

# Picture Books: An Effective Tool for Disability Education in Preschools

Honors Thesis

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the  
University Honors Program  
Colorado State University

By

Megan Weiler

College of Health and Human Sciences

Dr. Anita Bundy, Department of Occupational Therapy

Dr. Emily Merz, Department of Psychology

Fall 2025

## Introduction

Picture books play a crucial role in childhood development. Each page brings a valuable message to the reader to be used in an individual's formative years. If a story's underlying message is easily conveyed to the child, such themes may help the child through their own life experiences. A story with an effectively conveyed message allows a child to persevere like *The Little Engine That Could* or to let their imagination run as wild as *Where The Wild Things Are*. Fictional characters are seen as role models in young imaginative minds, leading a child through real dilemmas they are facing in their own storyline (Prince et al., 2021). Picture books are a gateway to a world encompassed by words on a page, only accessible to those who choose to read them. Children should have a positive shoulder to lean on, whether tangible or fictionary.

Children tend to gravitate towards characters who remind them of themselves. Picture books with children as the main characters provide an immediate connection between the story and the child due to easily detected similarities (Hayden et al., 2023). This connection grows stronger with shared visual characteristics, such as identical hair style, skin color, or physical ability. Shared traits and experiences display these characters as a familiar individual instead of a fictional creation. If children have the ability to see themselves through picture books in their classroom, this allows for promotion of equity and inclusion.

Inclusion is an important value to teach children from a young age (Koller et al., 2021). With the perpetuation of damaging stereotypes in today's society, inclusion is becoming a higher priority. There is a greater push to combat harmful representations of those in marginalized communities. Children's literature, as an essential part of a child's learning experience, is the first component to address in order to avoid this path of potential bigotry.

Children's picture books are products of their time. Well-known picture books have conserved their popularity since their creation, dating back as early as the 20th century (ten Have et al., 2021). There was an undeniable prevalence of exclusionary practices during this time period, revealing a fictional world that mirrors the beliefs of its creator. Because of this, characters within these books tend to share this perspective. The underlying layer of exclusion is apparent through attempts of diversity representations, or just the lack of any representation altogether.

There is quite a lack of diverse representation in historic picture books. Even if the storylines lack discourse around political issues, there is still no clear acknowledgment of marginalized identities. *The Giving Tree*, as an example, is the devastating plotline of a boy utilizing a tree's resources until it is able to continue growing, due to the demand overtaking the supply (Yigit-Gencten et al., 2022). The tree is marked as a selfless character, never hesitating to give parts of its body away to the boy. This is a picture book meant as a way to convey the consequences of overusing environmental resources. Along with this, it emphasizes the harm that comes with taking advantage of a system that only benefits the consumer. It is a message society still needs to fall back on, sixty-one years after its publication date. However, the representation of this story is a boy without disabilities with a fair complexion. It is still a powerful story, but it does not paint the United States population in an accurate manner. Every diverse identity falls to this failing system demonstrated in *The Giving Tree*, yet only one fraction of the population is seen in this picture book.

Disability representation was completely absent from this stream of popular picture books. A lack of disabled characters in children's literature restricts a nondisabled child's introduction to the aspect of both mental and physical disabilities (Tejero et al., 2025). Discourse

around disabilities was purposely avoided throughout, allowing popular picture books from the 20th century to reinforce ableist stereotypes into its young audience. Even with the current stream of diverse authors within children's literature, children's books continue to subliminally promote marginalization through perpetuation of biases they are unaware of. Ending this cycle of discrimination with these historic picture books is a constant struggle. Most of these picture books that have landed on daycare shelves have successfully retained their popularity for generations.

A child's exposure to media and literature is primarily determined by their parents or guardians. The foundation of a child's identity is built upon the media they consume on a daily basis, from movies they watch to picture books they reach with teachers. With most children taking part in a preschool education, teachers have an opportunity to assist with building their student's identity with picture books they choose to place on their classroom shelves (Tejero et al., 2025). Teachers tend to rely more on popularity over diversity when deciding which books to add into their curriculum (Prince et al., 2022). Within young audiences, familiarity is desired, bringing additional comfort with their predictability. Children seek out comfort to ease stress when they are away from their loved ones. This allows historical picture books to retain their popularity, as their underlying layers of support and relief supplied to their audience matters more than the underlying message. When a story requires a child to experience something new, it may cause confusion and resistance towards new ideas and identities. This places additional stress on preschool teachers, as introducing new concepts is a challenge for their young audience (Tejero et al., 2025). Children's literature within classrooms has the potential to guide children toward the best or worst forms of themselves. Teachers are expected to want their classrooms to

foster an inclusive and welcoming environment. What truly sets classrooms apart depends on the teacher's initiative to get their classroom to this destination.

