“Not a Stereotype”: A Teacher Framework for Evaluating Disability Representation in Children’s Picture Books

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“Not a Stereotype”: A Teacher Framework for Evaluating Disability Representation in Children’s Picture Books

H. Emily Hayden, Strategic Education Research Partnership
Angela M. T. Prince, Iowa State University

Abstract

Researchers and educators have explored representations of people with marginalized identities in children’s picturebooks for over 30 years. Disability has not been widely acknowledged as a marginalized identity nor explored as an aspect of diversity prevalent in classrooms. In the United States, over seven million students are identified with a disability, and most will spend the majority of their school day in general education classrooms. Like other diverse students, they may not see their identities mirrored in classroom literature. Picturebooks featuring main characters with a disability are rare, and some still foreground medical models, limiting individuals with narrow, ableist notions that focus on what a person cannot do rather than what they can. The authors describe the development and teacher validation of the Strong Stories Framework, a brief, research-based evaluation tool designed for teachers to use to select picturebooks that exemplify high-quality literature while foregrounding strengths-based depictions of disability.

Keywords: Inclusive, strengths-based, disabilities, children’s picturebooks, in-service teachers

For over 30 years, research and practitioner journals have explored representation of characters with marginalized identities in children’s picturebooks (CPBs). Unfortunately, disability has not been widely acknowledged as a marginalized identity nor extensively explored as an aspect of diversity in U.S. classrooms (Annamma et al., 2013), perhaps due to beliefs that students with disabilities will receive much of their education outside the general classroom. The numbers tell a different story. During the 2019–20 school year, 14% of U.S. public school students ages 3–21 received special education services. Of these 7.3 million students, 95% spent at least some time in the general classroom, and nearly two thirds received 80% or more of their education in such settings (U.S. Department of Education, 2021). Similar to other students from diverse backgrounds, students with disabilities may not see their identities mirrored in classroom literature (Crisp et al., 2016).

Disability has long been underrepresented in CPBs (Dyches et al., 2006; Emmerson et al., 2014; Hughes, 2012), and books that do feature main characters with a disability still frequently foreground deficit-based views (Koss, 2015) that advance ableist or med-
ical model notions of disability (Hayden & Prince, 2023). This misrepresentation defines and limits people with disabilities, identifying them by what they cannot do (Oliver, 1990). We describe the development and initial trial of the Strong Stories Framework (SSF): a brief, research-based rubric designed for use by educators to evaluate and select CPBs featuring main characters with a disability and encourage strengths-based, critical conversations about disability. Strengths-based views push against deficit models, foregrounding the humanity and agency of all people by focusing first on “what each person is able to do and to be” (Shogren et al., 2017, p. 22) and emphasizing each person’s capacity in any environment or circumstance.

Extensive research has explored the impact that seeing diverse characters has on children, including recent offerings from Bennett et al. (2021), Stewart (2017), and Vehabovic (2021). However, there are very few explorations of how educators evaluate and select diverse CPBs for classroom use. Most research describes lengthy evaluation processes directed to a research audience (Nasitir & Horn, 2003; Ostrosky et al., 2015) and not easily applied in teaching practice. The SSF features eight research-supported items, analyzing both literary quality and strengths-based characterization. During a 10-week period we shared exemplar CPBs, selected for strengths-based characterizations of disability, with teachers and students ages 6–8 in a read-aloud format (Prince & Hayden, 2021). We interviewed the teachers throughout the intervention, asking them to evaluate our process and the suitability of the SSF as an instructional tool. Here, we explore two research questions: (1) What did teachers observe in terms of student engagement with the books and characters? (2) What were teachers’ perceptions of the SSF?

