# Understanding Blindness through Storytelling, Playful Activities and Experiential Learning in First-Grade Students

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**Abstract**

Understanding and accepting disability is an important issue in both special education and education in general. Although schools provide opportunities for interaction among children, misunderstandings and hesitation toward disability may still occur, especially during the early school years. For this reason, the implementation of appropriately designed awareness programs is considered important in helping young students better understand disability and develop more positive attitudes toward it. The present study aimed to examine the effect of a 12-hour intervention program on first-grade students' understanding and acceptance of blindness. The program combined storytelling, playful activities, and Educational Drama Techniques in order to help students explore everyday situations related to visual impairment and reflect on the experiences of people with blindness. Through discussion, dramatic exploration, and experiential activities, students were encouraged to consider the feelings, challenges, and abilities of individuals with visual impairment. Data were collected through interviews and questionnaires administered before and after the intervention. The results indicated improvements in children's understanding of blindness, their acceptance of disability, and their behavioural intentions as reflected in the assessment measures. The findings suggest that experiential educational programs that combine storytelling, playful activities and Educational Drama Techniques can support young students in developing a deeper understanding of blindness and more positive attitudes toward disability.

**Key words**: educational drama techniques, inclusive education, visual impairment, peer acceptance.

## 1. Introduction

Inclusive education is widely recognized as a central principle in contemporary educational policy and practice, aiming to ensure equal opportunities and participation for all students in school life (Ainscow, 2020). Inclusion, however, is not simply a matter of placing students with disabilities in the same classroom as their peers. It also involves ensuring their active participation in classroom activities, fostering acceptance among classmates, and creating a school environment in which all students feel that they belong. As highlighted in the literature on visual impairment, attending a mainstream school does not necessarily guarantee meaningful participation in the social life of the classroom (Miyauchi, 2020). Recent studies focusing specifically on students with visual impairment also emphasize that participation and social inclusion in school settings remain challenging despite inclusive policies (O'Connor et al., 2024).

Although inclusive schools provide important opportunities for interaction between children with and without disabilities, coexistence alone does not always lead to genuine understanding and acceptance. Recent research indicates that students with disabilities may still encounter challenges in their social inclusion within the classroom and may participate less frequently in peer activities compared to their

classmates (Schwab, 2019). These difficulties may be related to limited knowledge about disability, stereotypes present in the broader social environment, or uncertainty about how to interact with someone who has different needs. For this reason, it is important to explore how children perceive disability and how these perceptions may change through appropriate educational experiences.

Children's perceptions of difference begin to develop during the early years of schooling and appear to be influenced by factors such as age, previous interaction experiences, and personal contact with individuals with disabilities (Cicek Gumus & Oncel, 2022). For this reason, appropriately designed educational activities can help young students better understand what disability means and become more familiar with the everyday experiences of people who live with it (Babik & Gardner, 2021; Ison et al., 2022). Recent research suggests that students with disabilities often participate less frequently in peer activities and social interactions within inclusive classrooms, highlighting the importance of structured opportunities for social participation (Wang et al., 2025).

In the case of blindness, understanding the nature of the disability may be particularly challenging for young children. Many children have little or no prior contact with individuals with visual impairment and may find it difficult to imagine how a person moves, plays, or participates in everyday activities without sight. This may lead to hesitation or uncertainty about how to communicate or cooperate with a peer who has visual impairment. Recent studies further suggest that when a disability is not easily understood by children, greater social distance between peers may emerge (Granjon et al., 2025; Paul 2020).

Within this context, storytelling and drama-based educational approaches have been recognized as effective ways to help children explore and understand experiences related to disability. Through stories, children can engage with the experiences of fictional characters, develop different perspectives, and cultivate empathy (Williams-Sanchez & Cook, 2024). At the same time, drama activities allow students to engage in experiential learning by exploring roles and situations, which can support a deeper understanding of others' feelings and experiences (Edmiston, 2000).

It has been shown that interventions incorporating drama-based and experiential activities can contribute to improving children's understanding of disability and strengthening acceptance among peers with and without disabilities (Giagazoglou & Papadaniil, 2018; Layachi et al., 2023). However, simply reading stories that refer to disability is not always enough. When storytelling is not accompanied by discussion and appropriate guidance from the teacher, children may still misunderstand aspects of disability or keep inaccurate ideas about it (Gulya & Fehérvári, 2023). For this reason, storytelling activities are considered more effective when they are combined with experiential and playful activities that allow children to actively explore issues related to disability and everyday life experiences.

