Critical Meaning-Making through Story and Illustration on Let's Read Indonesia: Exploring Well-Being and Justice in Pas Sekali!

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Abstract

Children's books do more than entertain; their words and images can shape how young readers understand belonging, difference, and whose needs are treated as normal. Yet how digital children's literature constructs meanings of disability, well-being, and justice remains underexplored in Southeast Asian scholarship. This study examines *Pas Sekali!* (2022), the Indonesian-language edition of a story originally developed for Let's Read Asia, focusing on how disability, well-being, and justice are constructed through the interaction of written text and illustrations. The study employs a qualitative approach, using critical content analysis to examine the written text and multimodal analysis to examine the illustrations. The findings show that *Pas Sekali!* constructs disability as a normalized part of human diversity, while representing well-being through accessibility and justice through equal participation. The recurring phrase "pas" ("just right") normalizes accessibility as an ordinary condition rather than a special provision, while the illustrations position Priya as an active participant alongside her peers rather than as marginalized. These findings suggest that a translated and locally circulated disability-inclusive story can serve as a resource for critical literacy by challenging deficit-oriented representations and presenting inclusion as a matter of everyday belonging and equal participation.

Keywords: *critical literacy; children's literature; disability representation; multimodal analysis; decolonizing education*

INTRODUCTION

Children's literature shapes children's perspectives on the social world. From an early age, stories and illustrations help children understand who belongs to the community, what experiences are considered normal, and whose needs should be prioritized (Melani et al. 2021). Picture books combine verbal and visual elements to convey social values through both what is stated and what is depicted. As digital platforms

continue to expand access to children's literature, it is important to examine how these works foster an understanding of social issues.

One key issue in children's literature is the representation of disability. Stigma, prejudice, and low expectations toward children with disabilities can act as barriers to inclusive education and limit their opportunities to fully develop their talents and potential (MacKenzie et al., 2020). In children's literature, children with disabilities are also often portrayed through the lens of pity, exclusion, or marginalization, rather than as part of the diversity of everyday life. In response to this issue, The Asia Foundation's Let's Read program has developed stories that normalize the presence of children with disabilities by highlighting their abilities and independence, rather than pity or special treatment.

In this study, disability is understood as a condition related to the social and physical environment that affects children's participation and opportunities to engage in social life. Its representation is examined through the portrayal of characters with disabilities and the environment's response to their needs. Well-being is understood in terms of accessibility, while justice relates to equal access and opportunities for meaningful participation. These three concepts are examined through the lens of critical literacy, which views children's literature as a space to challenge stereotypes, notions of normality, differences, and acceptance of all children.

This study focuses on a digital book titled Pas Sekali! (2022). This book is the Indonesian-language edition of a story developed for Let's Read Asia, a multilingual digital children's literature platform managed by The Asia Foundation. The Indonesian-language edition was chosen because it is relevant to the context of young readers in Indonesia. Written by Sidhant Maharaj and illustrated by Regina Vaka'uta, the story follows Priya as she faces her first day at a new school as a wheelchair user (The Asia Foundation, 2022). The portrayal of disability, well-being, and equity in Priya's school life provides an important context for analysis.

A number of previous studies have examined the role of critical literacy and multimodality in understanding representations and the construction of meaning in children's literature, including those by Ranieri and Fabbro (2016), Hughes and Talley (2025), Husband (2024), Cheng et al. (2025), and Jaelani et al. (2026). Some of their research focused on participatory actions to examine how critical media literacy activities

help young people understand and question discriminatory representations in the media. Some studies even demonstrate an increase in awareness of stereotypes and discrimination in the media, while others show that children's literature can be utilized through a critical literacy approach to raise elementary school students' awareness regarding disability. Furthermore, regarding digital literature, the study examines three digital storybooks on the Let's Read platform.

