



# Reading Disability through Multimodal Lenses: An Appraisal and Social Semiotic Analysis of This Way, Charlie

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## Abstract

*This study investigates the representation of disability in the children's picture book *This Way, Charlie*. While diversity in children's literature is a growing concern, recently published books focusing on disability remain under-analyzed. Drawing on Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA), this qualitative study examines how verbal and visual elements co-construct the narrative of disability. The verbal data is analyzed using Martin and White's (2005) Appraisal theory, specifically the Attitude system (affect, judgment, and appreciation), while the visual data is examined through Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) social semiotics. The unit of analysis includes all integrated text and illustrations from the book's beginning to its conclusion. Findings reveal that disability is represented through various interconnected scenes, ranging from the daily life at ranch to deeper explorations of emotional insecurity and past trauma. The analysis shows that the book transcends traditional medical models of disability by framing it within the context of friendship and mutual support. This study concludes that the integration of Appraisal theory and social semiotics offers a strong framework for understanding how inclusive meanings are constructed in multimodal texts. It ultimately highlights how children's literature can normalize diversity and foster a sense of belonging.*

## **1. Introduction**

Children's picture books serve multiple purposes in education. Generally, children's literature has been shown to support academic, social, cultural, and emotional development (Simpson & Cremin, 2022). These books play an important role in supporting early literacy development (Murphy et al., 2023) by offering rich vocabularies across various themes and fostering a meaning-making process through the synergy of pictures and text. Whether utilized at home or in school, picture books also function as a practical medium for foreign language acquisition.

Beyond linguistic development, children's picture books serve as a vital tool for understanding emotions, diversity, and social realities. This exposure is important because encountering diversity helps shape a child's sense of belonging and inclusion (Caple & Tian, 2022). Through narratives and imagery, children experience a wide range of emotional contexts that help develop their awareness and respect for both similarities and differences (Agustina et al., 2018). Conversely, limited exposure to such narratives can hinder empathy. This makes inclusive literature an indispensable educational resource particularly in promoting positive attitudes toward disability (Edwards & Hekel, 2021).

One of the most prominent emerging themes in contemporary picture books is inclusivity. Many international publishers now depict issues such as disability, diverse family structures, ethnic diversity, socioeconomic status, and neurodiversity. Exploring these topics is particularly compelling because the combination of text and illustration is uniquely powerful; while words convey the narrative structure, images add emotional depth and nuance that language alone may not fully express (Tsapiv, 2022). Furthermore, in the Indonesian context, disability and general inclusivity have become pressing concerns. According to the Online Information System for the Protection of Women and Children (Simfoni PPA), there were 987 reported cases of violence involving persons with disabilities in 2022 (Putranto, Diltha, & Isda, 2024). Beyond school-based bullying and social exclusion, persons with disabilities in Indonesia face multifaceted systemic discrimination, including restricted access to the legal justice system and a lack of digital inclusivity in essential public services.

Consequently, inclusivity literacy must be integrated into the formal education system from an early age. This integration can be effectively achieved by utilizing picture books as a primary educational medium, as such literature introduces complex social themes in an age-appropriate and comprehensible manner. Therefore, there is a clear necessity for picture books that foster disability awareness (Wardany, 2018), as exposure to inclusive narratives can influence public attitudes toward disability (Pebdani & Tashjian, 2021).

Extensive research has explored disability representation in children's literature. In Indonesia, Jaswandi and Kurniawati (2023) examined the effectiveness of disability-themed storybooks for children aged 5-6 in inclusive kindergartens. Internationally, Booth and Lim (2021) analyzed "disempowered

diversity" in Australian picture books, while Hayden and Prince (2020) focused on disrupting ableism through strengths-based representations. Similarly, Manola, Vouglanis, Maniou, and Driga (2023) highlight that children's literature plays an important role as a medium that shapes social perceptions and awareness of disability and social attitudes toward diversity. Research by Jensen, Herrebrøden, and Andreassen (2023) also reveals that people with disabilities are frequently underrepresented in educational textbooks, appearing in less than half of the analyzed texts and even fewer visual representations. However, it is quite rare to locate the research on the recent picture books with disability-themed published in the 2020s.

