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Representations of Disability in Picturebooks: Issues of Inclusivity and Literary Quality

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Abstract

Children need picturebooks that represent the diversity of their lives. Such books provide opportunities for all children, regardless of differences, to see themselves and their lives reflected in the pages. When children encounter books they can both enjoy and identify with, they are more likely to develop a love of reading. Recognition of the importance of this has led to the publication of a growing number of picturebooks containing characters of colour, or who are gender-diverse or disabled. While many of these have the literary qualities that inspire young children's imaginations as well as being inclusive, this is not always the case with picturebooks portraying disability. This research sought to build on existing analytical studies of inclusivity in picturebooks, drawing from frameworks developed by other researchers—in particular, the Strong Stories framework. The analytical framework used also included criteria to evaluate the literary qualities that make picturebooks imaginative and engaging for young children. The picturebooks portraying disability studied in this research came from recommendation lists of five literary or disability advocacy not-for-profit organisations. A qualitative content analysis was conducted, informed by an understanding of literacy as a social practice, with picturebooks as reflectors of ideology and social models of disability. Findings revealed that not all the recommended books were inclusive, and the majority lacked the literary qualities that make children reach for a book over and over. This research sheds light on the need for more picturebooks that inclusively and imaginatively portray disability.

Keywords: picturebooks; disability; inclusion; imagination

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1. Introduction

In spite of the plethora of digital children's media available and its ubiquity in young children's lives, the picturebook remains popular and retains a key role in many children's literacy lives, at home and in early years settings (Combs & Higgins, 2024; P. Crawford et al., 2024; Styles, 2023). Young children's joyful engagement with picturebooks, often through discovering favourites that they return to over time (Toomey, 2009), can set them up for a lifelong love of reading, which can also positively impact their chances of literacy success. Part of that joyful engagement comes from being able to find reflections of themselves and their lives in their books. For this to be possible, young children need access to picturebooks that portray the diversity of the world around them.

According to UNESCO (2026), literacy is "a means of identification, understanding, interpretation, creation, and communication . . . [that] empowers and liberates people". Acknowledging this and recognising the ongoing place of picturebooks in young children's literacy journeys makes it imperative that children of all backgrounds and ways of being

can find themselves reflected in the books they read or have read to them. Certainly, in the last few decades a growing number of picturebooks contain characters of colour, or who are gender-diverse or disabled. But how many of these books also have well-developed main characters, imaginative and adventurous plots, and richly aesthetic and complex illustrations? Are they written *for* children, valuing their ways of being, rather than *about* children, to help the majority of the world understand their otherness? For some types of difference, the answer to these questions is increasingly "yes". Many picturebooks portraying characters of different cultural or ethnic backgrounds are imaginative, high-quality books with interesting stories and characters that children will want to explore over and over. The exceptions, however, are often picturebooks that portray disability. The research outlined in this article seeks to problematise this by exploring the following questions: *Which picturebooks portraying disability, recommended as quality inclusive texts for young children, represent both inclusive values and literary quality? Which picturebooks portraying disability are likely to imaginatively engage young children of all abilities and ways of being?*

Building on previous research that has sought to inform educators and families on how to identify inclusive books, this research aims to inform authors, illustrators and publishers, as well as educators and families, of how they might evaluate both the inclusiveness and the literary qualities of picturebooks portraying disability. Ultimately, this research aims to contribute to advocacy for picturebooks that will enable every child to identify with, and enjoy, quality books that can nurture their love of reading.

2. Background

Currently, in many countries, there is much anxiety in public discourse about falling literacy levels and a decline in reading for pleasure. The UK National Literacy Trust's 2025 annual literacy survey found that one third of children and young people do not enjoy reading, and only 35% aged 8 to 18 years choose to read for pleasure outside school (Boardman, 2024). The survey report highlights the importance of reading for pleasure for enhancing children's confidence and hence, their reading ability (https://literacytrust.org.uk/research-services/research-reports/children-and-young-peoples-reading-in-2024/, accessed on 21 January 2025). Research supports this, showing the positive impact of reading for pleasure on children's literacy abilities and identities (Cremin & Scholes, 2024). The OECD also stresses the importance of encouraging reading for pleasure—"an interest in and enjoyment of reading, a sense of control over what one reads, involvement in the social dimension of reading and diverse and frequent reading practices"—as supporting positive literacy outcomes (OECD, 2019, p. 29). However, fostering pleasurable engagement in reading for all young children necessitates the availability of high-quality picturebooks that also authentically reflect diverse ways of being—books with well-developed characters, imaginative plots, and richly aesthetic and complex illustrations (Nodelman, 2005). For children who experience disability or differences such as neurodiversity, such books can be hard to find (Pennell et al., 2018), and those there are often embody a deficient, even ableist (Friedman & Owen, 2017) focus on the child/character experiencing disability or portray them as 'other', implying that it is better to be able-bodied or that disability is not normal (P. Crawford et al., 2024; Koss, 2015).

The research outlined in this article involves an exploration of a set of picturebooks recommended as inclusively portraying disability, with the aim of identifying examples that are both inclusive and enjoyable—quality literature likely to engage children's imaginations. The rationale for the dual focus lies in the importance of reading for pleasure. I propose that it is not enough for a picturebook to portray inclusive messages; the book should also engage readers' imaginations, absorb them in an interesting story, inspire empathy with the character(s), and most of all, make children want to read it.

