

# It's Hard to Be What You Can't See: Using Children's Books to Promote Inclusion

**Shivani Pandit**  
shivanipandit@saamarthya.org  
**Camille Catlett**  
camille.catlett@unc.edu

## A World View of Inclusion

### Realization of the Sustainable Development Goals By, For and With Persons with Disabilities: UN Flagship Report on Disability and Development 2018

<https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/publication-disability-sdgs.html>

- *Upholding the rights and ensuring the full inclusion of the world's one billion persons with disabilities is a moral imperative. It is also a practical necessity if we are to build healthy, sustainable societies to the benefit of all people of all ages and abilities.*

### National Education Policy 2020 (India)

[https://www.education.gov.in/sites/upload\\_files/mhrd/files/NEP\\_Final\\_English.pdf](https://www.education.gov.in/sites/upload_files/mhrd/files/NEP_Final_English.pdf)

- *Education is a great leveler and is the best tool for achieving economic and social mobility, **inclusion**, and equality. Initiatives must be in place to ensure that all students from such groups, despite inherent obstacles, are provided various targeted opportunities to **enter and excel** in the educational system. (p.4)*

### Early childhood inclusion: A joint position statement of the Division for Early Childhood (DEC) and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC)

<https://www.decdocs.org/position-statement-inclusion>

- *Early childhood inclusion embodies the values, policies, and practices that support the right of every infant and young child and his or her family, regardless of ability, to participate in a broad range of activities and contexts as full members of families, communities, and society.*

### Greatest barrier to inclusion: Attitudes

- Preschool Inclusion Challenges and Solutions: A National Survey (Barton & Smith, 2015)  
[https://ectacenter.org/~pdfs/topics/inclusion/inclusion\\_survey\\_summary\\_9.16.pdf](https://ectacenter.org/~pdfs/topics/inclusion/inclusion_survey_summary_9.16.pdf)

## Children's Books as a Vehicle for Promoting Inclusion

- Activity: Do you remember when you recognized yourself/your family in a book for the first time?
  - How You Felt When You Recognized Yourself in a Book for the First Time  
<https://www.weareteachers.com/diverse-books-meaning/>
- Windows and Mirrors and Sliding Glass Doors
  - It's Hard to Be What You Can't See  
[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/marian-wright-edelman/its-hard-to-be-what-you-c\\_b\\_8022776.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/marian-wright-edelman/its-hard-to-be-what-you-c_b_8022776.html)
  - Many Kids of Color Don't See Themselves in the Books They Read  
[https://www.marketwatch.com/story/males-particularly-white-males-are-persistently-overrepresented-many-kids-of-color-dont-see-themselves-in-the-books-they-read-11628535154?link=MW\\_latest\\_news](https://www.marketwatch.com/story/males-particularly-white-males-are-persistently-overrepresented-many-kids-of-color-dont-see-themselves-in-the-books-they-read-11628535154?link=MW_latest_news)
  - Mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors <https://scenicregional.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Mirrors-Windows-and-Sliding-Glass-Doors.pdf>
  - Rudine Sims Bishop [https://youtu.be/\\_AAu58SNSyc](https://youtu.be/_AAu58SNSyc)
  - Windows and Mirrors and Sliding Glass Doors: Ensuring Students See Themselves and Others in Literature  
<https://humaneeducation.org/windows-and-mirrors-and-sliding-glass-doors-ensuring-students-see-themselves-and-others-in-literature/>
- Report: 2019 Diversity in Children's and Young Adult Literature  
<https://bookriot.com/diversity-in-childrens-and-young-adult-literature/>

## Inclusion and Children's Books

### Disabled Persons in India. A Statistical Profile 2016.

[http://mospi.nic.in/sites/default/files/publication\\_reports/Disabled\\_persons\\_in\\_India\\_2016.pdf](http://mospi.nic.in/sites/default/files/publication_reports/Disabled_persons_in_India_2016.pdf)

- About 2.2% of India's population lives with some kind of physical or intellectual disability, which is about 30 million persons. Inclusion is possible only when disabilities are "visible" in the society. And the most effective way of making societies inclusive is to focus on its youngest citizens. When we can have conversations with young children that normalize disabilities, only then will they grown up to be truly inclusive-minded adults.
- Children's literature is a great tool to engage young children in stories that can shape their young minds to becoming more empathetic. As we know, healthy friendship with typical peers is the hallmark of social inclusion and we can never truly achieve this goal unless we talk to and engage typical children in conversations related to disabilities.
- We found that children with disabilities are often "invisible" from children books. It is not easy to find books that portray children with diverse abilities as central characters; particularly in a strength-based manner. Additionally, merely publishing inclusive books without a strategic intent to have conversations with young children to normalize disability is neither an effective nor a meaningful approach to inclusion.
- With this learning, we articulated our foundation's purpose to create meaningful, inclusive conversations by creating children's books that are rich with stories of ALL children. Our mission is that children with disabilities should be able to "see" themselves in literature; and children without disabilities should be able to "see" and embrace diverse needs through stories that are positive, engaging, fun and normalizing.
- Our inclusive books focus on one disability category at a time and invite children to share their thoughts, ask questions, reflect and find meaning in the story that can shape their young minds to being more empathetic.

### Examples and Resources from the Saamarthya Foundation:

**Children's Books:** set of 8 books highlighting 8 disability diagnoses, designed for children between the ages of 5-10 years. <https://www.saamarthya.org/naini-inclusive-books>

**Book Nook:** We are developing a curated list of children's books that focus on social-emotional topics, with a special emphasis on disability and inclusion issues.

**Inclusive Toolkit:** We are currently developing a toolkit for training teachers that will provide classroom activities that help teachers use our inclusive books, the book nook in an effective manner.

