



Analyzing Illustrated Children's Books with Special Needs Characters: The Case of TÜBİTAK

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Abstract

Children's books can be a functional tool for children to understand individual differences and individuals with special needs. It is stated that children's books on being with special needs are influential in developing a positive attitude towards individuals with special needs. This study aims to examine the preschool TÜBİTAK illustrated children's books about individuals with special needs in terms of their qualitative characteristics. A descriptive screening model was used in the study. The study used the criterion sampling method, and 14 books that met the inclusion criteria were analyzed regarding external and internal structural characteristics. In analyzing the external structure characteristics of the books, the design and arrangement criteria evaluation form developed by Demircan (2006) and the book information evaluation form were used. The illustrated short story books evaluation scale developed by Deniz and Gönen (2020) was used to evaluate the contextual characteristics of the books. The results show that most TÜBİTAK illustrated children's books for the preschool period, which are about individuals with special needs, are at an adequate level regarding design and arrangement, book information, and contextual features. These research findings have been discussed in the current literature, and suggestions for further research have been presented.

Keywords: Children with special needs, children's books with pictures, preschool, TÜBİTAK

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1. Introduction

Children's literature refers to literary products that address issues related to the child's natural environment, enable the child to gain a conscious reading habit, and aim to enable the child to look at the world from a different perspective (Sever, 2015). Children's literature includes products that appeal to the age range from birth to adolescence and include many artistic elements with written and visual messages prepared by children's language and cognitive comprehension levels in this period (Adomat, 2014). Children's

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books, among the products of children's literature, are essential in providing children with social values and attitudes and supporting children's emotional and mental development (Rubin & Watson, 1987).

Children's books can be written for multiple purposes, such as teaching cultural elements and new concepts, having fun, finding solutions to problems encountered in daily life, and learning about individual differences (Rudman, 1995). Explaining the topic with the help of pictures in the books enables children to approach the topic from the characters' point of view (Walker et al., 2008). Another benefit of children's books is that they can be used as a functional tool for children to understand individual differences and individuals with special needs (Rubin & Watson, 1987). It is stated that children's books with characters with special needs are influential in developing positive attitudes towards individuals with special needs (Thein et al., 2007). Including special needs in picture books or having a special-needs character enables children to develop an awareness of the situation and individuals in question (Prater et al., 2006; Turner & Traxler, 1997). It enables children to visualize the position of having special needs in their minds (Külük, 2013) and to develop empathy for these individuals through characters with special needs (Wopperer, 2011).

According to Galda et al. (2013), just like race, gender, and sexual orientation, having special needs is underrepresented in children's books. However, when multicultural literature is created to include individuals with special needs, broader representations of society can occur in classrooms. In this case, a democratic environment in which children can consider social diversity will be created. Through books featuring characters with special needs, children can witness how the situation of having special needs is socially defined, how this situation affects their interactions with family and society, how these individuals are treated, and the problems faced by these characters (Adomat, 2009). It is stated that such books will facilitate positive and meaningful relationships between individuals with typical development and individuals with special needs (Wopperer, 2011; Ayala, 1999).

On the other hand, for these functions to be realized, books should be competent enough to capture the reality of the child and have appropriate linguistic and visual features (Chiong & DeLoache, 2012) because using quality children's books can encourage positive attitudes and teach students about individual differences (Salend, 2001). In this context, when the literature is examined, it is seen that some criteria are used to determine the quality of children's books. These criteria, expressed as internal structure and external structure criteria, guide the critical factors that should be included in a children's book, and the consistency of the requirements with each other directly affects the quality of the books (Demircan, 2006).