Accurate portrayals of disability in children's books should be a priority. A significant portion of the United States population has a disability, yet this level of representation does not carry itself over into literature (Tejero et al., 2025). A 2019 study conducted by the Cooperative Children's Book Center found only 3.4% of children's books containing a character with disability. Limited representation prevents interactions and discourse between nondisabled children and disabled characters. There are a lack of opportunities to reduce a child's existing prejudices without this initial interaction. Prejudices sustained over a child's formative years contribute to lowered rates of self-esteem among disabled children (Aspler et al., 2022). Connections between a disabled character and its nondisabled readers blossoms a chance to foster meaningful understanding. As these fictional worlds rest on a bookshelf, it is a struggle for disabled children to build a sense of self-worth without connections to characters who resemble their identities and experiences.

### **1.a: Negative Portrayal of Disabilities in Children's Literature**

Characters with disabilities are often paired with the burden trope. The burden trope uses the character's disability as the primary reason for their depression and disdain for life, attaching all of their eternal hatred to their condition (Aspler et al., 2022). These characters are also considered antagonists because of their disability, with the majority of dialogue around this character coming off as profoundly negative. Using this trope in children's literature pushes forth an inaccurate and harmful representation of disabilities. Tying a disability to one's pain and suffering is anxiety inducing within its viewers. From the perspective of a preschooler without a

disability, that level of sadness is incomprehensible due to the lack of opportunities to connect with the character. The plotline behind the characters following the burden trope is superficial and bland, as every move they make is calculated and tied back to their disability. As a result, there is fear behind potentially having a disability in the future or being in close proximity to them as well. Disabilities under the burden trope are seen as a physical and mental state to be avoided at all costs.

With the burden trope, a disabled child's identity is linked to these characters due to their identical appearances. This can inadvertently bring bullying behaviors to nondisabled audience members when seeing someone with a disability in front of them, as negativity is so intertwined with their condition. Continual use of this trope also solidifies the degrading stereotypes linked to disabilities, as it does not allow for characters to live a regular lifestyle outside of their disability (Tejero et al., 2025). Storylines that include a burden trope with a disabled character should not be placed on a bookshelf when intending to promote an inclusive environment in a preschool classroom.

The Hunchback of Notre Dame has a character with physical disabilities, Quasimodo, that perpetuates stereotypes about visible disabilities. He is described as a lonely outcast, wearing a hooded cape whenever he is in public in order to shade his identity from the townspeople (Whittington-Walsh, 2002). He longs for connection when he meets Esmerelda, a gypsy. She believed his face was a disguise, as she has never seen anyone quite like him. An ugly face competition led to a crowd of people tormenting him, after Esmerelda urged him to compete. Additionally, Esmerelda was berated for her connection to Quasimodo, her attractive looks paired with his horrifying features automatically made her a target of these attacks. When Esmerelda showed him a sliver of compassion, Quasimodo immediately concluded this meant

she had romantic attraction to him. He was so unfamiliar with kindness, that receiving it from a woman had his mind skewed in the wrong direction. Quasimodo's physical condition is the source of all of his problems, latching him directly on to the burden trope. He cannot live a normal life in this universe, due to the overwhelming pain and devastation caused from simply looking in the mirror.

False positivity is also popular amongst disabled characters, paired well with overexaggerated celebrations for completion of daily mundane tasks. This is an example of the supercrip trope, it focuses on a disabled individual's ability to conquer their disability and blend into a nondisabled society (Brylla, 2018). Characters with disabilities under this trope are deemed heroes and survivors of their disability, all because they got out of bed in the morning. There is an additional need to overcome every disability seen within the supercrip trope, as it is believed no one can live a regular life with a disability. Characters are not allowed to live successfully with their disability, as every little movement is deemed a miracle. This reinforces ableist attitudes paired with disabilities outside of children's literature. When interacting with a disabled person in real life, expectations for their ability to live independently are depleted. Rather than seeing those with disabilities as an equal, they are seen as inferior and subhuman. Also, there is a lack of equity under this trope, since there are no clear mentions of necessary accommodations or accessibility issues within the plotlines they fall under. Supercrip representations turn the focus towards a cure, further pushing the negative attitudes paired with disabilities.

The medical model of disability is an additional way disabilities are inaccurately portrayed in children's literature and media. Disabilities are presented as a disease under the medical model (Shortley, 2018). The medical model highlights limitations and perpetuates

ableist ideologies into younger generations. This push for a cure under the medical model is primarily due to presumed abnormality, as those with disabilities are a step away from the “normal” human condition. Instead of urging society to be inclusive, the medical model pushes the disabled population to conform to society without additional accommodations or assistance. This inherently includes perceiving nondisabled bodies and brains as “the norm.” Those with incurable disabilities sought after this sense of normality with no final destination, promoting exclusion between nondisabled and disabled populations (Shortley, 2018). Their differences are attacked rather than accepted, placing the fault on the individual over society for their inability to conform.

