



# Representation Matters

## Board Books with Children with Disabilities

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**D**iversity is an important part of children's literature as demonstrated in numerous articles beginning with Nancy Larrick in 1965 and most recently codified in the We Need Diverse Books movement.<sup>1</sup> However, while diversity has the aim of inclusion, disability representation has not always been part of the equation.

The goal of this study is to explore the evidence of disability representation in children's literature with a focus on board books through the examination of one library collection. Our team selected board books because we had access to a finite collection we could explore in its totality, and we expected that, due to the nature of board books being explicit in representation, we would be able to easily identify disability representation.

Our aim in conducting this research is to add to the scholarly literature by analyzing and reporting upon the various types of

disability representation in board books. Given that the total number of unique titles in that collection was 1,143, we were able to conduct an audit of the entire collection. Each book was examined for types of character representation (i.e., human, animal, inanimate), ethnicity representation, and disability representation. From this collection, we found evidence of disability representation, but mostly through the inclusion of children and adults wearing eyeglasses. Additionally, we identified a few publishers and specific titles that may be helpful in collection development with respect to inclusion of disabilities.

### Why Moose Jaw Public Library?

Our sample was the board book collection located in the Moose Jaw Public Library (MJPL), Saskatchewan, Canada. MJPL serves a wide demographic of library customers and works in partnership with a variety of inclusion-oriented



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community-based organizations, including the Early Childhood Intervention Protocol, Inclusion Saskatchewan, Moose Jaw Family Services, and the Early Childhood Coalition of Moose Jaw. In striving to meet the needs of these organizations, MJPL aspires to ensure that all of its collections meet the broadest definition of diversity.

The MJPL makes a targeted effort to purchase diverse materials for its collection. In addition to reviewing library media journals and using standing orders, they purchase materials by recognized educators and advocates, and harness the power of two Canadian national institutions dedicated to equitable library access: the Centre for Equitable Library Access (CELA) and the National Network for Equitable Library Services (NNELS).

In 2019, MJPL received the CELA Accessibility Award in recognition of the efforts of the children's department toward providing equitable access to reading materials and programs to children during summer vacation. This included marketing and including inclusive books in programs, adapting programs to benefit all children, and making books accessible to all children.

Also in 2019, MJPL partnered with Moose Jaw Soccer to create an accessible soccer environment for all children, including those with autism. Additionally, in 2022, MJPL will be a pilot site for the Saskatchewan Integrated Library System collection of dyslexia-friendly books.

Finally, there is the librarian in charge of the children's collection. Tina Dolcetti, children's librarian at MJPL, has several years of experience working in the overlapping fields of community inclusion and disability as a mentor for Inclusion Saskatchewan and peer supporter for the Canadian Mental Health Association. Dolcetti was an advisory board member for Project PALS, an online training hub regarding autism and libraries, created by the University of Florida.

As a result of that work, Dolcetti was invited to participate and contribute to the Targeting Autism forums offered through the Illinois State Library and to participate on the Taking on

Autism panel at the American Library Association Annual Conference in 2017. Dolcetti also served as an advisor for Project Enable, a free course for librarians to improve disability awareness and service to their disability community, through the University of Syracuse.

Dolcetti's personal expertise, along with the emphasis on inclusion and accessibility across the library, resulted in the MJPL maintaining a widely diverse collection of inclusive and accessible books making this collection perfect for this study.

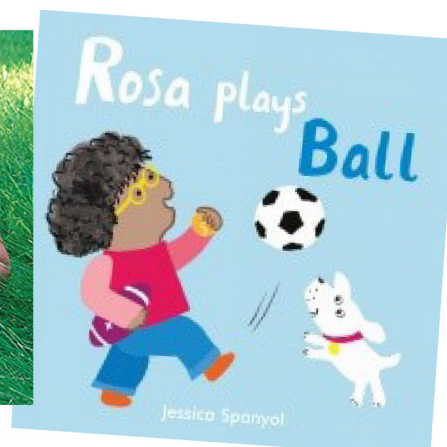
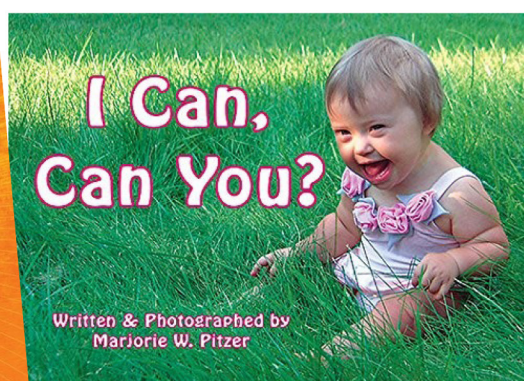
## Literature Review

To begin our discussion of why diversity audits matter at all, we must start with Rudine Sims Bishop's essay "Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors" as a landmark article on diversity in children's literature.<sup>2</sup> In her essay, Sims Bishop states that it is important for children to see themselves being represented in the literature they are reading. Additionally, it is also increasingly important for children to see people who are different from themselves in literature, as it attempts to break stereotypes and expand the child's world view.

