

Exploring Representations of Characters with Disabilities in Library Books

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Abstract Early literacy experiences are critical for young children's development. More specifically, quality literacy experiences are beneficial to children's understanding of their world. Ensuring that early childhood literature appropriately reflects the diversity of children's life experiences can support their sense of belonging within an early childhood environment. Considering that the number of children with diverse abilities who attend general education classrooms is increasing, it is imperative that these classrooms provide welcoming and supportive environments for all children. One way to support inclusive environments for children with disabilities is to ensure that classroom books include characters with and without disabilities. As many early childhood teachers and family members regularly use community libraries to find books to read to young children, exploring how characters with disabilities are represented in library books is important. Results of a study focusing on children's library books revealed that characters with diverse abilities were represented in ways that promote their

inclusion, however some books displayed poor insight into the individual lives of characters with varying abilities. Implications for research and practice are discussed.

Keywords Literacy · Early childhood · Reading · Disabilities · Library

Introduction

There is considerable evidence to suggest that quality early literacy experiences are critical for children's language and literacy development (Bus et al. 1995; Justice and Pullen 2003; Whitehurst et al. 1994; Zucker et al. 2012). Early literacy experiences, including book reading, help build children's vocabulary, oral language, and communication skills (IRA and NAEYC 1998; Marulis and Neuman 2010; Mol et al. 2009). Book reading positively impacts not only children's early literacy and vocabulary development, but also supports other areas of development, such as children's personal, social-emotional, and intellectual development (Browne 1996; Sonnenschein and Munsterman 2002). Reading books enables children to learn new things about the world, remember things they already know, and relate their personal experiences to facts or events shared in the books. It provides children with opportunities to reflect upon their personal experiences, think about others' perspectives, learn about relationships, and hear about diversity and differences.

Experts predict that by 2060 the African American population in the United States will increase from 13.1 to 14.7 %, the Asian population will increase from 5.1 to 8.2 %, and the Hispanic population will increase from 13.6 to 24.4 % (U.S. Census Bureau 2010). These changing demographics highlight the need for educators to be

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responsive to diversity in their settings. Similarly, the demographics of children with disabilities are changing as more children with Individual Education Programs (IEPs) are included in general education classrooms. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, in the fall of 2009 approximately 95 % of students with disabilities, ages 6–21, were served in general education settings (Snyder and Dillow 2013). Consequently, as schools become increasingly diverse, it is important to examine how classroom materials reflect our changing student population.

In this manuscript we share the results from an exploratory study of representations of characters with disabilities in children's books. We begin with a brief review of the literature on how individuals with disabilities are portrayed in children's books. We continue by sharing the methodology and results of this study, and conclude with a discussion of implications for research and practice, as well as limitations of the study.

The Portrayal of Characters with Disabilities

Children's literature serves several purposes. It provides a context for understanding social norms and behavior, helps children learn how to adapt to society, and facilitates the development of appropriate social-emotional skills. In addition, children gain information from texts, learn to relate words and pictures, are motivated and entertained, and learn about perspectives that may differ from their own (Ayala 1999; Mendoza and Reese 2001; Nodelman 1988; Sipe 2012). Contemporary picture books also contribute to both the literature and visual arts. That is, the purpose of picture books extends beyond their use for pedagogical instruction. Children's literature also is read for enjoyment and appreciation of its aesthetic beauty (Fang 1996; Sipe 2001, 2012). It is important to note that literature is a central mode through which children "see the world" (Flynn 2001). Children's books are a powerful means for fostering children's identity and understanding of various cultures, and teaching understanding and acceptance of individuals who are different (Adomat 2014; Cole and Valentine 2000; Ostrosky et al. 2015; Prater and Dyches 2008). Thus, it is vitally important that children's literature reflect the world in which we live, and reflect authentic stories through the portrayal of appropriate characters and illustrations.

Historically, children's literature has been widely criticized for inaccuracies in the portrayal of gender, body size, individuals from culturally and linguistically diverse communities, and individuals with disabilities (c.f., Crisp and Hiller 2011; Dyches et al. 2006; Smith-D'Arezzo and Musgrove 2011; Wedwick and Latham 2013). Although the accurate portrayal of characters with disabilities in

children's literature has been widely discussed, few empirical studies exist that focus on how characters with disabilities are portrayed in young children's literature (Prater 1999).