Although there are studies in the national literature to determine the qualitative status of illustrated children's books (Bulut & Kuşdemir, 2013; Demircan, 2006; Demirtaş, 2015; Kardaş-Koçak, 2017), there is a limited number of studies aiming to determine the qualitative characteristics of preschool books with characters with special needs. Güngörmüş-Özkardeş (2013) examined the distribution of books with characters with developmental differences in terms of types of special needs and found that autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) were frequently addressed in the books. Kaymaz (2017) examined how children with special needs are represented in picture books in various contexts. The findings of the study indicate that there are not enough readers of this kind, the subjects and themes addressed are limited, the unique needs of these children are emphasized in the solution of the situations and conflicts of the characters with special needs, and individuals with special needs are not represented in visuals in a qualified way. In the study carried out by Ekici and Ertem (2019), primary school-level children's books with characters with special needs were analyzed. The findings show that chronic illness and orthopedic disability are frequently included in the books, and the most common problems faced by characters with special needs in daily life are communication and transportation problems. Kırkgöz and Diken (2019) examined children's books for ages 0-8 about characters with special needs regarding internal and external structure features. As a result of the research, they determined that the most common type of special need in the books was orthopedic disability and that the books did not include characters with multiple disabilities. The findings also show that there are no clear statements that can help define the type of special needs in the books, the characters with special needs in the books are represented by focusing on their good and strong characteristics, and the books have limitations in terms of internal structure and external structure features. In the study by Öztürk et al. (2022), preschool picture storybooks were analyzed regarding their contextual characteristics. The findings show that physical disability and hearing impairment are the most common types of special needs. In contrast, visual impairment, ASD, and speech and language disorders are the least common types of special needs. There is a limited number of studies on children's picture books about individuals with special needs, and there is a need to plan new studies to reveal the qualitative characteristics of these books.

On the other hand, it is thought that it is crucial to review and discuss the qualities of the books published by the Scientific and Technological Research Council of Türkiye (TÜBİTAK), which has its editorial board and criteria, is one of the most preferred publishing organizations in children's publications, and has a children's library series in itself, regarding the internal and external structure characteristics of books with special needs character(s). Based on these requirements, this study aims to examine preschool TÜBİTAK picture books with special needs character(s) in terms of their qualitative characteristics. Within this scope, answers to the following questions were sought:

1. What is the level of TÜBİTAK's preschool period picture books with special needs character(s) regarding external structure features (design and arrangement features, author and book information)?
2. What is the level of TÜBİTAK's preschool illustrated children's books with special needs character(s) in terms of their content characteristics?

2. Method

2.1. Research design

A descriptive survey model was used in the study. The descriptive survey model is a research model that aims to describe an existing situation, phenomenon, or event as it exists. The main purpose of this model is to describe the current situation and provide detailed information about the situation (Creswell, 2014). The first author conducted analyses on the books' external and internal structure features. The second author conducted reliability analyses. This research was conducted with the permission of Bartın University Social and Human Sciences Ethics Committee with the decision dated 12.10.2022 and numbered SBB-0430. In the study, the first author conducted analyses on the books' external structure and internal structure features. The second author conducted reliability analyses.

2.2. Sample

The sample of this study consists of TÜBİTAK's preschool period illustrated children's books with special needs character(s). The criterion sampling method determined the books to be included in the study group. Criterion sampling is defined as the inclusion of all units that meet the criteria determined for the research (Patton, 2001). The criteria determined within the scope of the study were that (a) TÜBİTAK should publish the books, (b) the books should have character(s) with special needs (including individuals with chronic diseases), (c) the books should be aimed at early childhood (0-8 years), (d) the books should be in story genre, and (e) the books should be accessible. In line with the determined criteria, 1467 books in the early childhood categories accessed through TÜBİTAK, Kitap Yurdu, İdefix, BKM, Kidega, Nadir Kitap, Amazon were examined by the researchers within the scope of the inclusion criteria. As a result of the review, it was determined that 16 books met the study's inclusion criteria. However, the book titled “Riki'nin Yeni Dünyası” (Riki's New World) was not included in the study because it was not sold, and the book titled “Autism and My Brother” was not included in the study because it was not in the story genre. Findings regarding the general characteristics of the books are presented in Table 1.

When the subject matter of the books in the study was analyzed in terms of the type of special needs, it was determined that the books included characters diagnosed with chronic illness (albino, asthma, cancer, epilepsy), learning disability (dyslexia), Down Syndrome, emotional/behavioral disorder, Tourette syndrome, obsessive-compulsive disorder, physical disability, hearing impairment, ASD and ADHD. All the books are story-type books for children ages 5-8, printed on glossy paper with cardboard covers, and translated. The average number of pages of the books was 30 (range = 16-36).

