



Using Television and Book Media to Prevent Bullying and to Foster Sensitivity towards Children with Disabilities

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ABSTRACT

Realabilities is a prospective children's television program featuring five students with disabilities who harness their superpowers to protect their school from bullies. It portrays the strengths of children with disabilities as well as anti-bullying themes. Researchers administered modified pre and post-test versions of the Shared Activities Questionnaire (SAQ) and the Adjective Checklist (ACL) to test the changes in behavioral intentions and cognitive attitudes of fifteen typical children after they read one graphic novel of *Realabilities*. It was hypothesized that students would show improved behavioral intentions and cognitive attitudes upon reading this *Realabilities* graphic novel. While some interventions have effected modest improvements in behavioral intentions (Siltan, 2009), very few interventions have been successful at enhancing cognitive attitudes (Swaim & Morgan, 2001).

INTRODUCTION

The poor portrayal of children with disabilities in literature has reinforced the negative views typical children have of their peers with disabilities. Despite positive examples of inclusive literature, discriminatory language and negative stereotypes about disabilities continue to exist in children's books (Beckett et al., 2010). These adversities often result in social misconduct like bullying.

It is imperative to teach children about various disabilities to eliminate teasing, bullying, and emotional pain (Pepler, 1993). Carter and Spencer (2006) explain that classmates may be biased towards their peers with disabilities or towards children who appear different. These students struggle with a poor peer status; they have fewer friends, making them more vulnerable to victimization.

Researchers Wall, Wheaton and Zuver (2009) reported that only ten studies have been conducted in the United States on bullying and disabilities, but each concluded that children with disabilities were two to three times more likely to be victims of bullying than their typical peers (Holmquist, 2011). Unfortunately, children who are bullied often experience the following symptoms: bedwetting, difficulty sleeping, depression, low self-esteem, and discontentment at school (Kim & Leventhal, 2008).

Realabilities features five characters with disabilities (blindness, deafness, autism and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder). As a group, the team utilizes their special abilities to combat bullying in their school. This research seeks to determine whether a graphic novel version of *Realabilities* will enhance the behavioral intentions and cognitive attitudes of typical children towards children with disabilities and will promote a stop bullying platform.

