advised by Bloemert et al. For text and language focus, the teacher could ask the students questions, and elaborate on their replies with an explanation of the relevant concepts (Barrette et al. 221-222). Guided or semi-guided classroom discussions might be a suitable activity for the context and personal approach, as they can help students better understand the text and its concepts (Barrette et al. 223). Moreover, discussions might also increase the effects of the text (Barrette et al. 223; Bloemert et al. 175), a possibility which will be further explained later in this chapter.

## 1.2.    Stories and mentalising

In the previous part of this chapter, I have mentioned that reading works of fiction might have a beneficial effect on students' ability to consider new perspectives. This use of literature to improve people's abilities to empathise and to teach them new perspectives is a common

practice (Keen vii; Lissa et al. 45; Modern Language Association). Nevertheless, it remains important to investigate the true effects of literature, and the underlying processes that result in its impact on social abilities (Lissa et al. 45). In this part of chapter one, I will discuss how stories can improve social abilities, and how this can be implemented in an EFL classroom setting.

There are indications that using stories would be a good method of improving students' empathic abilities. People have long assumed that stories might impact our perspective and be a source of valuable life lessons (Mar, "Evaluating Stories" 454). This assumption has been confirmed by studies that have shown a correlation between reading literature and improved social cognition (Kidd and Castano 378; Mar, "Stories" 258-260; Tamir et al. 7). Some of those studies have found indications that there is a causal link between reading and improved social abilities (Mar "Stories" 259). These social abilities include an ability to empathise, to take consider others' perspectives, and to infer others' mental states (Mar, "Evaluating Stories" 457-458). A good understanding of other people's mental states, also known as theory of mind (ToM) or mentalising, is essential for having successful social interactions (Kidd and Castano 377). Mar considers perspective-taking a way to consider others' mental states by considering their experience from their point of view ("Evaluating Stories" 457). These concepts are also related to empathy, as ToM is positively linked to an ability to empathise (Kidd and Castano 377), although empathy, or feeling what we believe the other person to feel, also involves an emotional state (Keen 5). In other words, theory of mind is the ability to know other people's emotions and thoughts, and empathy is the ability to feel these same emotions (Breithaupt 23; Keen 5). Both abilities are engaged and can be practised through reading stories (Keen 11, 78; Kidd and Castano 377; Mar, "Evaluating Stories" 468; Tamir et al. 6-8). Caracciolo writes that "fiction can make empathic identification much stronger than it usually is in our engagement with other people, for the simple reason that we do not just "put ourselves into the shoes" of another; we imaginatively reconstruct those shoes … on the basis of textual cues" ("Beyond Other Minds" 48). In other words, there is reason to believe that stories could be valuable in teaching students to empathise and take on new perspectives.

There are several possible explanations for why fiction might improve social abilities, and multiple underlying processes have been detected and studied. Explanations for this phenomenon are that readers practice their social skills through fiction because reading encourages readers to infer characters' mental states and thus acts as a simulation of real life or

offers practice (Kidd and Castano 380; Mar, "Stories" 257; Tamir et al. 7), or readers can learn from the content of stories, which offer knowledge that may be useful in the real world (Mar "Evaluating Stories" 454, 456). Mar has constructed a framework that allows researchers to examine both possible explanations side by side ("Evaluating Stories" 454, 456). This framework evaluates how, when and why stories can improve social abilities (Mar, "Evaluating Stories" 454). Since the concept social cognition is rather broad, Mar distinguishes two categories: social processes and social content ("Evaluating Stories" 454-456). Social processes encompass processes such as mentalising ability or Theory of Mind, perspective-taking, and empathising or sympathising (Mar, "Evaluating Stories" 457). Social content, on the other hand, denotes knowledge that can be learned about the social world, for example "propositional knowledge about human psychology, human experience, and human relationship", but also social schemas and models, and experiences (Mar, "Evaluating Stories" 461-462). In the Social Processes and Content Entrained by Narrative or SPaCEN framework, both categories can be analysed to determine if a story improves social processes or social content, or both (Mar, "Evaluating Stories" 456).

