

# Searching for Mirror Books for Young Asian/Asian-American Children with Disabilities

*By Sohyun Meacham, Su-Jeong Wee, Wu-Ying Hsieh, Pei-Chun Chen, and Bryce Davis*

In searching for high-quality mirror books written in English for young Asian/Asian-American (A/AA) children with disabilities, we looked at all picture books with the Asian/Pacific American Award for Literature (APAAL, henceforth) or the Schneider Family Award (SFA, henceforth). Considering that picture books make up the majority of the reading experiences of young children below the third grade, it is unfortunate that there are far fewer characters portraying disabilities found in picture books than in chapter books or other forms of children's literature (Prater 59). In a benchmark work on this topic, Dyches and colleagues analyzed portrayals of disabilities in Caldecott picture books, which is an award based on the quality of the illustrations. Their analysis found that the ratio of the percentage of characters with disabilities included in the corpus of Caldecott picture books was much smaller than the percentage of students with disabilities in U.S. schools. Such characters appeared in only 4% of the Caldecott books, whereas 12% of the students in public schools had a disability in the year that the analysis took place. In our literature review, we could not detect any scholarly literature about the APAAL or SFA picture books. Therefore, we realized that content analyses of the picture books with the APAAL focusing on disability portrayals and of picture books with the SFA focusing on A/AA identities would be a valuable contribution to the scholarly literature.

The APAAL is awarded to literary works published in the U. S. "about Asian/Pacific Americans and their heritage, based on literary and artistic merit" (Asian/Pacific American Librarians Association [APALA]). Eligibility for APAAL requires authentic representations of Asian/Pacific-American experiences and Asian/Pacific authorship/illustratorship. No mention of disability portrayals appears in the official materials of APAAL (APALA). On the other hand, the SFA, bestowed by the American Library Association, "honor(s) an author or illustrator for a book (published in English)

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**Sohyun Meacham** is an associate professor in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at the University of Northern Iowa. **Su-Jeong Wee** is an assistant professor in the Department of Child and Family Studies at the California State University, Los Angeles. **Wu-Ying Hsieh** is an associate professor in the department of Special Education at the University of Northern Iowa. **Pei-Chun Chen** is an assistant professor of counseling in the School of Applied Human Sciences at the University of Northern Iowa. **Bryce Davis** is a teacher at Griffith Elementary School.

that embodies an artistic expression of the disability experience for child and adolescent audiences... The *distinguished* portrayal of people living with a disabling condition..." (American Library Association). This is one of the major criteria for the SFA. In particular, there must be a protagonist or secondary character with a disability, which could be physical, mental, or emotional. The character with the disability should be realistic and significant in the story, "not merely a passive bystander." The book should include accurate information about the disability. According to our investigation of their official website, the SFA does not seem to promote racial diversity or intersectionality among the books they award. As there are no published research articles extant about picture books with the SFA, information about racial diversity among the protagonists with disabilities in them is not available.

We used the total pool of 53 picture books awarded the APAAL from 2001 to 2020 or the SFA from 2004 to 2020. These periods cover all APAAL and SFA picture books from the institution of the awards to the time that the current project concluded. There may be other books that did not receive the APAAL or SFA where A/AAs with disabilities were portrayed. However, the APAAL and SFA are the only existing awards for children's literature that focus on the experiences of Asian Americans and people with disabilities, respectively. We expected to find quality picture books that mirrored the experiences of Asian/Asian-American children with disabilities in these two groups. Our analysis consisted of three phases: 1) to identify the A/AA characters with disabilities; 2) to describe these characters in relation to the other characters, setting, plot, and illustrations; and 3) to critically analyze the representational issues, power relations, and inequalities related to ethnic/racial backgrounds. For phases 1 and 2, we used a protocol adapted from Dyches and Prater's work. First, in order to identify the A/AA characters with disabilities in picture books with APAAL, we used a classification of the IDEA 2004 legislation. Therefore, thirteen disability categories were used, as follows: specific learning disability, other health impairment, autism spectrum disorder, emotional disturbance, speech or language impairment, visual impairment, developmental delay, orthopedic impairment, hearing impairment, deaf-blindness, intellectual disability, traumatic brain injury, and multiple disabilities (see USDOE's "The 42th Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of *The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act*" for definitions). The definitions and categories of disabilities described in the IDEA (U.S. Department of Education) provide a common understanding of the characteristics of disabilities portrayed in the picture books. We have no intention to use the traditional medical model that focuses on the deficits of characters in the stories. Rather, we analyze the representations of disabilities and further discuss what the characters can do instead of what they cannot do. The strengths and contribution of characters to society in the picture books are clearly discussed. We, as teacher educators, often emphasize equipping pre-service teachers with adequate knowledge, skills, and dispositions to educate students with disabilities in special education teacher

preparation programs. Comparably speaking, knowledge and skills are easier to measure than dispositions. This does not mean dispositions are not fostered in teacher preparation programs as dispositions can be shown in cognitive, affective, and behavioral levels (Triandis) and can be observed when pre-service teachers demonstrate their knowledge and skills. However, the easily observed knowledge and skills might mislead people to believe special education is equivalent to the medical model when a student with disabilities receives individualized intervention based on the needs. In their review of the application of Disability Studies (DS) in teacher education, Freedman et al. discuss "DS-informed teacher educators emphasize the use of a plurality of perspectives toward disability that shift the focus from the individual to the environment, through the development of inclusive education." Perhaps we have blended the sociological perspectives from DS into supporting students with disabilities in the context of inclusive education, which also reflects our stance in this article when we analyze the characters with disabilities.

