



Considering Gender in Assessing the Impact of the *Realabilities* Television Show and Comic Book Series on Typical Children's Cognitive Attitudes and Behavioral Intentions towards Children with Disabilities

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ABSTRACT

Realabilities is a children's television show and comic book series which features characters with disabilities who harness their special abilities to save their school from bullies. The current study investigated cognitive attitudes and behavioral intentions of children with disabilities among children in grades two, three, and four who participated in the *Realabilities* program. Findings suggest that researchers and professionals who aim to enhance children's interest and sensitivity towards children with disabilities should consider children's gender.

INTRODUCTION

Realabilities is a television show and comic book series created to bolster typical children's positive expectancies of children with disabilities by portraying the strengths or special abilities that many children with disabilities possess, rather than creating negative expectancies by solely focusing on the impairments of individuals with special needs. While some interventions have effected modest improvements in children's behavioral intentions (Sifton, 2009), very few interventions have been successful at enhancing cognitive attitudes (Swaim & Morgan, 2001). Rosenbaum (1988) identified sex as the strongest perceiver characteristic in ascertaining attitudes towards individuals with disabilities, with females reliably reporting more favorable attitudes than males. However, Swaim & Morgan (2001) found no main effects for gender on any of the measures relating to improved behavioral intentions of typical children towards a child with autism. The current research investigates *Realabilities*, a television show and comic book series portraying stop bullying themes and the strengths of children with disabilities. This research aims to investigate if 1) *Realabilities* improves the cognitive attitudes and behavioral intentions of typical children towards children with disabilities and if there are 2) Gender differences in children's cognitive attitudes and behavioral intentions after participating in the *Realabilities* episode and comic book intervention.

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS

Participants were 152 children (male: n = 80; female: n = 67) in grades two (n = 54; 35.5%), three (n = 58; 38.2%), and four (n = 39; 25.7%) who read the *Realabilities* comic books (n = 24), watched a *Realabilities* television episode (n = 65), or participated in both the comic book and television episode condition (n = 63). Almost half of the participants identified as African American (n = 73, 48%) and over one third identified as Latino (n = 58, 38%). The remaining participants identified as White (n = 7, 5%) and as Asian American (n = 6, 3.9%).

PROCEDURE

The current study compared children's positive cognitive attitudes and behavioral intentions of children with disabilities before and after participating in the *Realabilities* program as measured by a modified version of the Adjective Checklist (ACL; Siperstein, 1980, Siperstein & Bak, 1977) and the Shared Activities Questionnaire (SAQ; Morgan et al., 1996). The researchers administered a modified 10-item version of the 32-item ACL to assess children's cognitive attitudes towards children with disabilities.

RESULTS

Paired sample t-tests indicated that overall, children reported significantly more positive cognitive attitudes on the ACL and behavioral intentions on the SAQ towards children with blindness, deafness, physical disability, and autism after participating in the *Realabilities* Intervention