**Definition and Conceptual Framework**

Definitions of disability continue to evolve. In 1980, the World Health Organization (WHO) developed a manual that classified “impairments, disabilities, and handicaps [sic]” (p. 1), including definitions and characteristics for physical, mental, and psychological differences. A decade later, Oliver (1990) proposed a social model of disability, noting that identification as disabled is not a matter of a medical condition, but rather the result of limiting attitudes, structures, and beliefs imposed by society. In 2001 the WHO echoed this model, describing disability as “the outcome of the interaction between a person with an impairment and environmental and attitudinal barriers [they] face” (n.p.). Campbell (2009) named these limiting attitudes and structures “ableism,” and Derby (2016) asserted that ableism remains one of the last socially acceptable forms of discrimination because it “operates below our cultural radar” (p. 106). Recently, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (2019) acknowledged the pervasiveness of ableism, defining it as “a systemic form of oppression deeply embedded in society that devalues disabilities … based on implicit assumptions about standards of physical, intellectual, and emotional normalcy” (p. 17).

To combat the implicit bias inherent in ableism, scholars have suggested strengths-based views, promoting recognition of the whole individual (Shogren et al., 2017) with disability as just one aspect of a person’s life (Hayden & Prince, 2023). Sharing literature with strengths-based representations of disabilities could help children form narratives that refute ableist beliefs. Teachers could support students’ critical thinking as they begin to form their own strengths-based narratives, questioning how society views disability and how we might position people with disabilities more equitably (Prince & Hayden,
2021), paving the way for authentic social change in how disability is viewed (Emmerson et al., 2014; Rankin, 2018). To do this, teachers need efficient, research-based ways to find high-quality literature that unpacks and disrupts ableist views (Hughes, 2012).

**Literature Review**

Bishop’s (1990) metaphor of books as mirrors, windows, or sliding glass doors established the power and possibility of CPBs to expand children’s worldviews, becoming a touchstone for authors who support more diverse representations of characters in children’s literature (Enriquez, 2021; Lin, 2016; Smolkin & Young, 2011). Recent articles expanded this metaphor to analyze children’s library programming (Cahill et al., 2021), the 2020 Rainbow Book List for LGBTQ+ literature (Suzuki et al., 2021), and rural students’ reading experiences (Ruday et al., 2021). As the number and variety of diverse CPBs has increased, the discussion has shifted to focus on more accurate, meaningful representations of characters with marginalized identities. Enriquez (2021) referred to this as questioning the “foggy mirrors, tiny windows, and heavy doors” (p. 103) sometimes found in CPBs. This shift in Bishop’s metaphor is a telling indication that presence does not equal quality.

**Recent Explorations**

Because the SSF was developed for use by teachers, we reviewed the literature in several practitioner journals: *Language Arts*, *The Reading Teacher*, and *Teaching Exceptional Children*. Since 2018 *Language Arts* has published Collins et al.’s (2018) article on the importance of literacy teachers’ engagement with dis/ability studies and narratives, Clark et al.’s (2021) analysis of using CPBs to teach with and against social emotional learning goals, and Quast and Taira’s (2021) ethnographic case study of the intersectional identities, literacy experiences, and assets of one student with autism. In this same timeframe, *The Reading Teacher* has published Pennell and colleagues’ (2018) argument for including disability representations in classroom libraries, along with their search criteria for locating books, and Kleekamp and Zapata’s (2019) extensive guiding questions for inclusive text selection. In 2021 *The Reading Teacher* published Tondreau and Rabinowitz’s proposed lesson plan sequence guiding third-grade students to apply critical literacy skills to analyze disability representation in books; however, we view some of the student prompts they proposed as problematic, guiding students to consider whether characters with a disability are depicted as “ugly, deformed, or monstrous” (p. 64). Although we fully support “open dialogue through questioning that encourages students to explain their reasoning” (Tondreau & Rabinowitz, 2021, p. 66), connecting such loaded words (Nasatir & Horn, 2003) to teaching actions in early childhood classrooms is likely to promote negative responses (Ostrosky et al., 2015), reify medical model ableism, and position characters with disabilities as so outside of societal norms (Oliver, 1990) as to be considered inhuman (e.g. “monstrous”).

*Teaching Exceptional Children* has published on this topic for quite some time (Altieri, 2008; Dyches et al., 2009; Leininger et al., 2010; Prater & Dyches, 2008). These offerings are generally designed for an audience of special educators, although recent articles have explored inclusive focuses. Artman-Meeker and colleagues (2016) provided five discussion themes for use during shared readings, culled from “best practice in [both] special education and children’s literature” (p. 151) and centered on disability portrayal,
family roles, cultural diversity, voice, and self-determination. More recently, we (Prince & Hayden, 2021) outlined a process that general or special educators could use for class read-alouds that promote inclusion and belonging with typically developing peers, evaluating books for appealing theme, strengths-based characterization, realistic plot, social inclusion, and narrator’s point of view.