In addition to the IDEA categories, we considered some other distinctive traits such as "being clumsy, being a troublemaker, having a minor and temporary impairment, having a vivid imagination, being immature for one's age, having intense fascination with a subject, and having a label that might historically indicate a possible disability, but no disability was evident in the book" (Dyches *et al.*). The characters were rated a 1 if they did not meet any of the categories. They were rated a 2 if they did not meet a category, but with more knowledge about them they might. They were rated a 3 if they met any disability category from the above list. All characters with disabilities were classified as primary, secondary, or tertiary. Only the books with character(s) rated 2 or 3 were included in the body of books for the second phase of analysis. Thus, six books with characters with disabilities or potential disabilities were identified: four APAAL books and two SFA books. Seven characters out of all six books were identified, as follows: the drum dream girl and a person in the background (characters' names are unknown) in *Drum Dream Girl: How One Girl's Courage Changed Music* by Margarita Engle; Shek in *Coolies* by Yin; the firekeeper (character's name is unknown) in *The Firekeeper's Son* by Linda Sue Park; Chamnan in *Bread Song* by Frederick Lipp; Kami in *Kami and the Yaks* by Andrea Stryer; and Henry in *A Friend for Henry* by Jenn Bailey.

Investigator triangulation, one of four triangulation methods proposed by Denzin (301) assisted us in increasing the validity and credibility of our research findings. The current study was conducted by five researchers possessing various areas of expertise. The first author, a children's literature and early literacy researcher, and the fifth author, an elementary school teacher, first read and screened all the picture books with an APAAL or SFA to detect disability portrayals. Then all authors, with expertise in early childhood special education, child development and children's literature, and counseling, discussed all of the detected characters with disabilities as a continuous

peer-debriefing process, in order to validate the presence of disabilities and to critically analyze how those characters were portrayed.

Speaking about the investigators, we investigator-authors admit that our collective positionalities harnessed this work. All four of the authors are Asian/Asian-American transnational scholars in the fields of children's literature, early literacy, early childhood special education, and counseling. While we do not necessarily identify ourselves as people with disabilities in the traditional sense and may not fully understand the oppression that Asian/Asian-American children with disabilities undergo, we do recognize the intersectional oppression of multiple stigmatized identities that is distinctive from any other form of discrimination standing on the basis of racism, sexism, classism, ageism, ableism, etc. alone. As Asian/Asian-American transnational women scholars in professional contexts that are predominantly occupied by White Americans, we have had to combat othering actions and attitudes by those hegemonic peers such as marginalization, invisibilization, stereotyping, microaggressions, infantilization, and salary inequities, which have been threats to our mental health. We believe that our work in advocating for Asian/Asian-American children with disabilities should be normalized and heralded as a significant contribution to the field of Asian/Asian-American children's literature.

### **Combatting Othering**

The field of Disability Studies, which "examines how disability is socially constructed in society" (Adomat), is a counternarrative to the medical model of disability. The medical model portrays constructed disability as a category of illness and source of disadvantage and deficit that needs to be cured by medical treatments. This model has been a source of othering, social oppression, and discrimination against people with disabilities. Disability Studies, in tandem with social justice movements, focuses on this social oppression and discrimination (Shakespeare 197).

Adomat suggests that Disability Studies can shed light on analyzing how disability is defined and reflected in the characters' interactions with diverse people and problems in different social contexts. Analyses can determine whether a children's book is based on the medical model of disability. The literature taking this perspective emphasizes the differences between the characters with and without disabilities, as disabilities need to be cured to achieve the wholeness and high intelligence of people without disabilities. Alternatively, children's literature based on the Disability Studies perspective can promote the belief that disabilities are not something to be fixed, but are fluid and continuous. In addition, these latter books do not necessarily make disability the main topic, but create protagonists with a disability who engage in relationships that are socially and emotionally reciprocal, in various social contexts including family, religious organizations, school, community, and workplace.

Meanwhile, Bell's seminal book entitled *Blackness and Disability: Critical Examinations and Cultural Interventions* problematized that Disability Studies was established by White scholars, which meant that much media and research focused on white people with disabilities. On the other hand, he wrote, "too much critical work in African American Studies posits the African American body politic in an ableist (read non-disabled) fashion" (Bell 3). The disabilities of prominent Black achievers like Harriet Tubman were often unspoken in African-American Studies (Bell 3). We need an enhanced critical lens that goes beyond Disability Studies to look into the issues of A/AA people with disabilities in children's literature.