Although these studies have contributed to the fields of critical literacy, representations of disability, and multimodality, there is still room to explore how verbal and visual elements work together. Therefore, this study offers a perspective that integrates critical literacy and multimodal analysis to examine how the text and illustrations in Pas Sekali! construct meanings regarding disability, well-being, and justice. This study not only examines the meanings constructed by each mode but also the intermodal relationships in shaping these representations.

This study is expected to expand the body of research on critical literacy, multimodality, and representations of disability in digital children's literature in Indonesia. This situation highlights a knowledge gap that requires further investigation through research on this subject (Muller-Bloch & Kranz, 2015). Using a qualitative research approach that incorporates library research based on the book Pas Sekali, combined with a critical analysis through a hermeneutic framework, this study aims, at the very least, to reveal the linguistic elements conveyed through the story and its illustrations on the Read Indonesia platform in order to uncover a holistic reinterpretation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

1. Critical Literacy

The concept of critical literacy is heavily influenced by the ideas of Freire and Macedo (2005) regarding the reading of "words and the world"—a process that does not stop at understanding the literal meaning of a text but also invites readers to question how that text helps shape their perspective on social reality. For Freire, reading is not merely a cognitive activity but also a politically charged act, as every text carries a specific perspective that may either reinforce or challenge the prevailing social order. This line of thought was later systematized more rigorously by Luke and Freebody (1999) through

the Four Resources Model, which divides the reader's role into four components: decoding the text, interpreting its content, applying it within a social context, and critically analyzing it.

It is this last role that is most relevant to this study. Through this role, readers are encouraged to recognize that texts are not neutral but rather constructions that highlight certain perspectives and often overlook others (Luke & Freebody, 1999). For children, picture books are not merely a form of entertainment. These books indirectly instill an understanding of who is considered "normal" and who is positioned as a "different" group (Husband, 2024; Hughes & Talley, 2025).

2. Multimodal Analysis and Visual Grammar

Given that the subject of this study is a picture book, an analysis based solely on verbal text is clearly insufficient. Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) argue that images possess their own "grammar" for constructing meaning, much like verbal language. They divide this visual meaning into three dimensions: representational meaning (what and who is depicted, along with their actions), interactive meaning (how the images establish a relationship with the reader, for example through the direction of gaze), and compositional meaning (how visual elements are arranged within a single frame).

Specifically for the context of children's picture books, this framework was further refined by Painter, Martin, and Unsworth (2013) through the concepts of focalization and ambiance. These concepts highlight how illustrations position the reader in relation to the characters. For example, a character's gaze directed directly at the reader (demand) creates a more intimate interaction, whereas a character who appears unaware of the reader's presence (offer) conveys a sense of distance. Painter et al. (2013) emphasize that these elements are not merely aesthetic choices but visual strategies to guide the reader's empathy. It is this comprehensive framework that will be used to analyze how the illustrations in the book *Pas Sekali!* position the character Priya—through her actions, her relationships with other characters, and her placement within the page composition.

3. Representations of Disability in Children's Literature

Studies on the representation of disability in children's literature generally stem from a critique of the medical model, which tends to view disability as an individual

"deficiency" that must be corrected or pitied. In contrast, the social model offers a different perspective: the barriers faced by people with disabilities do not actually stem from their physical conditions, but rather from environmental and social constructs that are not yet inclusive (Oliver, 2013). This shift in perspective is crucial in the study of children's literature because it shifts the focus of analysis from "what this character lacks" to "to what extent the environment in the story supports or hinders the character's participation."

However, Hughes and Talley (2025) found that the representation of disability in children's books often remains trapped in outdated narratives: eliciting pity, portraying characters as overly extraordinary, or even marginalizing them from the center of the story. This situation has not yet fully presented disability as a natural part of human diversity. Nevertheless, a critical approach offers a solution. Husband (2024) demonstrated that children's literature combined with critical literacy can foster awareness among elementary school students regarding disability. In line with this, Ranieri and Fabbro (2016) also found that critical media literacy effectively helps young people challenge stereotypes and adopt a more open attitude toward differences.

