CHALLENGING THE STATUS QUO:

Disability in Australian Children’s Picture Books

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Abstract

This article will analyze a range of Australian picture books that both explore the topic of disability and serve as educational tools for exploring diversity issues. The books were identified in a survey administered by the State Library of New South Wales (NSW) public library service, which identified 62 books that deal with diversity. Thirteen of the 62 books were assessed as

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having characters with a disability—including autism, mental illness, dementia, spina bifida, neurodiversity, physical disability, deafness, and implied but unidentified disabilities. This article will analyze the approach adopted in each of the picture books using Rudine Sims Bishop's three categories of multicultural literature criticism—Social Conscience, Melting Pot, and Culturally Conscious. By doing so, the article will assess the extent to which picture books offer an authentic exploration of disability in step with broader educational developments.

Keywords

ableism, children's picture books, disability education, inclusion, literature

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INTRODUCTION

From 2014, all states and territories in Australia began to implement aspects of the Foundation to Year 10 Australian Curriculum as part of the adoption of a national curriculum. Since Federation in 1901, the state and territory governments had retained constitutional responsibility for schooling, but from the 1970s onward, the federal government increasingly began to encroach into the education sector (Kennedy et al.). The driving motivation, at least at a governmental level, was the desire to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of governance and public service delivery by "reducing duplication and overlap between federal and state governments" (Savage 868). At a more philosophical level, it also sought to "develop successful learners, confident and creative individuals, and active and informed citizens" (ACARA). The journey toward a national curriculum was nevertheless a complex process, marked as it was by "a range of social, political and economic imperatives and ideological positions" (Savage 868). In addition, it inevitably involved debates about core beliefs and values (Baguley et al.), underpinned by the need to ensure "equity and social justice and improved learning outcomes for our most disadvantaged and isolated students" (Ewing 127).

This determination to engage with disadvantaged students is also apparent in children's literature, which often sits outside the confines of proscribed curriculum materials. This has been particularly evident in picture books that seek to portray people with disabilities in realistic settings (Pennell et al.; Sidoti). As they are often chosen by parents, family members, or other adults, such as teachers and librarians, the selection of picture books offers researchers a broad insight into contemporary attitudes and morals (Avery; Baguley and Kerby; Flothow; Kerby and Baguley; Kerby et al., "Implied"). As a result, picture books have traditionally kept pace with wider societal developments but rarely, if ever, offer a radical take on issues. As this article suggests, for all their altruism in engaging with disability, authors and illustrators have usually created morality tales that in themselves are often quality literature, yet only rarely offer deep insights into the experience of disability.

This shortcoming was recognized by the public library service of the State Library of New South Wales (NSW) in 2020, when it initiated the Diverse Picture Book project in response to research being conducted by Helen Caple (University of New South Wales) and Ping Tian (University of Sydney). In February 2021, the researchers distributed a survey to NSW public library staff to identify diverse characters featured in Australian children's picture books from their library or personal collection. The categories included Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander characters, culturally and linguistically diverse characters, gender- and sexually diverse characters, characters with disability, and characters from regional or rural areas. The assessment criteria were:

- Inclusiveness—the picture book includes characters from diverse backgrounds.

- Character representation/characterization—the characters are represented in a non-stereotypical manner with an identity that is described and developed through the story.

- Theme—the theme of the picture book is closely related to issues of diversity. It is developed through the story, using narrative to create and share the lived experiences of the characters.

- Multimodal storytelling—the illustrations and text work together to develop ambience and atmosphere, creating a complex world. The story world is open to different interpretations and emotional responses to the characters and themes.

- Educational engagement—the picture book serves as an educational tool for the discussion of diversity issues for library staff, carers, and teachers. This could be through the story and theme or through additional information or background content in the book. (State Library of New South Wales)

