Early childhood educators embrace multiculturalism. The goal of multicultural early childhood education is to prevent children from absorbing stereotypes and to teach them to respect one another's differences. In the early childhood marketplace, manufacturers produce items to meet the demands of the multicultural classroom. Preschools and kindergartens provide everything from plastic sushi in the house centre to child-sized saris in the dress-up corner. A staple in the urban preschool, children's picture books must also address and represent the diversity of the community.

How inclusive are children's books? How inclusive should they be? Books that depict exclusively white, middle-class, nuclear family focussed characters and lifestyles are rejected. Educators insist that children's books must reflect their own communities and the reality of our ever-growing cosmopolitan society. Multicultural children's literature exists. But beyond multiculturalism, how effectively do children's picture books convey a message of tolerance and acceptance with regard to ability/disability?

To answer this question, lists of best children's books were analyzed. The New York Public Library's (NYPL) "100 Picture Books Everyone Should Know" was chosen because as an institution the library has credibility and because the use of "everyone" implies inclusion. The equally credible organization, the Educational Resources and Information Center Clearinghouse on Disabilities and Gifted Education (ERIC) provided the list of "Children's Books about Disabilities".

Fifteen of the 100 titles in the NYPL list are books that can be classified as multicultural, with characters representing a range of races and cultures other than white and middle-class, but none of the titles include obvious representations of or address issues of ability/disability.

In the ERIC list, the spectrum of challenges or disabilities, including physical, developmental and behavioural is well represented. There are books about children who are deaf, have autism and attention deficit disorder. However, despite this...
who are deaf, have autism and attention deficit disorder. However, despite this being a recommended list, this paper finds that books that are written to specifically impart messages to children about ability/disability are often so contrived as to be offensive.

Contrast this to many of the books on the NYPL list which have received a Caldecott Medal or Honor (awarded for distinguished picture books by the Association for Library Service to Children). While not written specifically to address them, these books could perhaps be used to present ability/disability issues in a more thoughtful way than do many of the ERIC books.

This paper looks at six picture books: two from the NYPL list, two from the ERIC list, one book that appears on both lists and one that doesn't appear on either. The paper compares the books using a checklist designed by the Circle of Inclusion, which is an organization dedicated to supporting inclusion of children with special needs in mainstream society.

The NYPL books are *The Snowy Day* (Keats, 1962) about a boy enjoying a snowfall and *A Chair for My Mother* (Williams, 1992) about a girl helping her family buy a chair after their home and all its contents burn in a fire. The ERIC books are *I Have a Sister, My Sister is Deaf* (Peterson, 1977) about an older hearing sister and her younger deaf sister and *Andy and His Yellow Frisbee* (Thompson, 1996) about a girl attempting to befriend a child with autism. The book common to both lists is *Leo the Late Bloomer* (Kraus, 1971) about a young tiger who is not developing as fast as his peers. The ERIC list claims Leo as a book about learning disabilities. The book not on either list is *What's Wrong with Timmy* (Shriver, 2001) about a girl who befriends a boy with a developmental disability.

The main categories of the Circle of Inclusion checklist call for books to show children with disabilities as leaders, problem-solvers and role models. However, in the ERIC books about disabilities, none of the characters display these characteristics. In fact, it is the able-bodied, typically developing peers or parents who are the leaders, problem-solvers and who serve as role-models due to their compassionate acceptance of disabled people.

*Leo the Late Bloomer* is desperately unhappy, ostracized from his peers and whose father wonders what's wrong with him. The other authority figure in the book—Leo's mother—urges the father to give Leo time to develop on his own schedule. No real problem-solving here, Leo's mother makes the decision, not Leo.

Shriver's *What's Wrong with Timmy* also fails to meet the criteria. The leadership is all from Timmy's friend Kate. Kate learns about the issue and takes control. It is her leadership that gets Timmy accepted, although it appears to be founded on pity: "She wondered why God makes life so hard for a kid like Timmy ... how hard it must be for Timmy to make friends and to be teased. As Kate lay there thinking, a tear made its way down her face" (Shriver, 2001). Likewise in *Andy and His Yellow Frisbee, and I Have a Sister*, it is the able-bodied sisters who are the leaders for taking care of their siblings and accepting them despite their disabilities.

The checklist also requires that illustrations should be free of stereotypes, showing children as individuals with distinctive features and offering genuine insights into the lifestyles of the characters with disabilities. However, in *Andy and His Yellow Frisbee*, Andy's face is always turned away from the reader. The illustrations depict Andy's frustration as disruptive behaviour characteristic of those with autism—"He screamed and screamed and screamed." The book misses the opportunity to present the reader with Andy's point of view.

In Shriver's book, the indistinct Timmy seems to be drawn to represent all children with disabilities, capturing no specific individual characteristic that Timmy would have. As for the checklist's caution against the use of "loaded words," it is surprising to see the word "retarded" in the 2001 book.
In contrast to the above, the characters in *The Snowy Day* and *A Chair for My Mother* are positive role models. They are adventurous, self-aware and contribute to their families. They may do more to reach children with disabilities and to drive home a message of inclusion to able-bodied children. In *A Chair for my Mother*, the little girl participates fully in her family's life. She could use a wheelchair, or have Down syndrome, but the point of the story is that she is a member of the family.

Keats' work was acclaimed as a trailblazer for his use of a black child as the main protagonist, but the child's colour was not the point of the story, and neither would be his disability, if he had one. Peter might have been deaf or have autism. This story is about children's joy, no matter what their race, gender or disability.

Each book has its own strengths but the Caldecott Medal and Honor books have proven the test of time and are considered among the best of children's books. Such books may prove more useful in supporting children with disabilities than the books expressly written to meet this objective.

I wanted to convey the joy of being a little boy alive on a certain kind of day – of being for that moment. The air is cold, you touch the snow, aware of the things to which all children are so open.

Ezra Jack Keats on *The Snowy Day* (back inside jacket).

References:


Biographical note:

Sonia Worotynec has been interested in children's literature since 1981 when she began her career in child and family services as a child care worker in Toronto, Canada. She has been a government policy analyst, a college Early Childhood Education instructor and a social policy researcher. Sonia is currently enjoying Lemony Snicket's *A Series of Unfortunate Events*. She can be reached at zsw@vex.net.
Some books inform and educate non-disabled children about disabilities, others acknowledge the challenges of living with a disability. Some books include disabled children casually or incidentally - reinforcing the important message that disabled children are children first, and should not be singled out because of their differences. Isaac and His Amazing Asperger Superpowers! Explains Asperger’s syndrome in a simple, gentle and positive way to very young children. read more >. Categories: Disabilities Tags: anxiety, asperger syndrome, autism, emotions, friends. We’re All Wonders. All children have an innate desire and ability to learn. Research shows that children learn using their senses during active exploration and self-directed play. Learn how to best support this for children with physical disabilities. Play is defined as a spontaneous, naturally occurring activity with objects in the environment that engages attention and interest. Physical play affords a child the opportunity to be active, problem solve, create, communicate and learn about social roles. Play provides opportunities to experiment with everything from cause and effect to higher-level play with object representation and multiple roles. Typically, developing children learn sensorimotor rules and progress cognitively from concrete to relational to functional to creative play. Denying children with disabilities their right to education has a lifelong impact on learning, achievement and employment opportunities, hence hindering their potential economic, social and human development. To ensure that all children enjoy their basic human rights without discrimination, disability inclusion should be mainstreamed in all policies and plans. This applies to education systems, which need to promote inclusion by ensuring the presence, participation and achievement of all children, including children with disabilities. GPE’s vision calls for inclusive and equitable quality educ