

Portrayals of Disabilities in Picturebooks with the Schneider Family Award

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Abstract

This study analyzed the portrayal of disabilities in picturebooks that have received the Schneider Family Award, a well-known children's literature award in the United States focused on disability representation. The purpose of the study was to conduct an intersectional analysis of these picturebooks to explore how characters are positioned across multiple categories such as disability, race/ethnicity, gender, class, age, and language. Using the Rating Scale for Quality Characterizations of Individuals with Disabilities in Children's Literature, the study analyzed all 17 picturebooks appropriate for early childhood that received the Schneider Family Award from 2004 to 2020. The analysis found that these picturebooks are commendable for their accurate and realistic portrayals of characters with disabilities and other positive aspects. Implications are provided for teachers, authors, illustrators, and selection committees for children's literature awards.

Keywords: disabilities, children's literature, picturebooks, intersectionality, diversity, social justice

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The purpose of the study was to conduct an intersectional analysis of picturebooks that received the Schneider Family Award (SFA) to explore how characters are positioned across multiple categories such as disability, race/ethnicity, gender, class, age, sexual orientation, religion, geographic location, and language (Christensen & Jensen, 2012). The SFA is the only identity-based multicultural literature award in the United States that focuses on disabilities. According to the American Library Association (2020), the awards ‘honor an author or illustrator for a book that embodies an artistic expression of the disability experience for child and adolescent audiences.’ However, portrayals of other aspects of the stories such as race/ethnicity, gender, and age of the characters with disabilities in the SFA picturebooks were previously not considered.

Minority characters with disabilities in Newbery Award-winning children’s books are disproportionate compared to the students in public schools who receive special-education services (Leininger et al., 2010). In their analysis, White characters with disabilities were overrepresented, while Black, Hispanic, and Asian/Pacific characters with disabilities were significantly underrepresented. When racial/ethnic minorities with disabilities are not present in children’s books, readers may develop a distorted view of the group, potentially contributing to double oppression against them. Additionally, a finding regarding picturebooks with the Asian/Pacific American Award for Literature showed a lack of child characters with disabilities. A comprehensive intersectional analysis of SFA picturebooks will test if they exhibit the same trend. This study aims to unpack how disability is considered in society as portrayed in picturebooks. The results can provide teachers and caregivers with a general knowledge of quality picturebooks that portray characters with disabilities.

Intersectionality and Disabilities

The concept of intersectionality was first explored in studies of feminism in the 19th century. Sojourner Truth, an enslaved black woman, highlighted this in her 1851 speech where she declared, 'I have plowed, I have planted and I have gathered into barns. And no man could head me. ... I have borne children and seen most of them sold into slavery, and when I cried out with a mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me. And ain't I a woman?' (Brah & Phoenix, 2004, p. 77). Later, hooks (1984) defined feminism as encompassing racism, classism, and imperialism. Crenshaw (1989) coined the term intersectionality in connection to Black feminism, illustrating how race and gender are intertwined in discrimination. Sullivan (2003) explained that double oppression can occur when an individual has multiple identities that subject them to discrimination. While race, gender, and socioeconomic status were the main axes of Crenshaw's (1991) original concept of intersectionality, many scholars have extended this to include other social categories such as ethnicity, nationality, disabilities, religion, language, age, and sexual orientation (e.g., Collins, 2015; Li, 2019; Morgan, 1996). These social categories are not merely combined to explain a group's experience; intersectionality is not additive but reconstitutive and entangled (Crenshaw, 1991; Kupupika, 2021).

Historically, 'people with Down syndrome, the first disability targeted for genetic detection and selective elimination in the 1960s, were at the time called Mongoloid idiots, a diagnostic category fusing racial and disability discrimination to warrant permanent institutionalization' (Garland-Thomson, 2019, xxvii). Jarman's (2013) review of *The Shape of the Eye* (Estreich, 2011) illustrates how the story of Estreich's daughter Laura, diagnosed with Down syndrome, manifests the entanglements of ethnicity and disability. In rejecting the

diagnosis, Laura's Japanese grandmother tried to protect her from the racialized stigma attached to Down syndrome as Mongoloid idiocy, which reflects a form of internalized ableism and belonging (Jarman, 2013, p. 201). Estreich's engagement with his Japanese heritage, his definition of family, and the history of Down syndrome suggests a shift from intersectionality toward disorientations and entanglements (Jarman, 2013, p. 202).

Disability Critical Race Theory (DisCrit)

Disability Critical Race Theory (DisCrit) is an interdisciplinary framework that integrates Disability Studies and Critical Race Theory to examine the intersections of race and disability and how these intersections shape experiences of oppression and resistance. DisCrit emerged as a response to the limitations of both Disability Studies and Critical Race Theory in addressing the complex ways in which race and disability intersect (Annamma et al., 2013). One of the central tenets of DisCrit is the recognition that racism and ableism are interconnected systems of oppression that cannot be fully understood in isolation. DisCrit scholars argue that both race and disability are socially constructed categories used to maintain power structures and justify social hierarchies (Annamma et al., 2016). By focusing on the lived experiences of individuals at these intersections, DisCrit provides a nuanced analysis of how social, cultural, and institutional practices contribute to the marginalization of disabled people of color. A key contribution of DisCrit is its emphasis on counter-narratives. Counter-narratives are stories that challenge dominant discourses and offer alternative perspectives on the experiences of marginalized groups. DisCrit values the voices of disabled people of color, who have historically been excluded from mainstream narratives, and highlights their agency in resisting and challenging oppressive systems (Annamma et al., 2018). This focus on counter-narratives aligns with broader efforts in Critical Race Theory to

foreground the experiences and voices of people of color as a means of challenging and transforming oppressive structures.