Table 1. General characteristics of the children's picture books in the study

No	Book Name	SNC	Age	Page	Author	Translator	Illustrated by
1	Cem's Dyslexia Story (Cem'in Disleksi Hikayesi)	Dyslexia	5+	23	H. Kraljic	S. E. Opşin	M. Lubi
2	Berke's Down Syndrome Story (Berke'nin Down Sendromu Hikayesi)	Down Syndrome	5+	23	H. Kraljic	S. E. Opşin	M. Lubi
3	Lara's Epilepsy Story (Lara'nın Epilepsi Hikayesi)	Chronic disease	5+	16	H. Kraljic	S. E. Opşin	M. Lubi
4	I Have a Friend with Down Syndrome (Down Sendromlu Bir Arkadaşım Var)	Down Syndrome	6+	31	J. Moore-Mallinos	U. Hasdemir	M. Fàbrega
5	I can do it (Yapabilirim)	Physical disability	6+	35	J. Moore-Mallinos	E. Kılıç	M. Fàbrega
6	I can't sit still (Bir Türlü Yerimde Duramıyorum)	ADHD	6+	33	P. P. M. Belviso	Ö. Hanoğlu	M. Fàbrega
7	I have dyslexia (Bende Disleksi Var)	Dyslexia	7+	36	J. Moore-Mallinos	E. Kılıç	M. Fàbrega
8	İnci' Great Race (İnci'nin Büyük Yarışı)	Chronic disease	7+	35	T. M. Golding	M. Özyurt Kılıç	M. Lucas
9	White as a Seagull (Martı Kadar Beyaz)	Chronic disease	5+	28	A. Kermauner	M. Özyurt Kılıç	M. Lubi
10	Bariş's Wanderings: A Story About Autism (Barış'ın Gezintisi: Otizm Hakkında Bir Öykü)	ASD	7+	34	L. Lears	M. Özyurt Kılıç	K. Ritz
11	I Can't Help It: A Story About Tourette Syndrome (Elimde Değil: Tourette Sendromu Hakkında Bir Öykü)	EBD	8+	34	H. L. Niner	M. Özyurt Kılıç	M. Treatner
12	Mr. Worry (Bay Endişe)	EBD	8+	34	H. L. Niner	M. Özyurt Kılıç	G. Swearin
13	Farewell to Cancer Garden (Kansere Elveda Bahçesi)	Chronic disease	7+	34	J. Matthies	M. Özyurt Kılıç	K. Valian
14	This is what it's like not to hear (Duymamak Böyle Bir Şey)	HI	7+	33	J. Moore-Mallinos	Özden Hanoğlu	M. Fàbrega

Notes. SNC: Special needs category; ADHD: Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder; EBD: Emotional behavior disorder ; OSB: Autism spectrum disorder ; HI: Hearing impairment

2.3. Data Collection Tools and Data Analysis

The books that met the study's inclusion criteria were analyzed regarding their external structure and contextual features. To evaluate the external structure features of the books, the design and organization criteria evaluation form and the book information evaluation form were used. Both forms were developed by Demircan (2006). The contextual features of the books were evaluated using the “Illustrated Children's Books Evaluation Scale” developed by Deniz and Gönen (2020).

2.3.1. Design and Organization Criteria Evaluation Form and Book Information Evaluation Form

The form for evaluating the design and organization criteria of the books consists of 14 items, all of which are positive question stems. The book information evaluation form consists of 21 items with positive question stems. The items in the forms used to evaluate the external structure features are coded and scored as (a) adequate (2 points) and (b) inadequate (1 point). According to the scores obtained from the items related to the external structure features, the books are classified into two categories: (a) adequate (1.50-2.00 point average) and (b) inadequate (1.00-1.49 point average).

2.3.2. Scale for Evaluating Picture Story Books

The scale developed by Deniz and Gönen (2020) to determine the quality of illustrated storybooks is a three-point Likert-type scale. Each item is evaluated and scored in three categories: “insufficient (1 point), partially sufficient (2 points), and sufficient (3 points)” according to a 3-point scale. According to the scoring, the points obtained from the scale vary between 21-63. The books are classified into three qualitative categories: (a) inadequate (21-34 points), (b) partially adequate (35-49 points) and (c) adequate (50-63 points). The factor analysis results showed that the scale comprising 21 items related to content and illustration features could be evaluated as a single dimension and that the scale explained 48.9% of the total variance. Cronbach's alpha coefficient of the scale was calculated as .94. For rater reliability, the correlation coefficient between two raters was found to be .92.