The three theoretical frameworks outlined above are applied in an integrated manner in this study. Critical literacy provides an analytical lens for questioning the social messages represented in texts, while multimodal analysis serves as a tool for dissecting how those messages are visually constructed. Furthermore, the social model of disability (Oliver, 2013) serves as the foundation for interpreting issues of well-being (through accessibility to the physical and social environment) and justice (through equal participation) within the narrative context.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative approach with a document analysis design to examine the constructions of disability, well-being, and justice in the written text and illustrations of Pas Sekali! (2022). The qualitative approach is used to understand meaning and representation in context. The study applies critical content analysis to the text and multimodal analysis to the illustrations to examine the construction of meaning through verbal and visual aspects (Johnson et al., 2019; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2020).

The primary object of this study is the digital book Pas Sekali! (2022), the Indonesian-language edition of a digital children's story developed for Let's Read Asia. The story was written by Sidhant Maharaj and illustrated by Regina Vaka'uta. The research data consist of the written text and illustrations found in this edition. Data were selected based on their relevance to the three research focuses: disability, well-being, and justice. Textual data included words, phrases, sentences, and expressions related to these three aspects, while visual data included characters, actions, interactions, positions, expressions, settings, and other relevant visual elements. Data selection was conducted systematically based on the research questions, in accordance with the principles of qualitative content analysis, which uses research questions as the basis for determining categories of analysis (Mayring in Moleong, 2007).

Data were collected through a documentary study, a data collection technique that involves gathering and analyzing documents as non-human data sources in qualitative research (Nasution, 2003; Sugiyono, 2005). The collection process involved repeatedly reading Pas Sekali! (2022) and recording findings by page or scene. Each finding was systematically documented to maintain source traceability and facilitate the analysis process.

Data analysis was conducted in three stages in accordance with the research problem statement. First, textual data were analyzed using critical content analysis to identify representations of disability, well-being, and justice, as well as the social meanings constructed through the texts. Content analysis was used to systematically examine the content of the documents and draw conclusions based on the characteristics of the messages under study (Moleong, 2007). Second, visual data were analyzed using multimodal analysis, taking into account the visual resources that play a role in meaning-making (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2020). Third, the results of the textual and visual analyses were compared and integrated to identify how the two modes collectively construct meaning, including relationships that complement, reinforce, or expand upon one another. These results were then interpreted through a critical literacy perspective to understand the construction of meaning regarding disability, well-being, and justice in the stories.

Data validity was ensured through credibility, dependability, and confirmability by means of repeated readings, systematic note-taking, and verification of the consistency

of interpretations with textual and visual evidence (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This study did not involve human participants; therefore, ethical considerations focused on the responsible use of sources, the attribution of authors, illustrators, and platforms, and the accurate portrayal of disability.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Critical Interpretation through Storytelling

The story Pas Sekali! opens with a depiction of Priya's doubts about her new school: "Priya was very anxious. It's her first day at the new school" (p. 1), which is later reaffirmed through her dialogue with her mother: "Mom, I'm unsure about this new school" (p. 2). Narratively, this opening establishes Priya's anxiety as the story's starting point anxiety that is natural for a child with a disability who is accustomed to facing environments that do not always accommodate her needs. The story then gradually rather than suddenly resolves these doubts through a series of repeated affirmations.

This emphasis is most clearly seen in the repetition of the word "just right," which appears four times throughout the story, each time referring to a different element: the accessible restroom, "The size is just right!" (p. 9); the wheelchair ramp, "This ramp isn't too steep or too gentle. It's just right!" (p. 11); the basketball hoop, "The hoop isn't too high or too low. It's just the right height!" (p. 13); and at the end of the story, Mere's statement to Priya, "That's because this school and you are a perfect fit!" (p. 14). This shift in the reference of the word "just right" is significant: from physical objects (toilet, path, basket) to a personal subject (Priya herself) indicates that the narrative does not stop at depicting accessible facilities but directs that meaning toward full acceptance of Priya as an individual. This pattern aligns with the social model of disability (Oliver, 2013), which posits that environmental adaptability not an individual's physical condition determines a person's participation and well-being.