In order to establish that a narrative improves social processes, the following three tenets must apply: "(1) stories must represent the social world, (2) social processes must be engaged by stories, and (3) these social processes must be improved by frequent engagement" (Mar, "Evaluating Stories" 454). The Social Content account also has three tenets: "(1) stories must contain accurate social content, (2) this content must be learned during story comprehension, and (3) this content must be applied in the real-world" (Mar, "Evaluating Stories" 454). To measure if stories are efficient in bringing about change, outcomes must also be evaluated (Mar, "Evaluating Stories" 466). In the following chapter, I will use this SPaCEN framework to examine if Sarah Kurchak's *I Overcame My Autism* might invite students to consider new perspectives.

### 1.2.1. Aspects that promote empathy

Research shows that reading fiction or stories has a positive influence on ToM, whereas reading nonfiction does not (Kidd and Castano 379; Mar, "Stories" 258; Tamir et al. 5). Mar nuances this statement by adding that the different outcomes can be ascribed to the "narrative aspect […] rather than the distinction between fiction or nonfiction", and that therefore a biography would have similar effects as fictional stories ("Evaluating Stories" 455). According to Kidd and Castano, the effects of reading on ToM development are strongest after reading literary

fiction (377). Kidd and Castano state that this might be due to the presence of "complicated individuals whose inner lives are rarely easily discerned but warrant exploration" in literary narratives, which is similar to real-life scenarios where we need to discern others' mental states (377). However, they also state that literature differs from real life as characters might challenge expectations more, causing readers to consider a wider variety of perspectives, training ToM (378). Similarly, Lissa et al. write that "literary characters … [confront readers] with perspectives and worldviews dramatically different from their own" (45). It is in this respect that literary fiction differs from popular fiction, with popular fiction drawing on more stereotypical and predictable scenarios and characters, while literary fiction is unpredictable and defamiliarising (Kidd and Castano 378; Lissa et al. 45). However, other scholars argue that the distinction between literary fiction and popular fiction is not always clear (Caracciolo and Van Duuren 527; Mar, "Stories" 260). Moreover, some scholars argue that the reverse is true. For example, Keen writes that "lowbrow fiction" might invite more empathic response than literary works (83). Some other studies have found that romance fiction has a larger impact on social abilities, but other findings differ (Mar "Stories" 260; Tamir et al. 2). While genre and quality seem to be some indication of a text's ability to evoke empathy or improve mentalising, results seem mixed.

Consequently, it seems more reliable to look at other features of a text to determine how effective it will be in improving empathy. Mar states that some types of content, for example "suspenseful segments", might have a higher chance of encouraging mentalising ("Stories" 260). Tamir et al. discuss a similar idea and suggest that "immersion into and simulation of the mental and emotional lives of the characters may be the mechanism of change" (2). These statements about suspenseful situations and immersion are in accordance with Keen's theories on narrative empathy (93-94). Keen claims that readers empathise readily with "child characters [who are] subjected to cruel or unfair treatment" (69). She observes that, while character identification may sometimes depend on similarities between the reader's experience and that of the character, reader can still empathise with characters who are very different from them (70, 93-96). This means that readers are likely to empathise with child characters who are victimised in the narrative, even if the readers have not had similar experiences themselves. This empathy for the character may consequently invite character identification (Keen 70). Another possible factor that can predict narrative empathy, is the use of internal perspective (Keen 96). The ideal narrative strategy is disputed (Lissa et al. 58-60; Keen 96-97), but scholars agree that inside views will usually evoke more empathy than purely external views, as readers

will often empathise with the character whose perspective is given (Booth 245-256, 377-378; Keen 96-97). Nevertheless, inside perspectives do not automatically mean that the reader will empathise with the character (Keen 97-98; Lissa et al. 58-60). Because other factors such as the way the character presents itself, the readers' age, their experience with reading, and their dispositions for perspective taking may influence reading experience, the exact impact that narrative strategies have on narrative empathy is difficult to predict (Lissa et al. 48, 58-60). In conclusion, multiple strategies can be employed within a story to help promote immersion and perspective-taking.