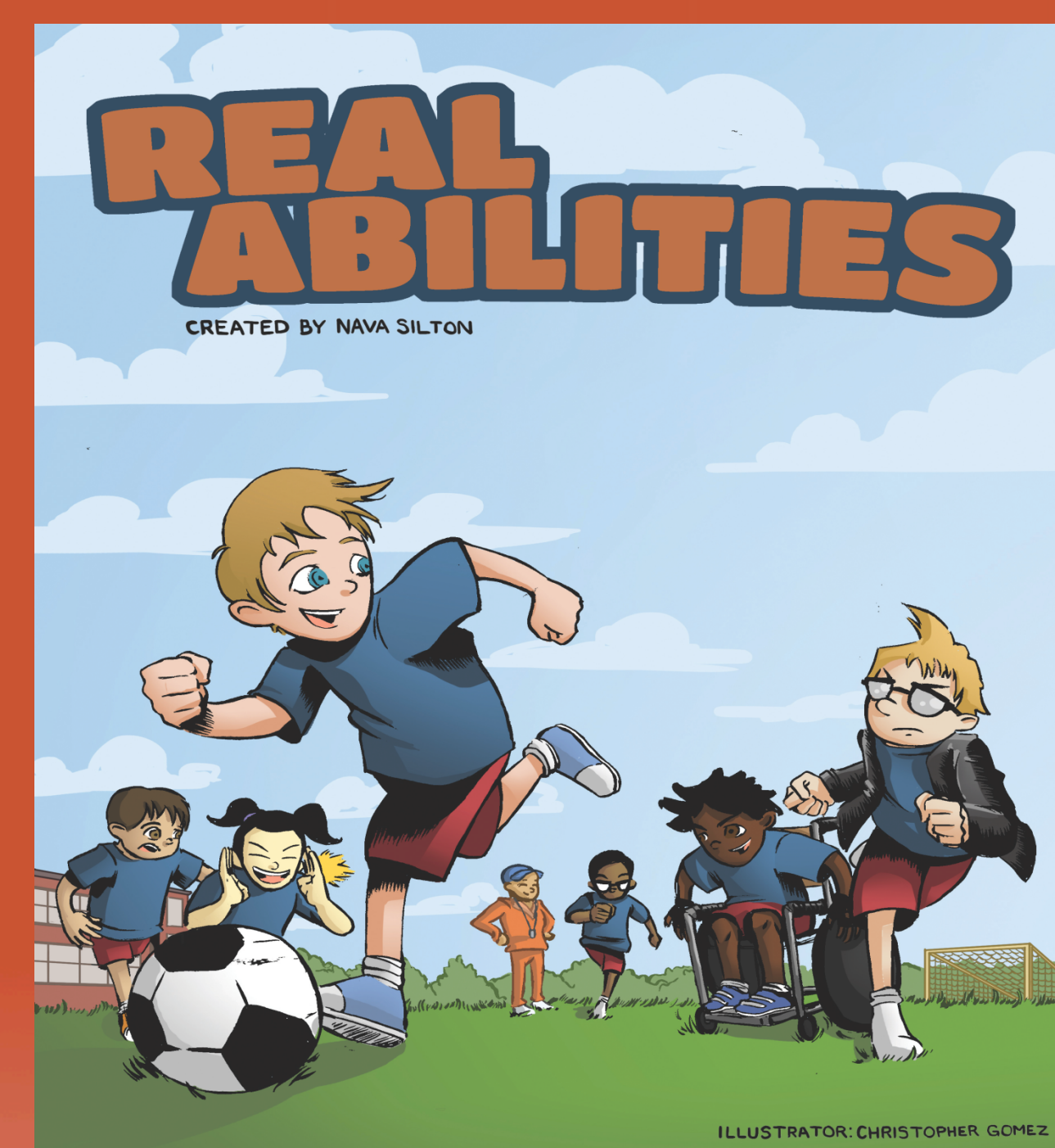
An analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was conducted to test the effects of the *Realabilities* program on positive cognitive attitudes and behavioral intentions by gender. Compared to children in grade 2 and 3, children in grade 4 showed significantly more total positive behavioral intentions towards children with autism after participating in the *Realabilities* intervention, $F(2) = 4.31, p < 0.05$.

Source	SS	Df	MS	F
Condition	4.18	2	2.09	.167
Pre-Intervention SAQ Total Autism	792.74	1	792.74	63.37***
Grade	107.78	2	53.89	4.31**
Error	1488.622	119	12.51	

*p < 0.1, ** p < 0.05, *** p < 0.01

DISCUSSION

Participants showed significantly more favorable cognitive attitudes and behavioral intentions towards hypothetical children with disabilities. These findings are especially illuminating, since they show significant changes in cognitive attitudes towards children with special needs: a task few if any video interventions have accomplished in the past. Consistent with findings from Rosenbaum et al. (1989), gender significantly predicted positive cognitive attitudes and behavioral intentions after participating in the *Realabilities* intervention, with girls more likely than boys to report positive cognitive attitudes and behavioral intentions towards children with disabilities after participating in the *Realabilities* program. Findings suggest that researchers and professionals who aim to enhance typical children's interest, sensitivity, and understanding of children with disabilities should specifically consider children's gender.



"The Real Goal": The first *Realabilities* comic book that was used during this intervention.



A scene from a *Realabilities* comic book with the characters in action!



New art, featuring Melody, RJ, Seymour, Uno, & Addy.