This repetition of the word "pas" simultaneously marks an implicit distinction between the two constructs that are the focus of this study. The first three instances represent well-being, as each refers to the suitability of physical facilities (restrooms, wheelchair ramps, basketball hoops) that allow Priya to carry out her activities without environmental barriers. The fourth occurrence, when the word "pas" shifts to refer to Priya herself, actually represents justice, because that acceptance no longer depends on

the adaptation of objects around her, but rather on the equal recognition of Priya as a person. Thus, the story constructs well-being and justice gradually and in stages, rather than as a single, flat package of meaning.

The choice of vocabulary in the narrative further reinforces this interpretation. Priya is portrayed through active verbs, such as “gliding” (pp. 6, 10) and “scoring” (p. 13), rather than the passive verbs typically associated with the portrayal of characters with disabilities in conventional narratives, such as “being helped” or “being assisted.” The use of a wheelchair is also not portrayed as a disability; instead, it is given a personal name, “Wheely,” and is discussed casually between Priya and Mere: “Your wheelchair is cool, Priya… Wheely helps me get around” (p. 6). This finding reinforces Hughes and Talley’s (2025) observation that authentic representations of disability are characterized by portraying characters as active agents, not objects of pity, while also addressing their concern that children’s books still often fall into patterns of representation based on pity or exceptionalism.



Figure 1. Priya is introduced to her classmates (p. 4)

Social acceptance of Priya is also built gradually through the characters around her. The teacher introduces Priya on an equal footing to her classmates (p. 4; see Figure 1), while the initiative for acceptance actually comes from her fellow students, as shown when Mere offers her a seat next to her (p. 5). These narrative details position acceptance not as an instruction from an authority figure (the teacher), but as a choice emerging from peer relationships—thus creating a representation aligned with the Let's Read project's goal to "normalize the representation of children with disabilities" (The Asia Foundation, 2022). Unlike the repetition of the word "pas," which emphasizes the dimension of well-being through the suitability of facilities, this detail of acceptance directly represents the dimension of justice, because what is at stake is no longer access to physical space, but rather the equality of Priya's social standing among her friends.

3.2 Critical Interpretation through Illustrations

Before discussing Figure 2, the same visual grammar framework should also be applied to Figure 1 (Priya is introduced to her classmates, p. 4), as this scene serves as the first visual entry point for Priya's social acceptance. In terms of representational meaning, Priya is depicted on equal footing with her classmates in a single formation, rather than positioned on the edge or separated from the group. In terms of interactive meaning, the characters' gazes are directed toward one another, not toward the reader, creating an impression of an "offer" (Painter et al., 2013), positioning the reader as an observer of the natural acceptance process unfolding among the characters, rather than as a party invited to participate directly. From a compositional perspective, the teacher is placed at the edge of the frame, not in the center, so that the primary visual focus remains on the interactions among the child characters. This compositional choice reinforces the interpretation in section 3.1 that social acceptance is constructed as a horizontal initiative among peers, not as a vertical instruction from adult authority figures.



Figure 2. Priya and Mere are sitting next to each other in class (p. 6)

From a representational perspective (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006), the illustrations in Pas Sekali! consistently position Priya as an active participant, rather than a passive object, within the scenes. In Figure 2, Priya and Mere are depicted sitting side by side at their respective desks, with equivalent body postures and lines of sight, without any visual emphasis that positions one character as more dominant than the other. Thematically, this scene represents a dimension of well-being, as the equality of their seating positions indicates that the classroom has accommodated Priya's presence as an integral part of the classroom's physical layout—in other words, not as an additional element requiring special adjustments.