Similar to the Disability Studies scholars, Asian-American children's literature scholars have combatted the othering of Asians and Asian Americans in children's books. According to Sarah Park Dahlen's analysis of recent trends in the Newbery and Caldecott Awards, while Asians and Asian Americans seem to be more represented than before, with more nuanced diversity and higher quality work by Asian/Asian-American authors and illustrators, there are ongoing problems. Stereotyped illustrations of Asian bodies, such as slanted eyes, yellow skin, and rice-bowl haircuts, and unappetizing Asian foods abound in the current body of Asian/Asian-American children's literature. European writers and readers have been fascinated for centuries with Asian physical features; however, Asians and Asian Americans have been othered, orientalized, and exoticized in children's literature, which so often stereotypes and dehumanizes them (Park Dahlen 09:29-11:42).

The stereotyping of Asians and Asian Americans relates to othering. While there is a vast diversity among these people based on their ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, religion, and so on, the hegemonic European Americans tend to lump them together without earnest research, treating them as a homogeneous group of insignificant others. Furthermore, the publishing houses avoid books that do not fit the stereotypes (So & Wezerek). White children's experiences are often centralized, and their interactions with stereotyped immigrant Asian-American populations reveal their anxiety regarding "racial and imperialist legacies projected upon white children" (Saguisag 229). Even in literary fantasy worlds, white children are depicted interacting with racially othered fantasy characters, manifesting their power (Saguisag 204-250).

Even some scholars of Asian children's literature fail to be comprehensive when writing about Asian children's literature. For instance, Sivashankar pointed out that Amos and Amos's book entitled *Children's Literature from Asia in Today's Classrooms: Toward Culturally Authentic Interpretations* "is more or less centered around books about East Asian and South East Asian cultures, leaving the reader with an incomplete picture of which nations' and cultures' stories are included under the broad umbrella of Asian children's literature" (7). Scholars discussing religion in Indian children's literature typically focus on Hinduism, obscuring the religious diversity of the country and thereby constructing a stereotype (Sivashankar 3). Another stereotyping issue with children's

literature written in English is that Asians/Asian-Americans are frequently depicted as English as a second language learners. The theme of the struggle to learn English is part of the “forever foreigner stereotypes” (Rodríguez & Kim 25) of Asian Americans in children’s literature. While there are more than 6.7 million U.S.-born AAPIs in the United States (New American Economy), when picture books only depict Asians/Asian-Americans who are immigrants and English-language learners, they can exacerbate the forever foreigner stereotype.

### Intersectionality

Exploration of the intersectionality between Asian/Asian-American backgrounds and disabilities deepened our investigation, as we looked for how the racial/ethnic identities and disabilities of characters interrelated in the characters and stories of the picture books with the APAAL or SFA. Crenshaw first initiated the conversation on intersectionality through an exploration of the politics that often “conflate or ignore intra-group differences” (1241). The example of an African-American female from a low-income family, compared to a Caucasian male from a middle-class family, is more than double oppression. Police brutality against African-American females is totally overlooked by the Black-male-dominated narrative of the #BlackLivesMatter movement (Kupupika 42). “Intersectionality is not additive. It’s fundamentally reconstitutive” (Crenshaw). It does not simply combine the effects of identity categories such as race, gender, socioeconomic status, dis/ability, and sexuality to explain a group’s experience (Kupupika 35). It is erroneous to simply hypothesize that the normative Asian/Asian-American experience and the normative dis/ability experience together constitute the experience of Asian/Asian-Americans with disabilities. Additive approaches in works regarding disability assign prominence to the disability and only look at “various variables as isolated and dichotomous rather than interactive and mutually interdependent” (Goethals *et al.* 75). To achieve greater progress in properly extending the concept of intersectionality, it is crucial to adhere to Kimberlé Crenshaw’s original aim and meaning (Kupupika 27). Intersectionality should be used as a tool to identify structures that discriminate against those who are marginalized.

When Asians/Asian-Americans are visible, the erasure of their disabilities is problematic. Likewise, when disabilities are emphasized, the erasure of race and gender is amiss. Among the total Asian/Pacific populations in three age groups, 3.1% of the birth-to-2 group, 5.5% of the 3-5 group, and 5% of the 6-21 group were served under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in fall 2018 (U.S. Department of Education, USDOE henceforth). These ratios were the lowest among all racial/ethnic groups. This does not necessarily mean that there were fewer Asian/Pacific children with disabilities. It could just mean they were underserved (Stodden *et al.*). A/AAs with disabilities are an underserved population due to both limited research and the lack of individual narratives (Chung). In addition, sample biases that include data based only on

the individuals who seek and obtain disability status and rehabilitation services can mean that inaccurate reporting is yet another problem impacting this group (Southwest Educational Development Laboratory Disability study for all 3-8).