A fourth important aspect is not an element that is in the text, but describes an aspect of the interaction between the reader and the text. Keen names character identification as an important aspect of the reading experience, as identification with characters may improve narrative empathy (93-96). For successful character identification, it helps if readers "identify with characters' goals and plans" or if the characters' experiences resonate with them (Keen 94). It is more likely that readers will experience character identification if they can recognise some part of themselves in that character (Keen 94). Nevertheless, character identification is still possible even when the reader and character are very different (Keen 69-70). Moreover, identification with characters depends more on the characters' intentions than on their traits (Keen 95). This means that even if readers feel their personality or circumstances differ from those of the character, identification with the character, and empathy for the character, are possible.

### 1.2.2. Implementation in EFL curricula

Some things need to be considered if these theories are to be applied to an EFL classroom setting in secondary education. First, it should be considered that this paper discusses the effects of reading stories in a second or foreign language. Research performed by Chung-Fat-Yim et al. has shown that there is no difference in cognitive or emotional engagement with stories in L1 or L2 (304-305). Thus, I do not expect the outcomes to be different in an EFL classroom setting than they are in the research that has been previously discussed. On the contrary, the added dimension of classroom discussions on the topic and guidance by the teacher towards new and deeper interpretations might add to the effect (Keen 91). Caracciolo and Van Duuren have also discussed this possibility, and they point out that there is insufficient research on the effects of post-reading activities (525-26). As mentioned earlier, some scholars believe that post-reading activities such as class discussions might help deepen students' understanding of

the text, thus increasing the effects of reading on mentalising abilities (Barrette et al. 223; Bloemert et al. 175). Although this explanation seems plausible, more research needs to be done on how much post-reading activities can impact results as compared to reading itself (Caracciolo and Van Duuren 525-26). In the context of this project, this means it remains important to focus on post-reading tasks and not only on the reading itself.

Finally, it is important to note that potential beneficial effects on theory of mind are not the only reason to implement literature in the EFL curriculum. As Caracciolo and Van Duuren have pointed out, literary texts should not be evaluated on their ability to bring about real-life change (523). Moreover, Keen writes that inspiring altruism should not be the only reason to read fiction, because in doing so, we "risk spoiling a great source of aesthetic pleasure" (168). It is for this reason that I suggest the use of Bloemert et al.'s comprehensive approach. This comprehensive approach ensures that multiple aspects of the text are investigated, which shifts the focus from a reading that centres solely on possible social improvement to a reading of the work as a text, an example of extended discourse, and an opportunity for immersion and engagement.

## 2. Case study: *I Overcame My Autism*

In the previous chapter, I have discussed some theories, findings, and approaches that apply to my paper. I have also discussed how disability fiction could be used in EFL classrooms as a tool to improve students' ability to mentalise. To make my explanations on this topic more concrete, I want to present an example in this chapter by way of a case study. For this case study, I have chosen the memoir *I Overcame My Autism and All I Got Was This Lousy Anxiety Disorder* by autistic writer Sarah Kurchak.