Schwartz touches on this topic as well, recognizing the impact that literature can have on children. Ebony Elizabeth Thomas, an associate professor at the University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education, is quoted in Schwartz's article as saying, "the white child gets all kinds of mirrors of the self in literature. . . . Whereas other children only get a very narrow slice of that history."<sup>3</sup>

In a study more directly related to the focus of our work, Hughes-Hassell and Cox examine this idea of seeing the self-mirrored in board books, as those are often a child's first exposure to aspects of society that are not immediately accessible to them in their current environment. Furthermore, board books may have an early effect on a child's self-esteem and self-image.<sup>4</sup>

Looking at disability representation is important because children with disabilities need to see themselves in the books they



read, and able-bodied children need to see those who do not look like themselves in positions of equality. The Cooperative Children's Book Center (CCBC) at the University of Wisconsin-Madison has been collecting diversity statistics since 1985 and today is considered a leader in collecting, analyzing, and reporting diversity trends in youth books publishing.<sup>5</sup> Statistics collected by the CCBC show evidence of a slow but steady increase in diversity representations in children's literature.

For example, books about Black children numbered just eighteen out of 2,500 titles (less than one percent) in 1985 but, in 2019, that number rose to 471 out of 4,035 titles (about 12%).<sup>6</sup> Still a small percentage of the total publications when considering the size of the population, but encouraging evidence of an increase.

The CCBC did not start tracking representation of children with disabilities until 2018. In their report for 2019 publications, they counted 126 titles (about 3.4%) that included some representation of disabilities.<sup>7</sup> Supporting this statement of disparity, in an examination of Newbery Award winners from 1975-2009, Leininger and colleagues examined how the winning titles portrayed disability in which the authors found that "the representation of Newbery characters with disabilities is not proportionate to the [2010] U.S. population of students with disabilities."<sup>8</sup> None of these statistics is specific to disability representation in board books; however, from these numbers we can see that overall there is little disability representation.

Consider also that the statistics collected by the CCBC count only occurrence or no occurrence of disabilities, not the quality of representation. This corroborates earlier studies of representation of people with disabilities in picture books. Importantly, some studies do go beyond noting the occurrence of disabilities. Kleekamp and Zapata, for example, provide four questions to be asked when considering the quality of the portrayal of a character with disabilities because the mere existence of a character with disabilities is not enough to count as being inclusive, noting that these books "often 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."<sup>9</sup>

Kleekamp and Zapata present the following issues to look for when evaluating a picture book for appropriate representation in an audit, including

- if a character is multi-dimensional,
- able to speak for themselves,
- given agency, and
- has mutually beneficial relationships with other characters.<sup>10</sup>

These four characteristics ensure that representation of children with disabilities is not only present, but has a positive impact on children both disabled and able-bodied.

Furthermore, educators and librarians alike recognize the need for more books that represent children with disabilities, but they do not know where to find them. Cockcroft states that "81 percent [of school and public librarians] consider it 'very important' to have diverse books in their collections, including titles about disability."<sup>11</sup> But, few of them have found good ways to add substantial amounts of representation to their collections, and when the books are included in review journals, they may be deemed to include poor portrayals of disability.

Reported in this article, one librarian asserted that even if a book has a character in a wheelchair, the surroundings may look inaccessible, which may not present an accurate depiction of the disability experience. Additionally, the books that do exist are often biographies and tend to be of historical or other public figures.<sup>12</sup>

Overall, representation is on the rise, but in comparison to the rest of the diversity seen in current picture books, it has a long way to go. Matthew and Clow, in particular, note that the few books published about disabilities are from smaller publishing houses often in conjunction with focused organizations and include this quote from a librarian, "It would just be so much easier if mainstream books came out with images that reflected the real world."<sup>13</sup>

Often discussions about inclusion of children with disabilities in a public library setting revolve around only the issue of physical inclusion. Universal design, accessible materials, and the physical environment are all important, as indicated in a study conducted by Kaeding, Velasquez, and Price.<sup>14</sup> However, beyond having an accessible library building, inclusion also means having representation of people with disabilities in the materials available to patrons.