One of the benefits of reading often cited, particularly in relation to fictional stories, is the development of empathy. Reading fiction (whether picturebooks or adult novels) allows readers to experience 'walking in another's shoes'. Young children encountering picturebooks can apply their imaginations to this experience and gain insights into other places—realistic or fantastical—and into how book characters might think and feel. Through this, empathy can grow. Empathy is the ability to sense another's feelings and have an emotional response. Empathy can help us to understand people who are different to ourselves and is thus potentially important for fostering inclusion (Niland, 2023). Empathy is more likely to arise through sharing in the experiences, thoughts and feelings of characters in fictional stories compared to non-fiction books, which impart facts about different lives (Best, 2020). Indeed, researchers such as Best have found that readers of fiction score higher on empathy tasks than non-readers. The power of fiction to foster empathy is thought to lie in a reader's imaginative and emotional engagement with the characters and the narrative (Matravers, 2023). This suggests that picturebooks portraying disability which are imaginative fiction may have greater potential for generating empathetic responses than picturebooks that are more information-focused, without character development and a plot with points of tension and resolution. It is likely too that such fiction picturebooks will have more aesthetically and semiotically complex illustrations that combine with verbal text to create fictional worlds and convey the experiences and emotions of their characters (Sipe, 2001, 2011).

Interestingly, not all scholars agree with the assumption that the experience of reading books automatically engenders empathy. Mallan (2013) argues persuasively against this assumption, regarding it as an over-simplification of the complex individual responses of readers. According to Mallan and to scholars in fields such as gender studies, an assumption of the empathetic understanding of characters who are very different to ourselves is problematic because it implies that it is relatively easy to truly understand what it feels like to live a life that is completely different to our own. We may think we can do this, but in fact may be affected by a similarity bias—the phenomenon that tends to make us feel more comfortable with people who are like us in our everyday lives. Mallam points out that similarity bias is what likely underpins so-called 'inclusive' books which seek to convey the message that those who are different are really 'just like us'. In picturebooks with characters who experience disability or are neurodivergent, such an attitude is arguably to some extent erasing parts of those characters' identities, and thus unintentionally conveying an ableist perspective. Mallam's insights are potentially valuable for those who create, select or read/encounter picturebooks conveying disability, when considering their audience. Books that might be intended to build empathy with the experience of disability for non-disabled children may assume that a 'just like us' message will generate empathy. However, if that message erases parts of the identities of disabled characters, then children who experience disability may perceive themselves through that 'erasure' lens. The experience of disability in some picturebooks could then become 'the elephant in the room'.

However, in spite of the need to be cautious about the potential of picturebooks to inspire empathetic responses in child readers, when a book has an interesting story, well-developed characters whose differences or disability are not over-simplified or glossed over, and whose stories are portrayed through richly aesthetic visual imagery and design, then children can use their imaginations to enter the narrative and the lives of the characters. While empathy cannot be assumed, it could still potentially occur. This is why it is valuable to analyse picturebooks portraying disability in relation to their literary qualities as well as their inclusive themes.

Notable children's literature scholar John Stephens, writing about ideology in multicultural picturebooks, points out that these books may be seeking to "intervene in culture"

(Stephens, 2011, p. 13). He uses picturebooks portraying the experiences of refuges as examples, pointing out that while government policies may be discriminatory and at times inhumane, high-quality children's literature can present a different view by encouraging imagination and potentially an empathetic response from readers to the experience of being in danger on a small boat in a rough ocean, and the loneliness of being far from home in a different country where you cannot understand the language. Such books cannot, of course, directly influence government policy, but over time can contribute even in small ways to changing social attitudes. Notable examples cited by Stephens are *Zeba came on a boat* (Lofthouse & Ingpen, 2007) and *My two blankets* by Kobald and Blackwood (2014), which are imaginative, engaging and emotionally moving, and thus have the potential to inspire empathetic responses that may in turn change attitudes. These two books show that inclusive messages are not in themselves enough—books need the literary qualities that make readers want to read the books and that inspire imagination and emotional responses. Books such as these have well-developed characters and engaging narratives told multimodally through skilfully written verbal text and aesthetically rich images. The research outlined in this article seeks to identify picturebooks about disability of similarly high literary quality.

3. Theoretical Framework

The theories that underpin this research into picturebooks that portray disability are a theoretical understanding of literacy as a social practice, and all texts, including picturebooks, as reflectors of ideology. The research also takes a strengths-based view of young children as sophisticated readers of multimodal texts such as picturebooks (Toomey, 2009), and as active agents in their own identity and learning journeys (Hart & Brando, 2018). It is also informed by a social model perspective on disability (Oliver, 2013).

3.1. Picturebooks as Social and Cultural Texts

The picturebook is a unique form of literary art: "As an art form it hinges on the interdependence of picture and words, on the simultaneous display of two facing pages, and on the drama of the turning of the page" (Bader, 1976, p. 1). In a quality picturebook, the relationship between words and pictures is complex, with both conveying meaning, mood and values, but in different ways. The visual grammar of illustrations and book design (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006) shapes readers' interpretation of images and hence their meaning-making, albeit in a less straightforward way than through simply reading words. This makes the interaction between words and images multi-layered and highly significant. Some argue that the richness and complexity of the image/text relationship is what makes a quality picturebook (e.g., Nodelman, 2005) and is most likely what engages children's interest and imaginative responses (Kiefer, 1995). Children are sophisticated readers even before they can decode print; hence, books created for and offered to them need to reflect a respect for this sophistication (Toomey, 2009).

Picturebooks are a central part of young children's early literacy journeys. Shared reading with a familiar adult, at home or in early childhood education settings, evokes closeness, conversation, flights of imagination, and has the power to nurture a lifelong love of reading (Egan et al., 2025; Toomey, 2009). Picturebooks are one of the ways that children learn about the world around them and explore ideas about identity—their own and those of others. Picturebooks are also a medium through which children encounter different beliefs, attitudes and values—about ethical aspects of life, about what is regarded as important and what is not, and about what is 'normal' and what is different or strange. All texts, including picturebooks for young children, convey messages, even when they are not explicitly stated or shown.