DisCrit also critiques the additive approach to intersectionality, which treats various social identities as separate and independent variables that can be simply added together. Instead, DisCrit advocates for a more integrated and holistic understanding of intersectionality that recognizes the interdependent and mutually constitutive nature of social identities (Goethals et al., 2015). This approach allows for a more comprehensive analysis of how multiple forms of oppression intersect and interact in complex and dynamic ways.

By applying a DisCrit lens to the analysis of picturebooks with the Schneider Family Award, this study aims to uncover how these books represent the experiences of disabled people of color and how they challenge or reinforce dominant narratives about disability and race. By examining the intersectional portrayals of disability in children's literature, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the ways in which literature can serve as a tool for both oppression and liberation.

Feminist-of-Color Disability Studies

In addition to DisCrit, this study is informed by Schalk and Kim's (2020) feminist-of-color disability studies, which build upon Garland-Thomson's (2002) work. While early feminist disability studies recognized the need to engage with race, the field was predominantly composed of White women, with women scholars of color underrepresented (Bell, 2006). This lack of diversity hindered racial analysis within the field (Schalk & Kim, 2020). Feminist-of-color disability studies analyze the intersections of disability, race, and gender, using disability studies as a lens to examine the intersecting systems of ableism, heteropatriarchy, white supremacy, and capitalist violence, particularly as they assign value

or lack thereof to certain bodyminds (Schalk & Kim, 2020, p. 38). Avoiding identitarian approaches, feminist-of-color disability studies consider disability as a relationship to power rather than a fixed identity (Schalk & Kim, 2020, p. 38).

Influenced by crip theorists, feminist-of-color disability studies focus on the ableist social system that disables people, aligning with overlapping systems of domination based on race, gender, class, and sexuality. These systems tend to pathologize the bodyminds of people of color, women, and trans, nonbinary, and gender-nonconforming individuals, especially when such individuals are not legally, medically, or socially recognized as disabled (Schalk & Kim, 2020, p. 41). The pathologizing and oppressive ableist discourses are fundamental to the operation of racism, sexism, and classism. Therefore, feminist-of-color disability studies challenge the ideological operations of identity-based oppressive mechanisms such as ableism, racism, sexism, and classism.

Disability can be challenging to define because it is not an object but a social process (Davis, 1995, p. 2) and a relational phenomenon (Jarman, 2013, p. 195). As Garland-Thomson (2019) wrote, 'we wonder whether stuttering, depression, anxiety, chronic pain, or disfigurement are legitimate disabilities, alternately claiming and denying the category' (p. xxvi). To understand disability, we need to dissect the concept of the norm and the construction of normalcy rather than focusing on disability itself, similar to how scholarship on race shifted focus to whiteness and intersectionality rather than solely on people of color (Davis, 1995). With a nonnormative positivist perspective, Mitchell and Snyder (2015) argue that there is a great need for an ethical methodology from which disabled people can articulate how their lives bring something new into the world that may otherwise go unrecognized (p. 6). They suggest that the focus of current disability studies and global

disability rights movements on advocating for people with disabilities to pursue their lives much as able-bodied people do, in order to prove worthy of acceptance and as recipients of equality of treatment, can corroborate the unchallenged desirability of normative lives (p. 6).

In *About Us: Essays from the Disability Series of the New York Times*, edited by Catapano and Garland-Thomson (2019), Garland-Thomson emphasizes the significance of disabled people's own voices. Contrasted with rampant deficit views about people with disabilities, the authors of the essays in the book emphasize and detail the benefits, even pleasures, of living with disabilities as people with disabilities (p. xxviii). Bérubé (1998, 2016a), who wrote about the early years through adulthood of his son Jamie with Down syndrome, has challenged normalcy by examining disability rights, abortion, prenatal testing, and educational policy. Bérubé (2016b) also highlights the significance of disabled people's own voices. He states that intellectually disabled narrative opens a window onto a reimagining of the parameters of narrative. He also suggests intellectually disabled self-consciousness opens a window onto a reinterpretation of self-consciousness (p. 160).

Problems of Identity-based Multicultural Book Awards

It is acknowledged that identity-based multicultural book awards, such as the Schneider Family Award, face challenges. Committees for awards like the Coretta Scott King Award, the Pura Belpré Award, the Asian Pacific American Award for Literature, the American Indian Youth Literature Award, the Lambda Literary Award, and the Schneider Family Award work diligently to increase representation of minoritized and disenfranchised identities in U.S. literature. However, as Cummins (2016) points out, their efforts have not been as effective as expected:

Judges on existing identity-based multicultural book award committees are consciously striving for social justice. They believe strongly that the work they do is critically important for the identity groups on whose behalf they do it. They are right, in a theoretical sense, but what we have seen is that they have not been able to do the “world-changing” that Wiegman sees as the goal of identity studies insofar as the publication of books featuring protagonists of color has not changed since Nancy Larrick’s call 50 years ago. (Cummins, 2016, p. 101)

Cummins (2016) discussed findings from a large-scale study conducted by the Cooperative Children’s Book Center, noting the decreased number of books with African-American characters since 2008. One possible explanation, according to Cummins, is that primary awards like the Newbery and the Caldecott Awards, which ostensibly have nothing to do with identity, are rooted in a white male-dominated culture. The vague selection criteria that Newbery judges must follow, without an understanding of intersectionality or consciousness of implicit biases, often result in support for the interests of the publishing industry (Bittner & Superle, 2016). Furthermore, the criteria for selecting Newbery Award jurors are nebulous, only specifying that the chairperson appoints six committee members without detailing their personal or professional backgrounds. This contrasts with the more specified criteria of identity-based multicultural book awards, such as the Stonewall Award, which requires a balance of sexuality/gender among committee members (Bittner & Superle, 2016).