Kaeding, Velasquez, and Price discuss the change a ramp or audiobook collection can make for a patron and also mention the need for more research on the development of collections to meet community needs.<sup>15</sup> These studies of picture books influenced our decision to focus on disability inclusion in the board book collection as a way of furthering the professional literature.

## Research Methodology

Our audit focuses on the board book collection of 1,143 titles at the MJPL. The board book collection was chosen as its size was manageable for a full audit and the library had an intentional emphasis on disabilities and accessibility. After a full audit was completed (described below), we then chose a smaller subsection of books that dealt only with human characters, which resulted in a collection of 447 books.

Diversity audits are a relatively new trend in librarianship in which the aim is to assess selected diversity qualities within a collection to discover trends and gaps that need to be addressed. Additionally, audits may connect the library's internal collection to the wider context of society and trends within the publishing world, that is, is there an actual gap in the collection or does the publication simply not exist? In general, studies about conducting diversity audits focus mostly on the process of conducting the audit and what to do with the results of the audit.<sup>16</sup> One example of an audit that focuses on societal trends is provided in Stone's audit of a theatrical plays collection in the University of California, Irvine (UCI) Libraries. In this research, Stone discovered that the collection in the study did not adequately reflect the breadth of works that were being published. Although Stone found that diverse playwrights were being published, whether they were being bought by UCI Libraries and therefore available to be read by their patrons was another story entirely.<sup>17</sup>

The goal of our audit and study is similar to Stone's in that our interests were both to evaluate if the MJPL's collection accurately reflected the societal and community needs to have access to books with disability representation (that is, had the titles in its collection) and also to learn if there were appropriate publications to add to the collection.

Some diversity audits in the literature have indeed included disability as a category of consideration but not to the degree required to truly reflect the full spectrum of disabilities. Reporting on an audit of a public library in Illinois, Mortensen included disability as a factor in the examination of literature used in youth storytimes, adult screening, and adult book discussions. In examining the literature used in these programs, Mortensen's evaluation for inclusion was a binary decision: "disabilities" was or was not present. Mortensen's audit is representative of how disability is frequently recorded in audits, that is, one-dimensional, and not the primary concern of the audit.<sup>18</sup>

While other identity markers such as gender, sexual orientation, race, and religion are segregated into separate sub-categories to represent their rightful complexity, "disability" tends to remain unidimensional. The category of "disability" is as complex as other identity markers and should include cognitive, physical, sensory, and other forms of disability. Our audit seeks to address this gap in the literature that sees disability as a singular subject, and delves into the complex issues and categories that affect representation in board books.

Having investigated methods for conducting audits and opting to audit the full collection at hand, we turned to investigating methods of conducting diversity studies. As a book examination site that receives most children's books published in the U.S. in any given year, the CCBC keeps diversity statistics of all of the publications it receives.

Over the years, the criteria for evaluation have evolved. For example, Pacific Islander was added as a separate category in

2019, prior to that year, the category had been "Asian/Pacific." As stated previously, disability was not included as a central category in their statistics until 2018.<sup>19</sup> As the CCBC continues to collect diversity data and as other institutions are conducting diversity audits, data about percentages of diverse main characters are revealing increases in the diversity of characters in children's literature. When institutions share their audit data, it allows our profession to evaluate issues of diversity in a more quantitative manner.

Drawing on resources from audits done on race, gender, sexuality, and other identity-groups (as described above), and based on the expertise of the MJPL librarian, our team developed several different categories to represent the different aspects of disability, along with other categories that would assist in statistical data analysis after the audit was completed. Due to the nature of board books, that is, short, simple story lines that allow for minimal descriptions, we relied mostly on illustrations and photographs as evidence of presence or non-presence of a given disability. We are well aware that quantity does not equal quality. In disability representation, stereotypes can still be present and harmful even though those characters are being depicted. If we were examining more complex books such as picture books or early readers, we would have included quality of representation in addition to presence.

To address the complexity of disability, we used the following headings: *physical disability*, *neurodiversity*, *sensory disability*, and *mental illness*. We also included *mobility aid used*, to indicate a wheelchair, walker, ankle-foot orthoses (AFOs), or other mobility devices; *sensory aid used*, to indicate a cane, guide dog, or other device used to assist the senses; and *hearing aids used*. Furthermore, we added information to help contextualize the book in a larger context, such as author and character identity. Focusing on the author, we investigated if the author is an *#ownvoices* author, or if the author is a medical specialist.