The model minority myth is a sensible explanation for the fact that Asian Americans with disabilities are underserved in the United States (Namkung). Since Peterson (11) called Japanese Americans the model minority for the first time in 1966 to praise their achievements, Asian Americans have been found to be the highest achieving racial/ethnic group in terms of educational attainment and economic status (Pew Research Center), which feeds the model-minority myth. In spite of their successes overall, there is large variance among the population subgroups that are marginalized, and the model-minority myth prevents them from accessing adequate services (Hasnain *et al.* 4; Poon-McBrayer 155). Due to this myth and the high representation of A/AA students in gifted programs, teachers often fail to refer A/AA students who have learning disabilities for assistance (Poon-McBrayer 155).

In addition, the A/AA populations are underserved in children's literature. Asian children with disabilities are barely represented at all in the children's books with major children's literature awards such as the Newbery Award (Leininger *et al.* 588) and the Caldecott Award. Therefore, we decided to focus on the APAAL and SFA picture books to explore portrayals of A/AA children with disabilities.

Bishop's seminal article "Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors" provides an important insight regarding the portrayal of A/AA children with disabilities. Children's picture books that portray A/AA children with disabilities can serve as mirror books (Bishop 3) for A/AA children with disabilities. Mirror books provide children the opportunity to reflect and affirm their own characteristics and cultural values, hearing their own excluded voices and seeing children like themselves from a different perspective. When children cannot see themselves reflected in the books they read, or when they find the stories or illustrations to be unauthentic, negative, or ridiculed, they learn that they and their culture are devalued and disrespected in the society. Moreover, these books can serve as window books (Bishop 4), which provide children opportunities to view and experience lives different from their own, by introducing them to people from different ethnic groups than the dominant culture and to people with disabilities. Children from the dominant cultural group without a disability need window books to reality, helping them understand and connect with the diversity they live in, preventing ethnocentrism (Bishop ix). Furthermore, reflecting Bishop's (ix) idea, these books also become sliding glass doors, which require readers to use their imagination to be able to experience the world that the author has created. These books give "window moments in stories" that enable the readers to realize their own power and see the inequity and injustice of systemic prejudice (Cunningham). The sliding glass doors not only help readers break down stereotypes and reduce otherness, they also change readers and often empower them to take action (Johnson *et al.* 569).

Bishop's metaphors of mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors have been applied to numerous research studies on diversity in literature (Suico 113-114). The inaugural issue of *Research on Diversity in Youth's Literature* (RDYL) in 2018, which was rooted in the study of diversity and representation in children's and adolescents' literature, selected their theme in response to Bishop's mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors. Consequently, researchers adapted these concepts in distinctive and meaningful ways to what they found in the literature for children and young adults. The new metaphor of curtains (Reese 390-391) was added to advocate for indigenous stories. Reese explained that the concept of curtains represented protecting knowledge from being exploited or misinterpreted, because the U.S. government had described Native Americans' religious ceremonies as problematic, and tried to make them illegal and take away their religious artifacts. However, the concept of curtains can be widely used for the censorship of literature or withholding of information, not simply for indigenous Americans. Additionally, Toliver (30) recently advanced "telescopes" to refer to imaginative and speculative stories. Both reflector and refractor telescopes have mirrors and lenses that reflect readers more clearly and brightly and magnify images that are usually unnoticed or unseen. In this way, telescope books help children see "futuristic and fantastical landscapes" (30) by highlighting their reflection as well as disclosing outside worlds more clearly and closely, while ignoring irrelevant objects.

### **The Lack of Mirrors in Picture Books in the United States for Today's Asian/Asian-American Youth with Disabilities**

The A/AA population, in general, is underserved in children's literature. Needless to say, A/AA children with disabilities are found even less in children's picture books. Among the Newbery and Caldecott Award books, not a single children's picture book includes A/AA children with disabilities (Leininger *et al.* 588). In addition, although the Asian/Pacific American Award for Literature (APAAL) focuses on Asian/Pacific Americans and their heritage and has been awarded for 20 years, a strikingly small number of books mirroring today's A/AA youth with disabilities in the United States have received it. As discussed earlier, mirror books that reflect A/AA children with disabilities, as well as window books for non-A/AA children and children without disabilities are strongly needed to allow them to view and explore this kind of intersectionality.

Seven characters in six books were identified in our screening for the presence of A/AA characters with disabilities or potential disabilities (4 APAAL books and 2 SFA books). Considering the age group targeted by picture books, 2nd grade and below, only two protagonists, Chamnan in *Bread Song*, an APAAL book, and Henry in *A Friend for Henry*, an SFA book, were in that age bracket, and hence easiest for the target readers to associate with. The settings of these books were in the present-day United States, which makes them more relatable to the audience as well. At this time, among the APAAL and SFA picture books, we can at least suggest that early childhood



classrooms use *Bread Song* and *A Friend for Henry* as mirror books for A/AA children with disabilities and window books for their peers. Meanwhile, although we see some evidence for Chamnan's having ASD (autism spectrum disorder) in *Bread Song*, the condition is not verified in author's notes or book reviews, whereas Henry's ASD is mentioned in the author's notes on the book jacket. In the next section, we analyze *A Friend for Henry* and *Bread Song* in detail.