The purpose of the present study was to examine the effectiveness of an intervention program designed to promote first grade students' understanding and acceptance of blindness. Although disability awareness programs have been widely implemented in schools, no studies have explored how storytelling can be combined with playful and drama-based activities in order to support young children's understanding of visual impairment. The intervention was developed around the Greek storybook *Odos Alkyonis*. The story describes a kingfisher bird that is born blind and hesitates to fly. The narrative served as the starting point for each session. Short parts of the story were presented to the students and used as prompts for a series of structured activities. These activities included discussion, playful exploration, and drama pedagogy techniques designed to help students better understand everyday experiences related to visual impairment. Through this process, students were encouraged to explore emotions such as fear, uncertainty, and confidence, and to reflect on both the challenges and the abilities of people living with blindness.

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1 Participants

The study included 34 first-grade students (19 boys and 15 girls) aged between 6 and 7 years (mean age = 80.66 ± 9.4 months). The participants attended two different first-grade classes in a primary school located in a town in northern Greece. The school was selected through convenience sampling because the classroom teacher and the school principal agreed to support the implementation of the study.

The participants were divided into two groups according to their classroom. One class was assigned as the intervention group and the other served as the control group. The intervention group consisted of 14 students (7 boys and 7 girls), while the control group included 20 students with typical development (12 boys and 8 girls).

All students participated in the assessment procedure before and after the intervention. Data were collected through questionnaire-based interviews designed to explore children's perceptions of disability, including attitudes and behavioural intentions. The first assessment took place one week before the beginning of the program and the second one week after its completion. Students in the intervention group participated in a 12-hour storytelling program enriched with drama-based activities. The students in the control group continued to follow the regular school curriculum during the same period.

Written informed consent was obtained from all parents or legal guardians prior to the beginning of the study, allowing the children to participate in the program and permitting the use of the collected data for research purposes. The research protocol received approval from the Ministry of Education in Athens, Greece, as well as from the Research Ethics Committee of the School of Physical Education and Sport Science of Aristotle University in Serres, Greece.

### 2.2 Testing Procedures and Instrumentation

#### 2.2.1 Assessment Procedure

Children's responses were assessed twice: once one week before the implementation of the intervention and again one week after its completion. The assessment process was conducted by two researchers who had been trained in the administration of psychometric instruments.

Each child was interviewed individually in a quiet area within the school environment in order to minimize distractions. During the interview, the researcher read each question aloud and recorded the student's responses.

The first measure administered was the Understanding Disability Scale, which is suitable for a broad age range and includes questions that can be easily understood by younger children. Favazza and Odom (1996) recommend the use of these types of scales because they are sufficiently simple for young participants while remaining appropriate for primary school students.

### 2.3 Understanding Disability Scale

The Understanding Disability Scale (UDS) was used to explore children's conceptual understanding of disability. The instrument is a qualitative measure consisting of two components.

In the first task, students were asked to draw *"a person with a disability."* In the second task, they responded to the open-ended question: *"What do you know about a person with a disability?"*

The drawings were analysed in order to identify whether children associated disability with characteristics related to blindness. Drawings were coded as relevant when they included elements consistent with visual impairment and as irrelevant when the depicted characteristics were unrelated to blindness.

The instrument is based on the Revised Primary Student Survey of Handicapped Persons developed by Esposito and Peach (1983). In its adapted form, the scale focuses specifically on children's understanding

of disability, following the modifications proposed by Van Hooser (2009). Previous studies have indicated that the instrument is suitable for use with young children.

**2.4 Acceptance Scale for Kindergartners – Revised (ASK-R)**

The Acceptance Scale for Kindergartners—Revised (ASK-R) (Favazza & Odom, 1999) was used to measure children's level of acceptance toward peers with disabilities. The instrument contains 18 items assessing both emotional and behavioural aspects of peer acceptance.

Responses are recorded using a three-point scale: Yes = 2, Maybe = 1, No = 0. Total scores range from 0 to 36 points and are interpreted as follows: 0–11 → low acceptance, 12–24 → moderate acceptance, 25–36 → high acceptance

For the purposes of the present study, the wording of the items was slightly adapted so that the term "disability" was replaced with "blindness." For example, one item asked: "*Would you play with a child if he or she was blind?"* This modification ensured that the questionnaire referred specifically to visual impairment.