The survey identified 62 books that explored diversity. Thirteen of the 62 books were assessed as having characters with a disability—*Quirky Quentin* (written by Indianna Bell and illustrated by Aleksandra Szmidt), autism; *My Daddy is Different* (written by Suzi Faed and illustrated by Lisa Coutts), mental illness; *Grandma Forgets* (written by Paul Russell and illustrated by Nicky Johnston), dementia; *Two Mates* (written by Melanie Prewett and illustrated by Maggie Prewett), spina bifida; *Some Brains: A Book Celebrating Neurodiversity* (written by Nelly Thomas and illustrated by Cat MacInnes), neurodiversity; *Window of Hope* (written by Robert Vescio and illustrated by Demelsa Haughton), physical disability; two books, *Boy* (written by Phil Cummings and illustrated by Shane DeVries) and *Olivia's Voice* (written by Mike Lucas and illustrated by Jennifer Harrison), explore deafness; *Free* (written by Aleesah Darlison and illustrated by Belinda Elliot) features a character who uses a wheelchair; and four books, *Our Home, Our Heartbeat* (written by Adam Briggs and illustrated by Kate Moon and Rachael Sarra), *Wide Big World* (written by Maxine Benebe Clarke and illustrated by Isobel Knowles), *Some Girls*, and *Some Boys* (both written by Thomas and illustrated by Sarah Dunk), explore generalized celebrations of diversity. This article will explore the approach adopted in each of the picture books by contextualizing them within the Australian educational landscape, framed by the three generic categories of multicultural literature criticism outlined by Rudine Sims Bishop: Social Conscience, Melting Pot, and Culturally Conscious.[1] Social Conscience books allow the dominant social group to understand the condition of the marginalized group, for example by allowing able-bodied people to understand disability. Melting Pot books seek to highlight the similarities and shared experiences of differing groups, which often results in a tokenistic representation of the marginalized group or a valuing of the dominant groups' norms. Finally, Culturally Conscious books are written for the group they represent and seek to authentically reflect its experiences (Sims). Through this approach, the article will assess the extent to which the written and visual representations of disabled characters support ableist discourses or whether they offer an authentic exploration of disability in step with broader educational developments.

OVERVIEW OF DISABILITY EDUCATION IN AUSTRALIA

The Australian educational landscape has experienced a range of significant changes throughout its history, especially for students with disability. Initially, children with disability were deemed uneducable and excluded from participation in any formal education (Lassig et al.). However, a focus on the individual's rights saw the right to education for all children, including those with disability, being recognized in the middle to latter half of the twentieth century in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, Universal Declaration of Human Rights). From this, a dual education system was established, whereby students with disabilities were educated in separate facilities with a focus on remediation and life skills, while students without disabilities continued to be educated in their neighborhood schools (Cologon). This compartmentalization is evident in picture books that make a sharp distinction between people with a disability and the often distant "other" of ableist peers. This has only been partially offset by recent developments that reflect an increasing expectation that all students should receive an education in their local education settings through mainstreaming, where educating students with disabilities alongside their non-disabled peers creates greater understanding and inclusion (Little et al.). This expectation has been termed more generally as inclusion, or inclusive education, and has resulted in significant changes to the ways in which Australian schools approach education, although one that does not always extend to picture books.

Australia, like many western countries, emphasizes its obligation and commitment to inclusive education for all students, including those with a disability, through various international, national, state, and territory conventions, legislation, and policies. Australia implemented the United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (UNCRPD) in 2008. Article 24 argues that students with disability should have access to inclusive education within the general education system and be accommodated and supported so that they can interact on an equal basis with others in the communities in which they live (United Nations, UNCRPD). On a national level, Australia promotes nondiscrimination in education through the Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (DDA) and the Disability Standards for Education 2005. Both documents make it unlawful to discriminate against students with a disability. In addition, individual states and territories have developed inclusive education policies to guide schools and staff in supporting inclusive education practices.

Despite these attempts to reduce disability discrimination and increase the inclusion of students with disability in the regular education system, considerable challenges have been identified. These include the lack of a consistent national approach to inclusive education (Anderson and Boyle); the failure of national legislation to mandate inclusive education (Duncan et al.; Spandagou, "Anti-Discrimination"); the inherent difficulties in interpreting terms such as "on the same basis," "reasonable adjustment," and "unjustifiable hardship" within the standards (Iacono et al.); the failure of the legislation to move beyond medical models of difference and address the current social model of difference that acknowledges the key role of environmental disadvantage in creating disability (Slee); and the failure of broad educational policy, such as the *Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration,* to recognize students with disability as a "priority equity cohort" (Winter and de Bruin 51).

Within the early childhood sector, the equitable implementation of inclusive education becomes even more contentious as some early childhood settings are included under the banner of Australia's national education legislation, while others are not. The DDA is relevant to all levels of education (Australian Government, Disability Discrimination Act 1992), including childcare, while the standards apply to all education providers, including preschools and kindergartens "but not child-care providers" (Australian Government, Disability Standards for Education 2005 7). Thus, all kindergartens, preschools, and schools have education-specific guidelines to address disability discrimination and promote inclusion. Childcare settings must use the DDA to guide decisions; however, the language in this document does not easily translate to educational contexts (Spandagou, "Anti-discrimination Legislation"). The principles underpinning education in Australian childcare settings are drawn from the Australian Early Years Learning Framework (Council of Australian Governments). However, specific reference to supporting students with disability occurs only twice throughout this document. As a result, inclusive education in Australia has become a "myriad of disparate regulations, policy frameworks, implementation guidelines, and monitoring strategies" (Beamish et al. 193).