Understanding of the picturebook as a social and cultural text, reflective of attitudes, values and ideologies whether explicit or implicit, is an area of increasing research interest (e.g., S. C. Crawford, 2016; Hayden & Prince, 2024; Koss, 2015). Reading is not simply decoding the verbal text, but a process of meaning-making (Halliday, 1975). Meaning-making includes deriving meaning from the verbal, the visual, and the interaction between the two. It is about what is happening in the story, how the characters are feeling, and about inferring social and cultural conventions, attitudes and values—in other words, ideologies; no text is ever ideologically neutral (McCallum & Stephens, 2011). Authors, illustrators, publishers (and readers) are inevitably influenced by their life experiences and contexts. Ideology can be conveyed through what is excluded as well as what is contained in a picturebook, and how it is portrayed (McCallum and Stephens). Children's life experiences are also part of their interpretations and meaning-making as readers of picturebooks. For those whose ways of being differ from the majority, any representations of diverse ways of being, or the absence of such representations, may influence their meaning-making and their interest in the book. Books can either contribute to children's sense of belonging or leave them feeling like an outsider. In a sense, most books are windows into others' worlds, but they can also be mirrors in which we see reflections of aspects of ourselves and our own lives (Bishop, 1990). For some children, such as those experiencing disability or neurodiversity, books are almost never mirrors; nor are they sliding glass doors that welcome then in and invite them to move between worlds (Bishop, 1990). Taking Freire's definition of literacy as "a set of practices that functions to either empower or disempower people" (Freire & Macedo, 2005, p. 98), it seems that for these children, literacy may sometimes serve to disempower.

3.2. Understandings of Disability and Inclusion

As this research focuses on picturebooks containing representations of disability, the strengths-based view of children as meaning-makers that underpins it was combined with a social model understanding of disability. This model views disability not as lying within an individual, but as the result of environments and attitudes that exclude, marginalise or discriminate (Oliver, 2013). According to social model thinking, differences in abilities should not be regarded as a problem to be cured, but as only one aspect of a person's identity, and part of the diversity of our world. The social model advocates for the right of all to be included in every aspect of society, including representation in arts and culture, such as, for young children, picturebooks. In this research I analysed representations of disability in the recommended picturebooks in terms of a social model of disability, an affirmative model of disability (Swain & French, 2000) that views it as a positive aspect of individual and social identities, and a strengths-based understanding of young children as competent meaning-makers (Halliday, 1975). In defining disability and outlining the theoretical perspective taken in this research, it is relevant to make a specific mention of autism here, as there are differences in whether it should be regarded as a disability or a difference—a part of the spectrum of neurodiversity that many argue encompasses all human ways of processing the world around them. Some specific discussion of autism and neurodiversity here is also relevant as many of the picturebooks portraying disability that are the focus of this research portray representations of autism that are often underpinned by a neurodiversity perspective. This research understands inclusion as embracing and valuing all forms of difference as part of the rich diversity of humanity—it takes the view that we are not all the same, but we share a common humanity, and we all belong together. Therefore, a neurodiversity perspective of autism (Lerner et al., 2023), rather than a medical model such as the definition provided in the DSM 5 TR (American Psychiatric Association, 2022), is appropriate when advocating for inclusive picturebooks. This is not to deny the

differences in communication, perception and functioning experienced by autistic people and the value of appropriate professional support. However, the medical model perspective that underpins the DSM 5 TR definition focuses on deficits, implying a need to change or fix so-called autistic behaviours. From a social model perspective, these are seen as forms of difference that may be exacerbated by the challenges of a world that is not autism-friendly. In early childhood settings, a neurodiversity-affirming approach to understanding autism is more appropriate for recognising all children's strengths, rather than their deficits, and supporting their sense of identity and belonging (Murphy, 2025).

3.3. Analysing Inclusivity in Portrayals of Disability

This research is not unique in specifically exploring portrayals of disability and neurodiversity in children's literature; other researchers have undertaken similarly analytical research. Koss (2015), for example, analysed portrayals of difference in children's picturebooks using critical race theories, gender schema theory and critical disability theory (based on a social model of disability). She conducted a content analysis on 455 books (those published by US trade publishers in 2012), looking for diversity in ethnicity, gender or ability. Koss analysed the overall content of the books and the portrayals of main characters (if the book indeed had a main character). She identified 198 books that portrayed disability, of which 196 portrayed physical disabilities, and only 30 had a main character. After removing 182 of the books where the physical disability constituted wearing glasses, and seven where the physical disability related to being a pirate (eye patch or wooden leg), content analysis was conducted on the remaining 34 books which portrayed physical disabilities and two portraying cognitive disabilities (dementia and a learning disorder). Koss pointed out how few books portrayed disability, when compared with the number of picturebooks published in the US that year. She also concluded that in the books identified, most portrayals of disability were ableist, showing the disability as something that needed to be fixed. The relative absence of disability (beyond the wearing of glasses) in children's picturebooks at that time was, according to Koss, a way of portraying stigma, a form of ideology, through what was not represented in these books (McCallum & Stephens, 2011).

Hayden and Prince (2024), acknowledging the important work of researchers such as Koss (2015) who have explored portrayals of diversity in children's literature, also pointed out how few researchers in this area have focused specifically on portrayals of disability. They therefore sought to look only at disability, noting nearly a decade after Koss's research how few picturebooks portray disability in comparison with other forms of diversity. Hayden and Prince therefore developed the Strong Stories Framework to look carefully at portrayals of disability, identify ableism where it occurs, and provide teachers and parents with a way to evaluate the inclusiveness of any representations of disability. They worked with teachers to trial the tool and refined it further before publication of a final version. The final tool has eight elements which users evaluate with 'yes' or 'no' (Hayden & Prince, 2024, p. 100). The elements focus on many aspects of character portrayal, such as role and interactions in the narrative, whether the character is multi-dimensional rather than being solely defined by their disability, whether character portrayal is strengths-based or deficit-based, and whether characters are human or animals. Also covered in the elements is the book's general potential for engaging and maintaining children's interest, the accuracy of any information about disability (visual or verbal), and the use (or not) of a social model perspective on disability.

