Reading Classroom Stories That Reimagine Disibility in Early Childhood Settings

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Abstract

Children and adults are frequently engaging in shared reading activities and storytelling within early childhood settings. This includes children with varying abilities and intersecting identities learning in inclusive or special education settings. Researchers recognize the importance of representation in children's stories, and stories that reflect young readers, their families, and broader community (Bishop, 1990; Bishop, 2012; Oxley, 2006). However, minimal empirical evidence of disability representation in children's literature exists (Tondreau & Rabinowitz, 2021). Thus, this empirical study investigates favorite classroom picturebooks in active early childhood special education (ECSE) classrooms. The study aimed to gain insight about the frequency and quality of inclusive literature, by investigating disability representation in active ECSE classrooms. The research surveyed active ECSE teachers to generate a data corpus of 50 unique favorite classroom stories. Using qualitative semiotic analysis, the study analyzed the texts and visuals for elements of inclusion, to discern elements of inclusion within each story. Within the data corpus, 7 out

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of 50 favorite stories included disabled and non-disabled characters. This analysis highlighted the absence of disability within the data set, and variations between strong, some, and limited disability representation. The data suggests a need to increase young children's exposure to inclusive stories and strength-based representations of disability.

Keywords: early childhood literacy, early childhood special education, representation, disability studies in education, children's literature, anti-ableism

Introduction

Social justice approaches to early childhood education place tremendous agency and value on the role of the educator to "disrupt ideologies about normalcy through the curriculum they teach and the pedagogies they use" (Lalvani & Bacon, 2019, p. 89). To build upon inclusive, anti-bias, and anti-racist values, including ableism (Lalvani & Bacon, 2019), early childhood practitioners may select books and use shared reading time as opportunities to engage with social justice themes. These behaviors can represent active choices to resist the established trends of reading stories that reproduce dominant perspectives and systemic ideologies, including disproportionate overrepresentation of White and non-disabled characters (Crisp et al., 2016).

One of the key lessons from picturebook research over the last decade is to use "a critical lens to examine how narratives and representations construct inclusion and diversity" (Arzipe, 2021, p.68). However, stories that include characters of Color and stories that represent underrepresented and marginalized communities are currently heavily debated and sometimes banned in certain parts of the United States. Consequently, teachers, librarians, and other members of the school community have been attacked, and threatened with criminal charges in certain states, including Texas, South Carolina, and Florida (Vissing & Juchniewicz, 2023). Vissing and Juchniewicz (2023) explain the significance of this censorship:

> It oppresses the stories and experiences of especially marginalized groups in favor of a narrative that supports the status quo. Those who wish to censor information have consistently labeled their actions as virtuous and in the best interest of society. The current banning of information is no different; the focus on sexuality, gender, race, religion, and immigration status are labeled as bad for children when these are actually relevant life experiences and topics of interest for youth. (p. 198)

These policies impact young children and families, including those

who receive early intervention (EI) or early childhood special education (ECSE). EI/ECSE settings are often diverse, including children with and without disabilities, children of Color, and children and families with varying intersecting social identities (Beneke & Park, 2019). These children benefit from seeing stories for and about them, inclusive of their intersecting identities. More broadly, all early childhood educational settings benefit from a range of stories and characters to read. As educators select curricula and classroom artifacts, they must integrate knowledge about complex social identities intersecting, including race, ability, language, gender, culture, and socioeconomic status (Friesen et al., 2022). Curricular choices, including shared reading activities, represent one way to intentionally support inclusion and belonging in EI/ECSE classrooms. EI/ECSE professionals may use social justice curriculum as one of many ways to create more inclusive classroom environments. Book selection within early childhood classrooms represents one area to connect curricular goals with pedagogical orientations towards inclusion and social justice.

Currently, little research exists regarding the stories frequently used in EI/ECSE classrooms. Within children's stories in early childhood settings, there is a scarcity of books with disability representation (Hughes, 2012). Previous research has investigated disability representation in children's literature, yet not specifically in early childhood special education classrooms. For example, scholars examined disability representation in award-winning picturebooks from North America (Brenna, 2013), disability and diversity in Caldecott Books (Koss et al., 2018), disability in Newberry award-winning books (Leiningeretal et al., 2010), and other investigations of disability in published children's literature in North America (Dyches & Prater, 2005; Emmerson & Brenna, 2015; Hayden & Prince, 2020). However, to our knowledge, research has yet to investigate how ECSE classroom stories represent disability, or how disabled characters with intersecting identities are depicted during storytime in EI/ECSE settings.

This study investigates stories in 15 early childhood special education classrooms, and their portrayal of disabled characters. It was conducted using a social model of disability stance to analyze representations of disability and inclusion. The social model affirms that the identity and experiences of disability and impairment are strength-based and positive identity markers, as opposed to the medical model pathologizing disability and impairments (Berghs et al., 2016). Additionally, it recognizes that impairments do not cause disability, but rather the physical and social environments can isolate and exclude disabled people from participation and access (Berghs et al., 2016).

This study aims to gain more awareness about disability representation in classroom stories, recognizing the value of inclusive stories for all young children. The research conducts semiotic analysis of the picturebooks and interprets findings from the perspective of inclusive, justice-driven, and anti-ableist pedagogies (Lalvani & Bacon, 2019; Beneke & Park, 2019). This research used semiotic analysis of the text and pictures to analyze disability representation and inclusion within favorite classroom stories. Using a data corpus of favorite books generated from 15 ECSE teachers' favorite stories, the research asked: *In inclusive stories, how do the text and visuals of disabled characters' participation indicate evidence that the picturebook shows strong, some, or limited inclusion?*

The Importance of Inclusion and Belonging in Early Childhood Education

For early childhood educators supporting young children with a range of abilities, goals for the classroom environment include creating spaces that foster inclusion and belonging. Additionally, aspirations for policy and practice of early childhood inclusion are inextricably connected to cultivating a sense of belonging for all young children and families (DEC/NAEYC, 2009; Lee & Recchia, 2016; Odom et al., 2011; Mitsch et al., 2022). Johansson and Puroila (2021) describe belonging as a fundamental human need, building upon one's sense of connection with others and places, and "worldwide curricular goal in early childhood education" (p.2). Experiencing belonging is increasingly important for children growing up in pluralistic societies, and for early childhood inclusion. This study investigated representations of inclusion with goals to raise awareness about how inclusive representation in curricula may promote a greater sense of belonging and be more inclusive of young children receiving EI/ECSE services.

