FROM STORYBOOK REPRESENTATION TO INCLUSIVE EMPATHY: A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

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Abstract

Inclusive education requires more than access to schooling; it also requires relationships, recognition, and meaningful participation. Children's picturebooks featuring disability may provide opportunities to encounter diverse experiences and consider perspectives beyond their own. Yet research on disability representation, narrative-based empathy, and attitudes toward disability is often discussed across partially separate strands. This conceptual paper proposes the Storybook-Based Inclusive Empathy Framework (SBIEF), developed through a focused conceptual synthesis of literature on children's empathy, storybook reading, disability representation, and inclusive education. Five recent studies are integrated with foundational scholarship: analyses of Down syndrome representation and picturebook inclusivity, a systematic review of storytelling and empathy, a teacher-perspective study, and an intervention study on attitudes toward peers with disabilities. SBIEF links four components: disability representation, narrative engagement, empathy-building processes, and inclusive attitudes. Teacher facilitation and an inclusive classroom climate are treated as supporting conditions. Maisha: Terlahir Istimewa dan Luar Biasa is used as an illustrative case, not as evidence of intervention effectiveness. The framework offers an integrative pedagogical explanation and propositions for future empirical investigation.

Keywords: storybook reading; disability representation; narrative engagement; empathy; inclusive attitudes; elementary education

INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education is not limited to the placement of children with disabilities in educational settings. It also concerns the quality of relationships, recognition, and participation that students experience in everyday school life. For inclusion to become meaningful, learners need opportunities to understand human differences, challenge stereotypes, and develop respectful ways of interacting with peers whose abilities and experiences may differ from their own.

Elementary education is an important context for social and emotional learning. During the primary school years, children develop their understanding of emotions, interpersonal relationships, and social expectations. Empathy is relevant to this development because it involves both affective responsiveness to others and the capacity to understand another person's perspective. Nevertheless, empathy should not be treated as a single or automatically

acquired outcome; its development and assessment require attention to children's developmental characteristics (Bayne et al., 2024).

Children’s storybooks offer a potential pedagogical resource for introducing experiences beyond children’s immediate environments. Through characters, plots, dialogue, and illustrations, readers may observe social situations, recognize emotions, and consider alternative perspectives. Kucirkova (2019) proposed a conceptual account of how storybook characteristics and reading experiences may relate to empathy. Ciesielska et al. (2025), in a meta-analysis of 21 studies involving 2,293 children, found that relationships between storybook reading and selected empathy-related skills vary by outcome and context; their findings do not support a deterministic claim that every form of reading improves every dimension of empathy. A recent PRISMA-based review by Dewi and Kurniawati (2026), which synthesized eight empirical studies involving children aged 0–8, similarly identifies emotion recognition, perspective-taking, and prosocial tendencies as relevant outcomes while noting methodological heterogeneity and the need for stronger longitudinal research.

Disability representation is a further consideration. A storybook may introduce a child to disability, but its educational value depends partly on how the character is portrayed. Characters should not be reduced to a diagnosis, limitation, or object of pity; they should be represented as individuals with emotions, relationships, agency, interests, and opportunities for participation. Tatar (2026) discusses contrasting literary representations of people with Down syndrome, including the visual autobiographical narrative Mallko i tata and other works, and considers how literature may invite reflection on acceptance and social exclusion. Niland (2026), through qualitative content analysis of 35 recommended picturebooks from the United Kingdom and Australia, found that only nine rated mostly positively against an adapted Strong Stories framework and only two of those nine rated highly for literary quality. These findings underline that the mere presence of a disabled character does not guarantee inclusive or engaging representation. Related scholarship also emphasizes strengths-based and authentic portrayals (Kleekamp & Zapata, 2019; Hayden & Prince, 2023; Hughes & Talley, 2026).