Building on this discourse, the present study analyzes *This Way, Charlie*, written by Caron Levis and illustrated by Charles Santoso. This book was published by Abrams Books for Young Readers in 2020. Since its publication, the book has gained significant recognition for its portrayal of inclusivity, earning spots on prestigious lists such as the Pennsylvania and Virginia Young Reader's Choice Programs (2021-2022), as well as being named a finalist for the 2022 Georgia Children's Book Award. *This Way, Charlie* portrays an unlikely friendship between Jack, a goat, and Charlie, a horse with vision loss. Through simple narrative events, the book communicates themes of trust, patience, and acceptance. While the text describes actions and dialogue, the illustrations emphasize emotional closeness and physical positioning.

To examine how inclusivity is constructed through both verbal and visual elements, this study adopts Martin and White' (2005) Appraisal Theory and Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) social semiotics theory, which are widely used in multimodal discourse analysis studies. By analyzing *This Way, Charlie* as a multimodal text, this paper aims to reveal how representations of inclusivity are communicated to young readers and how these portrayals contribute to shaping children's empathy, by addressing the following research questions: (1) How is disability represented through verbal and visual modes in *This Way, Charlie*? and (2) How do multimodal elements construct inclusivity in the narrative?

## 2. Method

This study employs a qualitative approach to provide an in-depth interpretation of how inclusivity is constructed in children's literature. The primary data source is the picture book *This Way, Charlie*, with the units of analysis consisting of selected "spreads" (two-page layouts) with all spreads analyzed, while the analysis only focuses on the picture that examines disability. These spreads are treated as an integrated whole, where verbal (textual) and visual (illustrative) elements are examined together. For analytical clarity, each spread is coded sequentially into Spread 1 represents pages 1–2, Spread 2 represents pages 3–4, and so on. As the book consists of 36 pages, the spreads form a continuous narrative sequence that allows the researcher to trace how the story and visual

elements develop across the book.

This study adopts Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA), a framework rooted in Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) that treats language and imagery as integrated social semiotic resources (Setiawati et al., 2023; Herman et al., 2023). Verbal data is analyzed using Martin and White's (2005) Appraisal theory, specifically focusing on the attitude to identify how evaluative lexis constructs a narrative of inclusivity. This encompasses three evaluative domains: Affect, Judgment, and Appreciation.

Affect is used to analyze the characters' internal emotional states or feelings; Judgment assesses the moral or ethical qualities of their behaviors and character; and Appreciation evaluates the quality and value of settings, situations, and the surrounding environment (Martin & White, 2005). Complementing this, visual elements are examined through Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) social semiotics, utilizing representational meaning to reveal narrative patterns and emotional bonds through visual cues such as body language, gaze, and physical proximity.

The analysis was conducted in three systematic stages, beginning with the identification of key spreads that prominently feature interactions related to inclusivity and disability. These selected data were then deconstructed by examining verbal elements through the appraisal framework and visual elements through representational meanings. This focuses on specific semiotic resources such as character placement, framing, use of space, gaze direction, and color schemes. Finally, a synthesis was performed to integrate these findings. This is to reveal how the visual and verbal modes complement and reinforce each other in the overall meaning-making process.