*A Friend for Henry* is the story of how Henry, who has ASD, makes his first friend at school. The text does not use the label ASD. Instead, it describes Henry's characteristics. For instance, Henry needs things to go his own way. He arranges the carpet squares for the class reading time. All of the edges and corners need to fit together perfectly. Then Samuel, one of Henry's classmates, does somersaults on the carpet squares, messing them up. Samuel explains he made "a magic carpet from a genie's lamp," but this does not work for Henry. Henry responds to Samuel with the literal facts: "It's from Rug World. There's the sticker." Henry can't stand when his classmates break the rules, like when they eat three crackers instead of two, or when they put worms on the playground swings. When Henry is about to lose hope of making a friend, he finds Katie. She likes reading time as he does. They look at the fish in the fishbowl and build a tower together, avoiding the triangles that Henry dislikes. Henry eventually overcomes the challenge of making a friend, observing his classmates and considering the characteristics he would like to have in a friend. This story delineated the process of how Henry eventually made a friend that he could appreciate, without stereotypically exaggerating the friendship-related challenges faced by people with ASD. Although Henry's condition might have impacted his ability to form friendships, the story of how he and Katie became friends is quite similar to the experiences of people without disabilities, which makes it relatable to people without ASDs.

*A Friend for Henry* does not directly portray an A/AA culture, even though Henry's A/AA background is implied. Although the majority of his classmates are white, Henry's classroom is racially diverse, and his teacher Mrs. Magoon has brown skin. Katie, who eventually becomes Henry's friend, is a brown-skinned girl according to the illustration, although her racial/ethnic background is undisclosed. While the names *Henry* and *Katie* might have been chosen to avoid stereotypical Asian and African-American names, they defer to European-origin names. When we looked at the illustrations to see if there were any Asian stereotypes in the physical features, such as rice-bowl haircuts or yellow skin, we found one—that Henry's eyes are slanted. This does not mean that his classmates of other races are depicted with full-size rounded eyes. Their eyes are also illustrated with lines. However, the different length of those lines is noticeable.

*A Friend for Henry* does not portray whether Henry's white classmates attempted to make friends with Henry. While this book did not mention anything about social exclusion or Henry feeling ignored, it is possible that Henry's difficulty to make friends

could be related to social exclusion issues among people with disabilities or racial minorities or immigrants. Research found that students with disabilities are more likely to be bullied than their peers without disabilities (Gage et al. 256; Morales et al. 1128) and that racial minority students who are picked on for disability undergo double suffering (Murez). A Friend for Henry which received the Schneider Family Award for its laudable portrayal of disability unfortunately does not assist our attempt to look into the intersectionality of race and dis/ability.

*Bread Song* describes an 8-year-old boy called Chamnan and his grandfather, who had recently moved from Thailand to the United States. Chamnan has difficulty verbalizing his thoughts in English, as a new immigrant and English-language learner. Although the text does not explicitly mention the word *anxiety* or terms normally related to an emotional disturbance, Chamnan exhibits anxiety as he adjusts to living in the United States. He is still learning English in the story. It is uncertain if he has difficulty learning languages in general, as the story does not describe his progress in learning Thai before coming to the United States, but it may be that learning English is a partial cause of his anxiety.

Chamnan's anxiety is first displayed when he and his grandfather cross the street from their Thai restaurant to Alison's bakery. Chamnan is always illustrated with either a smile or a curious expression, despite text indicating that he is anxious. The book says that Chamnan is scared as he crosses the street, which takes him further from home. Hearing many new noises, he forgets the new English words he has learned (Lipp 8).

Later in *Bread Song*, Chamnan and his grandfather go to see Alison baking bread early in the morning before the store opens. The text describes Chamnan as being surprised by the sound of his own voice (Lipp 27), but in this scene Chamnan begins to demonstrate joy and laughter. Chamnan begins to feel less anxious during the bakery scene because of the intimate moment he shares with Alison and his grandfather watching the bread bake. The text says this is the first time that Chamnan has felt at home. It can also be inferred that this is when Chamnan's anxiety about being in a new place starts to decrease (Lipp 24). While he is at the bakery with his grandfather and Alison, he overcomes his anxiety and begins to speak out loud. Previously, in the book, he is anxious about being around all of the people and afraid to speak out loud. However, at the end of the story, Chamnan's anxiety has dissipated and he overcomes his shyness and speaks in English at the bakery. In the illustration, he is waving his hands in the air joyfully. It is clear in the picture that he is confident and much less anxious. Later on, Chamnan exhibits a growing ability in speaking English and ease in interacting with others from the neighborhood while at Alison's bakery.

In terms of power relations, the European food culture, which is represented by Alison's Bakery, is more empowered than Chamnan's homeland's food culture, which is represented by his grandfather's Thai Mountain Restaurant. While many of Alison's breads are featured in illustrations throughout the book, Thai foods are not pictured at

all, in spite of there being a scene shown with Alice at the restaurant. This was a lost opportunity to normalize and humanize Thai foods. Only the White American woman's willingness to build reciprocal relationships with the immigrant individuals is emphasized.