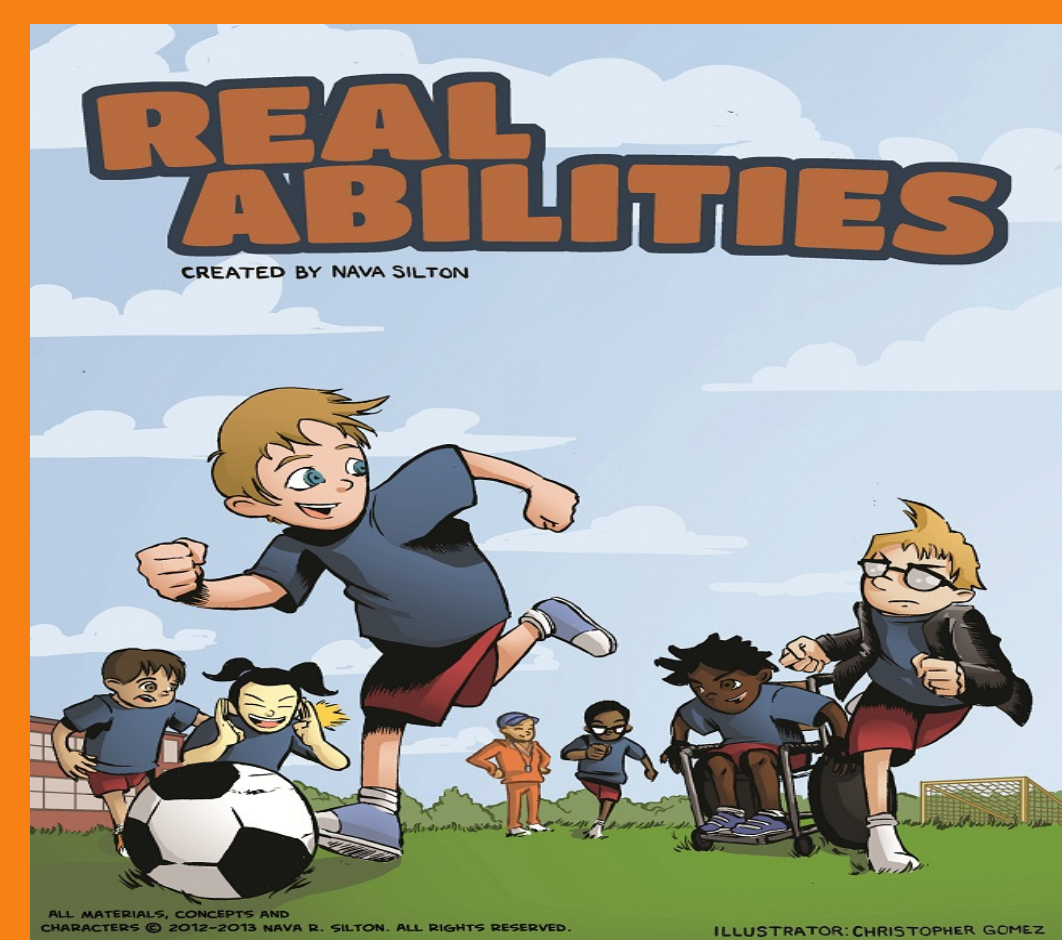
METHOD

PARTICIPANTS

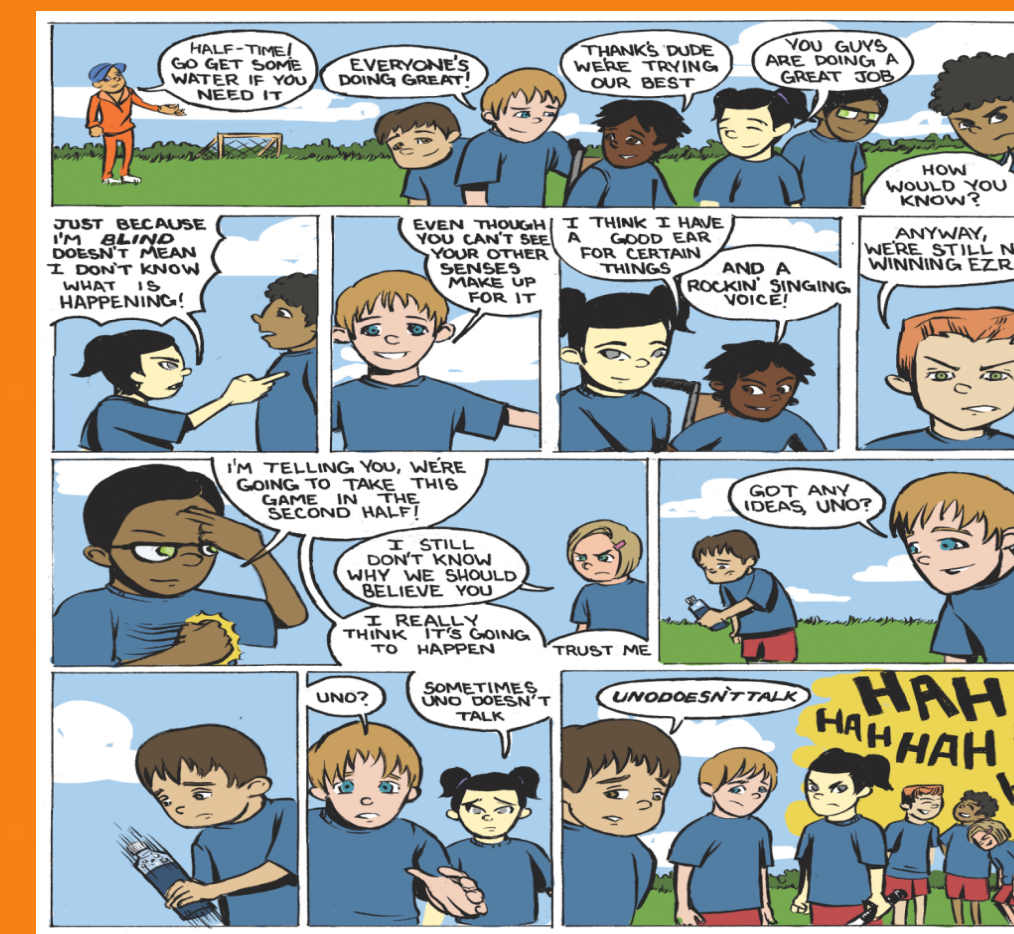
One hundred and fifty-two students (79 boys [53.7%] and 66 girls [43.4%]) in second (35.5%; n=54), third (38.2%; n=58), and fourth (25.7%; n=39) grades participated in the graphic novel and television show intervention in a public elementary school in Brooklyn, NY. Twenty-four of the students (15.8%) were in special needs classrooms and 128 of the children (84.2%) were in typical classrooms. Half of the students (n=73) identified as African American, forty percent (n=58) identified as Latino, five percent (n=7) identified as white and four percent (n=6) identified as Asian American. All of the students attended a Public Elementary School in Brooklyn, New York.