### **3. Result**

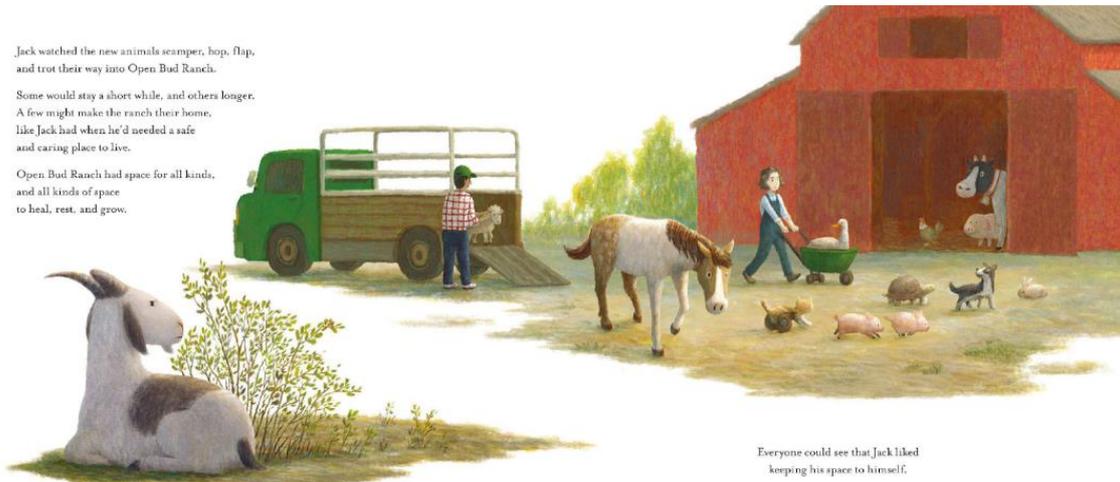
Through this framework, the discussion explores how the narrative and illustrations collaboratively represent the relationship between Jack and Charlie, particularly in portraying disability and inclusivity. The analysis focuses on how actions, visual distance, gaze, positioning, and layout contribute to shaping readers' understanding of empathy, mutual support, and belonging. The analysis of disability representation in this study covers four main subtopics. These topics are presented in the results to show how the story and images work together. The discussion focuses on an inclusive environment, Jack's insecurity, the development of friendship, and the representation of blindness.

## ***Inclusive Environment***

Jack watched the new animals scamper, hop, flap,  
and trot their way into Open Bud Ranch.

Some would stay a short while, and others longer.  
A few might make the ranch their home,  
like Jack had when he'd needed a safe  
and caring place to live.

Open Bud Ranch had space for all kinds,  
and all kinds of space  
to heal, rest, and grow.



Everyone could see that Jack liked  
keeping his space to himself.

*(Spread 1: Open Bud Ranch)*



*(Spread 15: The animals and Antonia who is going to rescue Charlie)*

From the verbal text in Spread 1, Open Bud Ranch is introduced as a sanctuary for animals with diverse needs. The narrative states, “A few might make the ranch their home... Open Bud Ranch had space for all kinds, all kinds of space, to heal, rest and grow.” Through positive appreciation, the term “home” and the phrase “space for all kinds” redefine the ranch as an inclusive sanctuary. Furthermore, the affective lexis of “heal, rest, and grow” emphasizes a sense of security. This indicates that an inclusive environment plays an important role in the wellbeing of diverse individuals.

This verbal message is visually reinforced by the depiction of diverse characters in Spread 1 and Spread 15: Jack, a one-horned goat; Charlie, a horse with vision loss; and several other animals using assistive devices like wheels and prosthetic legs. These visual elements collectively construct disability not as a

deficit or an "abnormality," but as a normalized characteristic within a shared community. Such representation aligns with the role of picture books in shaping children's perceptions of diversity (Caple & Tian, 2022). By presenting multiple animals with disabilities coexisting, the illustrations communicate that physical differences are an integral part of everyday life rather than a source of isolation.

Visually, the use of a long shot in Spread 1 emphasizes the ranch environment and the collective presence of the animals. According to Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), a long shot situates participants within a broader context, prioritizing relationships and the social setting over individual detail. In this composition, disability is framed as a shared and accepted condition within the community. Jack's physical difference is not foregrounded as a limitation; instead, it is integrated into a larger inclusive landscape. This reflects how visual design can construct a sense of belonging and normalize diversity (Tsapiv, 2022).

The analysis of Spread 1 and Spread 15 demonstrates that Open Bud Ranch is constructed as an inclusive environment where animals with diverse physical conditions live together and support one another. The verbal narrative emphasizes the ranch as a place of safety and belonging through expressions such as "home" and "space for all kinds," highlighting values of care, healing, and growth. This message is visually reinforced by the depiction of animals with different disabilities sharing the same environment. The use of a long shot further situates the characters within a collective social setting, emphasizing community rather than individual difference. Together, the verbal and visual elements present disability as a normalized aspect of diversity and promote the idea of inclusivity as a shared and supportive community space.

### ***Insecurity***

By now, Jack knew this ranch gave plenty of fresh hay, groomed with soft brushes, and always trimmed hooves slowly. Still, he didn't want anything to get too close, too quick, or too loud. So Jack stepped back, and he watched out for Charlie.