Several researchers have reviewed books for young children that featured characters with disabilities (Ayala 1999; Dyches et al. 2006). These researchers found that authors frequently portrayed characters with disabilities as being limited in personality and lacking depth. Additionally, the representations of characters with disabilities in these storybooks were largely inaccurate. For example, characters with disabilities were often portrayed as having received miraculous cures from disabilities that are typically permanent in real life. Empirical studies have also examined how specific disabilities are portrayed in literature. For example, children with intellectual disabilities were featured in primarily supportive roles and not as main characters (Leininger et al. 2010; Prater, 1999). Also, books that feature characters who are Deaf often portray deafness as a disease or disability, and not as part of a larger culture or community (Golos and Moses 2011; Golos et al. 2012).

Not surprisingly, several studies have noted a trend in more positive portrayals of characters with disabilities for books published in the late 1990s and early 2000s. These characters tend to be members of inclusive settings and portrayed in a more positive light than in earlier studies (Prater 1999). For example, in these books characters with disabilities engage in typical daily activities, including positive and meaningful interactions with peers, and their disability is not the focus of the story. Surprisingly, researchers found that children with intellectual disabilities are often portrayed in helping roles or as "doers" (e.g., protectors, teachers, and caregivers) and their similarities to characters without disabilities are highlighted (Dyches and Prater 2005; Dyches et al. 2001).

Despite these findings, there is still a paucity of literature that positively portrays characters with disabilities. Specifically, the accuracy with which books for very young children portray characters with disabilities is limited (Ayala 1999; Heim 1994; Mellon 1989). While many teachers and family members look to community libraries as a resource for books, finding quality materials that feature characters with disabilities can be challenging. The purpose of this article is to share the results from an exploratory study of children's books that were available in public libraries within a Midwestern community with a population of approximately 100,000. Specific research questions addressed were: (a) Using a purposive sampling procedure, what children's library books feature characters with disabilities? and (b) To what extent do these books receive favorable/unfavorable reviews when examined using research-identified quality measures on reviewing books that portray individuals with disabilities?

Methods

Data Collection

A Google search was conducted to generate a list of children's books featuring characters with disabilities that were available at the public libraries in a Midwest community. Additionally, two state-funded library systems were accessed to search for books: a regional library database and an interlibrary loan system. The regional library database contains over 5 million resources and subscribes to numerous electronic databases that provide support to more than 5000 public libraries, academic, school, and special libraries. The interlibrary loan system provides access to school libraries within a 50-mile radius of the Midwest community, and allows school, public, and academic libraries to borrow materials from other libraries. That is, the interlibrary loan system serves as part of a consortium of library systems that meet the information and research needs of approximately 850,000 students and thousands of faculty and staff at a local Midwestern university. More than six hundred communities are served through this particular interlibrary loan system. Search terms used included *disabilities*, *young children*, and *special needs*. These searches resulted in a list of 80 books. Following the online searches, a "manual search" at one local library was conducted, resulting in an additional 125 books that featured characters with disabilities. Thus, our search resulted in a sample of 205 children's books.

The research team, consisting of four members (the three authors plus one graduate student), conducted an initial screening of the 205 books. The following inclusion criteria were used: (a) featured children and/or animals with disabilities; (b) appropriate for kindergarten through first grade with regard to sentence structure and vocabulary; (c) text was written in English or translated into English; (d) content was developmentally appropriate (e.g., theme, topic) for kindergartners and first graders; and (e) focused on the 13 disability categories included under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (e.g., autism, speech or language impairment, intellectual disabilities, etc.) or developmental delays in general. Kindergarten through first grade books were selected because research indicates that children begin to form attitudes about disabilities around age 5 (Triandis et al. 1984). Books that focused on other health impairments, such as asthma and diabetes were eliminated. Based on this screening, 102 books met the criteria for inclusion in this study (contact the first author for a list of books); thereby answering our first research question regarding library books that focus on characters with disabilities.