The research outlined in this article draws on the Strong Stories Framework (Hayden & Prince, 2024), but also takes a new direction by including analytical criteria related to literary quality. Given the theoretical perspectives that underpin this research—literacy as a social and cultural practice, books as reflectors of ideology, and children as competent meaning-

makers—it is, I argue, essential to honour the right of all children to access high-quality books. Thus, this research also involves systematic evaluation of the literary qualities of the selected picturebooks as well as the inclusivity of their portrayals of disability.

3.4. Analysing Literary Quality

The decision to focus on literary quality as well as inclusivity in this research recognises the importance of reading for pleasure, and all children's right to quality literature. There is little recent research on young children's reading preferences; however, a 2005 survey by the UK National Literacy Trust showed that for preschool- and primary (elementary) school-aged children, fiction was the preferred reading matter of 61.5% of children (fourth in the list of preferred reading matter after jokes, magazines and comics), whereas only 35% listed factual books as preferred reading matter (15th in the list) (Clark & Foster, 2005). Some older research has found that primary (elementary) school children prefer books with exciting or funny narratives that evoke their emotions, and books where they can find links between the characters and their own lives (Boraks et al., 1997; Davila & Patrick, 2010). Children also enjoy the chance to select their own books (Davila & Patrick, 2010). Unfortunately, there is little research that has explored children's reasons for choosing particular books (Hsieh, 2025).

While the research into reading for pleasure mentioned earlier suggests positive correlations between reading for pleasure in childhood and literacy success, the notion of reading for pleasure more broadly could be seen as problematic, as readers read for a range of different purposes beyond pleasure. In terms of fiction, the way genres for young people and adults are categorised, books labelled 'literary fiction' or 'classics' are often separated from genres such as fantasy, romance, crime or thrillers, with literary fiction exemplifying higher quality literature than other genres. Whatever the view is in terms of the relative literary merit of books in each genre, some books demand more of readers than others (Nikolajeva, 2015). This idea is relevant for fiction for readers of all ages, beginning with picturebooks for early childhood, although Nikolajeva refers to children's books. The types of children's picturebooks she identifies as demanding more from readers, and being of higher literary quality, are those with multiple layers of meaning, created through features such as aesthetic complexity, narrative structures with some ambiguity, and the use of forms of symbolism and intertextuality (2005). Nikolajeva argues that such books engage children emotionally, cognitively and even ethically. She also raises the point that literary theorists who explore reader response focus on how children engage with books (e.g., Arizpe & Styles, 2015; Pantaleo, 2016; Sipe, 2002, 2015) and suggests that it is also important to explore why children engage with books.

During early childhood, when children are in the very early stages of their journeys as readers, those who advocate for the importance of reading for pleasure may argue that wanting to read and finding pleasure in books is the most important thing to encourage at this point in children's development as readers (Cremin & Scholes, 2024). While lengthy consideration of the issues around literary quality and the value for children of engaging with books that demand more of them cognitively is beyond the scope of this research, it could be argued that the features of literary quality identified by researchers such as Nikolajeva (2015, 2005) suggest that when children's interest and imagination are spared by the emotional, cognitive and ethical demands of higher quality picturebooks, they are more likely to engage deeply and repeatedly with those books. The research into young children's engagement with picturebooks, which focuses on a range of children's active responses, (e.g., Sipe, 2001, 2002, 2011, 2012, 2015), seems to indicate that literary qualities related to the aesthetic and semiotic features of books serve to inspire children's imagination and creative thinking, as well as emotional responses. The features identified by researchers

such as Sipe (2001, 2011) and Nodelman (2005) are the indicators of literary quality that have been used in this study. In fact, their work can arguably be regarded as suggesting a correlation between literary quality and reading for pleasure when it comes to picturebooks for young children, especially given that active, creative, playful responses are so central to young children's way of engaging with the world (Brooker et al., 2014).

The concept of literary quality has been debated in literary studies for decades, including the Reader Response Theory developed by Louise Rosenblatt (1938, 1982). Rosenblatt acknowledged that analysis of quality is subjective, as readers' responses are not simply directed by the text being read, but by many other factors related to life experiences, social contexts and individual identities (Rosenblatt, 1982). I acknowledge the veracity of this analysis, as the subjective and socio-culturally constructed responses of all readers also applies to myself as a researcher seeking to analyse the qualities of picturebooks. Subjectivity is a significant limitation of the study presented in this article, as the analysis of the set of picturebooks portraying disability is the work of one person. While the criteria that relate to analysing the representations of disability have been developed through research with a number of researchers and participants (Hayden & Prince, 2024), the criteria that relate to literary quality in the form used for this research have not yet been used by other researchers. However, research into children's picturebooks—studies of their literary features and of children's responses to picturebooks—suggest that particular types of books and aspects of visual and textual style engage children's interests and imaginations more than others. Thus, I turned to research into children's responses to the literary qualities of picturebooks, seeing this as a possible way to understand the impact of literary qualities on children's engagement (Calafato & Simmonds, 2022) as a central rationale for my research.