Evaluation Tools for Teachers

The literature above established the necessity of including disability representations in classroom libraries and provided extensive guidance for book selection. However, the time constraints teachers navigate require conciseness, and validity of such tools is essential. We were unable to locate previous studies that provided teachers with a quick-use tool for selecting CPBs featuring main characters with a disability, although recent studies have explored this with other aspects of diversity. Nganga (2020) gave preservice teachers tools to analyze diversity representations using a critical multicultural lens. de Bruijn and colleagues (2021) developed an analysis tool drawing on critical multicultural theory and critical race theory but did not collect in-service teachers’ perceptions of its effectiveness. Henderson et al. (2020) described one in-service teacher group’s use of specific criteria to analyze diversity in their classroom libraries but, similarly, did not provide an instructional tool for this task. We aim to fill this gap by exploring teachers’ responses to the SSF as an instructional tool.

Teacher Judgment and the Development of Valid, Reliable Instruments

Our first research question asked teachers to report on student engagement with CPBs selected using the SSF. There is strong support for the validity of teacher noticing in this area. Observing and interpreting student responses to instruction is a critical part of professional knowledge for teaching (Schnitzler et al., 2020), and Kelly and Abruzzo (2021) noted, “teacher reports can say a great deal about the nature of implementation—revealing when teachers themselves notice an improvement in the classroom learning experience” (p. 307). Meta-analyses have shown that experienced teachers make accurate judgments of students’ cognitive abilities (Machts et al., 2016) and achievement (Südkamp et al., 2012), and Schnitzler and colleagues (2020) extended this research to explore ways novice teachers make judgments about student engagement, revealing multiple observable student behaviors that mark engagement.

Our second research question explored teacher perceptions of the SSF: our initial steps toward establishing face validity (Holden, 2010). We grounded our analytical design in teachers’ expertise by gathering their responses to items as well as their observations of the SSF’s usefulness to promote student learning. Quantitative surveys are often developed with data gathered through such qualitative methods, and we draw on teacher knowledge to “unpack [the] complex phenomena” (Desimone & Le Floch, 2004, p. 18) that surround questions of ableism, equity, and diversity in classrooms and, specifically, in CPBs. We will use this initial validation to refine the SSF into a tool to gather quantitative data in valid, reliable ways.
Methods and Materials

Participants and Setting

Teacher participants in this interview study were part of a larger 10-week study analyzing children’s responses to CPBs featuring main characters with a disability. Each week, Emily read a different picturebook to students ages 6–8 attending a school in the rural midwestern United States. Teachers accompanied their class to the read-aloud each week and received a copy of the picturebook for their classroom library. Table 1 presents demographic information for the teachers, who were each interviewed three times during the 10-week study. This analysis reports data from Interview 3.

Table 1
Teacher Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Educator</th>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Years of experience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Diana</td>
<td>2nd-grade teacher</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helen</td>
<td>2nd-grade teacher</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Katie</td>
<td>1st-grade reading interventionist</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maddie</td>
<td>3rd-grade teacher</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tess</td>
<td>1st-grade reading interventionist</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Books

Prior to Interview 3 we assigned one CPB to each teacher to evaluate using the SSF. Teachers included additional books in their interview responses. Each book teachers referenced is summarized below.

*Armond Goes to a Party: A Book About Asperger’s and Friendship* (Carlson & Isaak, 2014) details Armond’s planning prior to attending a friend’s party. Armond lists reasons he dislikes parties: noise, disorganization, and schedule disruptions. At the party, all of his fears come true. He uses his prior planning and supportive relationship with the hosts to take agency, moving to a quiet space for a break and rejoining the party in time for presents, cake, and singing.