The scale has demonstrated strong reliability indices, including Cronbach's alpha = .87 and split-half reliability = .91.

**2.5 Behavioral Intentions Scale (BIS)**

The Behavioral Intentions Scale (BIS) was used to examine children's willingness to interact with a peer with blindness. This instrument was based on the Behavioral Intentions Scale developed by Roberts & Lindsell (1997) and the Friendship Activity Scale proposed by Siperstein (1980). Items that were not developmentally appropriate for younger children were removed, resulting in a list of 15 activities that reflect common interactions among young students.

During the assessment, children were shown a picture of a child with blindness and were provided with a brief description. The interviewer then asked the question:

*"Would you do … with this child?"*

The activities were grouped into five categories:

- helping behaviours
- sharing behaviours
- physical proximity
- common activities
- familiarity

Children responded using the options: No = 0, Maybe = 1, Yes = 2. Higher scores indicate stronger behavioural intentions toward interacting with a peer with visual impairment and greater willingness to engage in inclusive social activities.

**2.6 Storytelling Program with Drama and Play-Based Activities**

An intervention program based on storytelling, drama pedagogy techniques, and playful experiential activities was implemented during physical education lessons in the first-grade inclusive classroom. The intervention was developed around the Greek children's book *Odos Alkyonis* (Giagazoglou-Papouda, 2019). The story describes the journey of a small kingfisher named Alkyoni who is born blind and initially hesitates to fly because of fear and uncertainty. During the story, Alkyoni meets a snail who becomes her friend and supports her in overcoming her fears.

At the beginning of each session, students sat in a semicircle on the classroom carpet. The researcher narrated a short part of the story. The narration was intentionally interrupted at key moments of the plot in

order to create opportunities for discussion and activity. During these pauses, students discussed the characters, the difficulties faced by Alkyoni, and the emotions experienced by the protagonists. These discussions served as a starting point for a series of structured activities designed to help children better understand the experience of visual impairment. Students were encouraged to reflect on questions such as how Alkyoni might feel when she cannot see, how she might move in the environment, and how the support of a friend might help her overcome her fears.

In addition to storytelling and discussion, the intervention included a variety of drama pedagogy techniques such as theatrical play, teacher in role, hot-seating, frozen image, thought tracking, conscience alley, and mantle of the expert (Neelands & Goode, 2000). These techniques allowed students to explore the thoughts and feelings of the characters and to express their ideas through dramatic action.

Alongside these activities, playful and psychomotor tasks were also incorporated. These activities aimed to provide children with experiential insights into everyday situations related to visual impairment. For example, students participated in movement games in which one child closed their eyes while a partner acted as a guide. In other activities, children explored the classroom space while relying on a peer for direction and support, simulating how assistance and trust can facilitate safe movement in the absence of sight.

Through these playful and experiential exercises, students experienced the importance of cooperation, communication, and trust. The activities also helped them understand how individuals with visual impairment may navigate their environment and interact with others. Overall, the combination of storytelling, drama techniques, and movement-based activities aimed to engage students emotionally and physically in the narrative world of the story. This approach encouraged children to explore different perspectives, develop empathy, and reflect on both the challenges and the abilities of individuals living with blindness.

## 3. Results

### 3.1 Understanding Disability Scale

At the pre-intervention stage, both groups demonstrated limited understanding of blindness. In the intervention group, none of the students produced drawings that clearly represented visual impairment, while only three students (21.4%) provided verbal responses related to blindness. Similarly, in the control group only one drawing (5%) depicted blindness-related characteristics and four students (20%) provided relevant responses.

Following the intervention, a clear change was observed in the intervention group. Most students were able to represent blindness in their drawings, with 12 out of 14 drawings (85.7%) coded as relevant. A similar improvement was observed in verbal responses, where 11 students (78.6%) provided answers reflecting an accurate understanding of blindness.

In contrast, only minimal changes were observed in the control group. The number of relevant drawings remained unchanged, while only a slight increase was observed in the number of relevant responses. The detailed distribution of responses is presented in Table 1.