Government reviews, such as the Senate Standing Committee on Education and Employment, have highlighted a significant gap between policy and practice, with the needs of students with disability not being met in a manner consistent with how legislation and policy intended (Done et al.; Duncan et al.; Iacono et al.; Spandagou, "Anti-discrimination Legislation"). Rather, the segregation of students into special schools, special educational programs, disability-specific programs, and home schooling has risen over recent years (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare; de Bruin; Slater et al.). The introduction of anti-discrimination legislation and policy has had no effect, or indeed may have hindered the implementation of inclusive education for students with a disability in Australia (Malaquias; Winter and de Bruin).

The underlying issues of ableism (Cologon; Spandagou, "Inclusive Education") and the difficulties in identifying and accepting a comprehensive, united definition of inclusive education continue to segregate students with disability, even when they attend mainstream education with their peers (Duncan et al.; Malaquias). The overarching focus on the "place" of education of the past two decades (Cologon) must be replaced with the "quality" of inclusive education as we move forward. General Comment No. 4 of the United Nations Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities clarifies that inclusion involves a

> process of systematic reform embodying changes and modifications in content, teaching methods, approaches, structures, and strategies in education to overcome barriers with a vision serving to provide all students of the relevant age range with an equitable and participatory learning experience and environment that best corresponds to their requirements and preferences. (4)

This document also notes that inclusive education should "enable communities, systems and structures to combat discrimination, including harmful stereotypes, and recognize diversity" (United Nations Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 3). Overall, embracing human diversity and providing education opportunities to reduce ableist beliefs, attitudes, and practices, as well as promote a positive sense of identity and connection for children with disability can support a more accepting cohesive future for all.

PICTURE BOOKS AND DISABILITY

Despite the growing preparedness to engage with groups that have traditionally been marginalized, the picture books available for students in early childhood classrooms remain overwhelming conservative. A recent audit found that ninety-nine percent of them promoted dominant cultural viewpoints (Adam; Adam and Barratt-Pugh; Adam and Harper). However, authors and illustrators often find themselves constrained by the imagined "demands of children's literature as sanitary, benign, and didactic" (Tribunella 102). As a result, their approach tends to mirror the attitudes of the book-buying public, in this case adults, rather than being in the vanguard of social and political change (Kerby et al., "Subjugation"). Melanie Koss and colleagues audited 337 Caldecott-winning books (the Caldecott Medal is an American children's picture book award) and found that the shifting terrain of children's literature parallels social and political developments outside of children's literature. Portrayals of underrepresented issues, such as disability, in children's picture books are often a barometer for their representation on a broader, societal scale. This is particularly important when authors and illustrators explore issues that have only recently attracted mainstream attention across the genre, such as disability.

Exposing children to literary experiences, such as picture books, particularly by reading to them, can support a child's development (Sheridan et al.). This can lead to children building skills toward developing empathy, tolerance, and friendship and can also enhance social-emotional well-being, problem-solving, conflict resolution skills (Kemple), and the acquisition of new vocabulary (Botelho and Rudman; Crowe et al.; Prutting and Kirchner). Indeed, children's literature can play a key role in ethical socialization and education. Clémentine Beauvais argues that "ethical instruction has always formed part of children's literature" and as a result, it is "a facilitator of ethical life, as a companion in ethical choices, and more generally as a participant in the ethical climate of a given society" (108–09). Despite the relatively benign nature of children's picture books, they are inherently political as they are an integral part of a child's early exposure to literature. They are also a powerful ideological tool, one that contributes to social and political discourse (Kerby et al., "And the Band Played") by transmitting societal values that drive the social and academic development of young children (Adam; Adam and Harper; Adam and Barratt-Pugh).

Schools are nevertheless well placed to guide student engagement with difference (Adomat; Andrews; Ostrosky et al.; Pennell et al.). Santiago Solis likewise acknowledges the power of picture books to shape perceptions of corporeal variation. Yet herein lies a danger, for primary schools are traditionally unsympathetic to disability (Saunders). Therefore, unfavorable depictions in picture books found in classrooms and libraries invariably create the impression "that any type of impairment or 'difference' should be feared, pitied, mocked, or belittled" (Saunders 6). As Paul Duncum notes, people can read complexly; what a maker intends is often interpreted differently by different audiences in quite surprising ways. Yet as Arthur Shapiro notes, as "the influence of such images so often works subliminally, most of us remain unaware of how we internalize them or how they affect, in particular, children's attitudes and their accompanying behaviours" (3).