Research has also begun to examine the relationship between disability-themed picturebook teaching and children's attitudes. Zhang, Fu, and Xiao (2025) conducted a three-week online picturebook programme involving six teaching units and 12 class hours. Although 50 students initially enrolled, the effective pre–post analysis included 36 students in grades 1–3. The study reported statistically significant differences between pre- and post-intervention scores in the overall attitude measure and its cognitive, emotional, positive-behaviour, and negative-behaviour dimensions. These findings are promising but should be interpreted cautiously: the study used a one-group pre–post design without a control group, the questionnaire was completed with parental assistance, and the authors identified possible self-report bias and uncertainty about long-term effects. In a separate study, Hughes and Abarca (2026) analyzed feedback from 20 teachers who reviewed recommended picturebooks. Teachers identified themes of inclusive friendship, acceptance, self-identity, and overcoming challenges, while the authors also observed that teachers' reflections did not always critically examine ableist framing. Together, these studies support the relevance of storybook-based disability learning while highlighting the importance of representation quality, critical teacher mediation, and careful interpretation of intervention evidence.

Although scholarship has examined storybooks and empathy, disability representation in children's literature, and attitudes toward disability, these strands are often discussed as related but distinct areas. Existing work offers important insights into individual parts of the process: narrative and empathy mechanisms (Kucirkova, 2019; Ciesielska et al., 2025; Dewi & Kurniawati, 2026), representation quality (Tatar, 2026; Niland, 2026; Hughes & Abarca, 2026), and intervention-related attitude outcomes (Zhang et al., 2025). A more integrated pedagogical account is needed to explain how the quality of disability representation may shape narrative engagement, how teacher-facilitated dialogue may support empathy-related processes, and how these processes may be connected to disability acceptance and inclusive attitudes in elementary classrooms.

This paper addresses this conceptual gap by proposing the Storybook-Based Inclusive Empathy Framework (SBIEF). Its contribution is not the general claim that storybooks can promote empathy, nor the claim that narrative engagement and adult mediation have not been theorized. Kucirkova's (2019) Empathy-Building through Children's Stories (EBCS) framework already explains how story characteristics, reader–character engagement, developmental processes, and adult mediation may relate to empathy. Rather, SBIEF extends this discussion into the specific context of disability-inclusive elementary education by foregrounding the quality of disability representation as a distinct narrative entry point and by connecting empathy-related learning processes to disability acceptance and inclusive social orientations. It also specifies critical teacher facilitation and inclusive classroom climate as pedagogical and contextual conditions. The paper addresses three questions: (1) How may the quality of disability representation shape children's engagement with a story? (2) Through what empathy-related learning processes may narrative engagement support social understanding? and (3) How may these processes be connected to disability acceptance and inclusive social orientations in elementary classrooms?

Empathy development in children

Empathy is discussed in this paper as a multidimensional construct involving affective responsiveness and the capacity to understand another person's perspective. For the purposes of SBIEF, four related learning processes are distinguished: (a) emotional understanding, or recognizing and interpreting emotions; (b) perspective-taking, or considering a situation from another person's point of view; (c) affective empathy or empathic concern, involving an emotional response to another person's experience; and (d) reflective consideration of possible social responses. These are conceptual learning processes, not a validated measurement scale, and they should not all be treated as dimensions of empathy in an identical technical sense. In particular, emotional understanding may support empathic responding, while reflection on social responses is related to, but distinct from, empathy itself. Bayne et al. (2024) emphasize that empathy assessment for children aged 3–12 requires attention to developmental appropriateness and measurement limitations. Dewi and Kurniawati (2026) identify emotion recognition, perspective-taking, and prosocial tendencies as recurring areas in storytelling interventions, whereas Ciesielska et al. (2025) report variation across outcomes and contexts. SBIEF therefore distinguishes empathy-related processes from prosocial behavior, disability acceptance, behavioral intentions, and inclusive practices.

Storybooks and narrative engagement

Storybook reading can involve more than decoding written language. Children may attend to illustrations, follow a character's experiences, discuss events, identify emotions, and consider what a character may think or feel. Kucirkova (2019) offers a conceptual account of how children's storybooks could promote empathy through the interaction of literary features and developmental processes. The meta-analysis by Ciesielska et al. (2025) indicates that relationships between storybook reading and selected empathy-related skills depend on the type and context of reading. Dewi and Kurniawati (2026) further identify interactive, moral, and culturally grounded storytelling as promising features, while cautioning that the evidence base remains methodologically heterogeneous. SBIEF consequently treats reading, observation of illustrations, guided dialogue, and reflection as complementary pedagogical experiences rather than assuming that exposure alone is sufficient.