Recommended policies and practices orient early educators towards creating inclusive classroom spaces, which center "belonging and membership, positive social relationships and friendships, and development and learning" (Lee & Recchia, 2016, p.1). Thus, practitioners must continue to invest in children's inclusion and belonging. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and the Division for Early Childhood (DEC) (2009) explain early childhood inclusion:

> Early childhood inclusion embodies the values, policies, and practices that support the right of every infant and young child and his or her family, regardless of ability, to participate in a broad range of activi-

ties and contexts as full members of families, communities, and society. The desired results of inclusive experiences for children with and without disabilities and their families include a sense of belonging and membership, positive social relationships and friendships, and development and learning to reach their full potential. (p.2)

Accomplishing these goals requires elements of early education settings, including materials, curriculum, the structure of the classroom, instruction, and the environment, as all impact young children's access and participation. To facilitate meaningful, high-quality inclusion, practitioners benefit from continuously revising their practices, which includes material selection and curricular choices. Just as the classroom environment may need adjustments to become more accessible, the curricula may need changes to become more inclusive.

The Importance of Representation in Picturebooks

In picturebooks and classroom stories, the representations of characters can profoundly impact young readers. For example, character depictions and representation can "foster social imagination by helping readers learn how to better live in the world beyond the book" (Johnson et al., 2018, p. 570). Recognizing the influence of representation on young children, researchers underscore the importance of text selection for young children. Texts and stories can influence inclusion and belonging in early childhood. The relationship between young children and the stories they read is important to consider. For example, McClung (2018) emphasizes the limitations of normative representations of families, as they reinforce the narrative of "two-parent, cohabitating families that are white, cisgender, able-bodied, and heterosexual… Collectively, such texts marginalize the reader whose life does not conform to the dominant view of a proper childhood" (McClung, 2018, p. 402). For reading to empower young children and affirm their identities, young children benefit from a range of consciously inclusive books that reflect their diverse social identities (Möller, 2016). Multicultural children's literature has long advocated for more diverse and inclusive children's literature. It provides a powerful foundation to generate understanding about diversifying representation, strengthening the classroom community, and conveying inclusive values.

One area of research investigating children's literature in the classroom focuses on identifying areas to improve book selection for inclusion and belonging. For example, Gomez-Najarro (2020) applied an intersectional framework to explore social identity markers in Common Core State Standards (CCSS) book exemplars, finding that few CCSS books:

… raise questions about power at the intersection of *multiple* social identity markers. Indeed, many elements of identity—such as sexual orientation and ability—are not represented at all in the books. Echoing the historically disproportionate representation of culturally diverse characters in children's books, the second and third grade fictional stories in Appendix B of the CCSS suggest a need for more complex portrayals of social identity, reflecting the reality of today's K-12 students. These text exemplars continue a longstanding tradition in which children's literature fails to reflect the diverse body of students it is designed to serve [emphasis in original]. (p.406)

This illuminates absences and space for a variety of stakeholders to move towards more inclusive representation of all children and families.

To cultivate equitable and inclusive early childhood classrooms, Souto-Manning (2019) argues that educators must historically contextualize power, understanding that "Historically, minoritized children have been positioned as biologically inferior, deficient (when compared with White, middle-class, ableist ways of being and behaving" (p.65). This rhetoric existed in picturebooks. However, when children read stories that dehumanize others, or take deficit-based or exclusionary depictions, these stories hold the power to influence or inform children's understanding of the social constructs and realities they depict. For example, children are learning about race and gender from picturebooks, in addition to other messaging throughout their education (Buescher et al., 2016). These messages can exist in contrast to the values of EI/ECSE professionals and other service providers that actively devote time, energy, and resources to creating inclusive spaces.

Revisiting classroom libraries and traditional stories can generate deeper understanding of how implicit biases present themselves in children's literature. For example, classic stories may have nostalgic appeal and strong cultural presence, but those attributes may prevent people from exploring how stories might reflect oppressive social norms such as racism, patriarchy, heteronormativity, sexism, and ableism (Yenika-Agbaw, 2011). From this vantage point, there is a need for corrective action that intentionally reflects inclusion and belonging, including through showing characters with intersectional identities, including disabilities.

Disability Representation in Stories

Researchers have indicated a need for greater representation of disabled characters from strength-based perspectives (Brenna, 2013; Golos & Moses, 2011), promoting more participation (Dyches & Prater, 2005), greater agency (Aho & Alter, 2018), and active problem-solving

within children's stories. Furthermore, critical assessments of disabled characters should address evidence of character resilience, self-efficacy, varying levels of independence, and rich identities and personalities (Hughes, 2012).

Developing a foundational understanding of depictions of high-quality inclusion can better support educators to identify inclusive stories that better reflect their students' intersectional identities and varying abilities and align with an inclusive pedagogy that is relevant for all students. Hayden and Prince (2020) provide an example of how educators may use classroom stories to reflect inclusive policies, explaining:

> Because the inclusion of students with disability in general education classrooms is increasing (U.S. Department of Education, 2020), their participation should be reflected in classroom books, and reflections should represent strength-based views if we are to counteract limiting, ableist views. (p.6)

Inclusive stories can be interpreted as one way for educators to create alignment between inclusive pedagogies and inclusive policies, to cultivate classrooms that promote all children's experience of inclusion and belonging.