*Wonder* is a young-adult novel about a boy named Auggie who has a facial deformity (Shortley, 2018). False positivity carried his storyline, from start to finish. Throughout the novel, he is celebrated for doing everyday, normal activities. Auggie is seen as extraordinary for making friends, being a brother, and showing his face in school everyday. Instead of allowing Auggie to live a regular life, he is seen as a walking miracle for his attempts to reach normality. His principal gave him an award at the end of the school year to further push this message. Auggie’s internal dialogue revealed that he was not sure why he received this award, since he did the same activities as the other kids in his classes. This story reinforces the mindset that having a disability means that the person is physically and mentally unable to do anything at the same rate as their peers. In return, readers who do not have a disability automatically perceive Auggie as inferior, due to the condescending nature behind the author’s words.

Having a disabled character living a normal life is a core component of children’s books, rather than spending their plotline fighting for a cure. If an author is unaware of their alignment with the medical model, as most biases are left unnoticed, this may end with their characters

succumbing to the medical model as well. Children's books constructed under the medical model will portray those with disabilities as inferior, abnormal individuals (Shortley, 2018). The medical model can be a silent contributor to the segregation between nondisabled and disabled children, therefore supporting their disproportionately higher bullying rates amongst younger populations.

### **1.b: Positive Portrayal of Disabilities in Children's Literature**

Relatability is a priority when constructing a well-rounded character, whether or not they have a disability. Children grasp onto shared experiences when building connections. A mutual understanding on relevant issues blossoms empathy, leading to more meaningful relationships. Relatable characters with disabilities let children without disabilities see these characters as regular people, rather than only seeing them for their physical or mental condition (Shortley, 2018). Instead of displaying those with a disability like a villain, they are displayed like the humans they are. Exposure to these disabled characters show children the consequences of exclusion. Empathy within young minds opens more opportunities to push back on current ableist notions, stemming outside of words on a page. A child may see ableism through other forms of media, such as movies or news headlines. They could see it within their peers and teachers, stemming out to their immediate family members as well. Children can challenge these notions on a daily basis with enhanced awareness of ableism, as they are taught to always treat others the way they would want to be treated.

Disabled characters should be seen through a strength-based lens throughout their plotline. A strength-based perspective recognizes the character in their entirety (Prince et al., 2021). When a character with a disability is built off their strengths, the story aims away from the

character's inabilities and limitations. This perspective focuses on the character's achievements and growth throughout the story. If a character is constructed around their disability instead of their personality or interests, it ends with lack of complexity and relatability within the character's storyline. Defining a disabled character by one part of their lives is unjust, as this mindset is not shared when creating characters without disabilities. This strength-based character will accept their disability as their own, focusing on what they can achieve without changing their physical or mental condition (Prince et al., 2021). A children's picture book under a strength-based lens counteracts ableism, shaping positive attitudes around disabilities without the influence of current stereotypes.

*El Deafo* by Cece Bell utilizes a strength-based perspective to make the life of a child with hearing difficulties more digestible for a young adult audience (Kersten-Parrish, 2019). What differentiates this novel from other novels containing disabilities is the parallels between the character's and author's experiences. Bell wrote this graphic novel as a way to recount her own experiences losing her hearing at four years old. Along with this, she does have setbacks in her life where people are apathetic towards her hearing difficulties, but she does not let these setbacks dictate her everyday life. It is really interesting to see her confront those who are confused as to why she has a hearing aid, since those in her age group are less educated on what hearing aids are used for. She would transform into El Deafo whenever she would utilize her hearing aid, a superhero alter ego. It was a way of making light out of an otherwise dark situation, as she feels unstoppable with her superhero gadgets on her ears. Bell eventually meets her lifelong best friend, who leads her to the realization that there is no need to conceal her superpowers. In fact, she embraces her hearing aids, proudly showing them off as a key part of her identity. *El Deafo* ties in relatability with the reader as well, because the author made this

novel into an autobiography of her own formative years. There is no fantasy twist that is seen in similar novels written by authors without disabilities, it is all straight from the heart.