Explorations of the ways young children engage with picturebooks (e.g., Arizpe & Styles, 2015; Pantaleo, 2016; Sipe, 2002, 2015) suggest that picturebooks with plot and characters that contain layers of meaning conveyed through aesthetic complexity, carefully crafted verbal text, and complex relationships between words and images, provide rich scope for children's enthusiastic exploration and repeated readings. Sipe terms this "expressive engagement" (Sipe, 2002), and sees these types of pleasure responses from children as the ways through which they make meaning from picturebooks. Parallels can be drawn between Sipe's research and Rosenblatt's Reader Response Theory (1982)—the idea that reading or being read to is an active process. By implication, these ideas suggest the importance of reading for pleasure, as it could be argued that children will be more actively engaged in reading or shared read-alouds when they enjoy the book. This proposition is an important part of the rationale for the research outlined in this article—the need for picturebooks about disability that inspire children's imaginations and their active engagement. In Sipe's extensive research into children's responses to picturebooks (e.g., 2001, 2002, 2012), Sipe noted that "certain texts may prompt responses of expressive engagement more than others" (2002, p. 480). In his later research, as well as researching children's responses, Sipe also analysed the literary qualities of picturebooks, the way layers of possibilities for meaning are created through the techniques used by illustrators and authors, and the way image and verbal text work together. He, along with others such as Nodelman (2005), Nikolajeva (2015), and Doonan (1983), focused on the picturebook as a unique art form, and as "highly sophisticated aesthetic objects" (Sipe, 2012, p. 4). The literary qualities of picturebooks identified and analysed by Sipe form the basis of the framework I have developed for use in this research.

4. Methods

This study involved a mostly qualitative content analysis of picturebooks for children under 6 years. Content analysis (Drisko & Maschi, 2015) was used, as data consisted of

published documents (picturebooks). The data comprised picturebooks containing representations of disability recommended by not-for-profit disability and children's literature organisations in the UK and Australia. The books were drawn from the recommendations of a group of five not-for-profit organisations in the UK and Australia. These were: in the UK, *BookTrust* (n = 5 books) and *Inclusive Books for Children* (n = 13 books), in Australia, *Life Without Barriers* (n = 6 books), and *Children and Youth with Disability Australia* (n = 8 books), and in both countries, the *International Board on Books for Young People* (IBBY) (n = 10 books). The website of each of these organisations includes a curated section of recommended children's books portraying either diversity more generally or disability specifically. IBBY also has a biennial international award for Outstanding Books Conveying Disability. These books come from many different countries, are in a range of languages, and include all children's books of all genres and age types. Therefore, for the purposes of this research, the recommended lists of IBBY UK and IBBY Australia were used to find picturebooks published in those two countries and written in English.

The first stage of the project was to compile a list of recommended picturebooks suited for early childhood (children aged up to 7 years) from each site. This search yielded 35 recommended books that portrayed disability or neurodiversity across the six websites. The total number of recommendations across all sites was in fact 42; however, seven of the books were recommended by more than one organisation.

Content analysis was used as the codes for analysis were pre-developed as well as informed by previous research (Drisko & Maschi, 2015), and the theoretical framework was used as outlined in Section 3 above. There were two stages of the content analysis. The first involved a high-level analysis of story and characters in all books, using principles adapted from the Strong Stories Framework (Hayden & Prince, 2024) (see below), with slightly simplified descriptors of the elements used. This framework focuses primarily on representations of disability and diversity, with only one principle about the books' potential for engaging children. Thus, the initial analysis was used to select books that reflected all elements of the Strong Stories Framework (Hayden & Prince, 2024, p, 100). The adapted criteria used for this study are as follows:

- The book's intention is to tell an engaging story that incorporates, but is not primarily 'about', disability;
- The disabled or neurodivergent character(s) interact(s) with others as the story unfolds and take a range of roles, e.g., leader, problem-solver, role model;
- The disabled or neurodivergent character(s) is/are multi-dimensional, with strengths and challenges and is the narrator of their story (either first person or their point of view);
- The disabled or neurodivergent character(s) is/are human (not animal), and may also represent other forms of diversity—ethnicity, language, gender, family structure;
- The book provides accurate information about disability or difference throughout, and reflects the social model of disability;
- The book has the capacity to be a window, mirror and sliding door (Bishop, 1990) for children—its aim is not simply to explain disability to non-disabled children;
- The book engages children's interest quickly and maintains it throughout the story.

The books that rated mostly positively against the adapted Strong Stories Framework were then explored in a second, more detailed stage of analysis, in which the books' literary qualities were also examined. For the analysis of the indicators of literary quality, I drew on the work of Nodelman (2005) and Sipe (2001, 2002, 2012) to develop analytical criteria (see below). This deeper analysis looked at the 'how' of the authors' and illustrators' creative realisation of their inclusive books. A qualitative, descriptive approach was taken, guided by the criteria listed below. I analysed the illustrators' visual techniques, features of the

verbal text, and the relationship between verbal and visual texts. The literary quality criteria used in this study were:

- The plot unfolds through complex interaction of verbal and visual modes.
- The illustrator uses varied elements of visual grammar and design in creative, aesthetically interesting ways to convey meaning about characters, points of view and the story world (colour, line, vectors, size, textures). The images encourage children to spend time looking at each spread.
- Images are not merely a visual realisation of the verbal text—they each contribute different things to the unfolding plot and characters, so that the story would be incomplete without both verbal and visual modes.
- The verbal text has a sense of rhythm in its word use and structure that makes it enjoyable to listen to as it is read aloud, and it leaves 'gaps' of meaning-making that the illustrations fill. The text may include use of rhyme and other poetic linguistic devices, metaphor, dialogue, and voice (first, second or third person narration).

This research is the first phase of an ongoing project. The initial phase has been conducted by a single researcher; therefore, the analysis is one researcher's perspective. The next phase of the project will involve several other researchers, who will evaluate for inter-coder reliability, analysing the same books, and will then refine the framework and develop versions that are accessible for children, families and early childhood educators. Subsequently, the same books will be shared with children and families experiencing disability to seek their perspectives and those of early childhood educators—on the books and the analytical framework. It is anticipated that the framework will be further refined as a result of families' perspectives.