Within inclusive children's stories, educators must also develop critical awareness to recognize the limitations of stories that may appear inclusive because they depict disabled and non-disabled characters sharing space on the page. Unfortunately, many "inclusive-seeming texts" exist, which Kleekemp and Zapata (2019) argue:

> benevolently perpetuate deficit narratives of characters worth pitying by positioning characters with disabled bodies as mascots or characters with disabled minds as class pets. It is not uncommon to encounter characters with disabilities who appear to lack agency or are victimized by other, "able" characters. (p.589)

This underscores the need for critical readings of disability representation within children's stories, as it is possible to unintentionally reinforce deficit perspectives of disabled characters. This is relevant for early educators selecting and reading children's stories. The act of selecting inclusive stories does not guarantee that the values within the stories are anti-ableist, inclusive, or aligned with social justice perspectives. Critical analysis of the meaning and representation is necessary for educators to assess not only the presence of disability representation, but the quality of inclusion within the story.

Inclusive stories that reflect a sense of belonging require high-quality depictions of disabled characters. They may be portrayed in a positive, realistic, and multi-faceted way, while being given active choice

and participation, prosocial relationships, and equal rights (Dyches & Prater, 2005). Practitioners must intentionally analyze these stories, as they can model inclusion in ways that align with inclusive policies and practices. Kleekamp and Zapata (2019) define high-quality inclusive children's literature in strength-based and inclusive ways, explaining "characters with agency and multidimensional lives who happen to carry disability labels" (p. 589). This advocates for thoughtful selection of stories. This is critical for all early childhood professionals, and requires understanding about how ableism manifests within traditional, nostalgic, and more current children's stories (Hayden & Prince, 2020; Yenika-Agbaw, 2011).

Methodology

Qualitative Semiotic Analysis

This study conducted semiotic qualitative analysis of picturebooks based on the early childhood special educators' answers sharing three to five of their favorite children's picture books. The analysis addressed the following research question: *In inclusive stories, how do the text and visuals of disabled characters' participation indicate evidence that the picturebook shows strong, some, or limited inclusion?*

This analysis investigated characters with varying abilities in picturebooks through systemic exploration of the image-text relationship, seeking out representations of inclusion. It examined inclusive stories to gain insight about how the stories showed evidence of inclusive values by using qualitative semiotic analysis of picturebooks. Semiotic analysis is a multimodal analysis of the image-text relations in picturebooks (Wu, 2014). Semiotic analysis is an appropriate way to investigate picturebooks, as children construct meaning from the story using the interplay between words and images together. This research systematically investigated the interplay between the written language and visual imagery on each page.

The study conducted empirical research about early childhood classroom picturebooks because picturebooks are considered artifacts of the classroom, home, or early childhood experience, and they hold sociocultural value. Children learn meaningful lessons from picturebooks, yet limited research regarding ECSE classroom stories exists. This research aimed to investigate stories with depictions of disabled characters from a corpus of favorite stories in ECSE classrooms. This investigation of picturebooks considers the educational and sociocultural impact, as inclusive classrooms hold sociocultural, and educational implications. Sociocultural analysis of picturebooks investigates

and advocates for culturally relevant stories, and stories that intentionally represent underrepresented and marginalized communities (Arzipe, 2021).

While less attention has been devoted to the representation of disabled characters in picturebooks, scholars are investigating disability in picturebooks from the sociocultural perspective (e.g., Hayden & Prince, 2020; Souto-Manning et al., 2019), and advocating that all of their students, disabled and non-disabled, may see themselves reflected in the classroom. This includes non-White characters with disability labels, as even within the limited disability representation in children's picturebooks, there is a "persistent overrepresentation of white male disability experiences in the existing literature" (Kleekamp & Zapata, 2019, p.596). These analyses speak to the ways that sociocultural studies of inclusive picturebooks often overlap with educational investigations of inclusive picturebooks (e.g. Pennell et al., 2017; Tondreau & Rabinowitz, 2021). The focus on inclusion aligns with the four core goals of anti-bias education: identity, diversity, justice, and activism (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2019). Anti-bias educational focus recognizes the ways that social identities can marginalize or privilege, and the need for educators to explore ability and disability, in addition to other identities.

Data Corpus

The list of picturebooks was collected using a self-administered online Qualtrics survey sent to 26 early childhood special educators working in a large urban environment in California. All teachers contacted held master's degrees and teaching credential for early childhood special education and graduated within the last five years. In total, 15 educators participated in this voluntary and anonymous survey. Additional demographic data for participations was not taken. Surveys were the most applicable data instrument to create the data corpus because of the ease of contact and ability for participants to self-administer surveys at their convenience (Fowler, 2013). This was particularly important due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which required social distancing measures and limited in-person interactions.

The survey included several questions related to classroom literacy practices, and took approximately 15 minutes to complete. However, the data corpus used to conduct this research emerged from one question, which was the first question in the survey: "Please name 3-5 of your favorite children's picture books." The answers culminated in a data corpus with 50 unique picturebooks to analyze (see Appendix A for

the master list of all 50 picturebooks). The additional questions were wide-ranging and exploratory. For example, questions asked about how teachers acquire classroom stories, how frequently they receive new classroom books, resources to support their classroom libraries, and diverse character representation in their classroom libraries. As this research aimed to analyze the text and images in ECSE picture-books, the additional information was not used in this study.

Data Analysis Plan

The first stage of data analysis required determining inclusive stories within the data corpus. Access to the stories for analysis occurred through both online videos, physical books from public libraries, and electronic books that were accessible through the public library service. Online read aloud videos were also accessed to investigate some of the picturebooks multiple times, as were the physical books in the local libraries. The online content was particularly helpful early in the data analysis plan for both convenience and the limitations to public spaces early in the COVID-19 pandemic. An excel spreadsheet was used to determine which stories clearly did not show evidence of disability, possibly showed evidence of disability, and definitely showed evidence of disability. Stories that possibly showed evidence of disability were reviewed by both authors and an additional expert, and consensus was reached to discern which stories met the inclusion criteria.

The second stage of data analysis included semiotic qualitative analysis of the inclusive stories identified. To systematically investigate the representation of characters with varying abilities, the rubric in Table 1 was utilized. Analysis exclusively focused on how disabled characters were represented in stories using six categories (communicator, addressed listener, unaddressed listener, bystander, and figure). Each story was read multiple times, and the rubric was used to explain the frequency and relevant context each time a character with varying abilities was present. Within each story, double-page spreads represented one unit of analysis, as the reader would see the double-page spread as one complete scene. Each double-page spread was analyzed, or single page if the story did not use the double-page spread to illustrate one large scene.