The social model of disability should also be included in children's literature. This mindset focuses on society's impairments over an individual's impairments (Shortley, 2018). It shows how people with disabilities are not disadvantaged because of their disability, but rather due to barriers imposed from society. These barriers are supported by the government. The voices of those affected by these barriers are snuffed out by those who would not think twice to oppose such accommodations. The social model lets for people with disabilities to be seen as their authentic selves without centering in on their disability, as such projected "abnormalities" amongst disabilities are due to societal and governmental implications. Shame must not be tied to a disabled character's identity, this line of thinking will pull the storyline toward the medical model of disability. A strong sense of self is crucial in a child's formative years, regardless if they do or do not have a disability. When exposed to positive disabled characters that mirror one's identity, children will likely develop a stronger sense of belonging in fictional and real life spaces (Tejero et al., 2025). They will begin to feel less like stigmatized objects and more like someone who is able to live a fulfilling valuable life.

### **1.c: Impact of Read-Alongs on Children's Literature**

Read-alongs are an effective tool within a classroom to support a child's comprehension skills (Koller et al., 2021). Children in preschool follow storylines without reading the text themselves, utilizing the guidance from the teacher and illustrations to make predictions and inferences. A teacher's immersive dialogue during read-alongs draws children toward the conclusion of the story. Teachers ask questions to the children, allowing for a deeper

understanding of oneself and the characters they are following along their plotline. This allows a child to live in a character's shoes, extending the life outside of a two-dimensional story (Pennell et al., 2018).

Before leaving preschool, a child's world is confined within the borders of familiarity. Their reality is yet to be explored, as a preschooler's life rarely extends outside of their home and classroom. Picture books targeted at a preschool audience are predominantly of the fantasy or realistic genre (Tejero et al., 2025). Realistic picture books guide a child through a comfortable universe. These stories tie in a layer of relatability to conclude with a simple lesson, typically already experienced by most of the target audience. Fantasy picture books expand a child's eyes past the confines of their ordinary life, exposing them to a world with infinite possibilities. Fantasy books typically have characters who are animals, bringing forth an emotional distance that is not observed in realistic picture books. Human characters placed in difficult situations typically upsets preschool readers more than animal characters when placed in the same scenario (Tejero et al., 2025). Utilizing animal characters makes for easier comprehension between the teacher and the preschoolers. There is less difficulty tied to explaining a cat's struggle over a child's struggle. Teachers inherently boost a child's mind skills when choosing fantasy books that contain animal characters. They are able to lead a child through a new reality that was previously left in the shadows.

A teacher's dialogue during read-alongs fosters early literacy with interactive gestures and thought-provoking questions (Koller et al., 2021). A teacher captivated by a picture book grabs the attention of their preschool audience through innate curiosity. The discussion of the story can start before opening to the first page, a world of questions can be asked from just seeing the cover page. It can lead to a discussion surrounding the expressions of the characters,

the setting of which the characters are placed, the colors used to create the characters, and even the actions of the characters on the front cover. These questions expand a child's literacy skills, allowing them to ask similar questions to themselves when beginning to read independently (Prince et al., 2022). This line of questioning should be carried through each page by the teacher. Conclusions are difficult to draw without encouragement and guidance.

Teachers need to practice compassion and patience while reading a picture book, as letting children express themselves between each page leads to the highest level of engagement. When reading the text, a teacher's tone should change while reading corresponding dialogue. Using distinct voices for each character conveys the message beyond the plotline (Prince et al., 2022). Children are more likely to know how a character is feeling when the teacher alters their vocal patterns to match the character's emotions.

The goal of this study is to effectively educate preschoolers on disabilities through a children's book. The children's book paired with this study will be constructed to fit within the guidelines of accurately displaying disability, as previously stated. Additionally, the book will have less than 16 double-page spreads, as picture books have an average of thirty-two pages. It will be a priority to keep the story short and concise, long story books lead to disengagement and lack of obtained awareness.

### **Plotline of *Time To Fly!***

#### **Page 1-3**

To begin the story, *Time To Fly!*, the first three pages show two young birds in a nest. They are watching their friends and family members fly in the open air, wishing they can fly as

well as their predecessors. Squeak is the bird who does not have a disability. Pip is the bird who has a prosthetic wing, displaying a visible physical disability.

It is important to acknowledge that invisible disabilities are more uncommon in children's literature compared to visible disabilities. But, due to the younger audience behind this project, four year olds may have a better understanding of a visible disability. Visual discrepancies easily catch the attention of a child, leading to confusion and a lack of understanding as to what they are seeing. Questions will be brought up with more ease compared to characters that have similar appearances. With the inclusion of a visible disability in this story, the preschoolers will be able to connect Pip's character traits to someone with a prosthetic appendage outside of the book, allowing their questions to be answered through a relatable backstory and plotline.