*I Am Helen Keller* (Meltzer, 2015) tells the life story of Helen, who was a typically developing child until an illness left her deaf and blind. Her life was changed by a teacher, Anne Sullivan. Helen attended Radcliffe at Harvard University, becoming the first deaf and blind person to graduate with a college degree, and lived a life of advocacy for people with disabilities.

*Emmanuel’s Dream: The True Story of Emmanuel Ofosu Yeboah* (Thompson, 2015) is set in Ghana, West Africa. Emmanuel was born with a limb difference and learned
to negotiate the world with his mother’s guidance. He attended school at a time when most children with disabilities did not. When his mother died, he cycled around Ghana to raise awareness about people with disabilities and was deemed a national hero.

*The Girl Who Thought in Pictures: The Story of Dr. Temple Grandin* (Mosca, 2017) is a biography of the world-renowned scientist, author, and autism self-advocate. In her early life, Temple was not expected to talk, live independently, or have a steady job. Using her strengths as a visual thinker, Dr. Grandin revolutionized the treatment of animals.

*King for a Day* (Khan, 2014) tells the story of Malik, a Pakistani child, and his participation in rooftop kite battles that are part of the festival of Basant. Although Malik is depicted using a wheelchair for mobility, this is never mentioned in the story, which focuses on his success in the kite battles, earning him the title “King for a Day.”

*Mrs. Gorski, I Think I Have the Wiggle Fidgets (A Story About Attention, Distraction, and Creativity)* (Esham, 2008) details the experiences of David, a child with attention deficits. Chastised in class, David believes his teacher dislikes him. He wants to pay attention, but his ideas and interests pull him off task. Before a parent-teacher meeting, David develops strategies he can use to support his attention in class. He successfully proposes these strategies to his parents and teacher, demonstrating self-determination and agency.

*Moses Goes to a Concert* (Millman, 2002) tells the story of Moses, a Deaf child who enjoys the sensory experiences associated with music. Moses attends a school for Deaf children, and he and his classmates are pleasantly surprised when their teacher takes them to a concert. The children are seated near the percussion section and are each given a balloon to feel the vibrations of the music. This book gives hearing people brief exposure to the experiences of Deaf people, includes American Sign Language in the narrative, and shows the hand alphabet in endnotes.

**The SSF**

To develop the SSF, we analyzed an existing research-based 43-item rubric for evaluating CPBs featuring main characters with a disability (Crawford, 2016) based on depiction of disability as well as literary features: physical appearance of the book, characterization, literary style, plot, setting, theme, and point of view. We utilized Crawford’s (2016) rubric to select 18 books and develop discussion questions for the 10-week intervention and used our initial analysis of students’ responses to refine the 43-item rubric for teacher use. This original SSF contained 10 items (see Table 2). During Interview 3 we asked five questions about the 10-week intervention, then asked about teachers’ perceptions of the SSF.
Table 2

Original 10-Item Strong Stories Framework

1. Illustrations and images show the character actively involved in the environment.
2. A balance of roles exists between the main character and their peers. Characters share roles of leader, problem solver, role model, and hero.
3. The character is not presented as a stereotyped case (e.g., violent, laughable, a burden, pitiable, victimized, dependent, lesson in perseverance).
4. The character represents ethnic, racial, or linguistic diversity or diversity in lifestyle or family structure.
5. The narrative and dialogue are appropriate for the age of the reader.
6. The story catches interest within the first three to five pages.
7. Accurate information regarding the disability is provided throughout the plot.
8. Interesting plot is presented throughout story.
9. The story promotes the social model of disability.
10. The story is written from the perspective of the main character, either in first person or third person limited form.

Results

Teachers’ Observations of Student Engagement With Books and Characters

Teachers demonstrated a multidirectional approach to noticing student engagement (Kelly & Abruzzo, 2021), providing specific examples of ways the books met, or did not meet, literary or characterization elements described on the SSF. They combined these examples with actions they saw their students take. Teachers described ways they purposefully extended topics from the books into class discussions and reported student-initiated dialogue about item-related topics. This evidence that strengths-based conversations occurred after our read-alouds, initiated by either teachers or students, attests to the relevance of the SSF items. They “ring true” (Rossman & Rallis, 2017, p. 53), lending face validity and credibility to the SSF as a tool for selecting books that can initiate strengths-based conversations, potentially introducing the social model of disability into early childhood classrooms.