### Examples and Resources from Children's Publishing in India

- Depictions of disability in children's books: A view from India <https://madinasia.org/2020/06/depictions-of-disability-in-childrens-books/?fbclid=IwAR0DJx5gbDtQJ77oagHNsTUCL-UsfmKPEKp0bEEbVjPbe51rD9nxPqgJefc>

## Selecting and Using Children's Books

- Checklist: Considerations in Selecting Books for Young Children that Build Equity and Inclusion (pgs. 3-4)
- Free Resources About Similarities and Differences <https://scriptnc.fpg.unc.edu/natural-resources-free-resources-about-similarities-and-differences>
- Using Stories to Nurture Identity <https://www.zerotothree.org/resources/2788-using-stories-to-nurture-identity>
- Children's Books: Portrayals of People with Disabilities <https://iris.peabody.vanderbilt.edu/resources/books/>
- 2021 IBBY Selection of Outstanding Books for Young People with Disabilities [https://www.ibby.org/fileadmin/user\\_upload/2021\\_IBBY\\_Outstanding\\_Catalogue.pdf?fbclid=IwAR1sGREZOFMKtOpZ7uJhSBiDntzO4490DitOKBVIrsKIH E\\_qmtrs04hjgg4](https://www.ibby.org/fileadmin/user_upload/2021_IBBY_Outstanding_Catalogue.pdf?fbclid=IwAR1sGREZOFMKtOpZ7uJhSBiDntzO4490DitOKBVIrsKIH E_qmtrs04hjgg4)
- Reading at Circle Time <https://connectmodules.dec-sped.org/connect-modules/resources/videos/video-1-16/>
- SCRIPT-NC 2021 webinar: Using Children's Books to Support Identity, Equity, and Inclusion <https://scriptnc.fpg.unc.edu/script-nc-2021-webinar-using-childrens-books-support-identity-equity-and-inclusion>



## Considerations in Selecting Books for Young Children that Build Equity and Inclusion

Considerations for Characters	Yes	No	N/A	Comments
1. <b>Look at the characters who are diverse.</b> Are they treated like strong, active, and capable individuals? Are they able to make a contribution? Are they portrayed and treated as if they are lacking? Are diverse characters placed on a pedestal? Does their inclusion reflect tokenism?				
2. <b>Watch how the characters treat each other.</b> Do characters model views or actions that you would like children to emulate?				
3. <b>Consider how families are portrayed.</b> Are families of diverse cultures, compositions, and configurations portrayed authentically and respectfully? How are siblings depicted? Are siblings shown as being allies?				
4. <b>Consider the insights children will gain from the book.</b> Are there one or more characters with whom a young reader who is diverse can readily identify in positive and constructive ways? Do the words and images provide <u>mirrors</u> (i.e., an accurate reflection that values diverse children, their families, and their communities)? Do the words and images provide <u>windows and/or sliding doors</u> (i.e., opportunities to learn about or partake in someone else's experience)?				
5. <b>Consider the potential impact of the book.</b> Will it help to expand a child's world view? Will it build knowledge of other cultures and lifeways? Will it provide accurate insights that build opportunities for inclusion?				
Considerations for the Story, Theme & Setting	Yes	No	N/A	Comments
6. <b>Think about the narrative.</b> How are problems resolved? Does the storyline <u>encourage</u> conversations about differences? Does the storyline facilitate normalizing conversations? Does the storyline help change stereotypes or change the narrative? Does the theme allow the characters to go beyond "hero-ism"? Are children able to relate to the story irrespective of the character's ability?				
7. <b>Watch the vocabulary.</b> Is person-first language used (e.g., a child with a disability rather than a disabled child)? Is current and preferred terminology used?				

Considerations for the Story, Theme & Setting (continued)	Yes	No	N/A	Comments
8. <b>Look for the values conveyed through the book.</b> Does the narrative emphasize equity, fairness, and inclusion?				
9. <b>Look at the places in the book.</b> Are the ways in which homes, communities, and other settings portrayed and depicted authentically and respectfully? Does the context support or refute stereotypes?				
10. <b>Consider the insights children will gain from the book.</b> Are there one or more characters with whom diverse young children can readily identify in positive and constructive ways? Do the words and images provide <u>mirrors</u> (i.e., an accurate reflection that values diverse children, their families, and their communities?) Do the words and images provide <u>windows and/or sliding doors</u> (i.e., opportunities to learn about or partake in someone else's experience)?				
11. <b>Consider the potential impact of the book.</b> Will it help to expand a child's world view? Will it build knowledge of other cultures and lifeways? Will it provide accurate insights that build opportunities for inclusion?				
12. <b>Consider the setting.</b> Do the stories promote understanding of our diverse society? Does the book speak to ALL children?				
Considerations for the Illustrations	Yes	No	N/A	Comments
13. <b>Consider the age-appropriateness of the illustration style.</b> Are the illustrations colorful and engaging to hold young children's attention?				
14. <b>Consider how the illustrations portray different people.</b> Are diverse populations represented well?				
15. <b>Look at the illustrator's experience and background with the communities represented.</b> Are the illustrations and the information they communicate accurate and respectful?				
16. <b>Do the illustrations represent diversity within cultural groups?</b> Are the illustrations mindful of cultural differences within groups? Do the images capture diversity from the real world?				
17. <b>Are characters realistically and genuinely portrayed?</b>				
18. <b>Do the illustrations avoid reinforcing societal stereotypes?</b>				

This checklist was adapted by Camille Catlett and Shivani Pandit from Catlett & George (2005), Rudine Sims Bishop (1990), Derman-Sparks and the A.B.C. Task Force (1989), and Barnes, Berrigan, & Biklen (1978).