PROCEDURE

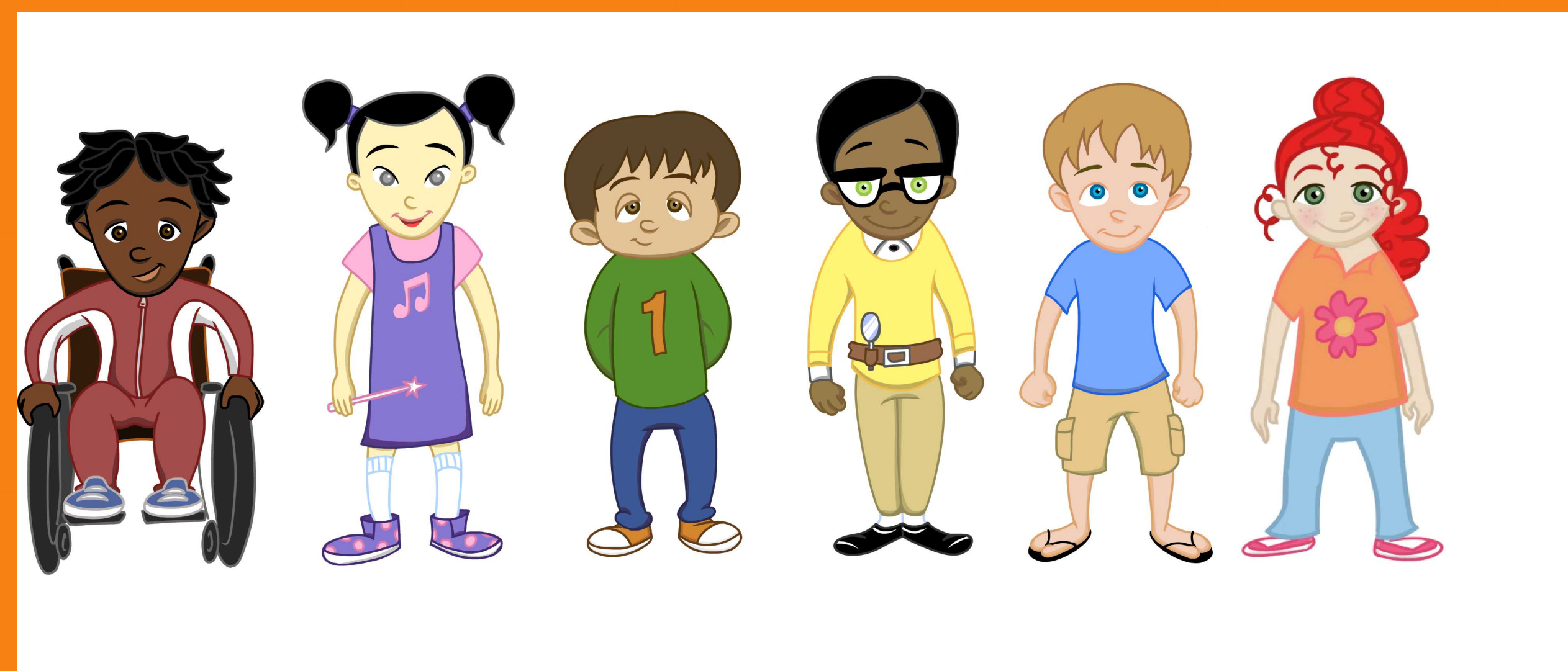
The researchers administered shortened versions of the Shared Activities Questionnaire (SAQ), a behavioral intention measure, and the Adjective Checklist (ACL), a cognitive attitudinal measure to the second, third and fourth grade elementary school students both before and after they read the first graphic novel of *Realabilities* and/or viewed the first episode of *Realabilities*. *Realabilities* is a prosocial, stop bullying show and graphic novel series targeted towards enhancing the interest and sensitivity of typical children towards children with disabilities. The children were then debriefed and were encouraged to discuss which aspects of the show and characters were most appealing to them and recommendations they would make for future episodes of the show.