Solis identified two studies that investigated the representation of characters with disabilities in children's literature, namely the studies by Mary Anne Prater and by Tina Taylor Dyches, Mary Anne Prater, and Sharon F. Cramer. Prater found that of 68 books surveyed, only nine were told from the perspective of the character with mental retardation (MR), 42 had characters who had MR but whose characters were static, and 47 had characters with MR who acted as the impetus for nondisabled characters to grow. The study by Dyches and colleagues, though smaller in scope, is if anything less positive about the approach adopted in children's literature. Only three of the 12 books surveyed told stories from the perspective of characters with MR and autism. Seven had characters capable of growth, while none showed a significant relationship between a character with MR/A and a non-disabled peer. Where friendships do exist, they are between MR/A characters and others with special needs (Solis). It is unlikely that such an approach could ever allow students to "see" themselves, or indeed, to avoid seeing themselves and their experiences as normal and all others as unusual or abnormal belonging to the world of the "other" (Pennell et al.). Sims Bishop contends that books are "sometimes windows, offering views of worlds that may be real or imagined, familiar or strange" (ix). She also argues that these windows can also be a mirror, as literature "transforms human experience and reflects it back to us, and in that reflection, we can see our own lives and experiences as part of the larger human experience" (ix).

This analysis of Australian picture books on disability is framed by Sims Bishop's three literary categories or typologies outlined in *Shadow and Substance: Afro-American Experience in Contemporary Children's Fiction.* The typologies Social Conscience, Melting Pot, and Culturally Conscious emerged from an analysis of 150 realistic fiction books about Afro-Americans published between the years 1965 and 1979. Sims Bishop, who is herself Afro-American, explored whether culturally unique meanings were being conveyed in children's books and the extent to which a distinctive Afro-American children's literature was emerging at the time. Sims Bishop's typology has also been used to frame the representation of disability in children's books (Coleman and Harrison). For example, Monique Coleman and Judith Harrison introduced a tactile extension of Sims Bishop's ideas to explore braille children's books. They found that diverse ethnic characters featured in less than 15% of the 328 books they analyzed. Like Sims Bishop's original study, the authors concluded that there was a dearth of culturally diverse books for blind and visually impaired children. The application of Sims Bishop's three categories revealed similar results in a study of children's books representing Asian or Asian American characters with disabilities (Meacham et al.). This analysis found that along with exoticized and outdated representations of Asian cultures, the children's books were largely devoid of Asian characters with disabilities. Disability, when it was represented, was homogenized and rarely foregrounded in a story. In a study about the representation of disability in children's hard cardboard (board) books, Alison Kaplan et al. analyzed whether the books included representations of physical or sensory disabilities, neurodiversity, or mental illness and whether characters used mobility, sensory or hearing aids. Of the 447 books they examined, only 5% included characters with disabilities (Kaplan et al.).

A lack of diversity, therefore, appears to be common in portrayals of disability in children's books, meaning that children who have disabilities will rarely see themselves in the books they read, while children without disabilities will miss opportunities to learn about disability. Any attempt, therefore, to scrutinize how disability is represented in Australian picture books is problematized by the society-wide marginalization or exclusion of people with disabilities (Solis), in addition to the ill-defined nature of the term (Mairs 12). This lack of focus pervades the picture books, thereby diminishing their potential as transformative educational tools.

CATEGORIES 1 AND 2: SOCIAL CONSCIENCE AND MELTING POT

Although Sims Bishop identified Social Conscience and Melting Pot as two distinct categories, Australian authors have regularly published picture books that are an amalgam of both approaches. This approach is particularly adaptable to picture books that explore disability because it creates didactic opportunities for children without disabilities, avoids adopting a societal construct of privilege (children without a disability) and underprivileged (children with a disability), and positions disability as merely one of many forms of diversity, or in the case of neurological issues, evidence of unique character attributes. The majority of Australian authors and illustrators seem to feel no need to engage with historical disadvantage or the more confronting challenges of disability as they operate within a context that expects children's books to avoid anything potentially distressing. Disability is therefore considered synonymous with difference. For all their good intentions, the books' merging of the Social Conscience and Melting Pot categories does not always facilitate an authentic portrayal of being disabled, often providing only tokenistic representations.