**Table 1. Percentage of blindness understanding**

| Group | Measure | Pre-Intervention | Post-Intervention |
|---|---|---|---|
| Intervention | Irrelevant Drawing | 14 (100%) | 2 (14.3%) |
| | Blindness Drawing | 0 (0%) | 12 (85.7%) |
| | Irrelevant Question | 11 (78.6%) | 3 (21.4%) |
| | Blindness Question | 3 (21.4%) | 11 (78.6%) |
| Control | Irrelevant Drawing | 19 (95%) | 19 (95%) |
| | Blindness Drawing | 1 (5%) | 1 (5%) |
| | Irrelevant Question | 16 (80) | 15 (75%) |
| | Blindness Question | 4 (20%) | 5 (25%) |

### 3.2 Acceptance Scale for Kindergartners – Revised (ASK-R)

To examine changes in children's acceptance toward peers with disabilities, a repeated-measures analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted with Time (pre-intervention vs. post-intervention) as the within-subjects factor and Group (intervention vs. control) as the between-subjects factor.

Descriptive statistics for the ASK-R scores in both groups are presented in Table 2.

At baseline, the two groups showed comparable levels of acceptance. The intervention group had a mean score of 18.7 ± 7.1, while the control group had a mean score of 19.5 ± 6.6.

Following the intervention, acceptance scores increased in both groups, with a notably larger improvement observed in the intervention group. Specifically, the mean score of the intervention group increased to 25.4 ± 8.6, representing an increase of 6.7 points (34.05%). In contrast, the control group showed a smaller increase to 21.4 ± 5.8, corresponding to a 1.6-point increase (8.1%).

The repeated-measures ANOVA indicated that the improvement observed in the intervention group was statistically significant ($F = 4.77$, $p = 0.004$), suggesting that participation in the intervention program contributed to higher levels of acceptance toward children with blindness.

**Table 2.** ASK-R acceptance scores between the two groups, pre and post intervention

| Group | Pre-Intervention | Post-Intervention | Variation | % | p |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Intervention | 18.7 ± 7.2 | 25.4 ± 7.4 | +6.7 | +34.05% | 0.004 |
| Control | 19.5 ± 6.6 | 21.4± 5.8 | +1.6 | +8.1% | 0.410 |

### 3.3 Behavioral Intentions Scale (BIS)

The Behavioral Intentions Scale (BIS) was used to examine children's willingness to engage in activities with a child with blindness. A repeated-measures analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to evaluate the effects of Time (pre- vs. post-intervention) and Group (intervention vs. control) on BIS scores.

The analysis revealed a significant Group × Time interaction ($F = 7.22$, $p = 0.001$), indicating that changes in behavioral intentions differed between the two groups. More specifically, children in the intervention group demonstrated a substantial increase in BIS scores following participation in the program. Their mean score increased from 4.8 ± 3.9 before the intervention to 9.3 ± 6.0 after the intervention, representing a statistically significant improvement ($p < 0.05$).

In contrast, only a minimal change was observed in the control group. The mean BIS score increased slightly from 4.5 ± 3.4 at pre-intervention to 5.0 ± 3.2 at post-intervention, and this difference was not statistically significant ($p > 0.05$).

Descriptive statistics for BIS scores in both groups are presented in Table 3.

**Table 3.** Behavioral Intentions Scale scores pre and post the intervention

| Group | Pre | Post | Variation | %Change | p |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Intervention | 4.8 ± 3.9 | 9.3 ± 6.0 | +4.5 | +93.8% | <0.05 |
| Control | 4.5 ± 3.4 | 5.0± 3.2 | +0.5 | +11.1% | >.0.05 |

## 4. Discussion

The present study examined the effectiveness of a structured intervention program that combined storytelling, educational drama techniques and playful experiential activities in promoting first-grade students' understanding, acceptance and behavioral intentions toward blindness. The findings revealed a clear improvement in the intervention group across all three dimensions, including conceptual understanding of blindness, levels of acceptance and behavioral intentions toward interaction. In contrast, no substantial changes were observed in the control group.

Regarding children's initial understanding of blindness, the results confirm that young students often have limited and unclear perceptions of disability. Prior to the intervention, many students were unable to identify key characteristics of visual impairment in their drawings or explanations and frequently associated disability with unrelated negative situations. This finding is consistent with previous studies indicating that young children tend to associate disability mainly with visible physical characteristics and often struggle to understand less visible or more complex conditions (Hodkinson, 2007; Hong et al., 2014). Similar observations have been reported in research on children's perceptions of visual impairment, suggesting that limited familiarity with blindness may lead to uncertainty or simplified interpretations of disability (Granjon et al., 2025).