I decided to work on *I Overcame My Autism* after I had settled on a topic for this paper, and I chose Kurchak's book for several reasons. First, I will discuss my reasons for choosing a work on autism. Autism spectrum disorder or ASD is a frequently occurring disability, with a prevalence of around 1 in 160, or, according to the Flemish Agency for Persons with Disabilities, 1 in 100 people ("Autism Spectrum Disorders"; "Autismespectrumstoornis"; Elsabbagh et al. 172). As a developmental disability characterised by social and communicative difficulties ("Autism Spectrum Disorders"), ASD seems like a suitable disability to discuss in class. According to Gillespie-Lynch et al., students often have good basic knowledge of what autism is, but there are still misconceptions and stigma that needs to be addressed if autistic students are to feel welcome in educational settings (2554). The fact that there is so much stigma surrounding a frequently occurring neurotype like ASD seems to make this a good subject for classroom discussions and reflections. After I had selected a disability, I searched for a non-fiction book or story on ASD that was written for the purpose of decreasing stigma by presenting autistic characters in a realistic way. I chose to do this case study on a book that had such a mission so that I could examine how the author tries to change readers' notions on autism. Sarah Kurchak's *I Overcame My Autism and All I Got Was This Lousy Anxiety Disorder* met my requirements.

Sarah Kurchak explicitly states multiple times what she hopes the outcomes of her book will be. She argues for "greater acceptance of and support for autistic people" (ix). In the introduction, she writes how she wants to achieve this:

> [This book] gave me a chance to be the change in terms of autism narratives I wanted to see in the world. Most of the stories you hear about autistic people in media and art are either miserable tragedies or inspirational triumphs, while most of our real lives exist

somewhere in between. With my book, I could finally introduce some much needed ¯\\_(ツ)_/¯ into the conversation. (9-10)

Kurchak observes that autistic people are often not involved in their own narratives, and media does not seem to have autistic people in mind when they create autistic characters (6-7). She tries to combat this issue by writing a book on her own experiences, which might give a more realistic portrayal of what autism can be like (x-xi, 9-10). With her book, she hopes to reach both autistic and non-autistic people, offering autistic people relatable stories, "perspectives and insights that might be of some use" (x), and discussing "bigger issues and discussions" for non-autistic people (xi). Kurchak believes that she can use stories about her own experience to encourage a more understanding attitude towards ASD: "I learned so much about the world outside of myself from the books, music, shows and films I loved, and I thought maybe I could make the reverse true for that outside world and whatever was going on inside of me. And, just maybe, if they liked the stories, people might also learn to like me someday" (218). Although she acknowledges that acceptance would not solve all the problems autistic people have, she points out that the environment can have a big impact on how autism is perceived, and on the wellbeing of the autistic person (78-79).

The previous excerpts of the book indicate that Sarah Kurchak uses her book to argue for more understanding for and acceptance of ASD. In this second chapter of my MA paper, I will discuss some techniques and strategies she uses to encourage empathy and perspective-taking. I will also discuss how these strategies might have an impact if this book were be added to the EFL curriculum. First, it must be verified if Kurchak's book might fit the requirements for a text that can be used to inspire empathy and perspective-taking.

## 2.1.  Is *I Overcame My Autism* an appropriate text for this purpose?

As discussed in chapter one, literature suggests that improvement of ToM is most likely to occur when reading fiction or stories. A memoir, however, is not usually considered a work of fiction. This might not be an issue, as Raymond Mar states that the "narrative aspect" is more important than the "distinction between fiction or nonfiction", and that consequently, reading a biography would have similar effects as reading fiction would ("Evaluating Stories" 455). Instead of making the distinction between fiction and non-fiction, he distinguishes between stories and texts that are not stories. Therefore, I will analyse if *I Overcame My Autism* meets

Mar's requirements for a story. Mar defines a story: "agent-centered accounts of goal-motivated causally-linked events that represent and evoke experiences akin to those found in the real world" ("Evaluating Stories" 456). This means that stories need three elements: social agents, events that are goal-centred and are presented in a causal order, and relatively realistic experiences. The first element, social agents, is present in Kurchak's book, which centres around her own experiences. Second, the story's events must be goal-oriented, and presented in a temporal and causal order. Kurchak's book is presented as "fifteen uneasy steps to an autistic 'success' story", with each chapter as one of the steps (10). These steps are organised in a temporal order, from Kurchak's birth to where she is now. It could be said that there is also a causal order and that actions are motivated by goals, because Kurchak tells the story of how she learned to live and cope with her autism. Third, because this memoir is based on Kurchak's own life, the events also qualify as realistic experiences. These three elements combined mean that *I Overcame My Autism*, although nonfictional, qualifies as a story. Consequently, we can expect it holds a potential for improving social abilities.