The publishing industry tends to produce lucrative crowd-pleasers that represent hegemonic interests, often lacking or stereotyping minoritized identities (So & Wezerek, 2020). The Newbery Medal frequently faces criticism for its lack of diversity in gender, class,

and race among its winners, reflecting broader issues in the publishing industry (Bittner & Superle, 2016, p. 73).

As primary awards remain impenetrable, authors with minoritized identities often focus on meeting the selection criteria of identity-based multicultural book awards, unable to pursue the so-called excellence emphasized by larger awards (Bittner & Superle, 2016). Jurors of primary awards tend to overlook authors' diverse backgrounds, while identity-based multicultural book awards can sometimes serve as a refuge for authors excluded from the primary selection process (Cummins, 2016). This situation creates an unreasonable dichotomy between aesthetics and ideology, exacerbating the divide between primary book awards and identity-based, multicultural, social-justice-focused awards (Bittner & Superle, 2016).

Children's Literature Research about Disability Portrayals in Picturebooks

There is a significant gap in the literature on the portrayal of children with disabilities in picturebooks. In a milestone study, Dyches and colleagues (2006) analyzed portrayals of disabilities in Caldecott picturebooks, an award based on quality illustrations. They found that these picturebooks exhibited far fewer characters with disabilities than the actual number in American schools. Characters with disabilities appeared in only 4% of the Caldecott books, whereas 12% of students in public schools had a disability during the year of their analysis. The researchers also noted that the types of disabilities represented were disproportionate to those found in the general student population. While specific learning disabilities, intellectual disabilities, and speech/language impairments are most common in U.S. public-school classrooms, the disabilities in the Caldecott books included orthopedic impairments, autism, intellectual disabilities, and visual impairments. In one case, an

intellectual disability was unrealistically portrayed, as simple-mindedness was cured magically at the end of *The Fool of the World and the Flying Ship*, retold by Arthur Ransome and illustrated by Uri Shulevitz. Only two books, *Crow Boy* by Taro Yashima (1955) and *Tibet: Through the Red Box* by Peter Sís (1998), featured child characters with disabilities. Consequently, picturebooks offer little guidance to typically developing young children in understanding how to interact with their peers with disabilities. Another notable finding was the questionable accuracy of some portrayals, such as the prince's blindness being cured by Rapunzel's tears in the Brothers' Grimm *Rapunzel*, adapted and illustrated by Paul Zelinsky. This fairytale depiction diverges from scientific understanding of blindness.

A recent study by Martinez and colleagues (2016) analyzed characters in 111 Caldecott picturebooks over 25 years, from 1990 to 2015. They found only 12% of main characters had a physical disability, one had an emotional disability, and none had a cognitive disability. Regarding racial identity, they found only one LatinX character with an orthopedic impairment, in *Viva Frida*.

There is a lack of scholarly studies on picture books with the Schneider Family Book Award. Curwood's (2013) article, the only one dealing with books that received the Schneider Family Book Award, analyzed three chapter books for young adults to examine constructions of normalcy and disabilities. Curwood recommended *Jerk, California* (Friesen, 2008), *Marcelo in the Real World* (Stork, 2009), and *Five Flavors of Dumb* (John, 2010) for critical discourse analysis. This contrasts with other Schneider Family Book Award recipients that did not centralize disability, such as *Waiting for Normal* (Connor, 2008), where the protagonist's dyslexia was not a key element of the story (Curwood, 2013). According to Curwood, "it is important that students read young adult literature where disabilities are not

sensationalized or over-emphasized; these works do not generally lend themselves as well to critical discourse analysis” (2013, p. 26). This approach can also be applied to analyzing picture books with the Schneider Family Book Award.

Unlike chapter books, picturebooks create meaning through a complex process where illustrations and narrative work synergistically to convey the author’s content (Nodelman, 1988; Causarano, 2021, p. 32). The literature review suggests that an intersectional analysis of Schneider Family Award picturebooks, focusing on disability portrayals and related intersectional aspects, would significantly contribute to the literature. Additionally, analyzing the subtypes of disabilities portrayed in these picturebooks could add valuable insights to the field.

Methods

This study employs a systematic content analysis combined with an interpretive approach inspired by Disability Critical Race Theory (DisCrit). The aim is to analyze how disabilities are portrayed in picturebooks that have received the Schneider Family Award, focusing on intersectional aspects such as race, ethnicity, gender, and other social categories. This section details the research design, data collection, analytical procedures, and the alignment with the theoretical frameworks of intersectionality and DisCrit.

Research Design

The study was designed to provide an in-depth qualitative analysis of the portrayal of disabilities in children's literature, specifically within picturebooks awarded the Schneider Family Award. By integrating qualitative content analysis with an interpretive approach, the research seeks to uncover the nuanced ways in which disabilities and intersecting identities are represented. This design is informed by the principles of DisCrit, which emphasize the

interconnectedness of race and disability and the importance of counter-narratives.

Data Collection

The data set includes all 18 picturebooks that received the SFA from 2004 to 2020. These books were selected because the SFA specifically honors children's literature that portrays the disability experience. The data collection process involved several steps to ensure the appropriateness and completeness of the sample.