Following the intervention, a substantial improvement was observed in the intervention group. Students were able to represent blindness more accurately in their drawings and to describe aspects of visual impairment in their responses. These findings support previous research indicating that structured awareness programs can significantly enhance children's understanding of disability (Giagazoglou & Papadaniil, 2018; Holtz & Tessman, 2007; Ison et al., 2010). The improvement in children's understanding was also accompanied by an increase in acceptance, suggesting that when children learn more about disability and understand it better, they tend to develop more positive attitudes (Ison et al., 2010; Nowicki, 2006).

This improvement was also reflected in the ASK-R scores. Children in the intervention group responded more positively to questions related to blindness compared to their responses before the program, whereas only minor changes were observed in the control group. Similar findings have been reported in studies showing that structured educational activities that focus on disability awareness can positively influence children's attitudes when they provide opportunities for discussion and active participation (Alhumaid, 2023). In the present intervention, students did not only listen to the story but also participated in discussions, playful movement activities and collaborative tasks that were introduced through different parts of the story. Through these activities they explored in a practical way how a person with blindness moves, plays and interacts with others. This combination of storytelling, play and shared experiences appears to have helped students approach blindness with greater understanding and respond with more positive and accepting attitudes.

A clear improvement was also observed in the Behavioral Intentions Scale (BIS). After the intervention, students in the intervention group reported a greater willingness to cooperate, help and participate in common activities alongside children with blindness. This finding is particularly important because willingness to interact is closely linked with the development of everyday peer relationships at school. Previous research has also emphasized that the presence of students with and without disabilities in the same classroom does not automatically lead to meaningful interaction unless children have opportunities to learn about disability and discuss it within the classroom (Miyauchi, 2020). In the present study, the increase in BIS scores suggests that the intervention helped students feel more confident and positive about the idea of interacting and cooperating with individuals with visual impairment.

A key element of the intervention was the integration of play-based activities that allowed students to experience aspects of visual impairment in a practical and engaging way. Through playful tasks, children were invited to guide a classmate who could not see, move through the space relying on a partner's assistance and complete activities that required trust and cooperation. These experiences appeared to help students better understand the everyday challenges associated with visual impairment while also highlighting the importance of communication, support and collaboration.

The effectiveness of this approach is consistent with previous awareness interventions focusing on visual impairment. For example, Reina et al. (2011) reported that educational programs incorporating simulation activities and experiential learning tasks, such as blindfolded sport activities and cooperative exercises, significantly improved children's cognitive and emotional attitudes toward peers with visual impairment. Similarly to the present study, these activities allowed students to explore the experience of visual impairment in a safe and structured environment, facilitating a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by individuals with blindness.

The combination of storytelling, educational drama techniques and playful activities in the present intervention helped students explore blindness in a more meaningful and practical way. Storytelling allowed students to connect emotionally with the narrative and to explore the experiences of the story's characters. Educational drama techniques encouraged students to reflect on different perspectives and express thoughts and feelings through dramatic action. Previous research has suggested that stories can promote empathy and perspective-taking when children identify with fictional characters (Adomat, 2012; Law et al., 2017), while drama-based activities can deepen emotional engagement and understanding (Edmiston, 2000; Giagazoglou & Papadaniil, 2018; Layachi et al., 2024). However, it has also been emphasized that the simple reading of stories about disability is not sufficient to influence attitudes if it is not accompanied by guided discussion and experiential activities (Gulya & Fehérvári, 2023). The present study supports this view, as the combination of narrative, play and experiential engagement appeared to facilitate a more meaningful learning process.

Overall, the findings suggest that structured and experience-based interventions can play an important role in shaping children's perceptions of blindness. By engaging students through storytelling, educational drama and playful experiential activities, the intervention created opportunities for discussion, participation and a better understanding of visual impairment. Through these activities, students were able to explore in a practical way how individuals with blindness move, communicate and participate in everyday situations. These findings indicate that when storytelling is combined with experiential and play-based activities, it can become an effective educational approach for helping children better understand blindness and develop more positive attitudes toward disability. Considering that attitudes toward disability begin to develop during the early years of schooling and may become more stable over time (Shaw et al., 2017; Cicek Gumus & Oncel, 2022), the implementation of similar experiential programs in primary education may support the development of more inclusive and supportive peer relationships. Future research could further explore the long-term impact of such interventions and examine how similar approaches might be adapted to address different forms of disability and educational contexts.

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