In Sims Bishop's study, Social Conscience books were intended primarily for non-Afro-American children (privileged) in order "to encourage them to develop empathy, sympathy, and tolerance for Afro-American children [under privileged] and their problems" (Sims 17). However, none of the books that Sims Bishop analyzed were written by Afro-American authors. The books were pervaded by cliches and stereotypes, and a pervasive paternalistic tone that was grounded in an inauthentic Afro-American experience. The Melting Pot category refers to books that do not reflect any distinct cultural experience. For all their good intentions, they promoted an Afro-American middle-class existence that aligned with white sociocultural norms and values. By ignoring any distinctly Afro-American experience, they only promoted positive images of Afro-American children, with no mention of drugs, poverty, or other cultural stereotypes. Society is therefore positioned as a homogenous community whose embrace of universality robs it of any specific insights into the Afro-American lived experience. Melting Pot stories are thereby able to maintain an overwhelmingly positive tone, whatever the challenges the protagonist faces during the narrative. This failure to address the lived experience of differing groups makes their inclusion in the text a tokenistic effort at representation. When applying these ideas to representations of disability in children's picture books, Social Conscience books can be authored or illustrated by people without lived experiences of disability and avoid storylines or images that speak to any insurmountable challenges.

Some Brains: A Book Celebrating Neurodiversity offers a didactic experience that generates an empathetic response among readers without a disability, or at least a different type of disability; yet, the abstract nature of neurodiversity as it is portrayed in this picture book might easily be misunderstood by a child to be a generic celebration of difference. This is evident in lines such as "We're all different in some way, or you would be me" (Thomas, *Some Brains)*, "All kids are the joy of the world", "All kids are special", "people have been different for ever and ever" and "love me just as I am"[2]. The addition of a glossary of terms denoting different types of neurodiversity and some notes regarding autism are useful for adults; however, they are not likely to attract children. The universalization of the disability experience falls within Sims Bishop's Melting Pot category, but the glossary and the title of the book itself suggests a Social Conscience motivation.

Quirky Quentin also struggles with the exploration of an abstract disability that is not readily evident in the image or the text. It is presented from the perspective of an autistic child's sister. As the title suggests, Quentin's behavior is just as easily characterized as quirks that encourage the reader to acknowledge that "there's no one else quite like him, he's different to all the rest", "he does everything in his own way" before ending with a request that the reader "Imagine if we all showed our quirks, Imagine how great it would be, because we all have a little quirkiness, Like Quentin, Like you. Like me" (Bell). This celebration of Quentin's quirkiness extends to his sister who acknowledges that "when I'm around him I'm never afraid to be myself" (Bell). Only the reference to being on the spectrum, which is included in the text, and the explicit mention of autism on the back cover act as a guide for the reader. Interestingly, the book's Facebook page, the publisher's website, and numerous online book stories insert the word "autism" into excerpts from the book. Like *Some Brains*, *Quirky Quentin* draws on the characteristics of Social Conscience—written for non-disabled people—and Melting Pot—positioning disability as an expression of just one type of diversity interchangeable with many others.

Two Mates tells the story of Jack, a First Nations boy, and his friend Raf. The book uses first person narration from Jack's perspective and opens with a mid-shot view of Jack, with his brown hair, eyes, and skin. On the next page, Jack and Raf are pictured together, seated on the ground, collecting tadpoles: Raf is red-haired and fair-skinned, so the book at first seems to be a Melting Pot of race rather than disability and able-bodiedness. The narrative sees Jack and Raf going fishing, hunting, heading to the markets, exploring rockpools, riding quad bikes, swimming, and going to school. In each image, Raf is either seated or his lower body obscured. For example, when hunting goannas, Raf appears to be sitting in long grass, pointing. Jack comments that "Raf is the best barni-spotter" (Prewett). On the final page, the text reads "Whatever Raf and I do, we always have fun. I'm glad we're mates" (Prewett). The image is of the two boys side by side, facing away from the viewer. Jack's hand rests on the back of Raf's wheelchair as he moves himself forward. It is only on this final page of the narrative that Raf's disability is revealed. The post-script material, which a young reader would tend to avoid reading given its adult tone, provides insights into why Raf is in a wheelchair.

The text of *Two Mates* is very much a Melting Pot narrative, as it ignores Raf's disability entirely. This suggests that there are no significant differences between Raf and Jack, resulting in the book being read as a Melting Pot of race, as this is the only visible difference between the boys. Neither race nor disability is acknowledged in the written narrative. The book is also told from the able-bodied perspective (it was written by Jack's mother, which may account for this). The final page of the book is a note from Raf's mother, who explains what spina bifida is and asks her readers: "when you meet kids who use a wheelchair, try and see the person, not just the wheelchair: And always try to see what that person can do, rather than what they can't" (Prewett). Clearly, *Two Mates* is written as a didactic opportunity for children without a disability.