Positioning SBIEF in relation to existing storybook–empathy frameworks

Kucirkova's (2019) EBCS framework is an important foundation because it already theorizes relationships among storybook characteristics, reader engagement, developmental processes, and adult mediation. SBIEF does not replace or claim priority over that contribution. Its proposed extension is context-specific: it places disability representation quality—including agency, authenticity, multidimensional characterization, and the risk of ableist framing—at the centre of the narrative entry point. It then makes disability acceptance and inclusive social orientations explicit as educational concerns that are related to, but not interchangeable with, empathy. This distinction is intended to connect storybook–empathy scholarship with disability studies and inclusive classroom practice.

Disability representation in children's literature

Disability representation concerns not only whether a character with a disability appears in a story, but also how that character is constructed and positioned. Relevant considerations include agency, complexity, social relationships, narrative role, accuracy, and whether the story reproduces deficit-based assumptions. Tatar (2026) examines selected children's and young adult works featuring people with Down syndrome and discusses differing representational strategies, including the tension between empathic portrayal and visual or narrative authenticity. Niland (2026) analyzed 35 recommended picturebooks using an adapted Strong Stories framework and additional literary-quality criteria; only nine rated mostly positively on the adapted representation framework, and only two books from the full sample rated highly for literary quality. Hughes and Abarca (2026) also report that teachers valued inclusive friendship and acceptance themes but did not always critically interrogate how disability was framed. These findings complement work on strengths-based and non-ableist representations (Kleekamp & Zapata, 2019; Hayden & Prince, 2023; Hughes & Talley, 2026). Together, they inform SBIEF's emphasis on humanizing, multidimensional, non-stereotypical, and engaging representation.

Inclusive education and disability acceptance

Inclusive education involves participation, recognition, and the removal of barriers to learning and social belonging. In SBIEF, inclusive social orientations are distinguished from observable inclusive practices. Disability acceptance refers to recognizing disabled people as valued members of the classroom community; respectful attitudes concern valuing differences

without pity or devaluation; inclusive behavioral intentions concern willingness to interact, cooperate, or include peers; and inclusive practices refer to actual opportunities for interaction and participation. These constructs are related but not identical, and a conceptual framework should not collapse them into one outcome. Zhang et al. (2025) provide context-specific intervention evidence: among 36 students with complete pre- and post-intervention data, a three-week online picturebook programme was followed by statistically significant changes in the overall attitude measure and its cognitive, emotional, positive-behaviour, and negative-behaviour dimensions. However, the one-group pre–post design, short duration, and self-report measure limit conclusions about causality, durability, and transfer to other contexts. SBIEF therefore treats inclusive social orientations as potential educational outcomes that may be supported by empathy-related processes when reinforced by classroom dialogue, equitable interaction, teacher practices, and an inclusive learning climate.

Teacher facilitation and classroom dialogue

Teachers mediate the relationship between a story and the meanings children construct from it. Hughes and Abarca (2026), drawing on feedback from 20 teachers reviewing recommended picturebooks, found that teachers recognized themes such as inclusive friendship, acceptance, and self-identity. Their analysis also cautions that teachers may praise stories for showing characters overcoming challenges without examining whether such framing places an unfair expectation on disabled people to demonstrate exceptional resilience. The authors call for stronger critical literacy and professional learning around ableism and authentic representation. In SBIEF, teacher facilitation therefore includes selecting and critically reviewing books, inviting children to identify emotions and consider perspectives, and connecting story discussion to respectful participation without generalizing one character's experience to all people with the same disability.