#### **Pages 4-6**

Next, the book focuses on what the two birds think about flying. Squeak is excited to fly, she already knows tips and tricks on how to stay in the air. Pip is nervous, as her metal wing throws off her balance and makes her past flying attempts unsuccessful. When the two birds attempt to fly, both of them take off at their own pace. Squeak is soaring through the sky, but Pip is too anxious to leave the nest. Once Squeak returned to the nest, Pip told Squeak about her nerves attached to flying. Pip is scared of falling, her metal wing drains her energy when she quickly pumps her wings. She is scared of getting hurt from falling as well. Her anxiety stems from her physical ability. Pip has felt this way about flying for a long time, which was made clear in the text. Her anxiety does not allow her to flourish outside of the nest. It locked her in an invisible cage, surrounding herself with comfort and shielding her from unfamiliarity.

#### **Pages 7-10**

Squeak was initially confused, as she did not understand why Pip was unable to keep up with her. After Pip expressed her anxiety and fears to Squeak, she understood why Pip was feeling nervous. Squeak was made aware of her privilege without placing Pip in a negative light. Instead of pursuing flying without her sister, the two birds came up with a plan. Pip will be the eye for danger, guiding herself and Squeak away from dangers in their path. Squeak will be the leader due to her straight flying path. Pip will spend time practicing flying and gliding before they take off on a trip. Jumping straight into flying is what made Pip nervous. Transitioning directly into flying would be counterproductive and against the intended message behind the story. Gliding is the next step for Pip. She will be able to feel the wind under their wings while being suspended in the air. Along with this, she will be able to slowly add in wing pumps, granting her longer time in the air. This gets them used to the feeling of flying before actual flying, making the transition less jarring and anxiety-inducing.

### **Pages 11-18**

Once the two birds fly together, they fly all around the world. From the mountains to a volcano, they are able to explore the world outside of their nest. The story ends with Pip saying how strong her wings feel with Squeak by her side. Her disability was previously seen as a road block, now it is perceived as an accessory to her achievements. She was able to keep herself and Squeak safe while on their journey. Pip and Squeak were both seen as the leader during their flight, mainly to minimize the popular superiority complex commonly seen between nondisabled and disabled characters. This complex is common in real life as well. Preschoolers have susceptible minds, taking in every bite of information they can get their hands on. When this superiority complex is avoided, inclusion becomes a core value instead of leaving the word in the shadows.

Lastly, the story will end with a message on inclusivity to tie it all together. It will be displayed from the perspective of a bird to promote emotional distance. Using phrases like “when everyone flies together, no bird gets left behind,” and “if we make space in the sky, everyone will be able to soar,” lets the preschoolers absorb this powerful message with ease, limiting their struggle with comprehending inclusivity. Diversity and inclusivity should be conveyed as a simple message when targeting a preschool audience. Complexity must be avoided when constructing a book geared toward young minds. This ensures a deeper understanding on serious topics, such as ableism and marginalization.

### **Positive Representation of Disabilities within *Time to Fly!***

*Time to Fly!* aimed to gently introduce preschoolers to visible disabilities, specifically a physical disability in the form of a prosthetic appendage. This story intertwined a strength based perspective, normalization, and relatability within each page. In order to further perpetuate this positive representation of disability, a picture book was utilized over various forms of media to make it easily digestible for a preschooler audience. The strength-based perspective is displayed when Pip’s accomplishments were discussed more than her limitations. At the beginning of the story, her limitations were temporarily highlighted because of her initial flying anxiety. Pip was scared because her wing was making her unsteady in the air, throwing off her center of balance. But, in order to differentiate this story from other negative representations of disability, Pip was able to work alongside her prosthetic wing in order to eventually learn how to fly. There was no need to “overcome” or undermine her physical disability, as she was able to stay at the same speed as her sister without any physical disabilities.

Normalization and relatability play a similar role in character development. When a character is seen doing normal activities, such as going to school, these actions are relatable to the reader as well. Because the plot of this story is more abstract, with the activities stemming outside of regular activities, normalization and relatability will need to collect on shared emotions over anything else. And so, because preschoolers are confronted with the transition from their current school environment into an entirely new atmosphere, this can cause fear from experiencing or trying something different. This anxiety is shared in Pip. She was also afraid of expanding her horizons and attempting something out of her comfort zone. Reading about a shared experience from a character with a disability allows for the reader to see the character as someone similar to themselves, rather than inferior or entirely different from who they are.

## **Methodology**

Collecting data for this study will require the participation of a preschool audience, primarily within the age range of five to six years old. A preschool curriculum aims to guide children through the transition from preschool to kindergarten, adding in additional lessons that assist with more real-life scenarios. It will be a time in their life that is in strong contrast with previous daycare years, as this transition requires a more complex lesson plan. Preschoolers are presented with conflicts and socialization that they will need to solve without immediate assistance from a teacher.