Thomas self-published *Some Girls* and *Some Boys* as very broad celebrations of difference that include disabled characters but are not specifically an exploration of disability. Between them, the books include 100 images of childhood diversity, six of which identify a specific disability. They are primarily intended as a reassurance to readers that "different" is not synonymous with "deficient." Thomas characterizes her books as a challenge to the pervasiveness of stereotypes in children's literature. This is a grand, though worthy, ambition, one that encourages a lack of specificity in her approach and a focus on creating didactic opportunities. Similarly, Clarke's *Wide Big World* is an equally broad engagement with diversity as it is experienced at a kindergarten: "You're brown[,] Belle," observes Izzy Jones, which elicits an enthusiastic "Yeah, I am!" followed by a smile and a hug. This encounter represents an idealized version of the author's first day of school when a classmate made the same observation "with accusatory scorn" (Silcox). In her memoir *The Hate Race*, Clarke recalls:

> Until that very moment, holding my mother's hand under the mulberry tree's enormous fan-like leaves, it never occurred to me that being brown, rather than the pale pinkish of most of my friends and neighbours, was in any way relevant to anything. There lurked, in this small girl's declaration, an implied deficiency. I was in no doubt that there was something wrong with being brown, that brown was not a very desirable thing at all. (qtd. in Silcox)

From that opening, Izzy meets a character who is "hairy and tall" and a baby who is "cute, chubby and bald" (Clarke, *Wide Big World*). Like the differences between people, Izzy is reminded that the "sun's red-hot-brilliant" and "the rain's cool and clean". As Belle further reminds Izzy, "difference is everywhere [for] the whole-wide-big world is wonderous-unique" Clarke, *Wide Big World)*. As one of her new friends observes, "Nature's smart, and wonderfully wild. She sprinkles her sparkle into every child" (Clarke, *Wide Big World*). A double page spread shows a group of children dancing under the tree, one of whom is in a wheelchair. A subsequent page shows the hands of a diverse group of children reaching out in friendship, one of which is a hook. Beyond those two images, which focus on race, there is no reference to children with disabilities. Though Hachette celebrates *Wide Big World* as a "gorgeous picture book about our diverse and wonderful world" on its website ("Wide Big World"), the book's exploration of diversity is not as diverse as that claim might suggest. The fact that Clarke, an award-winning author of Afro-Caribbean descent, is more inclined to explorations of race explains this focus:

> Cousins, aunts, and uncles of mine have settled all over the world: including in Germany, America, Switzerland, Australia, England, and Barbados. Mine is a complex migration history that spans four continents and many hundreds of years: a history that involves

> loss of land, loss of agency, loss of language, and loss, transformation, and reclamation of culture. (Clarke, "Here Comes the Fourth Culture")

Our Home, Our Heartbeat also focuses on race but makes some minor mention of disability. The book features Indigenous Australians who have gained prominence in politics, the arts, and sports. The only reference to disability is an image of actress Miranda Tapsell in a wheelchair preparing for a closeup, presumably when she played "Tiny Tim" Cratchit for a performance of Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*. That an actress who does not have a disability is used in this manner makes it clear that any disability might have been included without changing the narrative drive of the text. Like *Wide Big World*, this book's inclusion hints at the paucity of offerings for those looking to source picture books about disability.

CATEGORY 3: CULTURALLY CONSCIOUS

In Sims Bishop's original typology, Culturally Conscious books sought to offer readers an authentic representation of Afro-American lives and experiences. With an intended audience of Afro-American children, these books offer a celebration and recognition of Black culture from a Black perspective (Sims). Distinguishing features of books in this category include being set in an Afro-American community or home, and some means of identifying the characters as Black through physical descriptions, language, or other aspects of cultural behaviors, institutions, and traditions. Culturally Conscious books address themes that the other categories either neglect or present at a surface level, such as oppression, racism, discrimination, explorations of Afro-American identity, and survival (Sims). Of all the categories, the Culturally Conscious books come closest to constituting a body of Afro-American literature for children. They serve the same purpose for books dealing with disability.