RESEARCH METHOD

This paper adopts a focused conceptual synthesis approach to develop a proposed framework. It does not report an experiment, survey, classroom intervention, or empirical validation of SBIEF. The purpose of the method is to make the conceptual development process transparent and to distinguish findings reported in the source literature from the present paper’s conceptual integration. Five recent studies were included because they directly address the focal intersections required by the framework: representation of Down syndrome in children’s literature (Tatar, 2026); disability representation and literary quality in picturebooks (Niland, 2026); storytelling and empathy-related learning processes (Dewi & Kurniawati, 2026); teacher perspectives on disability representation (Hughes & Abarca, 2026); and picturebook-based learning related to attitudes toward peers with disabilities (Zhang et al., 2025). These studies were read alongside foundational scholarship on empathy assessment, storybook-based empathy, and disability representation. The selection is purposive and relevance-based, not exhaustive. This is not a systematic literature review: no claim of comprehensive database coverage, formal screening flow, or formal risk-of-bias assessment is made. The synthesis supports conceptual development rather than estimating the overall effectiveness of storybook interventions.

The conceptual synthesis is organized around five related areas: (1) children's empathy development and its assessment; (2) storybook reading and narrative engagement; (3) disability representation in children's literature, including representation of Down syndrome; (4) storybook-based learning and attitudes toward disability; and (5) teacher facilitation and inclusive classroom conditions. The source base includes conceptual work, a meta-analysis, a PRISMA-based systematic review, qualitative content analyses, a teacher-perspective study, and an intervention study. These sources are not treated as methodologically equivalent: empirical intervention findings are used to describe observed outcomes in their specific context, while conceptual and qualitative studies inform interpretation of mechanisms and representation quality.

Concept development proceeded in four stages. First, recurring concepts and findings were identified across the five literature areas. Second, the evidence was differentiated by source type and scope, including conceptual accounts, reviews, qualitative analyses, and intervention research. Third, relationships among disability representation, narrative engagement, empathy-related processes, and inclusive attitudes were compared and organized into a proposed pedagogical pathway. Fourth, teacher facilitation and inclusive classroom climate were positioned as contextual supports, and the relationships were formulated as conceptual propositions. The framework is an interpretive synthesis proposed by the author, not a causal model established by the reviewed studies.

The Maisha storybook, Terlahir Istimewa dan Luar Biasa, is used as an illustrative case to show how the proposed framework might inform elementary education. The book is considered through observable narrative features, including Maisha's efforts to learn to walk independently, her interactions with peers, and the support offered by friends. These features provide examples for discussing character agency, social relationships, challenge, and participation. This illustrative reading is not a formal validated content analysis and does not establish the book's effects on readers. Claims about authenticity or representational quality should be tested through systematic book analysis and, where possible, consultation with people with lived experience of disability.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The proposed Storybook-Based Inclusive Empathy Framework

The conceptual synthesis leads to the proposed Storybook-Based Inclusive Empathy Framework (SBIEF). The framework contains four interconnected components: (1) disability representation in children's literature; (2) narrative engagement; (3) empathy-building processes; and (4) inclusive attitudes. The recent literature supports the relevance of each component but does not establish the complete sequence as a tested causal pathway. Representation studies inform the first component; narrative and empathy research inform the second and third; and the picturebook intervention study provides context-specific evidence relevant to the fourth. Teacher perspectives further support the inclusion of teacher facilitation as a contextual condition. SBIEF is therefore presented as a proposed pedagogical framework requiring empirical examination.

Figure 1. Proposed Storybook-Based Inclusive Empathy Framework (SBIEF)

1. DISABILITY REPRESENTATION	2. NARRATIVE ENGAGEMENT	3. EMPATHY-RELATED LEARNING PROCESSES	4. INCLUSIVE SOCIAL ORIENTATIONS
Authenticity; agency; multidimensionality; strengths-based portrayal; non-ableist framing	Attention; story comprehension; character engagement; perspective engagement	Emotional understanding; perspective-taking; affective empathy; reflective consideration	Disability acceptance; respectful attitudes; inclusive behavioral intentions