Within this transition from preschool to elementary school is the introduction of new diverse identities, such as those of various ethnic backgrounds or those with disabilities. It is an important time for each child, due to the large influx of new information. There will be confusion and questions that need a direct answer, such as why someone may have a disability or why they

look different from those they are already surrounding themselves with. Any questions left unanswered may stem the child's development in the direction of biases that have been deeply rooted in society for centuries. The age range of approximately five to six years old is optimal for this exact reason. Preschoolers are preparing to expand their horizons outside of normality, leading to them feeling more comfortable with expressing their feelings and questions tied to these new identities. Open mindedness from the preschooler allows for an easier discussion on this particular topic, especially if there is an open line of communication from the teacher as well. Additionally, vocabulary will be more complex in this age range compared to previous age groups. This is essential for ensuring the message was properly conveyed from the picture book to the preschoolers.

### **Research Question**

Are picture books an effective tool for educating preschoolers on disabilities?

### **Experimental Design**

This is a pre-post pilot study. The study focuses on the effect of the intervention, the picture book, through a survey of questions asked to the children before and during the read-along. Attitude differences are measured once the read-along has concluded through an additional survey to assess what each child was feeling and thinking. Reactions from the children will be recorded as well, if they fall outside of the questions asked to the class. The study will be conducted over the duration of one day, located within one classroom.

### **Sampling**

Those who will participate in the study will be made aware of the study before it was conducted. The line of communication will extend to parents, teachers, and preschool administrators. Questions asked to the children before and after the read-along will be approved

by the preschool teachers before utilization in the study. Eligibility criteria for each participant within this study is minimal, confirming each participant falls within the age range of approximately five to six years old, as well as their current enrollment in the selected preschool program.

### **Read-Along Questions:**

As the story is read out to the preschoolers, a list of questions will be asked throughout each page. These questions are intended to gauge how each child is feeling about the characters, all while making sure they are following the plot of the story. Some children may be too shy to give their own answers in front of the class, especially if there is a lack of rapport between them and the individual reading the story. This is why poll style questions are used, that way there is a larger collection of answers and every child will feel more comfortable with their answers. After each poll question pertaining to how each child feels about the characters, there will be an opportunity for children to explain why they have a preference for one bird over the other. They are allowed to leave their seat and point at the birds on the pages before turning the page, allowing for a more immersive reading experience.

### **During Read-Along:**

- How do you feel about Pip and Squeak?
  - Poll style: Raise one hand if they like Pip, two hands if they like Squeak, no hands if they like the two birds equally.
- How would you feel if you were Pip or Squeak?
- What do you think Squeak should do?
  - (On the page where Pip expresses flying concerns)
- Do you think Pip will be able to leave the nest and join Squeak?

- Poll style: Raise one hand for yes, two hands for no
- Have you ever felt like Pip or Squeak?
- What are some ways you cheer up your friends when they feel sad?

**After Read-Along:**

- Did you like the story?
  - Poll style: Raise one hand if they like Pip, two hands if they like Squeak, no hands if they like the two birds equally.
- Do you connect more with one bird than another?
  - Poll style: Raise one hand if they like Pip, two hands if they like Squeak, no hands if they like the two birds equally.
- Which bird would you invite to your birthday party?
  - Poll style: Raise one hand if they like Pip, two hands if they like Squeak, no hands if they like the two birds equally.
- How should we treat those who are different from us?

**Data Analysis**

Results from this study will be collected as an audio read-along recording. If data collection involves putting the book down each page and typing on a device, children may shift their attention to the device over the picture book. Data will include children's vocalized reactions to the plotline as it progresses from page to page. Any answers to questions or emotions tied to the characters shown across multiple children, like an equivalent preference to the characters both with and without a disability, will be highlighted as desired results. Along with this, a collection of individual answers addressing the message behind the picture book will

determine whether children thoroughly understood the book's purpose. Answers addressing the disability and inclusion of those perceived as "different" should be prioritized over more irrelevant answers, like the color of the bird or their position in the nest.

### **Scenario A: Insufficient results**

If the majority of children do not understand the story's message or focus on elements of the story besides the character development, there is enough evidence to conclude the study has insufficient results. Undesired data will be collected if the majority of children show a stronger preference to the character without a disability, as one example. And when calling on children to explain their reasoning, any answers negatively describing the disabled character's physical condition will further support the story's inability to convey the intended message. The purpose of this story was to include a character with a disability that has their plot centered around what they are able to accomplish. Their inability to accomplish certain tasks because of their disability was not established in the text.