2.4. Reliability Analyses

In the study, inter-rater reliability was calculated for three cases: (a) evaluation of the design and organization features of the books, (b) evaluation of the author and book information of the books, and (c) evaluation of the content features. The formula “[agreement]/(agreement+disagreement) X 100]” was used to calculate the inter-rater reliability coefficient (Miles & Huberman, 1994). For the reliability calculation, 35% of

the books that met the study's inclusion criteria were re-analyzed by another researcher. The inter-rater reliability coefficients calculated as a result of the analysis are as follows: (a) 90% for the evaluation of the design and organization features of the books, (b) 96% for the evaluation of author and book information, (c) 93% for the assessment of contextual features.

3. Results

The design and organization findings of the books are presented in Table 2. According to Table 2, all of the books are adequate according to all items except for the items “Does the cover image take place in the book?” and “Is the cover of the book compatible with the subject?”. Although three books received sufficient points for the item “Is the cover image included in the book?”, the other 11 books received insufficient points. One book scored insufficient points in the “Is the book's cover compatible with the subject?”.

Table 2. Design and organization features of the books

No	Design and Organization	Adequate		Inadequate		— X
		f	%	f	%	
1	Is the format of the book appropriate?	14	100	-	-	2.0
2	Is the size of the book appropriate?	14	100	-	-	2.0
3	Is the book easy to carry?	14	100	-	-	2.0
4	Is the binding of the book appropriate?	14	100	-	-	2.0
5	Is the font size appropriate for the reader's level?	14	100	-	-	2.0
6	Can the pages be cleaned?	14	100	-	-	2.0
7	Do the pages have top-bottom margins?	14	100	-	-	2.0
8	Do the pages have right-left margins?	14	100	-	-	2.0
9	Are the spaces between the lines appropriate?	14	100	-	-	2.0
10	Is the paper of the book matte?	14	100	-	-	2.0
11	Is the paper quality appropriate?	14	100	-	-	2.0
12	Is the cover image included in the book?	3	21	11	79	1.2
13	Is the cover of the book compatible with the subject?	13	93	1	7	1.9
14	Is the inside cover of the book illustrated?	14	100	-	-	2.0

Findings related to the contextual features of the books are presented in Table 3. According to Table 3, it is seen that the books received an average score of 52 points (range = 46-58) in terms of content features. Ten books were sufficient regarding contextual features, and 4 books (Cem'in Dyslexia Story, I Have a Friend with Down Syndrome, I Can, and Mr. Worry) were partially sufficient. The partially adequate books received low scores for the following items: “The colors used in the illustrations are vivid and striking, the subject of the story is appropriate for the age and developmental level of the children, the subject of the story is interesting for children, and the story is of a quality that will meet the spiritual needs of children.

Table 3. Findings on the contextual features of the books

Book Name	Score	Qualitative status
Cem's Dyslexia Story (Cem'in Disleksi Hikayesi)	58	Partially Adequate
Berke's Down Syndrome Story (Berke'nin Down Sendromu Hikayesi)	57	Adequate
Lara's Epilepsy Story (Lara'nın Epilepsi Hikayesi)	50	Adequate
I Have a Friend with Down Syndrome (Down Sendromlu Bir Arkadaşım Var)	49	Partially Adequate
I can do it (Yapabilirim)	48	Partially Adequate
I can't sit still (Bir Türlü Yerimde Duramıyorum)	51	Adequate
I have dyslexia (Bende Disleksi Var)	53	Adequate
İnci' Great Race (İnci'nin Büyük Yarışı)	57	Adequate
White as a Seagull (Martı Kadar Beyaz)	50	Adequate
Barış's Wanderings: A Story About Autism (Barış'ın Gezintisi: Otizm Hakkında Bir Öykü)	51	Adequate
I Can't Help It: A Story About Tourette Syndrome (Elimde Değil: Tourette Sendromu Hakkında Bir Öykü)	51	Partially Adequate
Mr. Worry (Bay Endişe)	46	Partially Adequate
Farewell to Cancer Garden (Kansere Elveda Bahçesi)	57	Adequate
This is what it's like not to hear (Duymamak Böyle Bir Şey)	58	Adequate

Findings regarding the author and book information of the books are presented in Table 4. Table 4 shows that the books received sufficient points from 12 items regarding author and book information. The books were evaluated as follows: “Is there the author's name on the front cover (n = 7), is there a table of contents (n = 14), is there a glossary for unknown words (n = 14), is there an age group on the inside cover (n = 14), is there a book guide (n = 14), is the author(s) introduced? (n = 14), Is the author(s) introduced (n = 14), is there information about the author's other works (n = 14), is there the approval of the Board of Education (n = 14), and is there information about the publisher's other works (n = 5).