Mar's SPaCEN framework allows me to investigate in more detail if the social content and processes in *I Overcame My Autism* might lead to improved social cognition. Because this paper focusses on the improvement of perspective-taking abilities, which is a social process, I will only use the social processes model. I have already explained that "(P1) stories must [represent] the social world" (Mar, "Evaluating Stories" 458) applies. Research suggests that (P2) "stories must […] invite social processes" (Mar, "Evaluating Stories" 458) also applies, as Tamir et al. have found indications that stories might evoke mentalising (6-8). The third tenet, "(P3) [these] social processes […] must be amenable to improvement through practice" (Mar, "Evaluating Stories" 458) is true for mentalising processes, which can be improved by training (Keen 11, 78; Mar, "Evaluating Stories" 468). Thus, this analysis of *I Overcame My Autism* suggests that it may succeed in improving mentalising abilities and teaching readers to consider the perspective of autistic people.

Because this thesis focusses on the use of literature in an EFL classroom, comprehensibility is important. I have used the website checktext.org to attribute a Flesch Reading Ease Score to some parts of Kurchak's book in order to have an estimate of its reading difficulty. I chose to use the shorter essay "Real Autism" from the introduction, and some shorter excerpts of other parts of the book, which I typed into the website. The essay "Real Autism" had a score of 70.2. The "Disclaimer" had a score of 80.7. Both scores indicate that *I Overcame My Autism* is not a

difficult text to read in terms of word and sentence length. A second possible obstacle might be cultural differences. Sarah Kurchak often refers to celebrities, media, Canadian things, etc. with which Flemish teens might be unfamiliar. Luckily, she seems to anticipate that her reader might not understand these references, and often accompanies her text of a footnote that explains them, e.g. when she talks about Max Headroom, Canadian two-dollar bills, Nancy Kerrigan, The Cure, Los Ingobernables de Japon, and AAC (18, 21, 41, 45, 74, 180). These footnotes make the cultural component of this work more accessible for younger and foreign readers. Overall, *I Overcame My Autism* might be considered an appropriate text for secondary school EFL classes. As determined in the first chapter, especially the last two years of secondary education programmes that prepare students for higher education, will be suitable audiences.

## 2.2.    Strategies used to promote empathy and perspective-taking

In the previous chapter, four different aspects that may increase perspective-taking have been discussed: the use of inside perspective, suspenseful segments, victimised child characters, and character identification. An analysis of how these elements occur in *I Overcame My Autism* might give insight into how this book might convince their reader to consider new perspectives or feel empathy. I want to note that this does not mean the author has intentionally used these techniques. As I have found no suspenseful fragments in *I Overcame My Autism*, the following paragraphs will be an analysis of perspective, injustice towards child characters, and character identification.

Sarah Kurchak's memoir is written in a first-person narrative which shows all Kurchak's reflections, feelings, and thoughts as she remembers the experiences she writes about. As discussed in the previous chapter, inside perspectives are generally more conducive to empathy than external ones (Booth 245-256, 377-378; Keen 96-97). In the case of *I Overcame My Autism*, this inside perspective gives the reader access to the world from an autistic point of view and confronts them with struggles and thoughts they may never have considered before. While this aspect is present throughout the book, in some instances it is instrumentalised and contrasted with the perspective people usually consider. For example, during a trip to Vegas with her mother, Kurchak discovers that it is painful when her mother touches her arm (220-224). Her mother is hurt when she finds out, and the mom's perspective is first described:

Somewhere out on that casino floor, a mother faced her worst fear: losing her only child. […] After every bit of love, and patience, and (over?) protective mama bear-ness, after every hour spent encouraging her, and helping her through her tears and triumphs, every concert and every vacation, every slipped twenty when her job couldn't cover her bills, and every treated meal and indulgence, her daughter couldn't even bear her touch? […] (221-22)

Kurchak follows this segment with an explanation that this perspective of the parent is what is most often considered. Without invalidating her mother's emotions, she adds: "I just want you to know that, while that was unfolding, this other story was happening, too" (222). The next pages explain Kurchak's thoughts and feelings on this event, of which some are quoted here:

[…] I called my husband and tried to articulate what had happened. And why it happened. And why it was the end of the fucking world. […] I don't know what's going on here. I'm really freaked out about it. What if this is a thing now? What if I can't let the people I love touch me anymore? Like, it's just normal stuff that I've always done. That we've always done. She was just resting her hand on my forearm. It's no big deal! Well, at least it used to be no big deal. But now it hurts. IT HURTS. And I don't understand why and I'm so scared. […] Because I don't know how to tell myself that my sensory issues are changing and getting worse, and I don't know what is going to happen to me as I get older and I'm afraid I'll lose everything I am right now. And then I'll lose everything I have right now and I'm not ready for this. I'm so scared. […] And it just plays into every fucking fear I have because what if I do just keep getting worse? What if I can't keep up anymore? What if I am just a burden to all of you? […] But I do know Mom's upset and I do hate myself for it and this is the last fucking thing I want in the world. She's the last fucking person I would ever want to hurt. (222-23)

Kurchak demonstrates how this event made her panic about her sensory issues and her relationship with her mother (222-24). In this fragment, Kurchak actively uses inside perspective as a way to confront her reader with a side of the story she thinks they may be unfamiliar with.

A second element in narratives that might invite or increase empathy, is injustice towards child characters (Keen 69). In the chapters of the memoir that cover Kurchak's childhood, Kurchak

stresses her struggle to fit in with her peers. As a child, Kurchak was bullied by former friends, but did not notice they no longer liked her at first because she could not observe the signs (29). She tells a story about her "woeful" eleventh birthday party, where these bullies were invited because she was "still under the illusion [they] were [her] friends at that point" (39). Kurchak was excluded from the activities at her own party, and the bullies stole one of her video games (39). Because of her "general unlikeable aura", Kurchak's other classmates did not help, leaving Kurchak feeling miserable (30). After changing to a different school, Kurchak tried to fit in as best as she could to avoid being bullied again, but writes: "the only problem was, I didn't have a clue how to do that" (30). Eventually she decides she needs to wear jeans to be accepted, even though they feel like a "torture chamber" (31-33). She calls this jeans story "a story of a girl hurting herself so others won't hurt her" (37). Both inside perspective and unfair treatment of a child character are combined here to invite an empathetic response from the reader. Although Kurchak writes that she was "unlikable" as a child (30), Kurchak's descriptions of her emotional pain might make the reader empathise with her.

The combination of the aforementioned strategies might help character identification (Keen 69-70). As previously mentioned, while similarities between the reader and the character might help identification, it is not necessary for empathy (Keen 94-95). Whether or not the reader feels Kurchak has similar personality traits or experiences as they have, is therefore not necessarily important. Arguably, the narrative strategies used in *I Overcame My Autism* may help teenage students understand that Kurchak's intentions behind her struggles and actions – an attempt to be accepted by her peers – are not very different from their own.

In conclusion, Sarah Kurchak's *I Overcame My Autism* might be considered a suitable option for teaching disability acceptance through the use of literature. Because I have not empirically tested the outcomes of reading and discussing this text in an EFL classroom, I cannot definitively prove what the effects might be. Nevertheless, an analysis of some aspects of Kurchak's text show that there are elements which may invite empathy and improve mentalising. Moreover, a significant body of works in the fields of psychology and literature suggests that an improvement of perspective-taking abilities is possible.