*(Spread 4: Jack watching Charlie from a bush)*

Jack is consistently portrayed as a cautious and somewhat insecure character. In Spread 1 and Spread 4, he appears visually separated from the other animals, positioning himself at a distance from the group. This sense of withdrawal is reinforced by the narration in Spread 4, which explains "*The ranch gave plenty of fresh hay, still he didn't want anything to get too close, too quick, or too loud.*" The text contrasts physical provision with psychological readiness. While the ranch receives positive appreciation for its resources like "*plenty of fresh hay*", Charlie's internal state reflects negative affect because he "*didn't want anything to get too close*". This indicates that true inclusivity requires more than material accommodation and must also respect an individual's emotional boundaries.

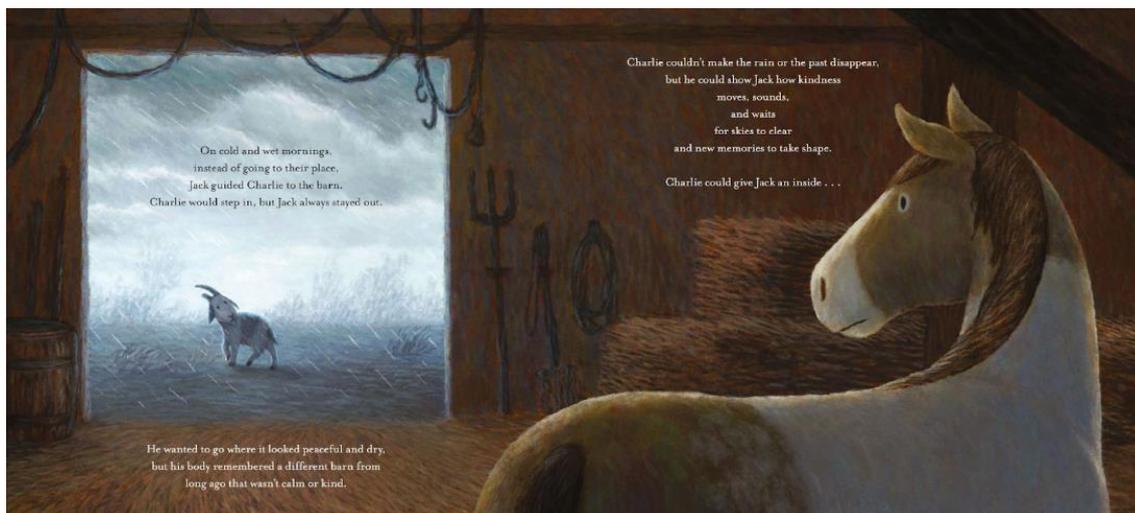
In children's picture books, visual separation often symbolizes emotional or social distance. By placing Jack slightly apart, the illustration subtly communicates his discomfort and hesitation in engaging with others. Such representation aligns with findings that picture books frequently use spatial positioning to depict feelings of vulnerability and self-protection, particularly in characters who experience difference or past trauma (Tsapiv, 2022).

Despite this withdrawal, the narration notes that Jack "*stepped back, and he watched out for Charlie.*" In terms of Attitude, the phrase "*watched out*" is a form of affective lexis. It shows that Jack cares deeply but chooses to be observant rather than intrusive. Instead of forcing a connection, Jack provides a watchful presence. This suggests that in an inclusive friendship, supporting someone sometimes means giving them the physical and emotional space they need to feel safe. This detail also indicates that Jack's care emerges not through direct interaction but through quiet observation.

From a multimodal perspective, Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) explain that framing and visual barriers can construct conceptual meanings that define participants' roles. Jack's position behind a partial visual boundary marks him as an observer rather than an active participant. This visually encodes his insecurity. However, the accompanying text reshapes this interpretation by revealing that his distance does not equal indifference. Instead, it becomes a protective form of care.