Student engagement and individual SSF items. Teachers identified specific instances of book characters actively involved in the environment (Item 1), noting how these depictions helped their class and individual students engage in strengths-based discussions, advancing the social model of disability (Item 9). Diana (second-grade teacher) provided a specific example for Mrs. Gorski, I Think I Have the Wiggle Fidgets (Esham, 2008), noting that one of her students “actually pointed out in the book that he acts just like the character. That one really hits home with a lot of my students.” Teachers rated this book as providing accurate information about attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD; Item 7), and Maddie (third-grade teacher) described it as “a great resource to show how
to find solutions for things that students find challenging.” Maddie identified specific plot elements that took the stigma out of ADHD by depicting strengths-based ways to negotiate challenges. Because the main character is portrayed as agentive rather than dependent (Item 3), Maddie’s students discussed using such strengths-based responses in their own lives, adopting some of the discourse from the book:

We talked about what happens or [what] you can do, like stand at your desk or wiggle your feet under your desk … that it’s okay [to] have wiggle fidgets as long as we can figure out how to help ourselves and each other when we have them.

Another book teachers rated with accurate information about a disability (Item 7) was *Armond Goes to a Party* (Carlson & Isaak, 2014). Tess (first-grade teacher) noted that Asperger’s syndrome is

kind of an invisible difference, an invisible disability. A lot of times it’s invisible because it’s undiagnosed and the kids just get put into this ... [not] like “I have this disability” [they] get put into the “weird box” ... “oh, you’re weird.” And so, this book was so good.

The extended conversations about books that took place in classrooms after read-alouds indicated interesting plots throughout the stories (Item 8), and all the books caught and held the interest of students in the first few pages (Item 6). Helen (second-grade teacher) noted the interest level of *King for a Day* (Khan, 2014), saying that the images of kite flying were “just so relatable to kids. [They are] aware of kites and what they are and what you need to fly them. That got them excited.” In this book Malik is actively involved in his environment (Item 1) and defined by his skill during kite battles rather than by his disability. Malik uses a wheelchair for mobility and students noted that he has “a challenge,” but this was not the focus of the story; in fact, Malik’s disability is never addressed in the story. Diana (second-grade teacher) described her students’ reactions to this book: “[They were] able to relate that everyone’s different, but everybody’s capable of achieving success.” Her students noticed that the story “wasn’t really labeled as there was a difference or a disability,” making this book an exemplar of the social model of disability (Item 9).

*King for a Day* was one of the few books we found that depicted intersections of race and culture with disability (Item 4). It inspired conversations about cultural diversity because the story plays out on the rooftops and in the skies over Lahore during Basant, a festival unique to Malik’s culture. Helen’s second-grade students, who lived in rural settings or small towns and attended a rural school, noticed the differences in homes, asking, “Why do you need fences on the roof?” Helen used these questions as conversation starters to explore different cultures and different ways of doing and being.

Curricular connections. The nature of early childhood teachers’ work is to connect experiences across content areas, and teachers described how the books and the SSF as an organizer influenced other classroom activities. The familiar topic of kite flying in *King for a Day* opened opportunities to explore the diversity of lifestyle and culture depicted. The illustrations and images of the Basant festival, unique to Malik’s culture, and the visual differences between the cityscape and rooftops of Lahore, Pakistan, and the students’ own outdoor spaces intrigued and engaged students. This book led to discussions of diverse customs for holidays and dress.
Other books connected with curriculum in English language arts and social studies. *I Am Helen Keller* (Meltzer, 2015) contributed naturally to the study of biography, and Helen (second-grade teacher) noted that because this book was written from Keller’s perspective (Item 10) it was easier for students to read and understand (Item 5). Students in Maddie’s third-grade class selected books from the read-alouds for an author study unit. They also spontaneously recalled Helen’s story during social studies discussions of events during the same timeframe. *Emmanuel’s Dream* (Thompson, 2015) inspired discussions about socioeconomic diversity.