After finishing the page-by-page analysis, we assigned each book to one of the three categories: strong, some, or limited representation of inclusion. The justification for this categorization was included based on the roles of the characters with varying abilities throughout the story. Strong representations of inclusion were characterized as showing disabled characters depicted with a range of participant roles, such

as active roles as the communicator, addressed listener, or central figures in narrative stories. Stories characterized as depicting some representation of inclusion included disabled characters with supporting roles in less than half of the story. Stories with limited representation of inclusion were characterized as bystanders or unaddressed listeners with minimal representation or added value to the story.

This analysis is limited to investigate participation among disabled characters from the participant role of (1) the communicator, (2) the addressed listener, (3) the unaddressed listener, (4) the bystander, and (5) the figure. These are inspired by Goodwin & Goodwin's (2004) participation framework. In this analysis, the communicator refers to the character using active utterances or other forms of active communication. The addressed listener refers to the character the communicator intentionally communicates with, and the unaddressed listener refers to characters in proximity of the communicator, without discernible textual or visual cues to indicate the character is actively addressed as a hearer in the communication exchange. The bystander is visually present on the page for the scene, although they are not referenced in the text. Their positioning is distant from the communicator and addressed or unaddressed listeners. This positioning communicates the character is not participating actively in the scene. Finally, the figure represents a character referenced as the subject or content on the page. The figure may be referenced in a communication exchange, visually, or in narration.

In inclusive stories, disabled characters were categorized as either the communicator, addressed or unaddressed listener, bystander, or figure. The level of participation was quantified to interpret the role of characters with varying abilities, and the intentionality for the theme of inclusion with active participation and agency. Finally, the data was organized to include stories with strong, some, and limited representations of inclusion.

Table 1
Data Analysis Rubric

Page-by-Page Analysis Assessing Representation
of Characters with Varying Abilities Picturebook:

Participant Role	*Frequency*	*Additional Notes:*
Communicator		
Addressed Listener		
Unaddressed Listener		
Bystander		
Figure		

Inter-rater Reliability

Data analysis first required a close reading of each story to determine whether the story included characters with varying abilities. For each story, the texts and visuals were closely examined for evidence of disabled characters. Within the data corpus, stories without characters of varying abilities were excluded from analysis. Stories that may have represented characters with disabilities were reviewed by two experts in early childhood special education, and required consensus regarding whether the stories were inclusive of disabled and non-disabled characters. Additionally, each rubric was completed by the first author and reviewed by the second author for interrater reliability. Where any discrepancy arose, the authors discussed and reanalyzed the story to gain consensus.

Findings

This research focused on ways that inclusive stories utilize the text and visuals of disabled characters, and their roles within each story. Based on the roles of disabled characters in the story, we garnered evidence of disabled characters' participation, and categorized participation in terms of strong, some, or limited inclusion. To study this, the research conducted semiotic analysis of the text-picture relationship to identify and assess inclusive stories. To determine which stories would meet the qualifying criteria for semiotic analysis of inclusion, the story needed to have text or visual representations of characters with disabilities. This required reading through each of the 50 stories, often multiple times, to discern which stories possibly included disabled characters and their roles. For stories that did not clearly evidence disabled characters, the authors analyzed the picturebooks alongside another professor in Early Childhood Special Education to reach consensus regarding the representation. Shared consensus was reached regarding the texts and visuals that represented disability in some form. Ultimately, within the data corpus of 50 stories, 7 picturebooks discernably included disabled and non-disabled characters. These seven stories were considered inclusive stories, and semiotic analysis was conducted to gain understanding of strong, some, or limited inclusion within each story. Two stories were categorized as having limited representation of inclusion, as disabled characters appeared only once and twice, and the roles were bystanders. Two stories were categorized as having some representation of inclusion, as the disabled characters were central figures yet only present in one and two pages. Three stories were characterized as showing strong representations of

inclusion, as the disabled characters were figures prominently represented in more than half of each story or communicators with equal representation as other central characters throughout the story. Table 2 details the findings regarding strong, some, or limited inclusion in the 7 picturebooks analyzed.

Semiotic Analysis of Inclusive Stories

Each inclusive story was read several times. Physical copies of books and online copies were accessed through the public library, and through online read aloud videos of the story, which showed the text and pictures. While reading and analyzing the pictures and text in each story, a rubric was completed to systematically assess visual or text representation of disabled characters' roles each time disabled characters were present in the story.

Limited Representation of Inclusion

Two picturebooks were inclusive of disabled and non-disabled characters, *Drum Dream Girl: How One Girl's Courage Changed Music* (Engle & López, 2015) and *Ambitious Girl* (Harris & Valdez, 2021). Analysis of the text and visuals led to the assessment that the stories showed limited evidence of inclusive values, or limited inclusion. This was defined as having disabled characters as bystanders or unaddressed listeners with minimal representation or added value to the story.

Table 2
Results of Qualitative Semiotic Analysis in Inclusive Stories

Analysis of Inclusion in Each Inclusive Story

Strong, Some, or Limited Inclusion	*Picturebook*
Limited Inclusion	*Drum Dream Girl: How One Girl's Courage Changed Music* (Engle & Lopez, 2015)
Limited Inclusion	*Ambitious Girl* (Harris & Valdez, 2021)
Some Inclusion	*It's Okay to Be Different* (Parr, 2001)
Some Inclusion	*Be Who You Are* (Parr, 2016)
Strong Inclusion	*You Matter* (Robinson, 2020)
Strong Inclusion	*The Animal Boogie* (Blackstone & Harter, 2000)
Strong Inclusion	*All Are Welcome* (Penfold & Kaufman, 2018)

Drum Dream Girl:
How One Girl's Courage Changed Music (Engle & López, 2015)

Drum Dream Girl: How One Girl's Courage Changed Music (2015) was written by Margarita Engle and illustrated by Rafael López. The book has won the Pura Belpré medal, in addition to other notable book lists and awards. It depicts the true story of a girl who overcame widespread social and cultural gender bias to pursue her dream as an immensely talented drummer. She persevered to become a renowned drummer, and she helped to break barriers regarding gender discrimination for female musicians in Cuba and beyond.