At the time of the study, *#ownvoices* was an appropriate category of study to note that the author shared experiences with at least some of the characters portrayed in the book, e.g., race, disability, etc., which can be important but is not necessarily a check on the quality of the illustrations or text. We recognize the shift away from that phrase but as it was included in our study at the time, we maintained the heading.<sup>20</sup>

We noted if the author was a medical specialist as an indicator of an author with specialized knowledge; again, not as an indicator of the quality of text or illustrations. Due to the trend of a high percentage of animal and non-human characters in children's literature, we also noted if the main character was *human*, *animal*, or an *inanimate object*. In our collection, more than half of the board books were animal or inanimate objects. Finally, we created a category for *publisher* as we were curious to see whether certain publishing houses were more likely to publish books containing disability representation than others. In conducting this audit, whenever possible the

physical item was examined, however, due to the pandemic and restrictions on in-person research, books from the collection were also examined via YouTube read-aloud recordings and the Epic! reading application for tablets (<https://getepic.com>). The team met frequently to discuss findings and review any questions about representation to ensure we all agreed on the representation we were recording.

## Results

From the collection of 1,143 titles, we found 447 books that dealt with human characters and of those, eighty-seven of the titles included disability representation. Of those titles, six titles included characters who used mobility devices (wheelchair, leg braces, walker), one used an auditory device, seven had Down syndrome, forty-eight used vision aids (mostly eyeglasses), and twenty-five displayed a mix of more than one type of disability (most often eyeglasses plus some other disability).

Mental illness, although included as a category in our study, was not evident in the collection. Physical disabilities were much more prevalent in our board books with disability representation. Our hypothesis for this is that, due to their visual nature, these disabilities are easier to convey through simple images than other types of developmental or cognitive disabilities. Drawings of wheelchairs, crutches, eyeglasses, and hearing aids can be easily conveyed in board books in which words are either minimal or nonexistent. Anxiety, depression, autism, and other similar conditions are not as easily portrayed in pictures and therefore are not easily included in the board book format.

The count of forty-eight titles that included an occurrence of eyeglasses as a physical disability required further investigation on our part. Anecdotally speaking, we are aware that many people have corrected vision, including all four of the researchers, and so the fact that more than half of the books we examined also included characters with corrected vision was so expected that we almost didn't include eyeglasses in our analysis.

However, upon further investigation, we found that most of the titles that included eyeglasses, used that as an indication of age. This was interesting to us because the use of other disability indicators (mobility devices and hearing devices) was applied mostly to child characters. But with eyeglasses, about 80% of the incidences of eyeglasses indicated an older person. Further, all of the titles that included multiple types of disabilities, with the exception of one title, included eyeglasses plus another disability.

Although we found that in this collection, eyeglasses were more often used to mark an older person, there were notable occurrences of young children with eyeglasses. Jessica Spanyol's "Rosa" series is especially notable in this case, as Rosa, a toddler, is depicted with eyeglasses in a playful, bright yellow

frame. Providing eyeglasses representation on child characters in board books can help affirm and empower the youngest eyeglasses wearers that they are not alone and help non-eyeglasses wearers see these children in equitable situations.

Comparing the number of titles with disability representation to the total board book collection, we find that about 7% of the MJPL board book collection is inclusive of disabilities. That number, however, includes the instances of eyeglasses worn by adults only. If we subtract the thirty-two titles that only included adults wearing eyeglasses and no other disability, we end up with 55 titles, or not quite 5% of disability representation in the MJPL board book collection. Is that a number that is representative of the community MJPL wishes to reflect?

According to the CCBC, in 2019 3.4% of the total books received that year had primary characters with disabilities.<sup>21</sup> If we consider that we are looking only at board books in the MJPL collection, then we could say that our number of 5% representation does not look too bad. But the comparison is not quite equal in that we counted any representation, not just primary characters because in board books, the story often does not require a primary character.

Additionally, the CCBC number is derived from all of the books they received, not just board books and applies only to books published in 2019 whereas our collection covers many more publication years. Ultimately, only the librarian and the community members can say whether having 5% children with disabilities representation in their board book collection meets the community needs or not.