## 3. Possible outcomes and alternatives

### 3.1.1. The effects of reading literature

The effects of reading literature differ depending on the text and the reader. Kidd and Castano state that "fiction seems … to expand our knowledge of others' lives, helping us recognize our similarity to them" (377). If this is true, it could be argued that fiction might help its readers overcome differences, which might lead to a more inclusive and tolerant society. Many authors seem to make similar claims (Keen 121, 123, 167). Tamir et al. state that good citizenship may be linked to reading, and that even changes on a larger scale are possible, as these changes can find their origins in altered behaviour of individual readers (1, 7). However, other theories suggests that fiction is not always so effective in changing the world. It is important to note that improved mentalising does not necessarily lead to alterations in behaviour or more altruistic behaviour (Keen 90). While studies have stated that stories may improve the readers' ability to take on new perspective (Kidd and Castano 380; Mar, "Stories" 258-260; Tamir et al. 7), Keen argues that effects of reading only rarely cause changes in behaviour (22, 65, 90). She notes that many authors express a desire to make readers sympathise or change their behaviour, but most novels do not succeed to bring real life change in a significant way (89-92, 167-168).

Aside from the possibility that empathic engagement with literary characters does not transfer to changes in behaviour, other factors are to be considered that may affect the outcome of this project. For example, individual differences in social abilities and disposition to empathise may vary (Keen vii, 6, 10, 72-73). Moreover, readers' personality and life experiences might also impact the outcomes. Finally, readers might have different interpretations of the story or judge or sympathise with characters differently (Keen 75, 130, 136-138). Because much of the effect of the story depends on readers' characteristics and interpretations, the efficacy of narratives for every individual reader might be hard to predict. This means that some of the effects and interpretations will depend on individual characteristics of the students.

There are also some risks involved with using narrative empathy. Because readers' interpretations vary, there is a risk that their interpretations will be inaccurate. Keen describes this phenomenon as empathic inaccuracy (136-138). Authors can attempt to avoid empathic inaccuracy by describing the character's mental states clearly, but the risk of an incorrect interpretation or overshadowing of the characters' feelings by those of the reader, remains (Keen 136). Other risks might be more harmful. Keen warns that if fiction can teach us things,

it can also teach us dangerous things (40, 131). An even worse scenario is when readers enjoy empathising with characters' pain. For example, Breithaupt describes the risk of sadistic empathy, a phenomenon where "empathy […] becomes the goal of sadistic behavior" (Breithaupt 161-162). It is also possible that readers fail to empathise with the story, which might lead to invalidation or mocking. In *I Overcame My Autism*, Kurchak describes situations where parents of autistic children demanded personal information from her to verify that she was autistic, or autistic enough to be worth listening to (155-158). Teachers should be mindful of the fact that reading a text for the purpose of making students empathise with it is not without risks. Maybe some of these issues can be avoided if the teacher takes care to guide discussions and interpretations in the right direction.

### 3.1.2.  Alternative methods

In "Eliminating Ableism in Education", Hehir writes that it is important that disability is considered in diversity programs at schools (Hehir 22). Hehir suggests that having discussions on disability can make a difference: "students learn about people with disabilities who have achieved great things as well as those who live ordinary lives. People with disabilities are not presented in a patronizing or stereotypical manner" (Hehir 22-23). This paper has examined how disability fiction could be used in language classrooms to teach students about disability acceptance, and as a basis for discussions on disability and ableism.

However, Keen suggests that novel reading should not be tasked with the responsibility of making readers better people, but that people, for example teachers and parents, are responsible for inspiring altruism in others (167-168). She argues that "a simple perspective-taking game can inspire altruism" (168). Reading should therefore not be considered the only method of eliminating ableism or encouraging disability acceptance, but it might perhaps be used alongside other techniques.