This important message shares a valuable story with rich cultural and historical knowledge for children. However, there was limited evidence that inclusion of disabled and non-disabled community members was a central focus or theme in the story. There was one page that included an elderly community member sitting on a park bench, watching as the main character danced through the park. This character was considered a bystander, and can be interpreted as disabled as they are using a cane. Considering the illustrator and author's intentions, the inclusion of a character with a cane can be interpreted as inclusion of an elderly person with a mobility impairment. The visual inclusion of this bystander was not elaborated upon in the text, and there was no reference to this character throughout the rest of the story. The scene is depicted in Figure 1.

Based on the categories defined in the methodology, the role of the disabled character was a bystander. The brief and limited visual inclusion of one disabled character in a park, only represented on one page, did not indicate that the story meaningfully engaged with disability as a strong theme to support inclusion in the story. Due to this limited evidence, the text and visuals aligned with limited inclusion because of minimal representation throughout the story, and limited value added by the disabled character's presence in the story. It was not central to the plot, and text did not explicitly reference inclusion of people with varying abilities. Rather, it focused mostly exclusively on gender discrimination of the main character, and her persistence and ultimate success in being a musician.

Ambitious Girl (Harris & Valdez, 2021)

The second inclusive story with limited inclusion is *Ambitious Girl* (2021), written by Meena Harris and illustrated by Marissa Valdez. This book also explicitly rejects gender biases and discrimination. It also takes an intersectional approach to representation to center the

Figure 1
Excerpt of Drum Dream Girl (Engle & Lopez, 2015, p.11-12)

experience of Black women and girls. The main character is a powerful Black girl with a strong and supportive family, and she is educated about how women were historically and continuously described in disempowering ways, like too ambitious, too confident, or too proud. However, she has a loving and supportive family to uplift her and highlight her strengths and values. This story takes an intersectional approach to uplift girls and women, and to promote empowerment. It also can be an important addition to classrooms seeking to promote anti-bias curricula for young children, as themes touch upon the four core goals of anti-bias education (Identity, diversity, justice, and activism; Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2019).

Regarding disability representation, the text did not explicitly address disability, and two pages visually included a disabled character. The creators intentionally illustrated a wheelchair user as a community member participating as a bystander or audience member as the main character speaks to the crowd. Figure 2 focuses on the main character standing at the podium, with family and community behind her. They can be interpreted as supportive and engaged community members. Figure 2 represents the first of two inclusive scenes, as a White disabled girl with orange hair and overalls is using a wheelchair that has a yellow and orange heart flag. There is another White character with blonde hair and glasses, positioned behind the wheelchair user, with one hand on the wheelchair's push handle.

These characters were again present in one other scene, in a crowd listening to the main character speak. Both times this disabled person was represented, they were not main characters, but rather present in a larger audience and an outdoor community space. This book was characters as depicting limited inclusion because both pages that included the wheelchair user included visual representations of the characters without text references that indicated inclusive values of disabled and non-disabled people. The character was also present only in the crowd in both instances, and their presence was not a focal point for the page or the story. The representation was interpreted as minimal and not adding significant value to the message or visuals within the story. Like *Drum Dream Girl: How One Girl's Courage Changed Music* (Engle & López, 2015), *Ambitious Girl* (Harris & Valdez, 2021), shared a meaningful and relevant message. However, semiotic analysis of the text and visuals in the stories did not indicate that inclusion of disabled and non-disabled people was a central component of the story or its theme.

Some Representation of Inclusion

Two out of seven of the inclusive stories were characterized as showing some representation of inclusion after conducting semiotic analysis of the text. Some inclusion was defined as showing characters

Figure 2
Excerpt of Ambitious Girl (Harris, 2021, p.21-22)

participating with supporting roles in less than half of the story. The two stories characterized with some inclusion were both by Todd Parr, renowned children's author and illustrator. The stories were *It's Okay to Be Different* (Parr, 2001) and *Be Who You Are* (Parr, 2016).

It's Okay to be Different (Parr, 2001)

In Parr's (2001) *It's Okay to be Different*, the visuals and text both reflect inclusion through depicting disabled characters alongside non-disabled characters, and explicitly referencing aspects of disability in the text. For example, Figure 3 includes the text and visual references to disability, as the page reads: "It's okay to need some help" and depicts a visually impaired woman with yellow skin, red hair, a purple sweater, and blue pants, as she stands with one hand holding the harness of a service dog. The dog is yellow, has one red ear and one blue, and a green circle around one eye. The dog is smiling and has freckles, and the woman is also smiling. The text and visual reference both indicate intentional inclusion of disabled people, and it explicitly states the fact that it is okay to need help.

Furthermore, the story includes another disabled character and the visuals and text again both intentionally reference disability, as seen in Figure 4. This page reads "It's okay to have wheels" and shows a wheelchair user with dark teal skin, wearing a red shirt and blue pants, smiling while one hand is positioned near the back wheel of the

Figure 3
Excerpt from It's Okay to be Different (Parr, 2001, p. 2)

wheelchair. In both instances, the characters were identified as figures in the story because they were referenced in the text and visuals, as the story narrated to the readers. These figures were central to the messages on the page, and these pages stood out as intentionally inclusive in both the visuals and text. They were interpreted as indicating inclusion through both text and illustration, as they communicate to the reader about disabled people and inclusion of disabled people. When stories show images of inclusive characters in the background without textual references, the reader may not gain clear understanding of messages of inclusion within the story. However, in this picturebook, two pages highlighted disabled characters as central in the story, and the text also explicitly engaged with the characters identity as disabled people in need of some help or wheels.

This story was coded as some representation of inclusion because it clearly and intentionally depicted two disabled characters in the story and message about recognizing individual differences. It was not coded as a strong representation of inclusion because disabled characters were present in the visuals and text of two pages out of 30 unique pages and images, which included many types of characters, such as animals, people, a snowman, and an invisible friend. The story promotes inclusive values in the text and images and shows strong inclusion within the pages that disabled characters are present. As a complete picturebook, it shows some inclusion only due to its limited representation in two pages. This book represents a valuable addition to the classroom library.