Window of Hope moves well beyond the limitations of Social Conscience and Melting Pot by focusing on a single protagonist, a girl named Max. She watches other children play from her window as "it felt comfortable to sit at the window and gaze at the world. It felt right" (Vescio). She feels isolated because she is an amputee, with her disability confining her, perhaps by choice, to her room. One day, she is visited by a bird who likewise has lost a leg. Max adopts the same language that she uses to understand her own experience: "she realised there was something wrong with the bird [it] is broken thought Max" (Vescio). She can assess her own approach to life through this sense of shared deficiency by asking herself, "is the bird sad that it only has one leg?" (Vescio). The bird's subsequent behavior answers the question—it tweets, whistles, dances, and rolls over "like a dog" (Vescio). Max makes a paper plane and sends it flying, perhaps just as she yearns to; "it swirled, swooped, and sailed out the window" (Vescio). Max, however, remains in her room. The bird follows the plane, leaving Max again alone and disappointed. When the bird returns, as the reader assumes it will, it brings with it the paper plane, for it has engaged in the "play" that Max had denied herself. She has an epiphany—"you're not broken. You're special" (Vescio). The bird then "warbled an enchanting, marvellous tune" (Vescio). Vescio emphasizes at this point that the book is not just about a child with a disability; it is written for a child with a disability. For the bird's friendship "has opened Max's ears and her heart" (Vescio). The final image shows Max outside playing with other children; "it felt different, better, and brighter. It felt right" (Vescio). As Sims Bishop argued when analyzing books depicting a fictional Afro-American life experience, more is required than just the inclusion of a character or characters with a disability. Interestingly, publicity for this book positions it as an exploration of compassion and an acceptance of differences. This is a clear effort to characterize it as a Social Conscience story relevant to a wide readership rather than the richer and more nuanced Culturally Conscious narrative created by the author and illustrator.

Free follows a remarkably similar framework to *Window of Hope*. Flynn uses a wheelchair following an accident and now remains in his room. Even when his mother offers to take him to the local park, he demurs, as "I don't belong there anymore … I can't play" (Darlison). His mother takes a reluctant Flynn to the park, "a place where minds stilled, and hearts blossomed" (Darlison). Almost overwhelmed by his sense of loss, Flynn sees a bird "weightless and free" (Darlison). He then dreams of the bird, which "swooped down to catch him" before carrying him "up into the sky's azure embrace" (Darlison). He smiles in his sleep at the thought of his escape. He returns to the park, and when he sees the bird again, the illustrator has him confined physically to his wheelchair as his spirit slowly rises to a standing position: "Slowly Flynn's body healed. His chair dissolved. His mind fluttered open. His heart whispered with joy. The boy slipped away and became the bird" (Darlison). Flynn is now weightless and free, though the final image of him playing in the park in his wheelchair emphasizes to the reader that this is a metaphor. Again, however, the promotional material for the book leans away from the limitations of the Culturally Conscious approach.

Olivia's Voice adopts a framework similar to *Window of Hope* but without the epiphanic moment that is central to the former's denouement. As the publisher notes, the book explores the "the vivid experiences of Olivia, a young deaf girl, as she explores a silent world full of vibrant colour, friendship and fun" ("Olivia's Voice"). Whereas Max only embraced friendship and the opportunities it offers for growth at the end of the picture book, *Olivia's Voice* celebrates a young hearing-impaired girl who embraces the sights and smells of a school day and a host of friends and teachers who acknowledge that she is a unique individual in her own right. Olivia embraces her school life—she reads and the "words float freely from the pages into my mind", "numbers play acrobats, tumbling and twirling into new numbers", draw[ing] and paint[ing] my ideas", and in music class playing the drum which that "sits in the corner, a sleeping beast waiting to be woken only by me" (Lucas). At night, Olivia hears no sounds "until I sleep," when her imagination presumably faces no constraints. Again, though, the publisher emphasizes that the picture book "allows underrepresented deaf children to see themselves in a story" (Lucas). The need to ensure that as wide an audience as possible is drawn to the story necessitates an added observation that the book also "gives hearing children an opportunity to expand their understanding of the world" ("Olivia's Voice"). Clearly, publishers see the Culturally Conscious category at least in part motivated by altruism; however, it is the Social Conscience approach that ensures sales.

My Daddy is Different is another particularly strong example of a Social Conscience book, but in this case, it is not told from the perspective of a person with a disability. The book's author Faed is an early childhood teacher whose father suffered from a mental illness, which "had a huge impact on her childhood" (Goodreads). This personal experience pervades her book, one aimed at a child dealing with a much-loved father who "started saying strange things, doing strange things" (Faed). His son struggles to understand the change, for it was "like a grey foggy cloud had come over him and had taken away his sunshine" (Faed). Faed's protagonist deals with more than just a lack of understanding, but also shame and embarrassment, and the worry that his "world was no longer colourful" (Faed). He finds comfort, however, in the moments when his father is lucid again and able to articulate his love. Further comfort is found when, on a visit to a hospital, he sees a young girl with the "same worried look in her eyes [reaching] up and hug[ging] her Mummy anyway" (Faed). This realization that "maybe there were other kids whose Mummy or Daddy had a mental illness too", that he "wasn't alone", and that "even if my Daddy was different in some ways, he was still the same Daddy who loved and cared for me" (Faed) ensures a positive ending that does not detract from the nuance of her story. The book concludes with several helplines, which emphasizes the didactic ambitions of the author.