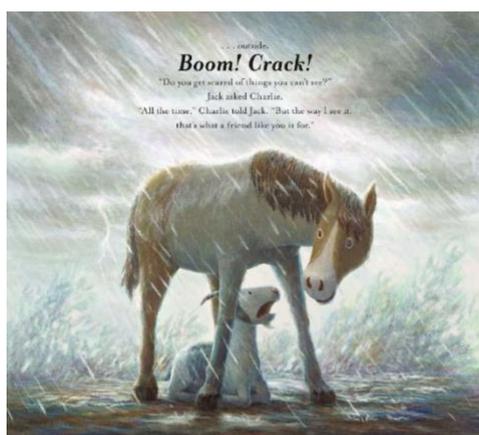
The analysis of Spread 4 highlights Jack's insecurity and emotional hesitation in interacting with others. The verbal narration describes his reluctance to allow anything to come "*too close, too quick, or too loud,*" reflecting his internal discomfort despite the supportive environment of the ranch. Visually, Jack is positioned at a distance from the other animals, reinforcing his emotional withdrawal. However, the narration also reveals that Jack quietly watches over Charlie, indicating that his distance does not signify indifference but rather a cautious form of care. Through the interaction of verbal and visual elements, the story portrays insecurity as a protective response shaped by past experiences, while also emphasizing that supportive relationships can develop through patience and respectful distance.

## Friendship



(Spread 8: Jack stay out while Charlie is inside)

"He (Jack) wanted to go where it looked peaceful and dry, but his body remembered a different barn from long ago that was not calm or kind"



(Spread 9: Charlie covering Jack with his body)

The theme of friendship becomes increasingly visible through both narrative and visual shifts across the later scenes. In Spread 9, the text explains that "... Jack guided Charlie to the barn. Charlie would step in, but Jack stayed out." This moment highlights Jack's willingness to prioritize Charlie's comfort despite his own emotional barriers. In the next text, the phrase "his body remembered" serves as a powerful form of affect, showing that Jack's trauma is not just a mental memory but a deep, physical reaction. The contrast between Jack's desire for a "peaceful and dry" place (positive appreciation) and his memory of an old barn that "wasn't calm or kind" (negative appreciation) evaluates his previous environment as non-inclusive. This linguistic choice emphasizes that for individuals with disabilities, the journey toward a new, safe space is often complicated by the "invisible" physical and emotional scars of the past.

The contrast in the illustration reinforces their difference. Charlie is warmly positioned inside the barn, a space associated with safety and shelter, while Jack remains outside under the rain. In visual grammar, Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) describe compositional elements such as boundaries and spatial separation as carriers of symbolic meaning. Here, the barn doorway functions as a dividing line that simultaneously separates and connects them, Jack remains physically excluded yet relationally committed. This reflects how picture books often portray emotional complexity through spatial positioning, especially in narratives involving vulnerability and support.

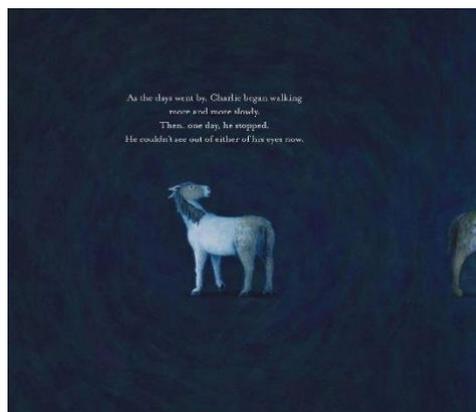
Friendship reaches a more explicit and reciprocal stage in Spread 9, where the storm heightens emotional tension. Jack and Charlie stand together outside as lightning fills the sky. Jack asks, *"Do you get scared of things you can't see?"* and Charlie responds honestly, *"I do... That's what a friend like you is for."* This exchange highlights the core of inclusive friendship through Affect and Social Sanction (Judgment). Jack's question, *"Do you get scared of things you can't see?"*, uses affective lexis (*"scared"*) to openly address the vulnerability associated with Charlie's visual impairment. Charlie's honest response, *"I do,"* followed by *"That's what a friend like you is for,"* shifts the narrative from fear to positive judgment (propriety/dependability). By identifying Jack's role as a protector, the text evaluates "friendship" not just as a social bond, but as a necessary support system that compensates for physical limitations. Visually, Charlie shelters Jack beneath his body, reversing the earlier protective dynamic and emphasizing mutual support.

The circular framing in the final illustration further strengthens this sense of harmony and emotional resolution. Jack is shown savoring the word *"friend"* *"like a mouthful of fresh, sweet grass,"* a metaphor that communicates comfort and fulfillment. This visual and verbal convergence signals the culmination of Jack's character development, from insecurity and self-protection to trust and relational closeness.