Development of Book Guidelines

To critically examine the 102 books, the research team adapted guidelines originally developed by Nasatir and Horn (2003). These two authors described the following guidelines as critical when reviewing books that represent individuals with disabilities: *check illustrations*, *check story line*, *look at lifestyles*, *weigh relationships*, *consider the effects on a child's self-image*, *consider author and illustrator background*, *explore author perspective*, *watch for loaded words*, and *check copyright date and target age*.

While other book review guidelines are available (c.f., Bland and Gann 2013; Heim 1994; Myles et al. 1992), we chose to use Nasatir and Horn's guidelines (2003), as they are a quality measure used within early childhood to evaluate the appropriateness of books that feature characters with disabilities. For the current study, coding procedures were developed and additional information was added to Nasatir and Horn's guidelines. For example, we described common stereotypes of characters with disabilities, ways characters are not accepted for their individual behavior, and examples of characters with disabilities who are cast as observers or doers. Additionally, guidelines were clarified to include a review of the narrative as well as pictures. When the 102 books were reviewed individually, each guideline was scored as "yes," "no," or "not applicable." Each guideline represented a separate criterion (see Table 1 for definition of book review guidelines).

After Nasatir and Horn's (2003) guidelines were revised, a graduate student in early childhood special education (ECSE) was trained on the procedures for reviewing each book in an effort to refine the definitions. This process involved the following steps: (1) the graduate student reviewed the guidelines with the first author; (2) the graduate student conducted a "trial run" by coding five books independently; (3) the graduate student and first author met to modify these definitions for clarity as they reviewed several books; (4) when needed, questions about the coding procedures were discussed with other members of the research team; and (5) the graduate student and the first author coded several additional books independently for the purpose of refining the definitions.

Inter-rater Agreement

A reliability coder was trained to review books by the first author. Five training sessions were conducted on a total of 26 books (5–6 books per training session).

Table 1 Definition of book review guidelines

Book review guidelines	Definition
Stereotypes	Identify whether stereotypes are present about characters with disabilities within the illustrations and narrative. Stereotypes include limited perceptions about what a character can or cannot do and their capabilities (e.g., assuming that a character in a wheelchair cannot play sports, assuming that a character with a motor disability has exceptional abilities in other areas). Stereotypes also include instances of the child and/or animal with disabilities having stereotypical thoughts about themselves (e.g., a character with a disability thinks about how she cannot do certain things)
Tokenism	Identify whether tokenism is present within the illustrations and narrative; characters are <i>not</i> depicted as genuine individuals with distinctive features and individual personalities
Type of role	Identify whether characters with disabilities are featured in leadership and action roles within the illustrations and narrative. Assess books on whether characters with disabilities are depicted as “doers” (e.g., playing with toys with their peers) or “observers” (e.g., watching peers play with toys)
Accepted for individual behavior	Identify whether books feature characters with disabilities that are accepted for their individual behavior. That is, to gain acceptance and approval, characters with disabilities do not exhibit extraordinary or “super human” characteristics, or do not seem fantastical in nature (e.g., a character with a visual impairment has the ability to “save the world”)
Resolution of the problem	Identify whether characters with disabilities are involved in problem resolution (e.g., they are part of the process by which a conflict is resolved, they help solve a problem). Characters with disabilities are not considered to “be the problem”
Same story told	Identify whether the same story could be told if the characters in the story did not have a disability. If the story content is specific to ideas and issues about disability (e.g., describing a therapy session or services a character receives) the same story could not be told about a character without a disability
Genuine insight into daily life	Identify whether the text and/or illustrations offer genuine insight into the daily routine in the life of a character with a disability
Clear balance between roles	Identify whether there is a clear balance between characters with disabilities and their roles as “doers” or “observers” in comparison to their typical peers. This is determined by examining the story line to see if characters with disabilities are featured as “doers” for the majority of the story line
Positive role models	Identify the presence of characters with and without disabilities with whom a child with a disability can identify as a positive and constructive role model
Author’s or illustrator’s background	Identify whether the author and/or illustrator has a background that would help them understand and contribute in a knowledgeable way to the “culture of disability.” This might include having a background in education, psychology, social work, curriculum development etc., or having a relative with a disability
Author’s or illustrator’s perspective	Identify whether the author and/or illustrator’s background strengthens the value of their work. Consider whether sensitivity to issues of disability and factual information about individuals with disabilities is evident
Loaded words	Identify whether words are present that could be regarded as offensive or harmful to individuals with disabilities. This includes words such as slow, retarded, lazy, docile, crazy, feeble-minded, idiot, afflicted with, suffering from, etc.
Copyright date	See whether the copyright date is appropriate (books published before 1990 were considered “old” for the purpose of this study)
Target age	Identify whether the target age is appropriate for the intended audience (all 102 books met the target age criteria at the screening level phase of the study)