Since the focus of our study was on diversity and inclusion, it was important to also measure disability along with instances of other diversity issues to assess if the collection was generally inclusive or not. We found that within the MJPL board book collection of books with human characters (as opposed to animals or inanimate objects): 72.9% of characters were assumed white, followed by 49.8% having brown skin, 30.4% identified as Black or African, 19.6% identified as Asian, and 3.8% identified as Native American/First Nations. Happily, the numbers for the books with disability representation are not as lopsided. Importantly, very few of these titles were single representations, most of the books included mixed race and ethnicity representation. In fact, in the count of disability representation, only twelve titles contained assumed white only characters and seventy titles out of the eighty-seven titles with disability representation included multiracial representation. While this can be seen as an encouraging set of statistics, we were unable to identify with certainty any titles that included Black/African characters with disabilities and identified only two titles that were only "brown skin."<sup>22</sup> We are hoping this does not mean that illustrators are using "brown skin" tones merely for the sake of appearing to be multiracial or multiethnic, but rather that it is simply difficult to present sufficient detail in a board book to be explicit about racial or ethnic identity.

## The Question of Publishers

We were also interested to see if there were publishers that either specialize in or include a number of disability representation titles in their catalogs. The collection we reviewed is, by the nature of most library collections, limited. Therefore, we cannot make any global statements about the publishing industry with respect to disability representation.

However, from investigating this collection that includes titles from over thirty different publishers, we have noted a few publishers that excel in quality representation of children with disabilities. For librarians, teachers, and other adults looking to expand their collections with disability representation, we suggest examining the catalogs of Child's Play and Woodbine House.

Without being an advertisement, we cannot help but highlight one publisher in particular that published books demonstrating an authentic presentation of inclusion—Child's Play (United Kingdom). As stated on their website, their publications focus on “whole child development, focused play, life skills, and values. . . . [Publishing] books that fully reflect our diverse society in terms of heritage, disability, gender, and family.”<sup>23</sup>

True to their focus on inclusion and accessibility, the website itself can be viewed as text only or with high visibility. Out of the eighty-seven titles containing humans with disabilities examined in our study, twenty-two titles were published by Child's Play. Further, all but three of those titles were racially diverse.

One author in particular, Jessica Spanyol, has a series featuring a character called Rosa, who wears eyeglasses and whose skin color is clearly not white, although a specific race or ethnicity is never stated. As discussed earlier, having a young child, the main character in this case, wearing eyeglasses is empowering for young eyeglasses-wearers and raises awareness for all children. Additionally, one of the recurring supporting characters is Samira, who is in a wheelchair and who fully participates in activities with accurate illustrations of a child in a wheelchair.

Another one of Spanyol's series titles is the Clive series. Although Clive himself is assumed white and does not overtly exhibit any disability, one recurring character named Anisa wears a leg brace and another recurring character, Asif, wears eyeglasses and has brown skin color. As for Clive, he engages in many roles traditionally associated with female nurturing family roles, such as taking care of babies, and professions, such as being a librarian or a nurse, which provide positive portrayals of expanding traditional sex roles. A bonus factor is that the text for both the Rosa and Clive series is printed in dyslexia-friendly fonts. Additionally, many of these titles are also available in Spanish.

Another author to highlight is Annie Kubler whose book, *Zoom Zoom Zoom!*, is an excellent, albeit not perfect, example

of inclusion and diversity. The child characters are identifiable as white, Asian, and Black/African and the disabilities are portrayed through the inclusion of a Black/African child in a wheelchair, another with an eye patch, an assumed white child with a hearing aid, and an Asian child and white child wearing eyeglasses. The last page of the book shows the Black/African child in a modified wheelchair that looks like a rocket ship, which is a very powerful and empowering image. While the font is not dyslexia-friendly, it is accessible in that there are no serifs on the letters. Our only issue with this book about children going to the moon is that they all present male and since this is a rocket-based book, it is unfortunate that no female-presenting characters are included.

Because these books are not only inclusive and diverse, but are also engaging and well-written, it is little wonder that there are so many Child's Play books in the MJPL collection. The Child's Play company is located in England and may not appear in United States-based catalogs but is worth investigating.

Woodbine House (Maryland) focuses on publications to specifically address disabilities, Down syndrome, and autism in particular, stating, “Our mission has grown to encompass publishing accessible, empowering books for families, teachers, and professionals who are seeking guidance and support in helping children and adults with any disability achieve their potential.”<sup>24</sup> Their board books in particular illustrate children with Down syndrome and account for six of our eight books that include representation of children with Down syndrome (the other two are from Star Bright Books and Orca Book Publishers).

Two of the Woodbine authors highlighted in this collection are Marjorie W. Pitzer and Laura Ronay both of whom are documented specialists in child development. Sadly, this publisher went out of business, but books by Pitzer and Ronay are likely to be easily found in second-hand bookstores and book distributors. The closure of this specialized publishing house is a call for another publisher to step in to ensure this kind of representation.