Another example of insufficient results is if the majority of preschoolers focus on illustrations or characters that do not advance this story's goal, entirely missing the message behind the read-along. This might include a child preferring the character with a disability because the character is their favorite color, or if the children are in different settings than the characters themselves. A lack of engagement can also result from the individual reading the story, or a lack of understanding. If this occurred, the administrator must ask more expressive, probing questions than what is described in the methodology. Of course, if the administrator asks too many questions while reading the story, the children may disengage anyway. Teachers need to adjust their expressions with the audience's attention to the story in order to be seen as

properly responsive, instead of being overstimulating or boring.

### **Scenario B: Expected results**

While the picture book is read to the preschoolers, it is expected that they will be able to follow the plot and each character's development. Along with this, students should not favor either character, as the characters have equal roles and unique, compelling strengths.

Preschoolers should also be able to recognize each character's unique personality traits, like Squeak's anxiety in the volcanic environment or Pip's care for Squeak to get them to safety.

Preschoolers should have positive reactions towards each character, as neither character displays demeaning or degrading behavior.

Additionally, preschoolers should probe the character's disability when reading the story, as well as within their answers to certain questions. When asking the preschoolers more specific questions about Pip, it is important for the preschoolers to grasp how Pip's physical ability is different from Squeak. This should be evident on pages four and six that outline Pip's flying anxiety. After these pages, when asking the preschoolers what Squeak should do in regards to Pip's flying anxiety, they should respond with team work and cheering Pip on as she learns to fly. Also, preschoolers should sympathize with each character in their lower moments and connect to each character while not demonizing disability. Connections are crucial for an understanding of the story, because Pip and Squeak will both be valuable characters to the preschool audience. The education aspect of this project is best supported if the preschoolers see the characters as equivalently favorable, as well as seeing themselves within each character. They should be able to comprehend disabilities without an ableist lens on top of each illustration.

## **Conclusion**

There is a growing number of children in the United States who utilize a special education system. This statistic contrasts with the number of children's books containing disability representation, as it continues to remain stagnant. This percentage of picture books contains all notable forms of disability representation, whether representation that degrades or representation that uplifts. Positive representation of disabilities is substantially less common than negative representation, as the disabled villain trope and the supercrip trope are deeply rooted in children's literature. It is a formula that has produced some of the most popular books of past and current generations, which repeats a cycle that continuously paints those with disabilities as abnormal, strange, or scary.

It is crucial for a child to see themselves in picture book characters. Specifically, seeing a character with a similar appearance is the key to developing self-confidence, as well as self-esteem tied to their identity. If a character who uses a wheelchair is seen doing extraordinary activities, it allows children who use a wheelchair to know they also have the strength to be extraordinary and strong. But the overall lack of disability representation, especially for those with invisible disabilities, results in children with disabilities having to take more time to find confidence and their identity, contributing to a delay in their overall self-image compared to children without disabilities.

A lack of self-esteem or confidence in disabled youth makes socializing with those without disabilities additionally challenging. Especially in elementary school, it is common for children with disabilities to only socialize within their inner circle (Smart, 2021). Familiarity and predictability are what fuel this decision, as an initial conversation with a peer may end with teasing or disrespect toward one's disability. This decision contributes to delayed social skills

amongst disabled youth, as their inner circle often consists primarily of familiar individuals. Conversing with peers during school is an important step for a child's development, as well as their independence. Disability representation will always be a necessity for all children, including those without disabilities. Developmental tasks for those transitioning into elementary school involve developing social skills, including pursuing relationships with peers with likable characteristics and personality traits (Smart, 2021). Children connect those with physical disabilities to villainous characters like Darth Vader from *Star Wars*, or Scar from *The Lion King* (van Wormer et al., 2015). Quick, undeserved assessments of a disabled child's character make friendships especially hard to establish, further pushing children with disabilities behind in overall development. A child with a disability who is surrounded by peers who correlate their disability with villains will struggle to accomplish developmental tasks at the same rate as their nondisabled peers.

Ableism plays a small role in today's society, with the inclusion of various laws that prohibit disability discrimination, but structural laws do not prohibit individualized biases around disabilities. This allows ableism to sit in one's subconscious, latent and spurred by ignorant literature tropes. To reduce these inherent biases, educators should start with children's literature. Picture books support the foundation of a child's core beliefs. Letting children learn about those different from themselves in the form of a picture book is the key to halting ableism and biases before completion of one's formative years. Once a child can establish their beliefs through education, they will be more aware of instances when inclusivity is challenged or avoided outside of the classroom. And if they are aware of discrimination against those with disabilities, the next step is spreading inclusion by challenging discriminatory practices. Picture books challenge biases rooted in the public zeitgeist through representation of disabilities under an

accurate, strength-based lens. It is important to bring these books to preschool shelves to spread their message and promote inclusivity for all children.