Table 4. Author and book information

No	Design and Organization	Adequate		Inadequate		\bar{X}
		<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	
1	Is the name of the book on the front cover?	14	100	-	-	2.0
2	Is the author's name on the front cover?	7	50	7	50	1.5
3	Is the name of the publisher on the front cover?	14	100	-	-	2.0
4	Does the book have a table of contents?	-	-	14	100	1.0
5	Is there a glossary for unknown words?	-	-	14	100	1.0
6	Does the inside cover indicate the age group for which the book is intended?	-	-	14	100	1.0
7	Is the year of publication written on the inside cover?	14	100	-	-	2.0
8	Does the place of printing appear on the inside cover?	14	100	-	-	2.0
9	Does it say what edition the book is?	14	100	-	-	2.0
10	Does the book have a manual?	-	-	14	100	1.0
11	Is there an ISBN?	14	100	-	-	2.0
12	Is the author(s) introduced?	-	-	14	100	1.0
13	Is the name of the illustrator given?	14	100	-	-	2.0
14	Is the name of the translator or proofreader given?	14	100	-	-	2.0
15	Is there a scientific advisor for the Turkish text?	14	100	-	-	2.0
16	Is there information about the author's other works?	-	-	14	100	1.0
17	Is there information about the publisher's other works?	5	36	9	64	1.0
18	Is there the approval of the Board of Education?	-	-	14	100	1.0
19	Does the book have page numbers?	14	100	-	-	2.0
20	Is there book information on the spine of the book?	14	100	-	-	2.0
21	Is the price of the book written on the back cover?	14	100	-	-	2.0

4. Discussion

The study aims to examine TÜBİTAK picture books for preschool children with special needs character(s) in terms of internal and external structure features. The findings show that TÜBİTAK's preschool books with special needs character(s) are sufficient for internal and external structure features. The findings of the study are consistent with the findings of studies examining books with special needs character(s) in the national literature (Ekici & Ertem, 2019; Güngörmüş-Özkardeş, 2013; Kaymaz, 2017; Öztürk, Afacan, & Demirtaş, 2022).

The study's first finding is that most TÜBİTAK illustrated children's books with characters with special needs are adequate in terms of external structure features. When the design and arrangement feature of the books examined were examined in detail, it was determined that the cover picture of 11 of the books was not included in the book, and the cover picture of 1 book was not compatible with the subject. Kırkgöz and Diken (2019) reached similar findings in their study and stated that the cover image was incompatible with the subject of the books, and the cover image was not included in the book. In the study conducted by Gönen, Katrancı, Uygun, and Uçuş (2012), it was determined that the book covers were not sufficient. A detailed examination of the books

in terms of author and book information reveals that the books do not have a table of contents, a glossary and a guide for unknown words, no introduction of the author(s), no information about the other works of the author and the publishing house, and no approval of the Board of Education. It was also observed that half of the books ($n = 7$) did not have the author's name on the front cover. It can be concluded that there is no need to obtain the approval of the Board of Education since TÜBİTAK published the books examined in the study, TÜBİTAK has its publishing principles, and the books are subjected to its editorial filter. At the same time, although the absence of author names on the cover page shows that it is not included in TÜBİTAK's publishing principles, it can be concluded that the books should be made more qualified in terms of other items.