One area of interest in our study was to discover if there were titles that were representative of disabilities but were not in the collection. This question was difficult to answer if for no other reason than there are a lot of board books published every year. We highlight here a very few publishers and titles but emphasize that this is not an exhaustive list and there are many publishers not presented here that are worthy of consideration.

In terms of a publisher that is already included in this collection, Child's Play, we recommend the addition of *What Can I Hear?* by Annie Kubler. Although the child characters in this book outwardly exhibiting disabilities are assumed white, there are three instances of disability representation including a child with an eye patch and eyeglasses, a child with a hearing aid, and a child with a cochlear implant. Another



Kubler title, *I'm a Little Teapot*, includes two assumed white children, one with a cochlear implant and one wearing eyeglasses. Kubler, like Spanyol, is adept at positively portraying children with disabilities in her books.

Triangle Square, a division of Seven Stories Press (New York), focuses on raising political awareness in young children.<sup>25</sup> Triangle Square creates board books including one title in the MJPL collection, *Counting on Community*, which includes representation of a non-white child in a wheelchair. This book is part of a series titled Little Activist Book Bundle, which includes two other books that are not currently in the collection: *A Is for Activist* and *Together*. *A Is for Activist* shows eyeglasses, limb differences, and a wheelchair, and *Together* also shows eyeglasses, as well as a wheelchair. As a series, these titles demonstrate good examples of inclusion and diversity.

The third publisher to highlight is Free Spirit Publishing (Minnesota), mentioned here less for disability representation and more for the dedication of the company to supporting social and emotional development in children and teens. As stated on their website, their mission is, “to provide children and teens—and the adults who care for and about them—with the tools they need to think for themselves, overcome challenges, and make a difference in the world . . . and to support them in developing their talents, building resiliency, and fostering a positive outlook on life, so they can reach their full potential . . . [and] to offer accessible, contemporary books that help young people develop socially, emotionally, and intellectually.”<sup>26</sup>

The four Free Spirit books in the MJPL collection are racially and ethnically diverse but display only older people wearing eyeglasses. Nevertheless, the themes of the books both within the collection and available from the publisher can be empowering to young children as they grow and develop including a series of board books the publisher lists as their “mental health board book collection,” which includes titles such as *Calm Down Time*, *Bye-bye Time*, and *Worries Are Not Forever*.

Our final example of a publisher worth further consideration is Charlesbridge (Massachusetts), specifically the series by Ruth Spiro, “Baby Loves the Five Senses.”<sup>27</sup> The MJPL collection holds one of the titles, *Baby Loves Touch!*; however that title does not include disability representation. We recommend the librarian also add *Baby Loves Hearing!* and *Baby Loves Sight!* to their collection. These two titles showed not only images, but also text referencing disabilities. For example, in *Baby Loves Hearing!*, both a hearing aid and cochlear implant were clearly shown, and each adaptive device was explained.

Additionally, it showed that some people were deaf and unable to hear at all. In this case, the correct American Sign Language signs for “play” and “yes” were shown, with directional guidance. In *Sight*, eyeglasses were shown, and people without the ability to see were also mentioned. In addition,

there was a depiction of a low vision child using braille to read a book.

One publisher not represented in the collection is MVP Kids (Arizona). MVP Kids is very intentional in incorporating disability representation in its books for young children covering topics from feelings to holidays to professions.<sup>28</sup> In their board books, a recurring cast of characters display an array of races and ethnicities as well as various disabilities including one non-white character depicted with a cochlear implant. There are numerous examples of eyeglasses and quite a few examples of mobility devices including use of a walker. What makes this instance almost unique is the fact that the child character (rather than an older adult) is using the walker. Seeing a child use this device can really resonate with children who use walkers. There was also a wheelchair used in this series, which is not in itself an unusual representation of disability, but in this case the wheelchair was used for a doll that a child was playing with, indicating that a wheelchair can be inclusive of a normal part of life, not something that is on the fringes of society.

As good as this company is in providing examples of complete inclusion and diversity, we have some concerns. We are uneasy with the *Celebrate! Thanksgiving* book, published in 2017, that still has the children celebrating the Pilgrims and traditional themes. As it is a recent publication, this depiction was disturbing to us. Additionally, it is difficult to find information about the company itself. It appears that all publications are created in-house and the books are created as curriculum, which sometimes results in didactic and heavy-handed text. Still, the inclusion represented in these books makes these titles, at least on an individual basis if not the full series, worth investigating.