Figure 4
***Excerpt from It's Okay to be Different (Parr, 2001, p. 5)***

Be Who You Are (Parr, 2016)

Todd Parr's (2016) *Be Who You Are* also showed some evidence of inclusive values through the text and illustrations. There is one page which can be interpreted as showing an intentional commitment to inclusive values. Figure 5 says: "Learn in your own way", with a cat smiling. There are red, blue, and green question marks over the cat's head as the cat reaches towards the dog bowl with one paw. The reader sees that the bowls have DOG and CAT written on them, and it shows that the cat is intentionally reaching towards the dog bowl, an area that is not typical for cats. As this unique cat curiously reaches for the dog food, the illustration highlights that there are different ways of learning, just as there are different ways of being and experiencing the world. The character was coded as a figure, as they were central to the plot while the text narrated to the reader.

Although there is only one clear depiction of learning differences, this is still somewhat inclusive because it is intentional and a central character with supporting texts to reinforce the theme of the entire story regarding being uniquely oneself. This page adds a new element of the story, as other pages do not reference or normalize learning differences. The image and the text are contributing and expanding on this message in a unique way, which is adding value to the story and message. Therefore, although this inclusive message is only present in one page of the story, the text and visual representation of learning differences support the characterization of this story as showing some representation of inclusion.

Figure 5
Excerpt of Be Who You Are (Parr, 2016, p. 7)
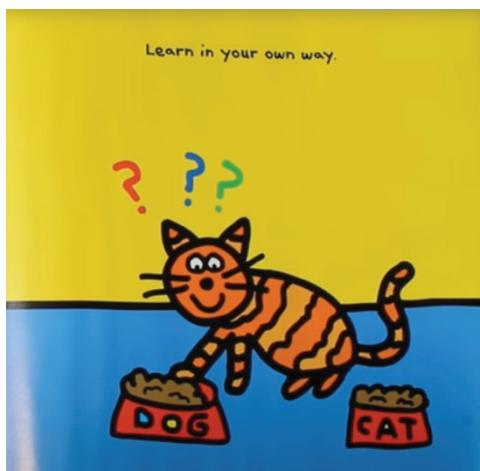
Strong Representation of Inclusion

Three of the seven inclusive stories showed strong representations of inclusion. Strong representations of inclusion were characterized as showing characters depicted with a range of participant roles across several pages, including active roles as communicator and addressed listener. For these stories, all the stories were narrative stories. However, characters with and without disabilities were central characters and active participants throughout the stories, and the creators of these picturebooks ensured that the main characters received similar dedicated space and attention on each page.

All Are Welcome (Penfold & Kaufman, 2018)

This story follows a group of students attending school within a diverse community. Students live with their families, and both families and students are a very diverse group of people. This can be seen through the different customs, dresses, flags, and other indicators throughout the visuals in the story, as well as the text in the story, which explicitly highlights diversity within the community. In the story, two of the students are illustrated as disabled. One student uses a wheelchair, and another student has a mobility impairment. The format of the story is narrative, and it includes many pages focused on routine activities throughout the school day. The text consistently affirms that while routine activities are occurring, all students are welcome at the school, and there is a shared sense of belonging in the school community. Friendships and relationships are depicted through closeness with peers, smiling, sharing, and being inclusive of students with varying abilities.

Figure 6 shows one example of the students all together outside on the playground, and the text references inclusive values through affirming that all students belong, and diversity is a source of strength. While the text did not explicitly reference disability or varying abilities, it continuously referenced that all students were welcome in school. It positioned school as a safe place and community for all. Furthermore, in terms of the frequency of inclusion, the students depicted as disabled were included in at least half of the story. They were coded as figures given that the story narrated to the reader as opposed to depicting conversations among characters within the school and community.

Most of the pages included groups of multiple students together, and they were included within the core classroom group. There were some pages that focused on a few children or families at a time, and the disabled children were present in some of those scenes. There were

Figure 6
Excerpt from All Are Welcome (Penfold & Kaufman, 2018, p. 15-16)

no characters that were considered main characters present in every scene. The illustrations were interpreted as thoughtfully inclusive, and the pages depicted inclusive interactions. The characters were depicted as sharing meaningful friendships, and the depictions showed inclusive classrooms, outdoor spaces, experiences at the gymnasium, art, lunch and other activities throughout the day. This book is categorized as showing strong inclusion, as the disabled and non-disabled classmates were all central characters, and active members of their classroom community frequently and consistently throughout the book.

The Animal Boogie, (Harter, 2000)

The final story with strong evidence of inclusion was Debbie Harter's (2000) *The Animal Boogie.* This story is unique because it includes an animated video for a multimodal experience, found on the publisher's website and on YouTube. The publisher, Barefoot Books, offers several multimodal singalong stories. The Barefoot Books Singalongs are series of animated videos of picturebooks for young children and classrooms to watch and sing along. These are often well-loved stories and songs for young children, as they are very engaging. These stories are also often accessible for teachers and families to use their electronic devices to enhance the storytelling.

This story follows a group of children through the jungle as they encounter various animals and move together. It is inclusive because one of the main characters uses a wheelchair. The character has shoul-

der-length black hair, brown skin, a short pink dress, pink shoes, and she is sitting in a wheelchair. In the story, each main character investigates their own animal over the course of four pages. For example, Figure 7 shows the main character with disabilities with a bird, holding feathers in her hands and flapping her arms to mimic the bird. This is consistent with the behavior of the other main characters, as they explore animals and use their bodies to find commonalities between the animal behavior and their own physical expression. At the end of the story, the children reconvene and 'boogie' together. Like in Figure 7 and throughout the story, the disabled main character is centered and engaged, and her mobility impairments do not seem to be limiting participation or ability to explore the jungle with her friends.