No disabilities are explicitly mentioned in *Bread Song*. However, we suspected that the description of the primary character, Chamnan, shows some characteristics of ASD. This speculation arose from the text below:

Chamnan heard the first popping sounds. His eyes grew large with surprise. There were cracking, snapping, and clicking sounds coming from the cooling bread. Chamnan looked into Alison's eyes. She whispered, "Isn't it wonderful?" By this time, Chamnan was beginning to bounce on the tips of his toes. (Lipp 22)

In *Bread Song*, Chamnan was not communicating verbally. Bouncing on the tips of his toes shows repeated bodily movements. This seems to be something of an overreaction to the bread's cracking, snapping, and clicking sounds. Although people with ASD have difficulty communicating verbally, Chamnan's immigrant status, anxiety-induced shyness, and lack of proficiency in English might be limiting his verbal communication, especially in an unfamiliar environment in a different culture. The illustration of Chamnan begs the question whether the language barrier is caused by a disability or simply adjustment to a new culture.

It would be strange if we rarely saw language-related struggles of characters with disabilities in APAAL or SFA picture books. Many immigrants see lack of English proficiency as a barrier to economic advancement in the United States (Parascandola and Punjabi 43-61). Over 70.5% of the Asian-American population spoke a language other than English at home in 2010 (Poon-McBrayer 155). Of the Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders who spoke a language other than English at home during 2009-2013, 48% spoke English less than "very well" (U.S. Census Bureau). Scholars point out that too much emphasis on Asian-American immigrants' struggles with English in children's literature is problematic because it can stereotype them (Pang *et al.* 217-218). Conversely, if the body of children's literature overall does not portray any struggles with English, it might suppress strugglers' voices. Bhadury's review of Superle's book about contemporary English-language Indian children's literature points out that utopian visions of empowered girlhood can be problematic (220). Similarly, idealized portrayals of immigrant children without any struggles with English might not reflect reality accurately. Some English-monolingual Asian-immigrant students with reading difficulties in English are sometimes not identified as having learning disabilities because of their ethnicity, whereas many Southeast-Asian students with limited English proficiency are misdiagnosed as having learning disabilities (Poon-McBrayer 155). As only English-educated, middle and upper-class children have access to Indian children's

books written in English, these books tend to skew the discourse that speaks to/for their class, and may not reflect other Indian/Southeast-Asian immigrant/non-immigrant people's English proficiency/difficulties (Bhadury 218). Generalized stereotypes regarding Southeast-Asian students' English proficiency can lead to missed or misdiagnosed learning disabilities during their transnational and/or English-learning periods.

### **The Exoticization of A/AA People with Disabilities: Stories from the Past, Stories Set Outside the United States**

*Coolies*, *The Firekeeper's Son*, and *Drum Dream Girl: How One Girl's Courage Changed Music*, which received the APAAL, and *Kami and the Yak*, which got the SFA, are historical fiction stories set in the past that depict traditional lifestyles and beliefs. *The Firekeeper's Son*, *Kami and the Yak*, and *Drum Dream Girl* are set outside the United States – Korea, Nepal, and Cuba, respectively. While the main part of *Coolies* features life in the United States, the Chinese immigrant protagonists are dressed in traditional Chinese gowns, which are different from contemporary Chinese clothing in China or the U.S. This section describes our analysis of these four books.

In *Coolies*, a historical fiction work that describes the lives of Chinese contract workers in 19<sup>th</sup>-century America, Shek and his younger brother, Wong, come to America in 1865 to work on the railroad. The story portrays the difficult working and living conditions that the coolies undergo. Shek has a physical disability acquired in an avalanche which is mentioned briefly. He is covered by an avalanche while the two brothers are building the railroad in Nevada. At the end of the story, Shek and Wong have survived the unjust treatment of the Chinese immigrants and opened a store in Chinatown.

*Coolies* does not describe the accident in detail. Instead, it shows Shek recovering in a tent, having been discovered and rescued by Wong and the other workers. Wong is holding Shek's head and giving him tea. Shek looks very weak, his eyes are closed, and his face appears frostbitten. Shek stammers, "I...will...get better..." The drawn-out sentence indicates that he is having trouble speaking. Shek lost two toes from frostbite. In the next picture he is healthy again. Shek's acquired physical disability is not illustrated. The story does not disclose exactly how losing two toes impacts his balance or walking ability. All the reader is made aware of is that he lost two toes from the accident. Shek and his brother are pictured standing with their arms around each other. It is unclear whether Shek is leaning on his brother or if they are sharing a sentimental moment.

*Coolies* primarily depicts struggles that are unrelated to the disability: racism and the difficult labor conditions of Asian immigrant workers in the nineteenth century. It portrays how traditional Chinese values such as perseverance, filial piety, and familism carry Shek and Wong through disappointment and hardship. They are not defeated by

racism, abuse, or a disability. Instead, they choose to run a store and help other people write letters home. It shows that they become valued members of a community that is beyond their family, and are able to contribute to more than the emotional growth of the other characters.