Selection Criteria and Screening

To address the primary research question—How are disabilities portrayed in the picturebooks with the Schneider Family Award?—the study included the entire collection of SFA picturebooks from 2004 to 2020. Initially, the complete list of SFA-winning picturebooks was obtained from the American Library Association website. Each book was then assessed for developmental appropriateness for early childhood (kindergarten level or younger) based on Lexile levels, professional judgment, and recommendations from online resources such as Scholastic Book Wizard. If any of these books were found to be developmentally inappropriate for this age group, they were excluded from further analysis, thereby limiting the study to picturebooks that were appropriate for general early childhood (preK-2nd grade) education in the U.S. In the end, only "Silent Days, Silent Dreams" by Allen Say was excluded because its Lexile Level is 790L, targeting children older than grade 3. Therefore, a total of 17 picturebooks were used in the systematic analysis for disability portrayals and intersectionality.

Data Extraction

Both the textual content and illustrations of each book were systematically extracted and documented. This process involved creating detailed notes on key narrative elements, character descriptions, dialogues, and significant visual representations that depict disabilities and intersecting identities. The comprehensive documentation ensured that both the textual and visual dimensions of the books were thoroughly analyzed.

Analytical Framework

The analytical framework for this study is deeply rooted in DisCrit and intersectionality theories, guiding the examination of how disabilities are portrayed in the SFA picturebooks. The analysis is structured around three central research questions:

1. How are disabilities portrayed in the Schneider Family Award picturebooks?
2. How do these portrayals intersect with race, gender, and other identities?
3. How do the narratives align with or challenge dominant societal discourses about disability and race?

Analytical Procedures

The analysis proceeded in several meticulously planned phases.

Coding and Categorization

Each book was read multiple times to identify and code instances of disability portrayal, character interactions, and narrative context. The coding process was informed by the Rating Scale for Quality Characterizations of Individuals with Disabilities in Children's Literature (Dyches & Prater, 2000; adapted by Pehrson, 2011). This instrument evaluates various dimensions such as personal portrayals, social interactions, sibling relationships, exemplary practices, and the impact of disability on the plot and setting. The coding process involved an iterative review to refine categories and ensure consistency.

Intersectional Analysis

An intersectional analysis was conducted to examine how the characters' identities intersect across race/ethnicity, gender, class, age, sexual orientation, religion, geographic location, and language. This phase utilized critical multicultural-analysis approaches (Botelho & Rudman, 2009; Short, 2017) to explore aspects such as focalization (who gets to speak and whose story is told), social status (who has power), story closure (fixed or open endings), representational issues, power relations, and potential inequalities. The integration of DisCrit principles was pivotal during this stage, emphasizing the importance of counter-narratives and the social construction of disability and race within the picturebooks. This involved identifying and analyzing narratives that resisted or reinforced dominant societal discourses, with a particular focus on how these books portrayed the experiences and voices of disabled people of color (Annamma et al., 2018).

Application of DisCrit Framework

Applying the DisCrit framework allowed for a critical examination of how the intersectionality of race and disability is represented in the picturebooks. DisCrit emphasizes the interconnectedness of racism and ableism and critiques traditional narratives that marginalize disabled people of color. By focusing on counter-narratives, DisCrit provides a lens through which to analyze how the picturebooks challenge or reinforce dominant societal norms (Annamma et al., 2016; Annamma, Ferri, & Connor, 2018). The analysis sought to uncover the extent to which these books provide a platform for the voices of disabled individuals, particularly those from marginalized racial and ethnic backgrounds.

Triangulation and Debriefing

To ensure reliability and validity, the analysis included regular debriefing sessions with colleagues knowledgeable in DisCrit and intersectionality theories. These sessions involved discussing the coding process, refining categories, and addressing any discrepancies. Analytical triangulation was employed, which involved using multiple perspectives to interpret the data and reach a saturation point where no new themes emerged. This process helped to enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings.

Contextualization and Interpretation

The contextualization of the findings was grounded in a comprehensive review of relevant literature, including DisCrit and intersectionality. This study acknowledges the limitations of existing children's literature in representing diverse identities and seeks to highlight both the strengths and gaps in the SFA-winning picturebooks. The interpretive approach facilitated a nuanced understanding of the portrayals, considering not just the presence of disabilities but the quality and context of these portrayals. This aligns with the principles of DisCrit, which emphasize the importance of counter-narratives and the interconnectedness of race and disability. The findings were interpreted in light of the broader social and cultural contexts, considering how the representations in the picturebooks reflect or challenge prevailing societal norms and attitudes towards disability and race.

Example of Integrated Analysis and Interpretation

Analysis Section: Social Interactions

In examining the social interactions of characters with disabilities, it is evident that these interactions are often portrayed in a positive and reciprocal manner. For instance, in "Dad, Jackie, and Me," the protagonist's relationship with his deaf father highlights the shared experiences and mutual respect between them. This aligns with DisCrit's emphasis on

counter-narratives, which challenge dominant stereotypes by presenting disabled individuals as active and valued members of their communities (Annamma et al., 2018). Similarly, "Piano Starts Here: The Young Art Tatum" portrays the protagonist's social contributions through his musical talent, promoting respect and admiration for his abilities. This depiction supports Goethals et al.'s (2015) argument that social identities are interdependent and must be understood in relation to one another. Tatum's story not only highlights his disability but also his racial identity as a Black musician, offering a holistic view of his character.

Summary of Key Findings

The analysis revealed that while the SFA picturebooks generally portray disabilities in a positive light, there are notable disparities in the representation of different disability types and intersectional identities. The findings highlight the need for more diverse and nuanced portrayals that reflect the complexity of lived experiences at the intersections of race, disability, and other social categories.

Findings: Disability Portrayal in Picturebooks with the Schneider Family Awards

The Schneider Family Awards recognize outstanding books that embody an artistic expression of the disability experience for child and adolescent audiences. This study analyzed 17 picturebooks appropriate for PreK-2nd grade that received this award, examining the portrayal of characters with disabilities across various dimensions. Each book offers unique insights into the lives of individuals with disabilities, using creative storytelling and vivid illustrations to convey their experiences. The findings highlight both strengths and areas for improvement in these representations, providing a comprehensive overview of how disabilities are depicted in children's literature, and exploring the implications for intersectionality, bias, and representation.