The findings presented below are thus, in a sense, preliminary. It is also important to note, however, that Hayden and Prince developed the Strong Stories Framework as a result of their research, and then undertook a study to validate its use with five early elementary school teachers. The version that I used and have only slightly adapted with some small changes in descriptive wording, had been refined as an outcome of teacher-participants' feedback during their study (Hayden & Prince, 2024).

5. Findings and Discussion

5.1. Presence or Absence of a Story or Developed Plot

The first stage of the qualitative content analysis of the 35 recommended books, using the adapted *Strong Stories Framework* (Hayden & Prince, 2024), revealed that only nine of the recommended books (26%) met a majority of the criteria, and five books (14%) met all seven. An engaging story was rare. The nine (25%) that rated highest had a clear plot with some tension or problem and a resolution. A further eight (22%) had some sense of a plot, but mostly this represented a 'day in the life' sort of chronology of events. Indeed, over half of the books tended to be a 'slice of life' or a character portrait centring on the disabled or neurodivergent character's points of difference from a hypothetical 'normal' or an information book about disability and difference (18 books, 53%), rather than having an imaginative narrative. This means that although many authors may have intended to portray a social model perspective on disability, their work could be viewed as implicitly othering, and therefore arguably potentially ableist (Friedman & Owen, 2017).

5.2. Disabled Characters and Character Development

Many of the books' main characters do include a child experiencing disability or neurodiversity as an active agent (15 books, or 43%), and there is some character development—a sense of getting to know them through the story. However, it is rare for the verbal text to represent that character's point of view (10 books, or 28%). More common is an omniscient

narrator voice, or the point of view of a friend, peer, sibling or other relative, such as a grandparent. *Remarkable Remy* (Heyworth & Eckstrom, 2023) is one such example. In the book *Best Day Ever* (Singer & Nixon, 2021), the narrator and most developed character is the pet dog of the child character, who is a wheelchair user.

5.3. Literary Qualities

Even a surface-level analysis of the recommended picturebooks that provided data for this research revealed that the verbal, visual relationship and visual or multimodal storytelling is generally less complex and sophisticated than for high-quality picturebooks in general. Most of the plot (if there is one) and any character development are conveyed verbally, with images providing details of things like the physical context, particular activities, and elaboration of verbal descriptions of emotions. Similarly, visually and aesthetically imaginative design features are not common. There were, however, some notable exceptions—books in which there was a rich and engaging visual aesthetic to the illustrator's style with potential to create mood and engage children's imaginations. Some examples, which will be explored further in later phases of this research, are *Alice's shoe* (Thorndike & Harrison, 2023), and *Two mates* (Prewett & Prewett, 2012).

In relation to the qualities and styles of verbal text in the books analysed, there were similarly few examples of rich language use, with most focusing on a fairly predictable narrative style. In the books without a developed plot the verbal text was sometimes didactic in style. While some authors created verbal texts with a sense of rhythm and attention to patterns of sounds in their syntax, few show the poetic qualities or complex verbal/visual imagery of the highest quality picturebooks. A clear sense of gaps in the verbal text that mean the storytelling is incomplete without the integration of the visual (Nodelman, 2005; Sipe, 2012) is also uncommon. Some books that rated more highly in the Strong Stories adapted criteria also included more sophisticated verbal texts. *Noah catches the wind* (Worthington & Cowman, 2015), for example, uses metaphor. *You're so amazing!* (Catchpole et al., 2023) uses dialogue and understatement to convey the main character's emotions and create potential for humour.

To explore the verbal/visual relationships and literary qualities further, a deeper analysis of the nine picturebooks that met most of the adapted Strong Stories Framework indicators (Hayden & Prince, 2024) was undertaken. The indicators of literary quality set out in below were used to guide this stage of the content analysis. Only two books out of the group of nine (thus two books out of 35 recommended) rated highly in terms of literary quality. They were the Australian book *Boy*, written by Phil Cummings and illustrated by Shane Devries (Cummings & Devries, 2017), and UK book *What Happened to You?* (2021), written by James Catchpole and illustrated by Karen George (Catchpole & George, 2022). As these books were so notably different from most of the others in the research sample, a detailed analysis of both their inclusive and literary features is below.

Boy has the feel of a medieval European epic tale, in its plot, characters, illustrations, and writing style. There are knights, a castle, a king and a dragon. As in many such tales, characters are not given names—in a sense they represent tropes. The plot is reminiscent of Biblical stories such as David and Goliath, or folk tales such as the story of the lion and the mouse, where someone small overcomes someone with much greater size and physical power. Boy lives in a place where a dragon has been devastating the countryside, and as the king and his knights try to overcome the dragon there were many battles, which nobody ever won.

The portrayal of the character of Boy reflects a social model of disability (Oliver, 2013). Boy is Deaf, and while this is part of his identity, it is not presented as a weakness or a major problem. Our introduction to Boy is positive: 'Boy couldn't hear but he was happy.

He spoke with dancing hands, and he drew pictures for people in the sand. His parents loved his stories' (2017, unpaged). It is made clear that the villagers think he is strange, but this is not dwelt on and not portrayed as something he needs to overcome. It seems to be their problem, not Boy's. Boy's disability is also not presented as his superpower—a conceptualisation often seen in picturebooks about characters who experience disability, particularly autistic characters. His power comes from simply being a child who is very observant, and who decides to question the status quo, as children often do. There is a resonance with Hans Christian Andersen's *The Emperor's new clothes* (1837). As the child does in that story, so Boy, using his 'dancing hands', and then writing in the sand, 'asks the obvious question that no adult has ever asked: 'Why are you fighting?'.