Tess (first-grade teacher) noticed that her students were engaged by the sign language alphabet in the endnotes for *Moses Goes to a Concert* (Millman, 2002). Capitalizing on their interest, Tess incorporated this alphabet as multimodal support for learning vowel sounds. Katie (first-grade teacher) noted that this book would also lend itself to a science unit studying vibrations and sound waves, because Moses and his classmates used balloons to feel sound waves and were allowed to experiment with percussion instruments.

**Teachers’ Perceptions of SSF**

We did not ask questions about individual items; however, all 10 emerged in interview data, as described above. Additionally, teachers provided specific design feedback that we used to develop the final eight-item SSF (Table 3). Tess (first-grade teacher) emphasized ease of use and suggested adding boxes for teachers’ notes, such as special information, “what to be ready to explain. A lot of old books are still fine to read, but they just need some explanation from a teacher.” Tess noted,

> There are so many things in [the SSF] that made me think harder. “A character is not presented as a stereotyped case” [Item 3], and then it gave examples. I really like that one because sometimes I think I would have marked the book as a wonderful story had I not thought about that. But [the SSF] made me think more about, is this a great thing or is it just a stereotype?

Diana’s (second-grade teacher) data also suggested ways to clarify the SSF while retaining the strengths-based focus. For example, none of the teachers shared specific comments regarding Item 2: “A balance of roles exists between the main character and their peers. Characters share roles of leader, problem solver, role model, and hero.” However, Diana described her analysis of illustrations (Item 1) and how they worked with the text in *The Girl Who Thought in Pictures* (Mosca, 2017) to depict how Temple’s positioning changed over the course of her story, from being excluded because of her differences to becoming a leader by capitalizing on her problem-solving strengths:

> The illustrations took from her childhood up until her adulthood [and] showed her span of how she was treated earlier in her childhood and then as an adult. She was able to take her pictures in her mind and create brilliant things with them.

Helen (second-grade teacher) echoed the importance of analyzing illustrations: “[The SSF] made me look at the books for the artwork, the illustrations, the pictures and does that match the text, because that doesn’t always happen.” We clarified Items 1 and 2 to provide more detail for analysis.
Katie (first-grade teacher) added that teachers should note nonfiction features such as endnotes that give more information about a real person’s story or about a disability. She also recommended noticing whether characters were depicted as animals versus humans. Authors sometimes depict a character as an animal to allow children emotional distance and greater room for criticality “when the story message is very powerful, personal, and painful” (Burke & Copenhaver, 2004, p. 213). However, this choice allows authors to sidestep representing racial and cultural backgrounds of characters. Disproportionate numbers of racialized children in the United States are identified with educational disabilities (National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2020); however, intersectionality of race, culture, and gender is not reflected in CPBs depicting main characters with a disability (Hayden & Prince, 2023; Crisp et al., 2016; Koss, 2015). These topics should be part of critical discussions of disability representation (Clark et al., 2021). We added information to Item 4 guiding teachers to consider authors’ choices regarding representation of characters.

Finally, data from Katie (first-grade teacher) and Maddie (third-grade teachers) led us to significantly revise Item 3. Both wondered why a character’s perseverance would be a bad thing to depict. Katie noted, “I just feel like kids today, more than ever, need to see characters building their perseverance.” We agree. However, perseverance should not be the only aspect students notice about a character. Perseverance was the predominant theme in second graders’ discussions of Emmanuel’s Dream (Thompson, 2015), which is not surprising given that the book ends with Emmanuel’s unique efforts to raise awareness about disabled people in his country. Strengths-based views push us to take a more multidimensional view of disability (Crawford, 2016) and avoid defining people by one aspect of their lives or bodies. Limiting someone to one role, even a heroic one, positions them outside of socially typical norms (Derby, 2016; Oliver, 1990), opening the door to stigma or exclusion. We revised Item 3 to remove the negative framing of the question (“not”), foreground strengths-based characterization (“is presented as someone with both strengths and challenges”), and specify that perseverance should not be the “only” quality represented.