After we finished our analysis of the board book collection, Dolcetti made us aware of a few additional board books in the library that are not cataloged and shelved as part of the board book collection. Those books were two titles in braille and five titles presenting sign language. In discussing if these books should be included in the study or not, we opted not to include them for two reasons. First, the braille books were not designed for inclusion but rather as special books, in a sense, translations of other published books and thus the reason they were shelved in a special braille section even though they were board books. While, again, we opted not to include these books, librarians and educators may want to include them in their collections to meet community needs or to introduce braille to neuro-typical community members. We would like to point out that the National Braille Press has children's books translated into braille.<sup>29</sup>

Second, the five sign language books were in the language section but Dolcetti remarked that the books were rather old and unappealing and she would look for more current publications. This did, however, bring up the issue of baby sign language books, one of which is in the board book collection, but we opted not to count the title as a disability representation because this book and indeed most of the baby sign language

books are created as a tool for hearing parents to teach their hearing babies how to communicate before those babies have speech skills.<sup>30</sup> Additionally, these books are not universally embraced in the Deaf community, making us uncomfortable in including them in our analysis.<sup>31</sup>

## Conclusion

Results from our audit of the MJPL board book collection illustrate that there is representation of children with disabilities within the collection. While we may not be happy with the extent of the collection, at least we can say that the library is working toward inclusive representation. We were impressed with the books from the Child's Play family of

publishers within the collection, although the library could add more titles from that publisher.

In terms of disability representation in board books in general, from our sample, we are encouraged that the diversity movement is more inclusive of disability representation although we have a sense that there is still a long way to go for complete representation. The next step would be to conduct a similarly thorough examination of a picture book collection. Picture books, by virtue of more detailed illustrations and complex text, have more space to depict disabilities that are not as easily represented in board books. Knowing which publishers support positive representation of people with disabilities may help individuals in libraries, early childhood centers, or at home to develop more inclusive collections. &

## References and Notes

1. Larrick is often considered as the first to highlight the lack of diversity in children's books in her article "The All White World of Children's Books" published in the Saturday Review in 1965. See also the We Need Diverse Books website for more on this initiative: <https://diversebooks.org/>.
2. Rudine Sims Bishop, "Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors," *Perspectives: Choosing and Using Books for the Classroom* 6, no. 3 (1990).
3. Sarah Schwartz, "Teachers Push for More Diverse Books, Fewer Stereotypes," *Education Week* 38, no. 35 (June 2019): 10, <https://www-edweek-org.ezproxy.library.wisc.edu/teaching-learning/teachers-push-for-books-with-more-diversity-fewer-stereotypes/2019/06>.
4. Sandra Hughes-Hassell and Ernie J. Cox, "Inside Board Books: Representations of People of Color," *Library Quarterly* 80, no. 3 (2010): 212.
5. Beyond anecdotal statements from researchers quoting the statistics collected by the CCBC, here is a post that comments on other sources including the Associated Press that rely on the statistics from the CCBC that support our assertion that the CCBC is a leader in this area: <https://education.wisc.edu/news/media-mentions-outlets-across-nation-spotlight-ccbcs-diversity-data/>.
6. In conducting this study, we opted to view publishing statistics for 2019 instead of 2020 due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the publishing industry. For data reports, see CCBC statistics reports for 1985–2017 at <https://ccbc.education.wisc.edu/literature-resources/ccbc-diversity-statistics/books-by-and-or-about-poc-1985-2001/#1985>. For 2019 see <https://ccbc.education.wisc.edu/literature-resources/ccbc-diversity-statistics/books-by-and-or-about-poc-2018/>.
7. Cooperative Children's Book Center (CCBC), "The Numbers Are In: 2019 CCBC Diversity Statistics," *Cooperative Children's Book Center*, June 16, 2020, <https://ccbc.education.wisc.edu/the-numbers-are-in-2019-ccbc-diversity-statistics/>.
8. Melissa Leininger et al., "Newbery Award Winning Books 1975–2009: How Do They Portray Disabilities?," *Health Education and Training in Autism and Developmental Disabilities* 45, no. 4 (December 2010): 583.
9. Monica C. Kleekamp and Angie Zapata, "Interrogating Depictions of Disability in Children's Picturebooks," *Reading Teacher* 72 no. 5 (2019): 590.
10. Kleekamp and Zapata, "Interrogating Depictions."
11. Marlaina Cockcroft, "The Enduring Search," *School Library Journal* 65, no. 1 (2019): 28.
12. Cockcroft, "The Enduring Search."
13. Nicole Matthew and Susan Clow, "Putting Disabled Children in the Picture: Promoting Inclusive Children's Books and Media," *International Journal of Early Childhood* 39 no. 2 (2007): 67.
14. Joanne Kaeding, Diane L. Velasquez, and Deborah Price, "Public Libraries and Access for Children with Disabilities and Their Families: A Proposed Inclusive Library Model," *Journal of the Australian Library & Information Association* 66, no. 2 (2017): 96–115, <https://doi.org/10.1080/24750158.2017.1298399>.
15. Kaeding, Velasquez, and Price, "Public Libraries," 112.
16. One primary source of information for the role of audits is the Teen Librarian Toolbox PDF titled "Diversity Considerations in YA: Doing a Diversity Audit" by Karen Jensen (<https://teenlibrariantoolbox.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Diversity-Audit-Outline-2017-with-Sources.pdf>). It provides users with a step-by-step walkthrough. This could be used as a basic framework for developing a checklist. Kleekamp and Zapata discuss the use of a diversity audit specifically within the context of disability portrayal. It delves into the quality of the portrayal, rather than focusing on the superficial quantity of portrayal. Unfortunately for our study, our resources (board books) did not allow for sophisticated imagery based on the medium's format.
17. Scott M. Stone, "Whose Play Scripts Are Being Published? A Diversity Audit of One Library's Collection in Conversation with the Broader Play Publishing World," *Collection*