Cummings and De Vries show respect for Deaf identities through their accurate portrayal of Auslan sign language (Australian Sign Language). For example, the illustration at the end of the book shows the Auslan sign for 'thank you' done by everyone to Boy, as he has brought peace to the kingdom. The book thus ends with a strongly inclusive message, portrayed mostly visually, as it shows that Boy truly belongs in his community, and that there are many ways to communicate.

In terms of its inclusivity, this book has the potential to be a 'window' (Bishop, 1990) for everyone into a past fictional world with exciting things like dragons, and a 'mirror' for many children who would like to outsmart a dragon or for children who are Deaf and use non-verbal languages (Bishop). It could also be a 'sliding door' (Bishop), as the book is so engaging that children could imagine themselves in the story and think about what it would be like to be part of it.

The illustrations of *Boy* have an engaging visual aesthetic that sets a mood and sparks wonder about what the story might be about. The Viking style helmet Boy wears, for example, would inspire many children's imagination. On the second spread we see the castle and the knights. The verbal text has lots of onomatopoeia related to medieval battle sounds. Another important feature of high-quality picturebooks is the use of foreshadowing by Cummings and De Vries—of the adventure to come and of the fictional place and time. The interest that this sparks is continued in the next spread, where we meet the dragon and can understand the significance of the burnt-out landscape shown earlier. Through features such as these, the narrative maintains a pace that keeps children interested.

In terms of the integration of the verbal and visual modes, while the key plot points are told verbally, in keeping with the style of a traditional epic tale, the illustrations add mood, drama and give us a deeper sense of Boy's personality. The tale would feel quite empty without the imaginative richness and excitement that is conveyed through the illustrations and the integration of words and images. The illustrations are very carefully crafted, using vectors, size, and key words as part of the visual design, particularly during battle scenes. The illustrator made the interesting choice of a pink/mauve warm colour palette, which seems to make the mood exciting without overplaying violence or fear, given the age of the readers. Browns and greys are used in the early spreads, where we see the burnt-out trees caused by the dragon (although we do not know that until a few pages on). Most illustrations are double page spreads, with use of lines that draw the eye across from left to right that work with the verbal narrative pace to keep us turning the page as part of a sense of excitement. The backdrop colour varies in intensity depending on the action in the narrative.

Variations in pacing, another important literary feature of high-quality picturebooks, are created in several ways. For example, where dialogue and interaction are more important, especially later in the story, the backdrop is much paler, so that we focus more on the characters. When the characters stop their fighting, and after Boy's question, the point of view of different characters is shown on a page that has small round illustrations,

rather than one double page illustration as used earlier in the book. Thus, there is a slowing down of the pace, giving readers time to consider each character's point of view—the king, the dragon, the knights. These visually portrayed points of view mostly place us outside, viewing the action, which contrasts with the largely verbal presentations of Boy's point of view (albeit through a third person narrative). The excitement of the visual storytelling is also accentuated in a few places where the view is zoomed in, particularly for climactic fighting moments.

The style of the verbal text makes it rhythmic and pleasurable to read out loud. There is onomatopoeia, some repeated phrases, such as 'dancing hands', and some dialogue, which gives us a sense of what characters are thinking and feeling. There is not a lot of detail in the verbal descriptions, as this is provided by the illustrations. There is some effective use of verbs to describe the fighting moments, which complement the drama that is conveyed visually: 'There was roaring, flapping, running about, hiding, dodging, weaving and a lot of shouting'. Interestingly, the page after this, which starts 'Boy couldn't hear the battle cries, . . .' has a paler, softer colour palette, which creates a sense of quiet, a subtle way of conveying his experience as a Deaf person. The design in these pages include a lot of intentional placement of words for visual image, and some large, varied font sound words incorporated into the illustrations.

It is significant that *Boy* (Cummings & Devries, 2017) has been widely recognised for its literary quality and its inclusivity. The book was awarded the Children's Peace Literature Award in 2017 and was shortlisted in the Children's Book Council of Australia Book of the Year Awards in 2018. It has also been named an Outstanding book by IBBY (The International Board on Books for Young People).

The second book that rated highly against the Strong Stories Framework (Hayden & Prince, 2024) and against the indicators of literary quality used in this study is *What happened to you?* (Catchpole & George, 2022). This book has also won awards from the American Library Association and the UK Literacy Association. It explores the impact of what people say to you when you have a visible disability. The title of the book is a statement that Joe, the main character, regularly gets from other children. This book is effective as a book about a child's experience, as well as addressing the theme of ways to talk about disability, particularly because of the quirky humour expressed through the types of questions and guesses that the children make about why Joe has one leg and not two. The humour is conveyed verbally and visually, with a lot of different aesthetic techniques. The backdrop is children playing at the park, and the illustrator makes clever visual use of things such as a rope climbing grid, and imagined images in thought bubbles relating to children's questions (such as Joe's leg falling down the toilet), to guide the readers' eye and convey Joe's point of view. The book design is also visually and aesthetically engaging, using a mix of double spreads, single spreads and two- or three-column page layouts. This creates variations in the pacing of the narrative, also allowing natural points for close exploration by child readers. Some of the children's questions are in speech bubbles, using a hand-written, child-like font, to contrast with the standard font. There are examples of humour created by hyperbole, and by the dramatic use of a lot of yellow at the page with the most ridiculous guess at what happened—"'Yes,' said Joe. 'It was a thousand lions'. 'REALLY?' said the kids". This is then followed by a contrast—a sparsely illustrated page, white background. "NO!" shouted Joe. Next is a double page spread, very close up with Joe's face, as he hangs over a rope, with a lot of white space. This is a powerfully effective communication of his feelings, using sophisticated visual literacy techniques. The children and Joe then resume their pirate game. The children, as well as we the readers, never actually find out what happened to Joe's leg, and it does not matter, which is of course the whole point.