Boy is a fantasy story in which a young boy helps resolve a conflict between the king and a dragon. The third-person narration opens with the king leaving his castle to seek the dragon that has been burning the lands. The reader then meets Boy, the only named character in the narrative. Boy's deafness is immediately foregrounded:

> Boy couldn't hear but he was happy. He spoke with dancing hands and he drew pictures for people in the sand. His parents loved his stories … but the villagers didn't understand. (Cummings)

The use of "but" creates binaries that explore deafness with considerable nuance—Boy is deaf BUT happy, he communicates BUT the villagers don't understand. Nevertheless, Boy inadvertently interjects himself into the battle between the king and the dragon. He initially struggles to be understood, so he "made his hands dance … took a sword and wrote in the sand" (Cummings). He writes "Why are you fighting" in the sand, a question directed at the king, his knights, and the dragon. This opens a dialogue between the warring parties, which ends with Boy drawing a picture in the sand showing them "how their days could be, without fighting and fear" (Cummings). Having seen the conflict resolved, "everyone was waiting to see Boy … 'Thank you' they said with dancing hands" (Cummings). The story ends with the villagers touching their fingers to their chins, with "thank you" in parentheses above their heads. Boy's actions and the villagers' recognition of the value of difference is reminiscent of childhood stories such as "Rudolf the Red-Nosed Reindeer." As it does far more subtly with this Christmas staple, the use of a fantasy setting does not diminish this representation of disability as the popular culture representation of the superhero might; instead, it works as a device to engage young readers and position the deaf character explicitly as a hero to be celebrated.

Sims Bishop's categorization as it applies to disability needs to be approached with some flexibility. *Grandma Forgets* explores the experience of a little girl dealing with her grandmother's dementia, "touching on the cruelty of a condition that robs sufferers of their memories. In the story, Grandma does not recognise family members, forgets how to play their games, and frequently loses Dad's keys" (Merrick). Julia Hope, a lecturer in education and children's literature at Goldsmiths, University of London, argues that the book should be "praised in the way it manages to turn what can be a potentially distressing situation for children into an upbeat, loving and at times fondly comical story" (Merrick). Although the child is a key protagonist, she shares that role with her grandmother, who is clearly identified as experiencing dementia. The picture book ends with the girl's observation that "every time I see Grandma, I tell her that I love her. So it doesn't matter if she forgets" (Russell). As Ian Kinane argues, it is an emotional payoff that puts the illness in a safe context by exploring dementia "in a simple, age-appropriate way" that conveys to the reader "that interaction and affection can be hugely beneficial for a person with dementia and help[s] to ensure that the time they spend together is still pleasurable" (cited in Merrick). *Grandma Forgets*, like other Culturally Conscious texts, acknowledges the lived reality of interacting with a relative with dementia and the challenges this presents for families, without glossing over the impacts of memory loss.

CONCLUSION

Jerry Diakiw argues that "our identities, our attitude to people of different races, our sense of self and therefore probably our sense of national identity or lack of it are largely fixed by the end of elementary school" (cited in Brown 43). The literature provided to children during their formative years plays a vital role in how they subsequently view diversity, which must be considered within the context of broader educational developments. As such, this research provides a timely assessment of how picture books chosen by experts in the field engage with disability. It has shown that a comparatively small number of picture books suitable for the early childhood context address disability. Among these books, the majority takes a Social Conscience or Melting Pot approach to disability and, as a result, may encourage a more generalist understanding of disability. This approach of "we are all different and disability is just another form of difference" has the potential to minimize the true lived experience of disability, especially the more difficult constructs of well-being, relationships, and authentic experience.

Picture books identified that meet the criteria for being Culturally Conscious offer children and adults a more authentic representation of disability. They provide opportunities to present positivity and challenge the societal construct of privilege around disability. The development and inclusion of Culturally Conscious picture books for children provide a stepping stone for the social and political change needed to reduce discrimination and stereotypes and enhance inclusion for our most disadvantaged and isolated children. For if the hand that rocks the cradle does not quite rule the world, it certainly can influence the attitudes and actions of those who will.

Notes

1. Known professionally both as Rudine Sims and Rudine Sims Bishop. In text, "Sims Bishop" will be used. In-text citations will use the publication designation.
2. The picture books analyzed are unpaginated, so specific page references are not provided for these texts throughout. In-text citations will use the author name and text title (if the author has multiple publications).

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