Adapted from Nasatir and Horn (2003)

Reliability training involved three steps: (1) a careful review of the book guidelines which included reviewing one book together; (2) the independent coding of 26 books; and (3) discussion of coding discrepancies during which consensus was reached. Twenty-six percent of the remaining 76 books were randomly selected to assess reliability ($n = 20$ books). Reliability agreement averaged 90 % (range 80–100 %) across 12 guidelines (copyright date and target age were not included in the reliability figures for they were used to select books at our first level of screening). Detailed reliability percentages are presented in Table 2.

Results

To answer our research question on the appropriateness of children’s books for an early childhood audience, findings on each book review guideline follow. Table 2 includes a summary of the review guidelines across all categories.

Stereotypes

The 102 target books were examined to determine whether stereotypes were present about the character with a disability. Eighty-one books (79 %) contained no stereotypical

Table 2 Data for each book guideline

Categories	Reliability Frequency of agreement (%)	Representation by guideline ^a Frequency (%)
1. Stereotypes	18/20 (90)	21 (20.5)
2. Tokenism	20/20 (100)	2 (1.9)
3. Type of role	19/20 (95)	90 (88)
4. Accepted for individual behavior	19/20 (95)	93 (91)
5. Resolution of problem	16/20 (80)	68 (67)
6. Same story told	16/20 (80)	49 (48)
7. Genuine insight	20/20 (100)	95 (93)
8. Clear balance	17/20 (85)	75 (74)
9. Positive role models	19/20 (95)	97 (95)
10. Author/illustrator's background	18/20 (90)	53 (52)
11. Author/illustrator's perspective	18/20 (90)	52 (51)
12. Loaded words	17/20 (85)	27 (26)
13. Date	N/A	94 (92)

^a The numbers and percentages in this column reflect the number of books that met each guideline from the sample of 102 books that were reviewed

images or language while 21 books contained words or illustrations that would be considered stereotypical. Examples of stereotypical images included depictions of children with disabilities with persistently sad faces and depictions of children with disabilities as frail. Narrative examples that conveyed stereotypical ideas included assumptions about a child in a wheelchair being unable to master an athletic skill or play ball with peers on the playground.

Tokenism

When examining the books in terms of tokenism, the research team's attention focused on the distinct features and unique attributes of the characters with disabilities. If book characters were not portrayed as genuine individuals then they were considered token characters within the storyline. Only two books received negative reviews in terms of tokenism due to the depiction of children with disabilities as having excessively "attractive" features (i.e., made up with blush, lipstick, and long eyelashes) and/or being portrayed as perfect children.

Type of Role

Illustrations and narratives were examined as to whether the characters had equivalent leadership and action roles. Reviews focused on whether characters with disabilities were portrayed as "doers" or "observers" during the majority of the narrative. In 90 books (88 %) the type of role was action or leadership, while in 5 books (5 %) this criterion was not applicable. Seven books (7 %) portrayed

individuals with disabilities as having unequal roles in comparison to individuals without disabilities. For example, in one book typically developing peers were portrayed as caretakers of a child with disabilities during the majority of the narrative (e.g., helping him onto playground equipment, pushing him around the school). Characters depicted as "doers" included examples of children with disabilities going camping and participating in recess.

Accepted for Individual Behavior

Ninety-three (91 %) books featured characters with disabilities that were accepted as individuals. These books portrayed characters with disabilities actively involved with their families and within their school communities. For four books (4 %) this category was not applicable, while for 5 books (5 %), characters with disabilities were portrayed as exhibiting extraordinary characteristics (e.g., being able to talk to sea monsters).