This story was categorized as strongly representing inclusion, as one of the main characters was represented as a central communicator, and this character was disabled and actively present throughout the story. They were not in half of the pages, as the format of the story highlighted each main character alone with an animal. Only in the end of the story were all the main characters together. Given the format and the role of the disabled character as a main communicator and figure, this story is interpreted as showing strong representation of inclusion. The text was focused on animals in the jungle and experiencing the jungle, and there were no text references to inclusion or disabilities. However, the intentional participation, engagement, and depiction of a main character as a wheelchair user

Figure 7
Excerpt of The Animal Boogie (Harter, 2000, p.15-16)

contribute to the categorization that this story shows strong inclusive representation.

You Matter (Robinson, 2020)

The children's picturebook *You Matter* (2020) was written and illustrated by Christian Robinson. It has since won multiple awards and gained notoriety for its ability to communicate an important message that each person matters, even if they feel lonely, lost, unsupported, or otherwise isolated. The text explores how people matter regardless of the circumstances, and highlight the importance of valuing oneself, particularly when experiencing difficulties. The illustrations reflect the theme of inclusion through the story's embrace of differences without stigmatizing. The text does not explicitly address disability and inclusion, although the illustrations and visual representations show evidence of disability and inclusion. For example, pages include disabled and non-disabled children and adults depicted as part of the community, which can be interpreted as showing disability as a valued form of human diversity. Furthermore, one of the main characters is a disabled child using a wheelchair.

The main characters can be seen on the front cover of the book, and throughout the story. Each main character has pages focused on them as they move through their life and community. Some pages are illustrations that do not include people but focus on nature and the environment from different scales. For example, there is a depiction of what one see's looking through a microscope, waves at the beach, animals walking along the sand, a T-Rex and other dinosaurs, views of planets in space and an astronaut looking down on Earth, and more. There is a variety of rich images and the use of the children in an urban environment juxtaposed with the other images of natural and fictional scenes. Furthermore, readers can see each of the main characters, all children, within the urban environments. For example, Figure 8 shows two main characters together standing on the curb on the right side of the page. It looks like they are waving for their dog, alone on the other side of the street. The following pages also show these two main characters reunited with their dog as they go through the park together. The disabled characters were coded as figures given the narrative style of the story.

The visuals reflect an intentional decision to be inclusive. The text is not explicit about disabilities and inclusion, yet the messaging is inclusive about the value of all human beings, regardless of their circumstances. It is very affirming of human diversity, which includes peo-

Figure 8
Excerpt of You Matter (Robinson, 2020, p. 23-24)

ple with varying abilities. These ideas are foundational to inclusion. Furthermore, visually, the text included the main disabled character alongside a friend and companion throughout the story, even when pages were more intimate and showed a few characters at a time, as opposed to larger community scenes. This choice of pairing the main disabled character with another main character ensured that the reader would not depict the disabled character as isolated possibly due to disabilities. There was not isolation or exclusion, but rather friendship and companionship. Therefore, this story was categorized as showing a strong representation of inclusion. The main character with disabilities was depicted with a range of participant roles, and active with friends and community members. They were present throughout the story, and the text references were consistently affirming that they, like the reader and other characters, matter.

Discussion

The findings from the research question evoke curiosity about the barriers or obstacles that ECSE teachers face to create more inclusive libraries. This is not to place the responsibility on the ECSE teacher, but rather a place to explore the structure, experience, and other factors that contribute to their work environment, and available resources to enhance their teaching.

In early childhood, adults can use children's stories to advance equity, including antiracist teaching and learning (Spencer, 2022). Additionally, inclusive early education with commitments to anti-bias work continues to integrate disability, race, and disability studies in education into early childhood pedagogy and practice (Erwin et al., 2021; Lalvani & Bacon, 2018, Love & Beneke, 2021). Furthermore, as early educators continue to cultivate inclusive educational spaces, diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging (DEIB) reflect guiding tenants to disrupt forms of institutional discrimination. One way to contribute to inclusion and belonging in schools includes curating text sets that better reflect population diversity among students, and provide windows, mirrors, and doors for students to see themselves and others reflected (Bishop, 1990; Möller, 2016).

The findings also indicate a need for more inclusive early childhood stories that explicitly engage with disability in their text and visuals. As Tondreau & Rabinowitz (2021) explain, "there is little empirical scholarship that examines the teaching of children's literature that represents individuals with disabilities" (p.63). Additional research is necessary to investigate what stories are read throughout a range of early childhood settings, and how educators and classrooms engage in conversations about disability during these storytelling routines.

Limitations

Limitations were present based on the methodology used. For example, when surveying teachers to create the data corpus for qualitative analysis, the surveys were limited by the lack of opportunity to clarify or gain further information regarding some of the survey responses. Many participants did not share authors, illustrators, or publication dates. In instances where the author or year were not cited, the authors and publication year were identified online. In instances with multiple possible authors or editions, the authors collectively determined which storybook to analyze. For stories with multiple editions, the original editions available for each of the stories were selected to provide context about when the texts and illustrations were created. However, this also represents a limitation, as some educators may have new versions of stories and the stories may have updated texts and illustrations. Given the voluntary and anonymous nature of the survey, there was no way to discern which edition the participant identified as a favorite ECSE classroom story.

Furthermore, the surveys were anonymous and voluntary, and they did not include additional data regarding the participants. For

example, gender, the number of years teaching, master's degree type, and age were not included in the data about participants. This would have been valuable information, and future studies can incorporate this additional participant data. Additionally, the survey was restricted as an English-only survey. This represents a limitation for participants with favorite classroom stories in languages other than English. While non-English books would have been welcomed, the survey did not explicitly encourage or prompt participants to share favorite books in any language they use.

Limitations in analysis also exist. The analysis attempted to systematically investigate the text and illustrations through multiple, comprehensive reviews of the stories. However, there could be evidence of disability and interpretations of disability that we failed to discern. Additionally, this qualitative study would have been enhanced with more naturalistic observational approaches during classroom storytime. This study was unable to conduct classroom-based observations, interviews, or focus groups with ECSE teachers. Observations or discussions about the ways that educators read with young children may have generated additional insight.