Figure 3. Priya's expression on the wheelchair ramp (p. 11)

The most prominent example of interactive meaning is seen in Figure 3, a close-up shot of Priya's face—with a broad smile and sparkling eyes—that fills nearly the entire page. This expression is interpreted through the concept of "ambience" proposed by Painter et al. (2013), which serves to elicit the reader's emotional engagement and invite them to share in Priya's joy, rather than merely observing her from a distance..



Figure 4. Priya and Mere playing basketball together (pp. 12–13)

The compositional meaning further supports this interpretation. In the basketball scene (Figure 4), Priya and Mere are depicted in symmetrical positions on either side of

the basket, both holding the ball with body language that indicates active physical engagement. On the following page, the scene expands to include other children playing around them, along with a rainbow in the background. This expansion of the composition visualizes inclusion that is not limited to the relationship between the two main characters but extends to a broader social environment. Unlike Figure 2, which represents well-being through the equality of static positions in a classroom, this basketball scene represents justice more explicitly, as it highlights equality of participation in the same physical activity, rather than merely sharing space.



Figure 5. Mere hugs Priya at the end of the story (p. 14)

On the final page (Figure 5), the visual composition becomes more intimate. Mere embraces Priya from behind, with very close physical proximity and a soft blue background that differs from the illustrations on the preceding pages. This change in composition marks a shift from the depiction of activities (playing, moving) to the depiction of emotional relationships (closeness and acceptance), in line with the shift in the meaning of the word “pas” from physical facilities to personal acceptance, as identified in the text analysis in section 3.1.

3.3 Stories and Illustrations as an Integrated Source of Critical Literacy

The interconnection between text and illustrations in *Pas Sekali!* reveals a dynamic relationship that shifts between reinforcement and complementarity. On page 9, the text “It’s the perfect fit!” is reinforced by an illustration showing how the bathroom space fits Priya’s body and wheelchair. On page 11, the text describes the physical suitability of the path, while the illustration adds Priya’s emotional response through her joyful expression. On page 14, the statement “This school and you are a perfect fit!” is reinforced by an illustration of Mere hugging Priya. These findings indicate that the meaning of “a perfect fit” evolves from the suitability of facilities to emotional experiences, participation, and social acceptance. This evolution of meaning suggests that inclusion is not only about access to physical spaces but also about opportunities to engage and feel accepted within a social environment.

These findings can be interpreted through the lens of decolonizing knowledge because Priya is not primarily represented through her limitations, dependence, or as an object of pity. Figures 2 and 4 portray Priya as an active participant in learning and play activities. This shift challenges the perspective that treats disability as the primary basis for determining a person’s abilities and social standing. In a critical reading, the story shifts the focus from questions about a child’s “limitations” to questions about how the environment can create opportunities that allow all children to participate. Thus, the representation of disability in the story can be interpreted as a shift from a deficit-based approach toward agency, participation, and a sense of belonging.

In the context of Indonesian culture, these representations can be interpreted through the values of togetherness, mutual cooperation, and tepa selira. These values are not explicitly stated in the story, but they can serve as an interpretive framework for understanding the relationships between characters and Priya’s involvement in shared activities. Gotong royong can be seen in the creation of an environment that allows all children to participate, while tepa selira can be linked to the acceptance of Priya without treating her as an object of pity. Thus, local values are used to broaden the interpretation of the representation of inclusion, rather than as a claim that the story explicitly teaches these values.