Resolution of the Problem

Sixty-eight (67 %) books portrayed characters with disabilities resolving problems in the plot, such as characters without disabilities helping a child in a wheelchair think through ways to become involved in extracurricular activities with peers. Four (4 %) books highlighted children with disabilities as the cause of the conflict in the narrative (i.e., the child did not follow the rules in playing a game at recess), or the narrative did not involve characters with disabilities in resolving problems.

Same Story Told

Books were examined to see if the same story could be told if the characters did not have a disability. Forty-nine (48 %) books were considered to have a narrative that could apply to children and/or animals without disabilities, such as themes about having a pet as a friend, or feeling disappointed by a family member. Forty-eight (47 %) books included narratives that could not apply to children and/or animals without disabilities, such as narratives focusing on a child with disabilities joining a class and the accommodations that might be needed for him to be successful, and experiences when receiving speech therapy.

Genuine Insight into Daily Life

Ninety-five books (93 %) provided genuine insight into the daily life of a character with disabilities. These books highlighted topics such as characters finding their way home after becoming lost and attending a fieldtrip with classmates. Two books (2 %) did not portray genuine insight into the daily life of a character with disabilities. These narratives featured “super hero” adventures of children with disabilities, or simply narrated what a child with a disability could not do (e.g., “Susie can’t read. Susie can’t write.”).

Clear Balance Between Roles

For seventy-five (74 %) books there appeared to be a clear balance of roles between characters with and without disabilities. Examples included children with disabilities playing soccer with their peers, or children with disabilities participating in activities at school with typically developing classmates. Seven (7 %) books did not show a clear balance between characters with and without disabilities. These books portrayed children with disabilities as being involved on the periphery and being non-responsive.

Positive Role Models

Books were examined to determine if a child with a disability could identify with a book character (with or without disabilities) as a positive and constructive role model. Ninety-seven (95 %) books met this criterion, two books did not meet this criterion, and for three books the criterion was not applicable (i.e., book was about learning sign language). The books that did not meet this criterion contained assumptions about what the character with a disability could not do or included negative language with regard to the character with a disability; positive features of the character with a disability were not highlighted.

Author’s or Illustrator’s Background

Fifty-three (52 %) books contained information about the author and/or illustrator, which strengthened the value of their work. In these instances, we concluded that author and illustrator backgrounds contributed to their understanding of the culture of disability. Sixteen books (15 %) did not contain background information in the biographies that added insight into their understanding of disability. Thirty-three (32 %) books did not provide any information on the author’s and/or illustrator’s background.

Author’s or Illustrator’s Perspective

Books were examined to see whether the author’s and/or illustrator’s perspective strengthened the value of their work. Across the 102 books, 52 (51 %) met this criterion while 17 (17 %) did not. For several books, there was insufficient information provided about this particular book guideline (33 books or 32 % were deemed NA).

Loaded Words

Books were examined to see whether they included phrases that could be regarded as offensive or harmful to individuals with disabilities (i.e., slow, feeble-minded, confined to a wheelchair). Seventy-one books did not contain words that might be considered offensive, and 4 books were categorized as not applicable for they focused on topics such as signing the alphabet. The remaining 27 books included at least one word that might be considered derogatory toward an individual with a disability. Offensive words and phrases included “crippled,” “pity me,” “puny,” “crooked,” and “He couldn’t do anything right.”

Copyright Date

When checking the books in terms of the appropriateness of the publication date, we looked at the copyright date to see if it was appropriate for our intended audience of kindergartners and 1st graders. Books published before 1990 were considered “old,” as this was to ensure that books were applicable to current early childhood environments, inclusive practices, and legislation. Ninety-four of the 102 books (92 %) were printed after 1990, whereas one book was published in 1989, three books were published in 1988, two books were published in 1988, one book was published in 1983, and one book was published in 1971.

Target Age

Given the researchers’ backgrounds and professional expertise in early childhood, clinical judgment was used to

assess book length, word usage, topic, and vocabulary for age appropriateness. All 102 books (100 %) met the criteria of being age appropriate. This criterion was used to screen the initial pool of 205 books.