Discussion

Kelly and Abruzzo (2021) established the importance of “teacher noticing,” adding that this “must be applied to the interpretation of student understandings and development of appropriate instructional strategies to be useful” (p. 307). Our research questions explored teachers’ noticing in both their interpretations of students’ engagement with CPBs and their perceptions of the SSF as an instructional tool. Teachers in this study provided specific examples of strengths-based conversations and activities students engaged in after listening to read-alouds of selected CPBs, providing evidence of student engagement with the critical topics and literary elements present. Teachers also described cross-curricular connections, adding to the instructional value of books chosen with SSF criteria. Finally, teachers provided evidence to support the credibility of every item on the SSF, with specific suggestions for clarifying this tool.
### Table 3.

**The Strong Stories Framework—Revised (Authors)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Element</th>
<th>Yes/no/unclear</th>
<th>Teacher comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Illustrations and images show the character with a disability actively involved in the environment: interacting with other characters in the activities depicted in the story.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. The character with a disability shares roles of leader, problem solver, role model, and hero, versus being depicted in subsidiary or inferior roles.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. The character with a disability is presented as someone with both strengths and challenges: a multidimensional person just like able-bodied people, rather than stereotyped as violent, laughable, a burden, pitiable, victimized, dependent, or only a lesson in perseverance.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. The character with a disability represents ethnic, racial, or linguistic diversity or diversity in identity or family structure (e.g., LGBTQIA+ or single-parent families). Is the character depicted as an animal or non-human? How does that impact understanding?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. The book catches the interest of most children within the first three to five pages and holds that interest throughout the story.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. The book provides accurate information regarding the disability throughout the plot.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. The book promotes the social model of disability.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. The book is written from the perspective of the character with a disability or the narrator.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* LGBTQIA+ = lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning/queer, intersex, asexual.

**Streamlining the SSF**

Changes to the SSF resulting from our analysis are highlighted in Table 3. We added a clause to Item 1 defining “actively involved in the environment” and refined Item 2 by removing the sentence “A balance of roles exists between the main character and their peers” and adding a clarifying clause, “rather than being depicted in subsidiary or inferior roles.” We revised Item 3 to foreground strengths-based, multidimensional views of characters with disabilities. We added language to Item 4 to further define the intersectionality we expect to see in future CPBs depicting characters with a disability and to initiate critical
conversations about intersectional identities and representation. Finally, we collapsed original Items 5, 6, and 8 into one new Item 5, leaving Items 7, 9, and 10 intact and renumbered.

**Limitations and Future Research**

Many authors have suggested ways researchers and teachers can analyze picture-books whose main character has a disability. Not all have done this from a strengths-based perspective (Shogren et al., 2017). As definitions of disability have evolved, some of these analytical tools use outdated, ableist terminology and some recent offerings have proposed teacher prompts with potentially traumatizing language. The SSF was designed to foreground strengths-based views of disability in a research-based, quick-use instructional tool, and teachers in this study characterized it as useful and credible for evaluating CPBs featuring main characters with a disability. Additional research collecting quantitative as well as qualitative data is needed to fully validate this tool, and it should be conducted with larger samples of teachers, with diverse identities, across multiple rural, urban, and suburban locations.

Teachers in this study did not receive prior training for use of the SSF. However, each teacher had detailed knowledge of the book they reviewed. Future research could consider providing training for teachers before using the SSF to evaluate CPBs. Differential outcomes could be explored, adding to reliability assessments of the SSF.

**Conclusion**

Our purpose was to gather initial validation data for the SSF as an instructional tool for evaluating CPBs on both literary quality and strengths-based depictions of disability. Although an increasing number of students with disabilities are educated in general classroom settings, depictions of main characters with a disability are rare in CPBs, and not all that are available depict their characters in strengths-based ways. Research on such books has increased of late, but we found no studies providing a research-based, quick-use tool for teachers to quickly evaluate CPBs for literary elements as well as strengths-based depictions of disability. We plan to build on initial validation data reported here, sharing the SSF with a broader, more diverse sample of teachers to determine large-scale reliability and validity, and ultimately to make the SSF widely available to general classroom and special education teachers, administrators, and professional development leaders.

**About the Authors**

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References