Pedagogical and contextual conditions: critical teacher facilitation • guided classroom dialogue • developmental appropriateness • inclusive classroom climate • opportunities for meaningful peer interaction

Component 1: Disability representation

The first component concerns the quality of disability representation. A character should be portrayed as a whole person rather than being defined exclusively by a diagnosis or impairment. The framework draws attention to identity, emotions, relationships, interests, agency, and participation, as well as the interaction between words and illustrations. The Strong Stories Framework developed by Hayden and Prince (2024) offers a research-based, teacher-oriented tool for evaluating strengths-based disability representation in picturebooks. Niland (2026) adapted this framework in a content analysis of 35 recommended books and found that recommendation status alone did not ensure inclusive representation or strong literary quality: only nine books met most of the adapted representation criteria, and only two of the 35 were rated highly for literary quality. Tatar (2026) also examines selected works featuring people with Down syndrome and discusses differing representational strategies and questions of acceptance, authenticity, and social exclusion. These sources inform SBIEF's attention to agency, complexity, strengths, social relationships, and the risk of pity-based framing, tokenism, or presenting one character as representative of all people with a particular disability.

Component 2: Narrative engagement

The second component concerns children's engagement with the story through reading or listening, observing illustrations, following the character's experiences, and discussing events. Narrative engagement is treated as an active process rather than passive exposure. Kucirkova (2019) and the reviews by Ciesielska et al. (2025) and Dewi and Kurniawati (2026) support attention to story features, reading context, interaction, and developmental appropriateness. Teacher prompts can invite children to identify what is happening, recognize emotions, and consider the character's possible perspective without assuming that all people with the same disability share identical experiences.

Component 3: Empathy-building processes

The third component describes empathy-related learning processes that may be activated or supported during guided engagement with a story. These include emotional understanding, perspective-taking, affective empathy or empathic concern, and reflective consideration of possible social responses. The terms are deliberately differentiated: emotional understanding and moral or social reflection may contribute to empathic learning but should not be presented

as interchangeable dimensions of empathy. Dewi and Kurniawati (2026) identify emotion recognition, perspective-taking, and prosocial tendencies across the eight empirical studies included in their review, while Ciesielska et al. (2025) report outcome variation and substantial heterogeneity across the 21 studies in their meta-analysis. Prosocial tendencies are therefore treated as possible social expressions or related outcomes, not as a synonym for empathy. Guided discussion may help children move from noticing a character's experience toward considering respectful responses. These proposed relationships require empirical examination with age-appropriate, construct-specific measures.

Component 4: Inclusive attitudes

The fourth component concerns inclusive social orientations, particularly disability acceptance, respectful attitudes, and intentions to interact or cooperate with peers with disabilities. These attitudinal and intentional constructs should be distinguished from actual inclusive practices, such as ensuring that classmates have meaningful opportunities to participate. Zhang et al. (2025) reported statistically significant pre–post differences among 36 students with complete data after a three-week online picturebook programme, including changes in the overall attitude measure and its cognitive, emotional, positive-behaviour, and negative-behaviour dimensions. Because the study used a one-group pre–post design and a self-report questionnaire completed with parental assistance, it cannot by itself establish that the intervention caused durable changes or that similar effects would occur with other books and classroom contexts. SBIEF therefore does not assume that empathy necessarily results in inclusive behavior. Classroom norms, opportunities for interaction, teacher modelling, accessibility, and institutional practices also matter.

Supporting conditions

Four conditions may shape implementation: teacher facilitation, age-appropriate narratives, classroom dialogue, and an inclusive learning climate. Hughes and Abarca (2026) show the value of teachers' perspectives when considering disability representation, while also identifying a need for more critical examination of ableist framing. Dewi and Kurniawati (2026) point to the importance of interactive and developmentally appropriate storytelling. These conditions influence how children interpret the story and whether reflection can be connected to everyday peer relationships. They are represented as contextual supports rather than as a separate final stage.

Conceptual propositions

P1. Disability representation that is humanizing, multidimensional, strengths-based, and attentive to agency may provide a meaningful narrative context for children to encounter diverse individual experiences.