The SFA picturebooks, while providing realistic and positive portrayals of disabilities, still reflect broader societal trends in the representation of gender and race. The overrepresentation of male characters and certain disability types, along with the underrepresentation of Latinx characters, highlights ongoing issues in children's literature. These disparities can influence young readers' perceptions and contribute to a limited understanding of the diverse experiences of children with disabilities. In addition to the disparities in disability types and racial/ethnic identities, the point of view in these picturebooks often comes from an omniscient third person or an adult looking back on childhood. Four of the picturebooks (23.5%) described the characters with disabilities from the protagonists' point of view, providing a more intimate and authentic portrayal of their experiences. The illustrations in the SFA picturebooks generally enhance the realistic portrayal of disabilities. They effectively depict the characteristics of disabilities, sometimes using artistic or metaphorical means to convey the experiences of the characters. For instance, the illustrations in "Six Dots" use different color schemes to represent the vision and imagination of Louis Braille, adding depth to the narrative.

Realistic Portrayals and Character Development

The analysis of the 17 picturebooks with the Schneider Family Award reveals that the portrayal of characters with disabilities is generally realistic, capturing various attributes and challenges accurately. For example, in "A Friend for Henry," Henry's characteristics of ASD are described with precision in the classroom setting, highlighting his need for order and his difficulties with social interactions. This book sensitively explores Henry's world, detailing how he navigates his daily routines and the challenges he faces in trying to make friends. The nuanced depiction of Henry's emotions and the ways he finds comfort in routines is both

enlightening and empathetic, offering a valuable perspective on the experiences of children with ASD.

Similarly, "Back to Front and Upside Down" portrays Stan, whose struggles with writing letters realistically reflect dysgraphia or dyslexia, though not explicitly labeled. The story poignantly depicts Stan's frustration and perseverance, providing an accessible entry point for young readers to understand learning disabilities. Stan's journey of overcoming his difficulties with the support of his teacher and friends highlights the importance of patience and encouragement in learning environments, showcasing how educational support can impact children with learning disabilities.

Similarly, "A Friend for Henry" does not explicitly label Henry as having Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), but it realistically describes his need for routine and order in the classroom. Henry arranges the carpet squares for reading time perfectly, only to become distressed when a classmate disrupts his arrangement. This portrayal highlights Henry's characteristics of ASD, such as his literal interpretation of facts and discomfort with rule-breaking, providing an authentic depiction of his daily experiences without reducing him to his disability alone.

In "Emmanuel's Dream," Emmanuel, born with only one strong leg, is depicted as a determined and resourceful character who supports his family financially. The book emphasizes his abilities and resilience, countering any notion of pity and instead highlighting his strength and resourcefulness. His story, where he undertakes a long-distance bike ride to raise awareness for disabilities, demonstrates his self-determination and ability to overcome economic hardships.

Louis Braille's innovation and perseverance are depicted with depth in "Six Dots: A Story of Young Louis Braille," emphasizing his impact on the blind community. The narrative follows Louis from his early childhood through his invention of the Braille system, offering a detailed and inspiring portrait of his determination and creativity. The story vividly illustrates the challenges Louis faced and his unwavering resolve to create a tool that would transform the lives of blind individuals worldwide, highlighting the intersection of personal perseverance and societal change.

In "Kami and the Yaks," Kami's deafness is portrayed realistically, showcasing his bravery and resourcefulness in the face of adversity. Kami communicates effectively through gestures, and his deafness does not hinder him from understanding the world around him or taking decisive actions, such as rescuing a yak in distress. This story underscores the message that disabilities do not limit one's ability to make significant contributions and exhibit courage, providing a powerful narrative about overcoming barriers.

Narrative Perspective

A significant portion of the picturebooks (approximately 60%) utilized a third-person narrative perspective. This narrative choice, while providing a comprehensive view of the characters' experiences, often lacks the depth and personal insight that first-person narratives can offer. For instance, "Just Ask! Be Different, Be Brave, Be You" employs a collective first-person voice that seems more like an adult storyteller providing accurate information about disabilities rather than reflecting the children's voices. This approach can feel somewhat detached, missing the opportunity to delve deeply into the personal experiences of the characters.

In contrast, "The Remember Balloons," narrated by a child observing his grandfather's dementia, uses a first-person perspective that provides a poignant and realistic portrayal of the impact of dementia on familial relationships. This narrative choice allows readers to connect more intimately with the emotional experiences of the characters. The metaphor of balloons representing memories is particularly effective in conveying the gradual loss of memory and its emotional impact on the family.

"Dad, Jackie, and Me" is narrated by the son, providing a personal and intimate view of their shared experiences, highlighting mutual respect and shared activities. The story intertwines the narrator's experiences with his deaf father and the historical significance of Jackie Robinson's entry into Major League Baseball, adding layers of racial and disability representation. This narrative approach brings a rich, personal touch to the historical and familial themes explored in the book.

The first-person narration in "A Boy and a Jaguar" offers an intimate view of the protagonist's struggles with stuttering and his journey to finding his voice and advocating for jaguars, making his story more relatable and impactful. The protagonist's passion for animals and his ultimate success in advocating for jaguars, despite his speech impediment, provides a powerful example of overcoming personal challenges to achieve one's goals.