The majority of the 102 books found in local libraries in a Midwest community represented characters with disabilities in ways that highlighted their strengths and inclusion in classroom environments and society at large, while several books were deemed problematic. For example, some books contained stereotypical language or displayed poor insight into the lives of individuals with disabilities. Further, the use of loaded words, which was a characteristic of approximately one-fourth of the books, has the potential to impact young children's perceptions about individuals with disabilities and self-esteem. Interestingly, many of the authors and/or illustrators shared backgrounds related to special education, which may have impacted their attitudes, perceptions, and the quality of these books. From our exploration of the 102 books included in this sample, we compiled a list of 21 books that received high scores using the Nasatir and Horn's criteria (see Table 3). Teachers and family members might consider borrowing these books when they visit their community libraries.

Table 3 Top 21 books

Author	Book title
1. Addabbo, Carole	<i>Dina the Deaf Dinosaur</i>
2. Bertrand, Diane	<i>My Pal, Victor/Mi Amigo, Victor</i>
3. Chamberlin, Kate	<i>The Night Search</i>
4. DeBear, Kirsten	<i>Be Quiet, Marina!</i>
5. Hill, Sandi	<i>Best Friends</i>
6. Hoffman, Dorothy	<i>A Very Special Sister</i>
7. Klein, Adria F.	<i>Max's Fun Day</i>
8. Kneeland, Linda	<i>Cookie</i>
9. Laird, Elizabeth and Davison, Roz	<i>Jungle School</i>
10. Maguire, Arlene	<i>Special People, Special Ways</i>
11. Pitzer, Marjorie W.	<i>I Can, Can You?</i>
12. Plucker, Sheri	<i>Me, Hailey</i>
13. Rogers, Fred	<i>Extraordinary Friends</i>
14. Seeger, Pete; Jacobs, Paul D.	<i>The Deaf Musicians</i>
15. Scott, Rosanna	<i>Peter and Friends at Camp</i>
16. Senisi, Ellen B.	<i>All Kinds of Friends, Even Green</i>
17. Shirley, Debra	<i>Best Friend on Wheels</i>
18. Stryer, Andrea	<i>Kami and the Yaks</i>
19. Suen, Anastasia	<i>Helping Sophia</i>
20. Tildes, Phyllis Limbacher	<i>The Garden Wall</i>
21. Woloson, Eliza	<i>My Friend Isabelle</i>

Discussion

Young children's positive perceptions and attitudes about children with disabilities facilitate positive peer relationships (Diamond and Hong 2010; Diamond and Tu 2009; Favazza and Odom 1996, 1997; Favazza et al. 2000; Odom 2000; Odom et al. 2006). Research on attitude development suggests that children as young as 4 years of age identify 'obvious' physical disabilities such as cerebral palsy or hearing impairments (Diamond 1993; Diamond and Hestenes 1994; Dyson 2005), and that as children grow older they develop an awareness about less 'visible' disabilities, such as intellectual disabilities and mental illness (Conant and Budoff 1983; Nowiski 2006). Research also suggests that attitudes about individuals with disabilities are influenced by direct experiences (e.g., interactions with individuals with disabilities), indirect experiences (e.g., books, media), and children's primary social group (e.g., family members, peers) (Triandis 1971; Triandis et al. 1984). The impact of these factors on attitude development necessitates careful consideration of classroom, home, and community materials and activities to ensure that they promote acceptance and the development of positive attitudes towards individuals with disabilities.

The results of this exploratory study are consistent with earlier studies and demonstrate how characters with disabilities are portrayed in children's library books (Ayala 1999; Dyches et al. 2006; Leininger et al. 2010; Prater 1999, 2003). Further, this study extends the literature by focusing on books in early childhood. Using a revised version of Nasatir and Horn's (2003) guidelines, results revealed that 95 % of the 102 books provided genuine insight into the lives of characters with disabilities. Additionally, books tended to highlight characters with disabilities in supporting roles or as observers, and the characters maintained these roles throughout the narrative. However, at times when characters with disabilities were featured as doers (e.g., action, leadership), their disabilities were represented as super human or extraordinary. These portrayals reflect a lack of acceptance of characters with disabilities and their individual behavior (Dyches et al. 2006).