*The Firekeeper's Son*, another historical fiction picture book, is about a Korean firekeeper in the early 1800s. The firekeeper hurts his ankle when climbing a mountain to light a signal fire. He sits on the ground and holds his ankle, telling his son Sang-hee to light the fire to inform the king that the village is not under attack, instead of immediately helping the father. This theme of priorities and self-denial is also seen when Sang-hee has lit the fire—he must tend the fire rather than indulge his desire to see soldiers. This scene illustrates the culture of collectivism over individualism.

After Sang-hee has lit the fire, he comes back to his father on the way down the hill towards the village. Although the illustration does not show the disability directly, the father is using a stick to help him walk and leaning on Sang-hee for support. The text first describes Sang-hee placing an arm around his father's waist and then the father hobbling along (pp 34-35). The father's disability is portrayed by his need for extra help from his son as he heals. The last page of the book says that Sang-hee climbs the mountain every night to light the fire until the father is well.

In general, *The Firekeeper's Son* shows the collectivist culture and how it is passed from generation to generation. The people are not always being cared for, but care for others. They teach and assist others. These characters make their moral decisions based on collectivism, which emphasizes the importance of weighing the common good against personal needs.

*Kami and the Yaks* is about a young, deaf Sherpa boy called Kami who saves a yak when its hind leg is stuck in a crevice between two big rocks. The story explains that yaks are imperative in the Sherpa culture, providing food, clothes, and transportation. That is why when Kami finds the yak stuck and in danger he has to get his father and brother to rescue it. Since he struggles to verbally communicate the problem to them, he uses gestures. However, he is not as successful as he wants to be, as the text shows: "Because he never heard words, Kami was not able to speak. Instead, he grabbed his father's hand and pointed up to the meadow. Father was angry. He picked Kami up and plumped him down inside the doorstep" (Stryer). Meanwhile, as his communication with his brother is more successful than that with his father, the father and brother eventually rescue the yak. The story is set in the Everest region of Nepal and Tibet 500 years ago, before sign language was developed. It seems that the struggle that Kami has in communicating with his father is depicted accurately.

The main problem in *Kami and the Yaks* is that the yak is in danger. Despite Kami's deafness, he identifies the problem and communicates it to his father and brother. His disability does not impact the plot negatively. Considering the value of yaks in the culture, what this child protagonist with a disability accomplishes is exemplary.

*Drum Dream Girl: How One Girl's Courage Changed Music* is a picture book of Margarita Engle's poem about the childhood of a Chinese-African-Cuban female drummer, Millo Castro Zaldarriaga. The main storyline captures how Drum Dream Girl challenges traditional gender roles and becomes the first female drummer in Cuba.

Drum Dream Girl may be on the autism spectrum as shown by the description that she lives in her own world. Another sign of being on the autism spectrum is when other people do not understand you or how you think. Not many people in the story understand Drum Dream Girl. When she is around other people, they even give her dirty looks, like the woman in the park, or tell her that she cannot be a drummer because she is a girl. In addition, Drum Dream Girl is often illustrated being alone in the book. At such times, animals are the only characters around her, watching and showing interest in her drumming (shown through illustrations, not text). When Drum Dream Girl's father finally decides to give her an opportunity by finding her a music teacher, he is shown lassoing her back to earth from the sky. This illustration supports the notions that Drum Dream Girl lives in a world of her own and is misunderstood by most people. A man in the background of an illustration who is sitting on a bench and holding a cane can be interpreted as having an orthopedic impairment.

Prejudices and taboos for women are the primary obstacles that Drum Dream Girl deals with. It is evident that the society's gender stereotypes prevent females from playing drums. The poem states, "Everyone on the island of music in the city of drumbeats believed that only boys should play drums" (Engle). Drum Dream Girl is not willing to conform to gender norms. She dares to keep dreaming and drumming "... even though everyone kept reminding her that girls on the island of music had never played drums" (Engle). Because she never gives up, her talent is eventually recognized by her father and teacher, who believe that her drums deserve to be heard. Moreover, everyone who hears her dream-brightened music decides that "girls should always be allowed to play drums and both girls and boys should feel free to dream" (Engle). Eventually, the brave Drum Dream Girl changes the society's gender stereotypes about drum playing.

Drum Dream Girl makes her own choice according to her interest in drumming, regardless of the social prejudice and gender norms. The text reports that after being misunderstood by other people, she has to "keep drumming and dreaming alone" (Engle). Perhaps a special personality gift from being on the autism spectrum allows her to stay true to herself and not let others' discouraging opinions change her.