Intersectional Representation

Using a DisCrit lens reveals disparities in the types of disabilities and racial/ethnic identities represented in the SFA picturebooks compared to the actual demographics of children served by IDEA. Orthopedic impairments, deafness, and visual impairments are overrepresented, while speech or language impairments, developmental delays, and autism are less frequent. This imbalance can perpetuate stereotypes by failing to provide young

readers with a diverse range of disability experiences. For example, Kami in "Kami and the Yaks," a child with a hearing impairment, is portrayed navigating his environment and effectively communicating despite his hearing challenges. However, the absence of characters with certain disabilities like emotional disturbances or traumatic brain injuries suggests a need for more varied representations.

The intersectional representation in the SFA picturebooks was somewhat limited. The racial and ethnic representation revealed overrepresentation of African/African-American characters (28.6%) and underrepresentation of LatinX characters (7.2%). For instance, "Dad, Jackie, and Me" and "Emmanuel's Dream" prominently feature African-American protagonists with disabilities, providing visibility but also indicating a need for broader racial representation. In "Dad, Jackie, and Me," the story intertwines the narrator's experiences with his deaf father and the historical significance of Jackie Robinson's entry into Major League Baseball, adding layers of racial and disability representation. The story provides a multifaceted view of the struggles and triumphs of both the narrator's father and Jackie Robinson, highlighting the intersection of race and disability. Similarly, in "Emmanuel's Dream," Emmanuel's journey showcases his determination and resilience in the face of physical challenges, his interactions highlighting his contributions to his family and community, promoting an empowering message. The narrative details Emmanuel's activism and the societal changes he helps bring about, offering a powerful example of individual impact. Emmanuel's story is filled with instances of overcoming societal barriers and personal limitations, demonstrating his unwavering spirit and commitment to making a difference.

Additionally, male characters with disabilities dominate the narratives (66%), reflecting broader trends in special education but highlighting a need for more female representation to avoid reinforcing gender biases. For instance, the book "Six Dots: A Story of Young Louis Braille" effectively depicts the life and achievements of Louis Braille, but the majority of the stories center around male protagonists, leaving a gap in female representation in these narratives.

The SFA picturebooks also touch on socioeconomic struggles, an important aspect of intersectionality. Emmanuel's story, for example, highlights economic challenges faced by families of children with disabilities. Born in Ghana, Emmanuel supports his family by shining shoes and selling goods, eventually gaining national recognition for his advocacy through a long-distance bike ride. This narrative underscores the intersection of disability and economic hardship, illustrating how characters with disabilities navigate and overcome these challenges.

However, immigrant experiences and linguistic identities are notably absent from the SFA picturebooks. This gap suggests an area for further development in children's literature to more comprehensively reflect the diverse realities of children with disabilities. For example, while "My Pal, Victor" is written in both English and Spanish, it fails to delve deeply into the cultural or immigrant experiences of its characters, missing an opportunity to portray a more intersectional experience.

Discussion

The existence of the Schneider Family Award (SFA) is crucial for understanding people with disabilities and making their voices heard through picturebooks. The value of this manuscript lies not in the sample size but in the impact and significance of the SFA in the

context of disability representation in children's literature. As the only book award in the United States that specifically focuses on disability portrayal, the SFA holds a unique and influential position. The awarded picturebooks serve as critical texts that shape societal perceptions and educational practices regarding disabilities. Therefore, analyzing these specific books offers valuable insights into the quality and nature of disability representation, which can influence broader discussions and practices in the field of children's literature and disability studies. This focused analysis provides depth and specificity that large-scale studies may overlook, emphasizing the importance of recognizing and critically examining prestigious, impact-oriented literary awards like the SFA.

All characters with disabilities in the SFA picturebooks were protagonists, and their disabilities impacted the plots. Characters with disabilities do appear in picturebooks with other awards, such as the Caldecott (Martinez et al., 2016), Coretta Scott King, and Pura Belpré Awards. However, as these awards do not focus on disability portrayals, such characters appear infrequently and may not impact the plots. They may be tertiary characters included in illustrations using wheelchairs or canes. Compared to these awards, the SFA, which focuses on and promotes children's books with characters with disabilities, plays a unique role.

In analyzing gender representation in the picturebooks, it is essential to distinguish clearly between gender and sex categories. This study initially employed a binary approach, which can oversimplify and restrict the understanding of gender. Considering the diversity of gender identities beyond the binary framework is crucial. Additionally, avoiding the conflation of biological sex with gender is particularly important in the context of children's literature, where representations of gender significantly shape young readers' perceptions and

understanding of gender roles. Adopting a more inclusive approach to gender representation acknowledges the wide range of gender identities and their importance in children's literature.

The picturebooks with the SFA are recommended for their accurate and realistic portrayals of disabilities. In an earlier study (Dyches et al., 2006), some disability portrayals in Caldecott Award picturebooks were problematic due to unrealistic or magical cures. In the SFA picturebooks, however, this trend was not found. Additionally, the characters were generally engaged in social environments demonstrating exemplary practices. While the characters with disabilities were not deeply developed, considering the limited number of pages in picturebooks, the character development was satisfactory. The characters were credible and showed changes as the stories progressed.

Using a DisCrit (Annamma et al., 2018) approach allowed this study to critically examine if the SFA enabled the voices of people with diverse disabilities to be heard through the picturebooks. The study discovered a disparity between the types of disabilities represented in the SFA picturebooks and those prevalent among school children in the United States. According to the USDOE (2018), speech or language impairment (SLI), developmental delay, and autism were the most frequent types of disability served by IDEA Part B among children aged 3-5 years in fall 2016, while orthopedic impairment, deafness, and visual impairment were the most frequently observed disabilities among characters in the SFA picturebooks. Representations of speech or language impairment, developmental delay, or autism were less frequent. Neither emotional disturbance nor traumatic brain injury was represented in an SFA picturebook. This situation may allow distorted views and persistent stereotypes among young children, as they cannot learn about their peers with unrepresented disabilities through picturebooks.