The analysis of Spread 8 and Spread 9 illustrates the gradual development of friendship between Jack and Charlie. The verbal narration reveals Jack's internal struggle, as his desire for safety is complicated by memories of a painful past, highlighting how previous experiences shape his hesitation. Visually, the contrast between Charlie standing inside the barn and Jack remaining outside reinforces their emotional distance while also showing Jack's willingness to prioritize Charlie's comfort. As the story progresses, their relationship evolves into a more reciprocal form of support. The dialogue during the storm scene openly expresses vulnerability and trust, while the illustration of Charlie protecting Jack visually reverses their earlier dynamic. Together, the verbal and visual elements portray friendship as a process of mutual care, empathy, and emotional growth, culminating in a sense of harmony and relational closeness.

## **Blindness**

Antonia explained that once in a while, for different reasons, blindness happened. She couldn't mend Charlie's sight like she had the eagle's broken wing, or release him into the wild like the possums once they'd grown, but she could give Charlie time to see in his own new way. Antonia said everybody deserves plenty of food, love, and patience.



*(Spread 3: Antonia explaining about Charlie condition) (Spread 11: Charlie gradual blindness)*

Blindness in *This Way, Charlie* is represented through a combination of compassionate narration and carefully constructed visual perspective. In Spread 3, blindness is represented not as a tragedy to be fixed, but as a condition to be accommodated through compassionate narration and patient appreciation. Verbally, the text acknowledges Charlie's permanent condition, stating that "*once in a while... blindness happened.*" By using the affective lexis of "*food, love, and patience,*" Antonia shifts the focus from medical "repair" to positive judgment (propriety/care). Her promise to give Charlie "*time to see in his own new way*" functions as a valuation of diversity. It suggests that different ways of perceiving the world are valid. It also aligns with previous studies emphasizing that exposure to diverse conditions in picture books fosters children's awareness and acceptance of difference (Agustina et al., 2018).

In contrast, spread 11 visually shifts the mood when Charlie is depicted alone against a dark blue background, accompanied by the text stating that "*he couldn't see out of either of his eyes now.*" The use of deep, cool tones communicates emotional uncertainty and vulnerability, while Charlie's central placement foregrounds his experience as the focus of the scene. According to Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), color choices and visual salience play an important role in constructing affective meaning. The absence of environmental details further mirrors Charlie's loss of vision. It creates a visual emptiness that invites readers to sense the limitation of his perspective. This strategy supports Fang's (1996) argument that illustrations in children's books often function to convey emotional states that the text alone cannot fully express.

The verbal and visual representations in this part construct blindness as both an ordinary reality and an emotionally challenging experience. While the narration emphasizes patience and care, the illustration immerses readers in Charlie's vulnerability that encourages empathetic engagement.

The analysis of Spread 3 and Spread 11 illustrates how blindness is portrayed as both a lived reality and an emotional experience. The verbal narration presents Charlie's condition with compassion, emphasizing patience, care, and acceptance rather than viewing blindness as a problem that must be fixed. Antonia's explanation encourages understanding and highlights the importance of adapting to different ways of perceiving the world. Visually, the illustration in Spread 11 intensifies the emotional dimension by depicting Charlie alone in a dark space, using color and visual focus to convey uncertainty and vulnerability. Through the interaction of narration and imagery, the story invites readers to empathize with Charlie's experience while framing blindness as a natural aspect of human diversity rather than a limitation.

#### 4. Discussion

These findings indicate that *This Way, Charlie* communicates ideas about disability through the interaction between words and images. The narrative first conveys attitudes and evaluations about the characters and their experiences, which are then supported visually in the illustrations. In this way, the visual grammar framework proposed by Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen (2006) helps explain how verbal and visual elements work together to guide readers' interpretation of the story.

One important finding concerns how the story constructs inclusivity at Open Bud Ranch. The narration presents the ranch as a place where animals with different conditions live together and participate in everyday activities. This idea of shared community is then reinforced visually through illustrations that depict animals with different physical conditions occupying the same space. The use of wide framing further emphasizes the ranch as a collective environment, encouraging readers to see it as a shared living space rather than focusing on a single character's disability.