Some books showcased a limited role for characters with disabilities, or the narratives could not be told in the same way if the main character did not have a disability. Further, characters with disabilities often did not have active roles in problem resolution nor was there a clear balance between the roles of characters with and without disabilities. While the guidelines represent a cluster of topics to consider when evaluating children's books, the guidelines are not of equal weight. For example, if a book contains stereotypical words or illustrations a professional

or caregiver would most likely choose not to read the story, however the fact that an author's background is not in special education or a related field might not be such a major consideration in book selection.

While many books may be available in local libraries, they need to be critically examined prior to reading them to young children. Additionally, it is important to look across criteria as some books may be rated highly in one category, but poorly in another category. Further, some guidelines such as resolution of problems and the role of the person with a disability are often overlooked, yet these are critical variables to consider when selecting books. It is also important to carefully consider the messages conveyed to children through illustrations as well as the narrative. For example, although loaded words might appear salient to the critical eye when examining a book, it is equally important to consider balance, problem solving, and whether the same story could be told if the book characters did not have disabilities. These latter categories are less obvious guidelines but are vital to children's perceptions of individuals with disabilities.

Limitations

There are several limitations to this exploratory study that should be addressed. One limitation is that only books within one geographical area were examined. Extending this study to a larger geographical region may result in different findings. Additionally, the results from a more comprehensive study may have a greater impact on library science practices, as well as classroom practices. That is, results from a more comprehensive study could help librarians, often particularly skilled in collection development, become more aware of children's books that feature characters with disabilities and select appropriate books using the aforementioned guidelines.

Another limitation of this study is that one of the authors served as a reliability coder, conducted an initial screening of the books, and assisted in developing the coding guidelines. Involving several independent reliability coders who were not involved in the initial review of the books may have yielded more convincing findings.

Given the importance of evaluating picture books in terms of their visual artistic features, and children's appreciation of illustrations, a final limitation of this study is that books were not evaluated for their aesthetic beauty. That is, the researchers did not critique books based on authentic drawings, and a blend of text and illustrations. This is an important aspect of picture book analysis that was not addressed in this study and could benefit from further study.

Future Research

Future research should be conducted within a larger geographical area and should include bookstores and online book vendors as our world is rapidly changing with regard to how books and other curricular materials are accessed. It is important to examine materials that are available in online libraries, as well as traditional libraries in order to target a larger audience.

Another research consideration is the overlap in the definitions for *Type of Role* and *Clear Balance*. These two guidelines can present some confusion as to how books are examined. For *Type of Role*, books were critiqued based on whether characters with disabilities were featured as "doers" or "observers." However, for *Clear Balance*, books were examined based on whether characters with disabilities were featured as "doers" and "observers" *as often* as their peers without disabilities. As these two guidelines overlap considerably, future researchers might consider combining them into one category.

Finally, future research should evaluate picture books that feature characters with disabilities for their contribution to visual art. Researchers should systematically attend to drawings and illustrations, and the blend between illustrations and texts. This additional analysis would further our understanding of how characters with disabilities are represented in children's literature.

Implications for Practice

It is important to carefully review books prior to reading them to young children. Family members, educators, and other professionals need to be aware of evaluative criteria to consider when examining books that include characters with disabilities. As classroom environments become more diverse, it is important that teachers have the skills to create positive, inviting, and accepting classroom spaces, particularly for children with disabilities. Findings from this study provide professionals with an additional lens for examining books that not only exist within public libraries, but also within their school libraries. Knowing how to select books will help professionals broaden their skills and understanding of differences, and equip students with knowledge that will promote awareness and acceptance.

Book reading is an activity that is shared by many children, parents, and teachers on a regular basis. The messages that books contain can be extraordinarily powerful and can impact the perceptions and attitudes of young children with and without disabilities. As researchers, practitioners, and family members, it is prudent that we review book content to ensure that individuals with disabilities are appropriately portrayed, valued, and embraced within the narrative and illustrations. In addition to aligning with the philosophy and

culture of inclusion in our public schools, this approach provides individuals with disabilities with a voice that is truly representative of who they are.

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