Priya's portrayal also has the potential to be used in critical literacy and social-emotional learning for young readers. Priya's anxiety at the beginning of the story, followed by her involvement in school activities and acceptance by her peers, can be interpreted as an emotional journey from uncertainty toward comfort and a sense of belonging. However, this study does not claim that the story directly produces psychological changes in readers, as children's responses were not examined. Findings by Hayden and Prince (2023) indicate that representations of disability grounded in strength and agency can foster acceptance and challenge stereotypes. Therefore, Pas Sekali! has the potential to foster critical reading through questions such as "Why does Priya feel hesitant about her new school?", "What enables Priya to participate?", and "Do all schools provide equal opportunities?" These questions can help students connect the character's experiences with social conditions in their own communities.

Another aspect noted is the contrast between the language and the visual depiction of the characters. Pas Sekali! uses simple, easy-to-follow sentences, whereas the characters in the illustrations do not entirely possess distinctly childlike visual traits. From an interpretive perspective, the simple language makes it easier for children to follow the story's plot, while the relatively more mature visuals portray Priya as an individual with her own identity and social life—not merely as a "child with a disability." This visual ambiguity regarding age can also serve as material for visual literacy to explore how clothing, body shape, expressions, and appearance influence the interpretation of a character's age and identity.

Within the framework of Literature for SDGs, these findings are particularly relevant to SDG 4 on quality and inclusive education and SDG 10 on reducing inequality. The facilities available to Priya and her involvement in activities with her friends paint a picture of an education system that not only provides access but also opens up opportunities for participation. This aligns with SDG 4's focus on inclusive education and SDG 10's focus on reducing forms of inequality and exclusion. However, this relevance stems from an interpretation of the story's content, not as evidence that Pas Sekali! directly achieves the SDG targets. Rather, the story can serve as a starting point to encourage students to compare the portrayal of an inclusive school in the story with the conditions at schools in their own communities.

Compared to previous research, these findings expand the study of disability representation through decolonial, cultural, and critical literacy perspectives. Hughes and Talley (2025) highlight the tendency toward representations based on pity or exceptionalism, whereas Pas Sekali! emphasizes Priya's agency through her involvement in learning and play activities. Meanwhile, Jaelani et al. (2026) examine the relationship between text and images from a logical-semantic perspective, whereas these findings demonstrate that reinforcing and complementary relationships also shape the meanings of accessibility, participation, acceptance, and a sense of belonging. The contribution of this study lies in its integration of multimodal analysis with decolonial readings and local cultural perspectives in understanding inclusive education.

Nevertheless, Pas Sekali! tends to depict an environment that has already accommodated Priya's needs without showing the accessibility barriers or inequalities that might exist in real life. This portrayal makes inclusion seem ideal and necessitates a critical literacy approach. Readers are encouraged to question whether all schools provide similar facilities and social environments, and who still faces barriers to participation. In this way, the story can be read not only as a depiction of inclusion but also as a space to compare representations with social reality.

CONCLUSION

Overall, Pas Sekali! demonstrates that inclusion is built through the suitability of facilities, opportunities for participation, emotional comfort, and social acceptance—all reinforced by the relationship between text and illustrations. The meaning of "pas" evolves from physical suitability toward the experience of participation and a sense of belonging. The portrayal of Priya also reveals a shift from a deficit-based construction of disability toward agency and participation, which can be interpreted through the lens of decolonizing knowledge and expanded upon by the perspective of the value of togetherness in the Indonesian context. Theoretically, these findings reinforce the use of critical and multimodal approaches in children's literature studies, while practically, they demonstrate the potential of children's literature as a medium for discussing disability, acceptance, inclusive education, and inequality.

These findings are relevant to SDG 4 and SDG 10 through their depiction of equal learning opportunities and participation, but should not be interpreted as evidence that the stories directly contribute to achieving the SDG targets. However, this study is limited to a single book and does not yet include children's responses. Furthermore, the portrayal of an affirmative school environment tends not to depict barriers and inequalities in accessibility in depth. These limitations highlight the importance of critically examining the gap between the representations in stories and real-world social conditions. Future research could compare several children's books and examine how child readers interpret representations of disability and relate them to their own experiences and social phenomena in their communities.

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