Analysis of *What Happened to You?* using the Strong Stories and literary quality frameworks show it as a clear (and unfortunately rare) example of imaginative inclusion. It has a strong, multi-faceted main character who is not defined by his disability, gives a sense of his inner world, includes a story about children playing an imaginative game, contains an authentic reflection of children's curiosity, lots of humour and visual interest, and a question left unanswered. Overall, it gives young readers a lot to think about, potentially likely to lead to re-reading and repeated explorations over time. It is a book in which children who do or do not experience disability can find reflections of themselves. The front cover has Joe very prominently conveyed, showing that he has one leg and not two, which could perhaps be regarded as ableist, as Joe is initially identified through his disability. However, he is standing on a swing, foreshadowing that play is part of the story, and showing him using his agency to play. There is also a certain enticement in the book title being a question—readers will likely be keen to open the book and find the answer. The fact that the question is never actually answered respects children's sophistication as meaning-makers by giving them imaginative space to come up with their own possibilities or further questions. Significantly, too, there are other points of imaginative interest in the book that might stimulate discussion, such as the games the children are playing, and the experience of being continually asked questions you do not want to talk about. These are all important points of interest in the book beyond Joe's physical impairment, which may potentially be 'mirror' moments (Bishop, 1990) for many children. Importantly, the book's portrayal of Joe, using humour and play, is likely to inspire children's empathy, as repeatedly being asked annoying questions that they do not want to answer is something that many children may have experienced, although perhaps more often from adults rather than peers.

6. Implications for Future Research

For the first phase of this research project, and the purposes of this article, only a small selection of books from two countries was investigated based on recommendations from the organisations listed, and with only one researcher's interpretations of the analysis frameworks. While detailed findings from only two examples of a two-stage content analysis have been outlined in this article, other recommended books which rated quite highly against the adapted Strong Stories criteria (Hayden & Prince, 2024) will be explored further in future phases of the research involving other researchers, educators and families, and in subsequent publications. Significantly, though, many of the books included in this initial study, quite a few of which were recommended across several of the sites used, were evaluated in this initial phase as being neither inclusive nor of high literary quality, albeit by only one researcher. The thoughts of any single researcher or reader (as analysis of books is the focus of this research) will be subjective, particularly because every reader brings their own identities, life experiences and beliefs to their reading. Nevertheless, the findings of this pilot study indicate issues of supply as well as quality, and highlight the limited pool of picturebooks portraying disability. It is important to note that this issue, identified more than a decade ago by Koss (2015), remains a problem highlighted in recent research by Booth and Lim (2021), Caple and Tian (2022) and Adam et al. (2025). A glimmer of hope can, however, be noted in the increase in picturebooks portraying neurodiverse autistic characters, with the caveat that in the 35 books studied in this research, none of those rated highly against the adapted Strong Stories criteria (Hayden & Prince, 2024).

Although very limited in scope, the findings of the first phase of this ongoing project have relevance for children, families, early years educators and publishers, providing evidence of the small pool of picturebooks that inclusively portray disability. In future phases, searches using publishing industry data will be used to seek a clearer understanding

of how many picturebooks about disability have been published in recent years in Australia and the UK, so that a more representative dataset of what is available can be analysed for its inclusiveness and literary quality. The next phase of this research will also involve other researchers, children and families experiencing disability, and early childhood educators. The scope of the research will also be widened to other English-speaking countries such as the USA, Canada and Aotearoa New Zealand. Thus, while any analysis of books by readers is necessarily subjective, the more readers (e.g., children, their families, educators) use the criteria employed in this study, the more potential there is to use their responses to advocate for more imaginative and engaging books that positively represent disability.

Picturebooks can be powerful tools for working towards a more inclusive world (Deliman, 2021). When all children can access high-quality, imaginative, and enjoyable diverse books, they can build connections with children of all ways of being and develop respectful understanding of the richness of a diverse world. When children who experience disability see their ways of living and being reflected and valued in high-quality, imaginative, and enjoyable books, they are supported in developing a positive sense of identity and are empowered as readers. Inclusive picturebooks can break down power inequities between disabled and non-disabled children, also fostering children's empathy and understanding of others. Perhaps most importantly of all, picturebooks that are imaginative and engaging can build a love of reading that lasts a lifetime. Books that portray disability and difference in respectful, authentic and positive ways, but without any spark of imagination, character complexity, or verbal or visual richness are likely to stay on the shelves, only picked up by educators wishing to share important messages. What is needed are picturebooks that are not only inclusive of disability and difference, but that are also engaging and imaginative; books that will be self-selected and treasured by children and families—those who experience disability and those who may not. My research, and that of others cited, shows that unfortunately, there are far too few of such picturebooks. Thanks to the advocacy of the organisations whose resources were used in this research, more publishers are recognising the need for inclusive picturebooks, especially those that give voice to authors and illustrators who are themselves disabled and thus have lived experience to share in their creative work. However, the crucial importance of the imaginative engagement of young readers is as yet still undervalued when it comes to books representing disability. Hopefully, the quality of exemplars such as those analysed in this research will inspire other authors, illustrators and publishers to provide young disabled children with the picturebooks to which they have a right.

7. Conclusions

This article has outlined the first phase of an ongoing project exploring the inclusivity and literary qualities of picturebooks representing disability. The research data were a set of picturebooks that had been recommended as quality inclusive books for young children by UK and Australian not-for-profit organisations that support either literacy and books or disability and inclusion. The researcher drew on existing analytical frameworks for evaluating inclusive representations of disability and developed further analytical criteria for analysing literary qualities. The analysis suggested that many recommended picturebooks may not be as inclusive as first thought, and that few show the literary qualities that are most likely to engage children's imaginations and make the books favourites. Research was carried out by a sole researcher; thus, the frameworks used for analysis should be seen as pilot versions, to be refined during future phases of the project involving a team of researchers and other stakeholders, particularly children and families experiencing disability.

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