The second finding of the study is that a large portion of TÜBİTAK's preschool picture books with characters with special needs are at an adequate level in terms of contextual features ($n = 10$). Demircan (2006), in his study examining the external and internal structure of the books in the TÜBİTAK children's library category, stated that they were at an adequate level in terms of language and expression, subject-plan and illustration features, which are among the contextual features. In the study conducted by Kırkgöz and Diken (2019), it was determined that preschool books with special needs character(s) were insufficient in terms of internal structure features. The literature emphasizes that it is crucial to evaluate the contextual features of children's picture books (Hearne & Sutton, 1993). In this context, it can be said that evaluating the internal structure features of the books included in the current study contributes to the literature. Although the findings regarding the internal structure features of the study are consistent with the findings of the study conducted by Demircan (2006), they differ from those of the study conducted by Kırkgöz and Diken (2019). The main reason for this can be explained by the fact that the current study and the study conducted by Demircan (2006) included only TÜBİTAK preschool picture books and that these books were published after undergoing specific scientific reviews.

In line with the study's findings, some issues stand out and need to be discussed. The first of these is the distribution of the characters with special needs in the books included in the study in terms of disability groups. It was determined that the types of disabilities addressed in the books included in the study were chronic illness ($n = 4$), dyslexia ($n = 2$), Down Syndrome ($n = 2$), emotional/behavioral disorder ($n = 2$), physical disability ($n = 1$), ADHD ($n = 1$), ASD ($n = 1$) and hearing impairment ($n = 1$). Notably, the books in the study did not include any character(s) with visual impairment, speech-language impairment, and giftedness. In the study conducted by Güngörmüş-Özkardeş (2013), it was determined that ASD and ADHD were the most common types of special needs addressed in illustrated children's books, while in the study conducted by Kaymaz (2017), it was concluded that ASD was the most common type of special needs addressed in children's books and the least common types of special needs were hearing impairment, intellectual disability and language and speech impairment. In the study conducted by

Ekici and Ertem (2019), it was found that chronic illness was the most common type of special need in children's books, while in the study conducted by Kırkgöz and Diken (2019), it was concluded that the most common type of special need was physical disability. Finally, the study by Öztürket al. (2022) determined that physical disability, mental disability, and hearing impairment were more frequently covered in books. As can be seen, there are studies in the literature that are in parallel with our findings and those that are contrary to ours. Although the number of books in which the theme of disability is covered by dealing with characters with special needs has increased over time, it is seen that the types of special needs covered in the books are limited.

According to data from the Ministry of Family and Social Services of the Republic of Türkiye (2022), the most common types of special needs in Türkiye are chronic diseases (n = 917,259), intellectual disability (n = 385,313), physical disability (n = 311,131), visual impairment (n = 215,076), hearing impairment (n = 179,867) and speech and language impairment (n = 33,686). Considering these figures, it can be suggested that everyday special needs groups should find more space in children's books. Thus, it will be easier to develop awareness about individuals with special needs in children.

The second issue that needs to be discussed is that most of the books analyzed in the study (n = 10) were qualitatively adequate. Studies emphasize that care should be taken to ensure that illustrations have artistic qualities, gender equality is considered, and ethical and universal values are considered in the contextual features of the texts in children's books (Çatalcalı-Soyer, 2009). Wopperer (2011) stated that many difficult situations with words can be explained through the visual elements in books. For this reason, visual elements in children's picture books are as essential as the events described in the texts and the language used in the text. The study conducted by Can et al. (2022) determined that the visuals in children's books are one of the critical factors affecting children's preference for books. It is possible to say that the pre-primary period TÜBİTAK picture books with special needs character(s) examined in this study are quite good in terms of the qualitative aspects mentioned in the literature.

This study has some limitations. The first one is that only TÜBİTAK's preschool picture books with special needs character(s) were included in this study. Therefore, a more comprehensive range of children's picture books with special needs characters published by other publishing houses can be included in future studies. The second limitation of the study is that children's books were evaluated only in terms of internal and external structure features. In future studies, books can be analyzed in terms of variables such as the analysis of characters with special needs in children's books and how children with typical development are handled in terms of having special needs.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

It was determined that most of TÜBİTAK's preschool picture books with character(s) with special needs were appropriate regarding external structure features. When the contextual features of the books are considered, it is revealed that most of the TÜBİTAK preschool picture books are at an adequate level. In this context, it can be said that TÜBİTAK's preschool picture books with characters with special needs will contribute to raising awareness about individuals with special needs in children and providing them with information about these individuals.

In further research, preschool children's books and older children's books can be examined in detail. The study findings show that the analyzed books generally address specific special needs. In this direction, suggestions can be made to publishers and authors to write and publish books for different special needs.

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