Compared to *A Friend for Henry* and *Bread Song*, two realistic fiction books that are set in the contemporary U.S., we find that more books are set in the past, where clothing and/or ways of thinking are not contemporary. Park Dahlen emphasized that, although folklore should continue to be included in our body of literature, it should not dominate, because this trend can further dehumanize Asian/Asian-Americans as fantasy characters (53:07-54:39). There has been a disproportionately high ratio of folktales in

Asian/Asian-American children's literature. Cai discovered that folktales accounted for approximately 70 percent of the 73 Asian/Asian-American picture books that he collected from his three local libraries in the predominantly white town where he resided (169-170). Continuous exposure to such picture books may leave the false impression that Asian people still dress in traditional ethnic attire, which exacerbates Asian/Asian-American stereotypes (Cai 170). As *Coolies*, *The Firekeeper's Son*, *Kami and the Yaks*, and *Drum Dream Girl* are not folktales but historical fiction, or biographical historical fiction: they contain no fantasy characters. However, they are still set in the past, with non-contemporary clothing and lifestyles. In general, Asian/Asian-American picture books published in the United States tend to depict cultural traditions from the past, not contemporary lifestyles. This exoticizes and stereotypes the Asian/Asian-American people (Second Author, 36, 40). The imbalance of the past versus the present found in the APAAL and SFA picture books with characters having a disability is problematic.

### **Discussion: Problems of Homogenization of Disabilities and the Lack of Substance for Intersectionality Discussion**

Young children form their attitudes through direct contact, indirect experience (e.g., books) and social groups (e.g., teachers) (Ostrosky 33). Considering that book reading is a common activity in early childhood classrooms, how race/ethnicity and disabilities are portrayed in children's literature has a daily impact on children's development. In addition, teachers are an influential social group that impacts children's attitudes toward people with disabilities and people from other cultural/linguistic backgrounds. They can influence the children through reading stories, discussing the illustrations, and asking questions; young children also form attitudes while interacting with peers during book reading and discussions. Statistics from 2018 show approximately 67.1% of children ages 3 through 5 served under *IDEA Part B* regularly attended an early childhood program where at least 50% of the children had no disabilities (USDOE). It is evident that children will develop appropriate attitudes toward disabilities and races/ethnicities if they have interactions with children with disabilities in the classroom, the positive mediation of teachers, and materials containing accurate representations of these topics.

The lack of representations of A/AA child characters with disabilities in picture books is lastingly detrimental. The impact is twofold. First, children often use picture books to validate their experiences and explore important dimensions of their lives. Hence, if they are unable to relate to the characters and story elements of their picture books, A/AA children with disabilities are deprived of critical support for coping with their personal pressures. The lack of this resource hurts A/AA children with disabilities more than it does their counterparts who are not A/AA or those who do not have a disability. Second, it perpetuates the double oppression that afflicts the A/AA-disabilities population. As it is, picture books with the APAAL or SFA are not as frequently used in

classrooms as picture books with other awards such as Newbery Awards and Caldecott Awards in our observation. It further minoritizes A/AA children with disabilities when they are only represented in a single story (Adichie). It may create distorted views and perpetuate stereotypes among young children when multiple voices from this group are not included in the classroom literature. Such stereotypes promote false ability/disability diagnoses of A/AA children, which can jeopardize their access to the system that is supposed to provide them with services. The results of this study call for more realistic fiction picture books that accurately portray Asian and Asian-American children with disabilities.

In addition, the lack of representations of A/AA child characters with disabilities in picture books unwittingly homogenize disabilities. While there are various cultures of people with disabilities, when there is a limited number of picture books that represent A/AA child characters with disabilities, only certain disability cultures are represented. Thus, experiences with invisible disabilities in picture books are marginalized and dehumanized. For instance, there are many children with speech or language impairment (SLI), developmental delay, and ASD among the school children of the U. S. (USDOE), the cultures of children with SLI or developmental delay were rarely depicted in the reviewed picture books with the APAAL or the SFA. In addition, while A/AA immigrant children's English-language learning can be an important issue, only one of the six picturebooks portrayed an ELL child's language-learning experience (Chamnan's story in *Bread Song*).

The lack of representations of A/AA child characters with disabilities in the APAAL or the SFA picture books also prevents the current analytic work from digging deeper into the issues of intersectionality. According to Bell, notwithstanding the liberatory intent of Disability Studies, as white scholars established Disability Studies, white subjects were predominant in films and documentaries about disability. Minority peoples' disabilities are often unspoken, as Bell (3) pointed out about Harriet Tubman's disability. The current analysis found that there were two mirror books for today's A/AA children with disabilities among picture books with the APAAL or the SFA: *Bread Song* and *A Friend for Henry*. In *Bread Song* which received the APAAL, while it depicted Chamnan's A/AA-immigrant cultures, his disability was not unpacked. On the other hand, *A Friend for Henry* which received the SFA, only focused on issues associated with ASDs, whereas *Henry's* A/AA background was not recognizable. We initially sought to analyze mirror books for A/AA children with disabilities with perspectives on intersectionality. Then our discovery was that we could not find substance to analyze in terms of intersectionality in those two books. We would like to deliver this point to picture book authors and illustrators. We definitely need more mirror books for A/AA children with disabilities that delineate how race and disability interact in their authentic contexts.



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