Chapter 13
Kindness Makes a Difference:
Assessing the Efficacy of Addy & Uno, an Off-Broadway Musical, and the Realabilities Educational Comic Book Series Curriculum in Enhancing Children's Kindness, Empathy, and Interest in Their Peers With Disabilities and Mental Health Disorders

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ABSTRACT

High quality interventions, which employ an extended contact model, wherein stories, roleplaying, and other appealing informational media are used to promote more positive intergroup attitudes, tend to be effective at enhancing the attitudes, intentions, and interests of typical children toward their peers with differences. The following four studies assess the efficacy of The Realabilities comic book series and the Addy & Uno off-Broadway musical, which promote kindness, empathy, and a stop-bullying platform while teaching about disabilities and/or mental health disorders. The studies include 1) a qualitative study of 19 fourth grade students from an elementary school in Paramus, NJ, who viewed the Addy & Uno off-Broadway musical and participated in the full Realabilities educational comic book series intervention; 2) a qualitative study of 20 high school students with diverse disabilities, who participated in the full Realabilities comic book series intervention; 3) a quantitative study of 76 students from a high

school in Long Island City, NY, who read the first mental health-based Realabilities comic book; and finally, 4) a quantitative study of 66 students from a high school in Long Island City, NY, who read the first and second mental-health based Realabilities comics. The researchers used a coding system to find principal themes in the qualitative data and used modified versions of the adjective checklist (ACL) and shared activities questionnaire (SAQ), along with a knowledge measure, to assess quantitative changes from pre to post-testing of the comic book series. Study findings help support the efficacy of an extended contact model and suggest that programs like these may serve as useful antidotes to counter negative attitudes of children and adolescents towards disabilities and mental health disorders, respectively.

INTRODUCTION

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) (Okoro, Hollis, Cyrus, & Griffin-Blake, 2018), 1 in 4 adults in the United States is currently living with a disability. Despite the fact that twenty-five percent of American adults have a disability, disabilities are rarely showcased favorably on TV and in the media. Unfortunately, when individuals with disabilities are depicted in the media, they are often being portrayed in an odd, pathetic or poor fashion. It is critical to change the landscape and to focus less on a deficit-based model of disability and more on the refined and unique abilities and strengths individuals with disabilities possess, since they are continuously seeking creative solutions and "work-arounds" to succeed in life (Respectability, 2018).

Children and Disabilities

Recent statistics suggest that from 2013-2014, 95% of all children and youth between the ages of 6 and 21, who were accommodated by IDEA, were enrolled in typical schools (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). Moreover, the number of students who spent the lion's share of their school day (80% or more time) in regular education classrooms increased from 33% from 1990-1991 to 62% from 2013-2014 (NCES, 2016). This significant rise in just over a decade, suggests that regular education schools will need to be increasingly well-equipped to accommodate students with disabilities in the typical classroom. Research suggests that simply including children with disabilities in the classroom does not ensure that typical children will increase their interest, positive attitudes, intentions and socialization with individuals with disabilities. In contrast, high quality interventions that effectively educate typical children about disabilities and encourage children to befriend individuals with disabilities are critical towards fostering attitudes, intentions and promoting the socialization of typical children toward their peers with disabilities (Silton, 2015; Vignes et al., 2009). Moreover, if programs are not created to promote acceptance and social integration, then children with disabilities will be less accepted by their typically developing peers in the classroom (Favazza, Phillepson, & Kumar, 2000). Research consistently reveals that students with disabilities are not only more vulnerable to negative attitudes (Nowicki & Sandieson, 2002), but are less accepted, have fewer peers, socialize less frequently, and report more loneliness than their typical peers (Bossaert, Colpin, Pijl & Petry, 2011). Various research studies note the importance of establishing learning standards which focus on the development of social skills and social competence skills, rather than focusing exclusively on the acquisition of academic competencies like literacy and mathematics (Scott, Little, Kagan & Freelow, 2006; National Research Council, 2001)

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