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



A scene from the graphic novel with the characters in action!



These are the main characters: (from left to right): Rolly, Melody, Uno, Seemore, Ezra, and Addy

RESULTS

Main Analyses

Paired samples t-tests indicated that children reported significantly more positive cognitive attitudes on the Adjective Checklist (ACL) following the three episode television show intervention. Children reported more positive cognitive attitudes on the ACL towards hypothetical children presenting with blindness, $t(145) = -9.232, p < .001$, deafness, $t(144) = -6.721, p < .001$, physical disability, $t(144) = -4.756, p < .001$ and autism, $t(144) = -5.192, p < .001$.

Paired Samples t-tests also revealed that children reported significantly more positive behavioral intentions on the Shared Activities Questionnaire (SAQ) following the comic book and/or episode programming. More specifically, children reported more positive behavioral intentions on the SAQ towards hypothetical children with deafness on the SAQ Total, $t(128) = -3.146, p < .01$, on the SAQ Academic subtest, $t(139) = -2.873, p < .01$, on the SAQ Social Subtest, $t(139) = -2.158, p < .05$ and on the SAQ Recreational subtest, $t(136) = -2.248, p < .05$. The participants reported more positive behavioral intentions on the SAQ towards hypothetical children with physical disability on the SAQ Academic subtest, $t(143) = -2.235, p < .05$ and on the SAQ Social Subtest, $t(137) = -2.195, p < .05$. Finally, children showed significantly more positive behavioral intentions towards hypothetical peers presenting with autism on the SAQ Total, $t(125) = -4.033, p < .001$, on the Academic subtest, $t(134) = -3.941, p < .001$, on the Social subtest, $t(135) = -3.656, p < .001$ and on the Recreational subtest, $t(135) = -14.175, p < .001$.

Sample Qualitative Response:

"We just watched your episode of "Realabilities," I loved it! I empathized with the characters. I learned that it's important to accept everyone no matter if they have a disability. I think Ezra did the right thing, he made them feel a part of the group. I think it's hard to stand up to a mean person, but I think I would try to do the same." -E.S.

DISCUSSION

Participants showed significantly more favorable cognitive attitudes towards hypothetical children presenting with all four forms of disabilities and more positive behavioral intentions towards children with deafness, physical disability and autism. These findings are especially illuminating, since they show particularly significant changes in cognitive attitudes towards children with special needs; a task few if any video interventions have accomplished in the past.