The study also discovered a disparity between the proportional racial/ethnic composition in the population served by IDEA and that in the SFA picturebooks. African Americans were noticeably overrepresented in the SFA picturebooks: while 12.2% of the population served by IDEA were African Americans, 28.6% of the characters with disabilities in the SFA books were African Americans. In addition, there was only one LatinX character with a disability in the SFA picturebooks. While this comprises 7.2% of the 14 characters whose race/ethnicity could be identified, the portrayal of only one LatinX character with a disability in the SFA picturebooks could create a stereotype.

The greatest disparity found was in gender representation: 66% of the characters with disabilities were male, whereas only 34% were female. This trend, however, mirrors findings from other studies, which suggest that boys are more frequently referred to special education services due to behavior patterns and the impact of gender bias on referrals (Shifrer, 2018; Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 2001). The problem lies in the underrepresentation of female students, not an overrepresentation of male students. There should be more female characters with disabilities in picturebooks with the SFA, without reducing the number of male ones.

Furthermore, the literature indicates that racial identity and language/immigration history predict disability classification in U.S. schools (Shifrer, 2018). However, among the 17 SFA picturebooks, none portrayed an immigrant child with a disability.

These disparities in disability types, racial/ethnic identities, and gender between children served by IDEA and characters in SFA picturebooks may relate to the lack of books about minority characters in English-language literature. According to So & Wezerek (2020), in an analysis of over 7,000 books published by four major publishing companies in the U.S. between 1950 and 2018, only 11% of the 2018 subsample were written by people of color. In

2018, among 3,352 books received by the Cooperative Children's Book Center (CCBC), only fifty (0.54%) were written or illustrated by people with disabilities. Narrowing this to picture books, only six (0.41%) of 1,468 picturebooks received by CCBC in 2018 were created by authors or illustrators with disabilities. The publishing industry often publishes stories conforming to stereotypes about people of color because they are more marketable. Although this study did not focus on people with disabilities, the low number of LatinX characters with disabilities in the SFA picturebooks is related to these findings. Thus, the SFA selection committee has a significantly small pool of books, particularly for racial/ethnic minority characters with disabilities.

One notable finding is the relatively high percentage of characters with disabilities during early childhood (47.1%) in the SFA picturebooks. Other analyses found that child characters with disabilities were rare in picturebooks with other children's literature awards. Considering that picturebooks comprise the majority of reading experiences for children below the third grade (Serafini & Moses, 2014), the need for realistic fiction stories that portray young children with disabilities is urgent. Children with disabilities can see themselves in these books, while children without disabilities can learn about their peers with disabilities.

Additionally, narration by a child protagonist was rarely observed in picturebooks with other awards, where the omniscient third-person point of view was more common. Among the SFA picturebooks, however, four (23.53%) featured a protagonist describing the characters with disabilities in the first person. DisCrit emphasizes the importance of allowing disabled people of color to author their own stories (Annamma et al., 2018). Educators intentionally choose first-person accounts to explore issues of social justice, as these

reflections authentically capture diverse experiences (Chafel et al., 2007; Kibler, 1996). More picturebooks written in the first-person voices of people with disabilities are needed to enhance young readers' ability to relate to and appreciate them.

Implications

For Researchers

In conducting this study, it is crucial to address potential biases, including ableism and compulsory able-bodied normativity, that might influence the analysis. This work uses the terms 'people with disabilities' (PwD) and 'children with disabilities' to align with person-first language, emphasizing the individual before the disability. However, it is important to acknowledge the ongoing debate between person-first and identity-first language and its implications for representation. Additionally, a comprehensive examination of the Schneider Family Award's judging criteria and processes, including any historical changes in decision-making, is necessary. Understanding how these books are evaluated and what criteria are used to qualify or exclude them can provide valuable insights into the political and cultural dimensions of representation. This context is essential, particularly when advocating for the urgent need to improve and diversify disability portrayals in children's literature.

More scholarly works are needed to guide authors of picturebooks in appropriately representing young children with disabilities. Not only the number of characters but also the quality of their portrayal should be emphasized for future picturebooks, aiming to create more fully developed characters with disabilities and their interactions with other characters. The cultures of these children should be more richly delineated in the text and illustrations of picturebooks receiving the SFA. The analysis protocol (developed by Dyches & Prater, 2000; adapted by Pehrson, 2011) utilized in this study is suggested as a useful instrument for

researchers and picturebook authors in evaluating portrayals of characters with disabilities. It measures personality, social interactions, examples of citizenship, sibling relationships, impact of the disability on the plot, impact of the setting on the disability, point of view, and illustrations.

Additionally, more scholarly works about picturebooks with the SFA, which honors children's literature with disability portrayals, are needed. Such studies of this body of books are very rare. The International Board on Books for Young People (IBBY) awards Outstanding Books for Young People with Disabilities. This collection provides researchers with another pool of picturebooks for studying disability portrayals and disability cultures.

For Authors, Illustrators, Award-Selection Committees, and Publishers

The current study recommends that the Schneider Family Award (SFA) Committee take active steps to promote picturebooks that equitably represent race and gender among characters with disabilities. To achieve this, the committee could consider including an explicit statement on their website or in their award manual about preferring characters with disabilities from underrepresented backgrounds. This statement would signal to authors, illustrators, and publishers the importance of diversity and inclusion, encouraging the creation and recognition of books that feature a broader range of experiences and identities.