Future Research

Future empirical research may investigate how educators engage young children during storytime. Research has yet to discern how strategies during shared reading of inclusive stories may facilitate or impact inclusion. Researching shared reading practices using inclusive stories may generate insight about how educators use inclusive stories to support classroom inclusion. Additionally, interviews with educators, families, and other stakeholders that read with young children with varying abilities may also provide insight about the curricula, materials, and experiences related to the act of shared reading with inclusive stories. Furthermore, research may consider the availability of resources for teachers to purchase or acquire books, and to cultivate inclusive classroom libraries.

Furthermore, more surveys could provide additional information about inclusive stories from a range of early educators. Information about the practitioner's role (early childhood inclusion teacher in preschool, early childhood toddler teacher, early interventionist, early childhood special educator), age group (toddlers, preschoolers), and personal demographic information (race, ethnicity, languages spoken) may provide additional insight about inclusive stories in a range of early childhood settings.

Regarding the analysis of disability in children's stories, future research may also highlight systematic ways to investigate disability from intersectional perspectives. Educators and families may benefit from information and resources about intersectional representation, and applications to identify inclusive and intersectional stories for young children.

Conclusion

This research sought to build on the limited scholarly knowledge of this topic, by exploring if disabled characters are represented in the corpus of favorite stories in ECSE classrooms. The data suggest that disabled characters are not present in most of the stories considered favorites by ECSE teachers. These findings also generate questions about the strategies, policies, and practices about the impact of disability representation (or the lack thereof) in children's stories. It also raises curiosity about other classroom curricula and materials, and how they include or exclude disabled characters.

It begs the question, how might EI/ECSE classrooms reimagine normative practices in daily practice, evoke critical thinking skills, or make classroom repairs if they notice limited or problematic representation? How do inclusive EI/ECSE classrooms represent inclusion? Are young children exposed to inclusive stories on a regular basis? Are they high-quality? These questions may reflect future areas of research, as inclusive EI/ECSE professionals consider classroom stories that reflect their students and families. In conclusion, the simple and powerful insight remains: "*what* children read makes a difference" [emphasis in original] (Oxley, 2006, p. 554).

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Appendix A
List of Stories Created by 15 ECSE Teachers

Participant responses of favorite classroom picturebooks

Participant   Favorite Picturebooks

1	*Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?* (Martin Jr., 1967)
	The Empty Pot (Demi, 1990)
	There Was an Old Lady Who Swallowed a Fly (Adams, 1972)
2	*Brown Bear Brown Bear, What Do You See?* (Martin Jr., 1967)
	The Very Hungry Caterpillar (Carle, 1969)
	The Feelings Book (Parr, 2009)
3	*The Very Hungry* Caterpillar (Carle, 1969)

Brown Bear Brown Bear, What Do You See? (Martin Jr., 1967)
Planting a Rainbow (Ehlert, 1988)
Chicka Chicka Boom Boom (Martin Jr. & Archambault, 1989)

4   T*he Very Hungry Caterpillar* (Carle, 1969)
Brown Bear Brown Bear, What Do You See? (Carle, 1969)
Snowy Day (Keats, 1962)
Be Who You Are (Parr, 2016)

5   *In a Jar* (Marcero, 2020)
Its Okay to Be Different (Parr, 2001)
Lost and Found (Jeffers, 2005)

6   *Chicka Chicka Boom Boom* (Martin Jr. & Archambault, 1989)
Pete the Cat: Rocking in School Shoes (Litwin & Dean, 2011)
Shape Song Swingalong (Songs, 2011)

7   *Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?* (Martin Jr., 1967)
Pete the Cat and the Perfect Pizza Party (Dean & Dean, 2019)
The Feel Good Book (Parr, 2002)
We All Go Traveling By (Roberts, 2003)
Here We Go 'Round the Mulberry Bush (Kubler, 2001)
Dragon on the Doorstep (Blackstone, 2006)
If You're Happy and You Know It (Cabrera, 2003)

8   *Pete The Cat: I Love My White Shoes* (Litwin et al., 2010)
Animal Boogie (Harter, 2000)

9   *All Are Welcome* (Penfold & Kaufman, 2018)
Giraffes Can›t Dance (Andreae & Parker-Rees, 2001)
Ambitious Girl (Harris & Valdez, 2021)
Drum Dream Girl (Engle & Lopez, 2015)
The Peace Book (Parr, 2009)

10 *I Take Turns* (Linde, 2014)
Clean Up Everybody (Sparks, 2014)
Be Patient (Smith, 2014)
Are You Listening, Jack? (Garcia, 2014)
I Can Follow the Rules (Smith, 2014)
I Can Be Kind (Pippin, 2014)

11 *The Piggie and Elephant Series*
Pete the Cat: I Love My White Shoes (Litwin et al., 2010)
Rex Wrecks It (Clanton, 2014)

12 *You Matter* (Robinson, 2020)
Be Who You Are (Parr, 2016)
I Am Every Good Thing (Barnes & James, 2020)

13 *Hug* (Alborough, 2000)
Baby Beluga (Raffi & Wolf, 1997)
Brown Bear Brown Bear, What Do You See? (Martin Jr., 1967)
Mo Willems Pigeon or Elephant and Piggie books

14 *Freight Train* (Crews, 1978)
From Head to Toe (Carle, 1997)
Brown Bear Brown Bear, What Do You See? (Martin Jr., 1967)

Pete the Cat: I Love My White Shoes (Litwin et al., 2010)
Any mo and piggie

15   *Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?* (Martin Jr., 1967)
The Very Hungry Caterpillar (Carle, 1969)
The Very Busy Spider (Carle, 1984)
Goodnight Moon (Wise Brown & Hurd, 1947)
We All Go Traveling By (Roberts, 2003)
If You›re Happy and You Know It (Cabrera, 2003)
T*he Journey Home from Grandpas* (Lumley, 2006)
Driving My Tractor (Dobbins & Sim, 2012)
Up, Up, Up! (Reed, 2011)
The Animal Boogie (Harter, 2000)
Wheels on the Bus (Zelinsky, 1990)
Pete the Cat: I Love My White Shoes (Litwin et al., 2010)
Pete the Cat and His Four Groovy Buttons (Litwin & Dean, 2012)
Sneezy the Snowman (Wright, 2010)
Go Away Big Green Monster (Emberley, 2005)
The Mitten (Brett, 1989)