- Management* 45, no. 4 (December 2020): 304–20, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01462679.2020.1715314>.
18. Annabelle Mortensen, “Measuring Diversity in the Collection,” *Library Journal* 144, no. 4 (May 2019): 28–30, <https://www.libraryjournal.com/story/Measuring-Diversity-in-the-Collection>.
  19. The FAQs provided by the CCBC give some examples of changes in the diversity variables over the years under the questions “What factors should I consider when comparing numbers from year to year?” and “What about other aspects of identity beyond race and ethnicity—are you documenting those?” “Diversity Statistics FAQs,” University of Wisconsin Madison, <https://ccbc.education.wisc.edu/literature-resources/ccbc-diversity-statistics/diversity-statistics-faqs/>.
  20. For more on the disuse of “own voices,” see Alaina Lavoie, “Why We Need Diverse Books Is No Longer Using the Term #OwnVoices,” press release, [diversebooks.org](https://diversebooks.org), June 6, 2021, [https://diversebooks.org/why-we-need-diverse-books-is-no-longer-using-the-term-ownvoices/?fbclid=IwAR0NgjOn40vph-RJJJErW4m2IXaVwc97UtOzf\\_BbRa0Xvpi48jcQ4Sbzglw](https://diversebooks.org/why-we-need-diverse-books-is-no-longer-using-the-term-ownvoices/?fbclid=IwAR0NgjOn40vph-RJJJErW4m2IXaVwc97UtOzf_BbRa0Xvpi48jcQ4Sbzglw). Lavoie recommends more specific author identifiers.
  21. CCBC, “The Numbers Are In: 2019 CCBC Diversity Statistics.”
  22. In identifying race and ethnicity, we opted for the definition used by the CCBC as provided in “The Numbers Are In: 2019 CCBC Diversity Statistics,” namely that “Brown skin” indicates books in which the primary character clearly has brown skin (indicated by illustrations or text), but there are no specific racial or cultural signifiers in the illustrations or text.
  23. Child’s Play, accessed January 28, 2022, <http://www.childs-play.com/usa/home-page.html>.
  24. Woodbine House, accessed January 28, 2022, <https://www.woodbinehouse.com/about-us/>.
  25. Triangle Square, accessed April 27, 2022, <https://sevenstories.com/imprints/triangle-square>.
  26. Free Spirit Publishing, accessed April 27, 2022, <https://www.freespirit.com/>.
  27. Charlesbridge, accessed April 27, 2022, <https://www.charlesbridge.com/>.
  28. MVP Kids, accessed April 27, 2022, <https://www.mvpkids.com/our-company>.
  29. National Braille Press, accessed April 27, 2022, <https://www.nbp.org/ic/nbp/programs/cbbc/titles.html>.
  30. For clarification, see Gwyneth Doherty-Sneddon, “The Great Baby Signing Debate,” *The Psychologist* 21 (April 2008): 300–303, <https://thepsychologist.bps.org.uk/volume-21/edition-4/great-baby-signing-debate>.
  31. Brenda Seal examines the concerns that the use of signs in the hearing community is nothing less than cultural appropriation. Brenda Seal, “About Baby Signing,” *ASHA Leader* 15, no. 13 (November 2010), <https://doi.org/10.1044/leader.FTR5.15132010.np>.