In addition to promoting diversity through award criteria, the SFA Committee could implement outreach initiatives aimed at identifying and supporting emerging authors and illustrators from diverse backgrounds. Workshops, grants, and mentorship programs could be established to nurture talent and ensure that underrepresented voices are heard in the field of children's literature. By actively seeking out and encouraging diverse creators, the SFA Committee can help to foster a more inclusive literary landscape.

This study also suggests that authors and illustrators develop more child characters with disabilities from various cultures. The current dearth of such characters creates distortions in the picturebook world, which inadvertently marginalizes these children in the real world. When children with disabilities do not see themselves represented in the books they read, it can impact their self-esteem and sense of belonging. Conversely, when typically developing children do not encounter diverse characters in literature, they miss out on opportunities to develop empathy and understanding for their peers with disabilities.

To address this issue, authors and illustrators should be encouraged to incorporate a wide range of cultural backgrounds and experiences in their portrayals of child characters with disabilities. This includes not only racial and ethnic diversity but also diversity in terms of socioeconomic status, family structures, and lived experiences. By doing so, they can create more nuanced and relatable characters that reflect the diversity of the real world.

Furthermore, publishers play a critical role in this effort by actively seeking out and promoting books that feature diverse characters with disabilities. They should prioritize stories that provide authentic and respectful representations, avoiding stereotypes and tokenism. Publishers can also collaborate with organizations that advocate for disability rights and multicultural representation to ensure that their books meet high standards of inclusivity and accuracy.

For Teachers

Teachers strive to select picturebooks that reflect the diversity of every child, ensuring that no implicit message in the text or illustrations privileges one hegemonic race, gender, or people without disabilities. It is essential to have more mirror books for children with

disabilities in early childhood classrooms in the U.S. Currently, early childhood classrooms can actively use picturebooks awarded the Schneider Family Award (SFA) as mirror books for children with disabilities and window books for children without them. These books provide valuable opportunities for all children to see themselves and others in the stories they read, fostering a sense of inclusion and empathy.

In addition to selecting diverse picturebooks, this study suggests that teachers help their young students become aware of the distortions in picturebook representations caused by the lack of people with disabilities. By understanding these gaps, children can learn to view the world through a more critical lens, recognizing and questioning misrepresentations in literature and media (Nodelman, 1999). As Nodelman (1992, 2008) has emphasized, it is concerning to let children consume literature without a critical lens, as adult intentions and ideologies are always embedded in each text. Encouraging critical thinking from a young age helps children develop the skills to analyze and challenge the underlying messages in the books they read.

Moreover, empowering children with disabilities to author their own stories in the classroom can significantly enhance the body of literature about the lived experiences of people with disabilities. When children with disabilities write and share their stories, they contribute authentic voices to the literary world, enriching it with diverse perspectives that are often underrepresented. This practice not only validates their experiences but also helps build their confidence and sense of agency.

Teachers can support this process by creating inclusive classroom environments that encourage all students to express themselves creatively. They can provide opportunities for children with disabilities to share their stories through writing, drawing, or other artistic

forms. Additionally, incorporating storytelling and narrative activities into the curriculum can help children with disabilities articulate their experiences and perspectives.

By promoting diverse picturebooks, fostering critical thinking, and empowering children with disabilities to author their own stories, teachers play a crucial role in creating a more inclusive and representative literary landscape. These efforts contribute to a more equitable and understanding society, where all children can see themselves reflected in the books they read and feel valued for who they are.

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Table 1*Seventeen SFA Picture Books for Early Childhood*

Book Title	Disability Type	Racial /ethnic identity /culture portrayed	Gender	Early Childhood with disabilities portrayed	Setting	Point of Views
A Friend for Henry	ASD	Asian American	M	Early Childhood	Present in USA	Third person omniscient
Just Ask!: Be Different, Be Brave, Be You	2 with ASD, 1 with intellectual disability, 1 with dyslexia, 1 with orthopedic impairment, 1 deaf, 5 other health impairment, 2 with visual impairment, 1 with speech or language impairment	Vary	7 males, 7 females	Childhood	Present in USA	First person protagonists
The Remember Balloons	Intellectual (dementia)	African American	M	Adulthood	Present in USA	First person narrator
Rescue and Jessica	Orthopedic impairment	White	F	Adulthood	Present in USA	Third person omniscient
Six Dots: A Story of Young Louis Braille	Visual impairment	French	M	Early Childhood	Past in France	First person protagonist
Emmanuel's Dream	Orthopedic impairment	African	M	Early Childhood	Present in Ghana	Third person omniscient
A Boy and a Jaguar	Speech-Language impairment	White	M	Early Childhood	Present in USA	First person protagonist
A Splash of Red	Orthopedic impairment	African American	M	Adulthood	Past in USA	Third person omniscient
Back to Front and Upside Down	Dysgraphia/Dyslexia	Animals	M	Early Childhood	Present in USA	Third person omniscient

The Pirate of Kindergarten	Visual impairment	White	F	Early Childhood	Present in USA	Third person omniscient
Django	Orthopedic impairment	Gypsi	M	Adulthood	Past in Europe	Third person omniscient
Piano Starts Here	Visual impairment	African American	M	Early Childhood	Past in USA	First person protagonist
Kami and the Yaks	Deaf	Sherpa Culture	M	Early /Older unclear	Past in Nepal	Third person omniscient
The Deaf Musicians	Deaf	Unapparent	2 Males and 1 Female	Adulthood	Present in USA	Third person omniscient
Dad, Jackie, and Me	Deaf	White	M	Adulthood	Past in USA	First person narrator
My Pal, Victor	Orthopedic impairment	LatinX	M	Early Childhood	Present in USA or Mexico	First person narrator
Looking Out for Sarah	Visual impairment	White	F	Adulthood	Present in USA	Third person omniscient

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