P2. Narrative engagement accompanied by developmentally appropriate teacher dialogue may support emotional understanding, perspective-taking, and affective engagement with a character's experience.

P3. Empathy-related learning processes may support disability acceptance, respectful attitudes, and inclusive behavioral intentions, but do not guarantee actual inclusive practices.

P4. Critical teacher facilitation and an inclusive classroom climate may shape how children interpret disability representation and connect narrative experiences with social orientations.

P5. Representational quality, literary engagement, developmental appropriateness, opportunities for dialogue, and opportunities for meaningful peer interaction may condition the pedagogical value of disability-themed storybooks.

Illustrative application: Maisha's storybook

The storybook Maisha: Terlahir Istimewa dan Luar Biasa, featuring a child with Down syndrome, is used to illustrate how SBIEF may inform classroom planning. Observable story elements include Maisha's wish and effort to walk independently, her participation in play with peers, and the support she receives from friends when she encounters difficulty. These scenes can prompt analysis of agency, challenge, peer relationships, and participation. A teacher might invite children to describe Maisha's feelings, consider what support is respectful, and reflect on how classmates can make shared activities accessible. This is a proposed pedagogical application; no student responses or learning outcomes are reported in this paper. The book should not be treated as representing all children with Down syndrome.

Theoretical contribution and implications

SBIEF's theoretical contribution lies in a disability-focused extension of existing storybook–empathy perspectives rather than in claiming that the relationship between stories and empathy is new. Kucirkova's (2019) EBCS framework already explains how story characteristics, reader engagement, developmental processes, and adult mediation may relate to empathy. SBIEF adds a specific conceptual emphasis by placing the quality of disability representation—authenticity, agency, multidimensionality, strengths-based portrayal, and the avoidance of ableist framing—at the narrative entry point. It further distinguishes empathy-related learning processes from disability acceptance, inclusive attitudes, behavioral intentions, and actual inclusive practices. Finally, it foregrounds critical teacher facilitation and inclusive classroom climate as pedagogical and contextual conditions through which story-based discussion may be connected to inclusive social learning. The recent literature supports the relevance of these strands but does not establish the complete SBIEF pathway as a tested causal model.

Limitations and future research

The framework remains conceptual and has not been empirically validated. The five recent studies integrated here differ in purpose, method, age group, and scope; they should not be interpreted as jointly proving the SBIEF pathway. The proposed components and relationships require examination across different ages, storybook types, disability representations, and classroom contexts. Future studies should first conduct a transparent content analysis of selected books using explicit representation and literary-quality criteria, potentially drawing on the Strong Stories Framework (Hayden & Prince, 2024), while avoiding the assumption that one tool is universally sufficient. Book analysis should, where possible, include consultation with people with lived experience of disability. Researchers should then distinguish measures of emotional understanding, perspective-taking, affective empathy, disability acceptance, behavioral intentions, and actual participation; conduct feasibility

studies; and undertake longitudinal, quasi-experimental, or mixed-methods evaluations. Research should avoid treating one story or one disability representation as universal.

CONCLUSION

This paper proposes the Storybook-Based Inclusive Empathy Framework (SBIEF) as a disability-focused conceptual extension of storybook–empathy scholarship for elementary education. Drawing on conceptual work, reviews, qualitative representation studies, teacher perspectives, and intervention research, the framework connects four components: disability representation, narrative engagement, empathy-related learning processes, and inclusive social orientations. Its contribution is to foreground representation quality as the narrative entry point, distinguish empathy-related processes from disability acceptance and inclusive practices, and identify critical teacher facilitation and inclusive classroom climate as pedagogical and contextual conditions.

Maisha: Terlahir Istimewa dan Luar Biasa is presented as an illustrative case, not as evidence of established intervention effectiveness or as a universal representation of children with Down syndrome. SBIEF's propositions require empirical testing. Future research should examine storybook representation with transparent criteria, investigate teacher-mediated narrative engagement, and assess distinct empathy-related, attitudinal, and behavioral constructs using developmentally appropriate methods.

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