Jack's insecurity also plays a significant role in the narrative. The text suggests that Jack feels uncertain and hesitant in his interactions with Charlie, even though he cares about him. This attitude is visually represented in the illustration where Jack appears positioned at the edge of the group, which reflects hesitation and a form of self-protection. At the same time, the narration reveals that Jack quietly watches over Charlie, suggesting that his distance does not indicate indifference. Through this interaction between narration and illustration, readers can perceive both Jack's fear and his underlying care.

The development of friendship between Jack and Charlie gradually changes this dynamic. The narration highlights how their relationship evolves from uncertainty to mutual trust. This progression is supported visually by the changing spatial relationship between the characters: earlier scenes show them physically separated, while later scenes depict them standing closer together. The storm scene is particularly significant because the narration presents Charlie as the one who

protects Jack, reversing the earlier situation where Jack watched over him. Visually, this moment reinforces the shift in their relationship, marking the point where their friendship becomes mutual.

The representation of blindness in the story also contributes to the broader message of inclusivity. The narration does not portray Charlie's blindness as tragic or hopeless. Instead, it emphasizes patience, adjustment, and perseverance. This evaluation is visually strengthened in the illustration where Charlie appears alone in a dark space, highlighting the emotional difficulty of the moment. At the same time, the scene invites readers to empathize with Charlie's experience rather than to see him as helpless. Overall, these elements demonstrate how the picture book combines verbal and visual storytelling to communicate social values. Rather than presenting disability as a limitation, *This Way, Charlie* frames it as part of a diverse community, while emphasizing empathy, patience, and friendship in overcoming fear and difference.

This study contributes to Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA) by showing that inclusivity is not only constructed through text but also emerges from the interaction between verbal and visual elements. For instance, the wide framing strategy works alongside the narration to establish a sense of community, functioning as a powerful ideological builder for the reader.

Beyond its contribution to MDA, this study also challenges existing discourse on disability representation. While many children's books portray disability as a burden or an object of pity, *This Way, Charlie* shifts the narrative toward agency and reciprocity. By analyzing the storm scene, this study challenges the stigma that disabled characters are always the "objects of help." Instead, the analysis reveals a relationship built on equality and mutual support.

Furthermore, the use of Appraisal Theory, specifically Attitude analysis, provides a deeper understanding of the characters' internal worlds. This approach is different from narrative analysis which only looks at the story flow. It is also different from transitivity which only focuses on types of processes or who does what. Attitude analysis makes it easier to identify specific words and diction that show emotion. By using this theory, Jack's distance is not about being mean or indifferent. Instead, his behavior shows his insecurity and fear. This framework proves that disability in the book is not just a physical condition.

Through the analysis of Affect and Judgement, the characters show real agency and strength. This study demonstrates that inclusivity is built through mutual respect and emotional growth. Other structural theories often overlook these important emotional details.

The findings of this study offer practical ideas for different groups to improve how we understand disability. For teachers and parents, these books can be used to teach visual literacy and how to build a better narrative about disabled people. They can explain that when someone with a disability stays away, it might be because of insecurity rather than a lack of role, so we must treat them equally

and with respect. Furthermore, curriculum makers can use *This Way, Charlie* and similar books as learning materials, not just for language but also for subjects like citizenship. Finally, authors and illustrators are encouraged to show more empowerment and equality in their stories. By showing disabled characters as active members of the community, they help readers see that people with disabilities should ideally blend and interact naturally with everyone else.

## 5. Conclusion

This study explores how *This Way, Charlie* conveys the values of inclusivity and friendship through the interaction between verbal narration and visual illustration. The analysis confirms that meaning in the picture book is constructed not only through language but also through multimodal elements such as framing, color, perspective, and spatial composition. These visual strategies function to make emotional and social messages more accessible and engaging for young readers.

The findings show that inclusivity is communicated through the collective depiction of animals with different disabilities at Open Bud Ranch, where difference is normalized as part of everyday community life. Jack's cautious behavior illustrates how characters may struggle with insecurity while still expressing empathy and care, reinforcing the idea that vulnerability does not negate compassion. The friendship between Jack and Charlie demonstrates how patience, trust, and mutual support help overcome fear and personal limitations, while Charlie's blindness is represented as a condition requiring understanding rather than pity. Such portrayals highlight the role of picture books in shaping children's awareness and attitudes toward diversity and inclusion.

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