If discussions alone can make a difference, the use of fiction, although potentially useful, is not absolutely necessary to achieve this goal. Within the context of an EFL classroom, other media such as film, theatre, podcasts, etc. might also tell the stories of disabled people. Other activities are also possible, for example debates or interviews. Gillespie-Lynch et al. describe earlier attempts at decreasing stigma around ASD, and report that "stigma is more difficult to change than knowledge" (2561). In their own study, Gillespie-Lynch et al. have observed that a short training that gives information about autism, accompanied by first-hand accounts of autistic

people, was successful in decreasing stigma and teaching students more about autism, although they have not observed a change in behavioural intentions (2558-2559). Further research on teaching inclusivity could investigate what the best methods and media are for this purpose and for different groups of students.

# 4. Conclusion

This paper has united current research on education with research from the fields of psychology and literature to determine how disability fiction could be used in language classrooms to teach inclusivity and eliminate ableism. Studies in literature and psychology suggest that reading stories can improve social abilities, for example ability to mentalise, empathise, and consider new perspectives. Students may be more understanding and accepting of disabled people if they can empathise with them and are presented with realistic representation. This means that fiction as a tool to improve social abilities might be used as a valuable addition to diversity programs in school.

I have examined how these potential benefits of reading could be used to challenge ableism and promote disability acceptance. First, current theories and studies on the link between fiction and improved social abilities have been reviewed. These theories have then been applied to Sarah Kurchak's *I Overcame My Autism and All I Got Was This Lousy Anxiety Disorder*, a memoir by an autistic author. An analysis of Kurchak's work has shown that this book has the potential of making people more understanding of ASD by encouraging them to reflect on new perspectives.

Effects of this practice have been discussed, with some potential benefits and risks that should be considered. It should be noted that fiction often does not succeed in changing behaviour, and therefore additional activities and methods must be used, for example classroom discussions and other post-reading activities.

For a successful implementation in the language curriculum of this type of reading, this paper has suggested Bloemert et al.'s comprehensive approach, which combines focus on language, text, context, and reader into one comprehensive method. This approach allows focus on form as well as focus on content, and thus ensures that the benefits of the text can be maximised. Because sufficient language proficiency is required for engaging with literature in this way and having class discussions, this paper has focussed most on students in the last two years of secondary education. Expressed in CEFR levels, detailed analysis and evaluation of creative texts is possible at a B2-level and higher, but B1-level students will also be able to react to and analyse fiction, albeit in a less detailed and more descriptive manner.

## 4.1. Limitations and further research.

A first limitation of this paper is its limited scope. Because this is a short thesis and I wanted to connect the theory on reading and improving cognitive abilities with teaching practice, I have focussed mostly on secondary education in Flanders. However, the information and practices in this paper can be generalised for other regions.

Second, sufficient proficiency in English and reading comprehension are required if the teacher wants the students to learn from reading this book. Students need to be proficient in both reading English and spoken interaction if the teacher wants them to read this work and discuss it in class. A possible solution could be to find similar works in the students' native language, or to work together with multiple teachers and discuss ableism and disability in multiple subjects. These solutions would allow students to have conversations on these topics in a language they are more comfortable with. Further research could investigate how stories could be used for students who are less proficient in English, or who have less time for languages and literature in their curriculum.

This short MA paper focussed on the potential effects of reading on students' ability to learn to take the perspective of disabled people. As discussed in chapter 3, books are not the only medium that conveys stories. It might therefore be interesting to investigate other media and their effects. Perhaps further research could examine what types of media are most effective for improving mentalising, if there is a medium that improves the chances of real-world change, and what activities might best accompany these stories.

For my case study, I chose a book on ASD. Further research could also investigate if effects of reading such a book as *I Overcame My Autism* might transfer to other domains or result in a more understanding or accepting attitude towards other disabilities. It might also be interesting to examine if effects are long-term or short-term effects.

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