### **Future Plans**

*Time to Fly!* is a picture book constructed off of a strength-based perspective, based on a storyline around a character with a prosthetic arm and a character without a disability. A visible disability was utilized, as four-year-olds rely heavily on visual information to make sense of the world around them. It allows the preschoolers to notice the contrasting appearances in the two characters and recognize the clear differences. To include a character with an invisible disability requires abstract thinking, a concept that is more easily understood in a child's late elementary school years (Smart, 2021). But, due to the minimal representation of invisible disabilities in children's literature, this study should be repeated with a story involving a character with an invisible disability. Differing responses between the two stories will highlight additional biases that are otherwise ignored. Additionally, any understanding between the characters will emphasize that preschoolers are able to accomplish abstract thinking, they just need to have opportunities to expand outside of their comfort zone.

Preschools that have participated in the study should be gifted a copy of *Time to Fly!* after the conclusion of the study. This includes preschools that may have an abundance of picture books with disability representation or a large percentage of students with disabilities. Every preschool should include a story that can successfully educate preschoolers on disabilities, as it is not a current priority in a preschool curriculum. Once the study is concluded, education on diverse identities should continue far outside of the classroom. Parents and teachers must work together to keep pushing discourse around diverse identities throughout a child's formative years.

This will allow disabilities to be understood and accepted, rather than continuing the cycle of perpetuated stigma and marginalization in everyday life.

## Works Cited

- Aspler J., Harding K. D., Cascio M. A. (2022). Representation matters: race, gender, class, and intersectional representations of autistic and disabled characters on television. *Studies in Social Justice*, 16(2), 323–348. <https://doi.org/10.26522/ssj.v16i2.2702>
- Brylla, C. (2018). Bypassing the Supercrip Trope in Documentary Representations of Blind Visual Artists. *Disability Studies Quarterly*, 38(3).  
<https://doi.org/10.18061/dsq.v38i3.6485>
- Hayden, H. E., & Prince, A. M. (2023). Disrupting ableism: Strengths-based representations of disability in children’s picture books. *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy*, 23(2), 236–261. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468798420981751>
- Kersten-Parrish, S. (2019). Students’ Conceptions of Deafness While Reading *El Deafo*. *English Journal*, 108(6), 39–47. <https://doi.org/10.58680/ej201930203>
- Koller, D., & Stoddart, K. (2021). Approaches that Address Social Inclusion for Children with Disabilities: A Critical Review. *Child & Youth Care Forum*, 50(4), 679–699.  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10566-020-09589-8>
- Pennell, A. E., Wollak, B., & Koppenhaver, D. A. (2018). Respectful Representations of Disability in Picture Books. *The Reading Teacher*, 71(4), 411–419.  
<https://doi.org/10.1002/trtr.1632>
- Prince, A. M. T., & Hayden, H. E. (2022). Repositioning Disability in Children’s Picture Books Through Classroom Read-Alouds. *Teaching Exceptional Children*, 55(1), 30–38.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/00400599211038299>
- Shortley, V. (2018). ‘But Now I Yearn for a ... Story About a Cripple Who Isn’t Cured’:

Representations of Disability in Middle Grade and Young Adult Literature.

<https://doi.org/10.17615/2qcm-kh79>

Smart, J. (2021). *Disability across the developmental lifespan: An introduction for the helping professions*. Springer Publishing Company, LLC.

Tejero Hughes, M., & Abarca, J. (2025). An Exploration of Disability Representation in Picture Books: Teachers' Perspectives. *Literacy Research and Instruction*, 1–24.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/19388071.2025.2483673>

ten Have, H., & Patrão Neves, M. do C. (2021). Ableism. In *Dictionary of Global Bioethics* (pp. 77–77). Springer International Publishing AG.

[https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-54161-3\\_35](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-54161-3_35)

van Wormer, K., & Juby, C. (2015). Cultural representations in Walt Disney films: Implications for social work education. *Journal of Social Work*, 16(5), 578-594.

<https://doi-org.ezproxy2.library.colostate.edu/10.1177/1468017315583173> (Original work published 2016)

Whittington-Walsh, F. (2002). From Freaks to savants: Disability and hegemony from the Hunchback of Notre Dame (1939) to Sling Blade (1997). *Disability & Society*, 17(6), 695–707. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0968759022000010461>

Yigit-Gencten, V., & Gultekin, M. (2022). Nature-based reading and writing instructions in early childhood education: The Giving Tree example. *Environmental Education Research*, 28(1), 95–108. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13504622.2021.2015294>