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## The Pura Belpré Award and the portrayal of disability

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The Pura Belpré Award and the Portrayal of Disability

A Thesis Submitted  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Designation  
University Honors

Zoe Houser  
University of Northern Iowa  
May 2015

THE PURA BELPRÉ AWARD AND DISABILITY

This study by:

Title:

Has been approved as meeting the thesis requirements for the  
Designation of University Honors.

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# THE PURA BELPRÉ AWARD AND DISABILITY

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## Introduction

As a future teacher, I have been taught about the curriculum I will use, the students I may meet, and what I will encounter in the education field. As I approach graduation, two topics that have become more prevalent throughout the discourse of classes are disability and race. These are two populations of students are practically guaranteed to be in our classrooms. Although some school districts may have more of one or the other, any school district can be shown to have some differences in race or ability.

What makes the lives as teachers more interesting is the need to help every child succeed. Even if there are children from multiple populations in the classroom, it is in the teacher's best interest to help them succeed to their fullest abilities. In order to do this, teachers must learn more about these populations ourselves and help the students to learn about one another so that they understand the backgrounds the other students bring into the classroom. One of the best ways to do this is through literature detailing another population's experiences and stories. While many books geared towards children are high quality, those that have been given awards are often books that teachers gravitate towards to buy for their classroom.

The Pura Belpré Award is one of the lesser known literary awards. Because other literary awards have been around longer and received a large amount of attention, there has been much research done over the other literary awards, including how the award books portray disabled characters within their pages. However, there is a lack of research about the portrayal of disability in books that have been awarded or honored by the Pura Belpré Award.

This paper will address the question of how many Pura Belpré Award winning books include prominent characters with disabilities and if they are portrayed positively or negatively in the books. This research will result in a close examination of the children's literature that has won the Pura Belpré Award and detail how disability is shown or not shown. The findings will be used to assess whether or not these books serve the microculture of disability within the Latino community.

## **Literature Review**

### **Pura Belpré: The Woman and the Award**

The award for books that address the Latino culture is the Pura Belpré Award. Pura Belpré was an important figure within the Latino community in the early twentieth century. Pura Teresa Belpré Nogueras, also known as Pura Belpré, was a Latina from Cidra, Puerto Rico. When she immigrated to the United States, she became a librarian in the New York Public Library system, the first Puerto Rican to do so in the system. While there, she wrote folktales for a story writing class and had them published. From then on, she worked in the New York Public Library system, reaching out to Puerto Ricans through programs and literature. She died in 1982 but lives on in the Pura Belpré Award (Naidoo, 2013).

The Pura Belpré Award, according to the Association for Library Service to Children (ALSC), which is a division of the American Library Association (ALA), was established in 1996 and is presented to a Latino/Latina writer and illustrator whose work best portrays, affirms, and celebrates the Latino cultural experiences in an outstanding work of literature for children and youth (American Library Association, 2014). The Coretta Scott King Award that had been established to honor authentic African American literature served as the inspiration to create an award to honor authentic Latino literature. At first the award was given biannually until the year 2009, when it became an annual award. The award is co-sponsored by the Association for Library Service to Children and REFORMA, which is the more common name of The National Association to Promote Library Services to Latinos and the Spanish-Speaking (American Library Association, 2014).

### **Other Literary Awards and Disability**

There have been two previous studies that have studied ALA award winning books and how they portray disability. These studies influenced the course of this current research. Dyches, Prater, and Jenson's (2006) research focused on the books that received the Caldecott Medal and Honor status between 1938 and 2005. In those books, the researchers analyzed the characters for

disabilities and determined that eleven books portrayed characters with disabilities. The researchers broke down the plots of each of the books that had disabilities and analyzed the disability within the context of the book, giving teaching tips on how to use the book to within the classroom (Dyches et al., 2006).

The other piece of research by Leininger, Dyches, Prater, and Heath (2010) studied Newbery Award Winning books from 1975-2009. They researched the thirty-one Newbery Award and Honor books in those years to define which ones portrayed disabilities. Within these books, there were 41 main or supporting characters that portrayed at least one type of disability. The study results concluded that even though there was more representation of disability, there was not enough to be proportionate to the amount of students in special education in the United States. The study also concluded that these characters were not racially diverse in portraying students with special needs. This limited the representation of the special needs students to just a few ethnicities, which is not representative of the United States school system today (Leininger, Dyches, Prater, & Heath, 2010).

### **Children's Literature and Disability**

Other studies have focused on a single disability or single category of disabilities in order to find literature to support those students with disability in the classroom. Altieri (2008) defined dyslexia and examined children's literature that shows school-age children with dyslexia and how they interact with the school setting. Altieri (2008) located books that included "a school-age central character (main or supporting) with dyslexia" (p. 48). The books looked at were contemporary, realistic fiction, or books that could take place in today's world. The books were recently published, between the years of 1993 and 2003. To make the study more reliable, Altieri (2008) read the books several times and noted the characters and how their dyslexia was identified in the book, using "any instructional methodology implemented, characteristics related to the self-concept of the character with dyslexia, and the portrayal of the child's teacher" (p. 48). Her results showed that most of the characters with dyslexia had "low self-esteem" and employed "self-

deprecating comments” (p. 51). It was also difficult to find books that portray teachers in a positive light in the same book with characters with dyslexia (Altieri, 2008). Altieri (2008) spends the rest of the research article describing not only how children may view this, but how educators should view this literature and the research about the literature.

The implications for her study are that thought should be put into analyzing if characters are portrayed with disability, and if that portrayal is in a negative or positive light. This research can also give educators insight into how the literature children read about disability might portray the disability. If a child with that specific disability reads the book and the character thinks negatively of the disability, then the child with the disability may start to think negatively of themselves. This trend must be stopped or discussed so as to build up the self-esteem of disabled children and to portray positive images of disabled children to other children without disability.

### **Children’s Literature in the Classroom**

In terms of practical application of children’s literature for children with disabilities, there is a gap in the literature. Smith-D’Arezzo and Moore-Thomas (2010) described the integration of books that focus positively on disabled characters with children in urban schools to help improve the positivity of the perception of their peers with disabilities. This article also speaks to multicultural education with literature. Multicultural children’s literature should include diverse characters from many cultures. These characters should also be authentic to their culture and not a stereotypical representation of what society thinks the characters should be like. The way books are used to teach about these multicultural characters and concepts in the classroom are how books discussing disabilities should be used. Smith-D’Arezzo and Moore-Thomas advocated for this practice since both methods are espoused to reduce prejudice against groups. Using this practice correctly would help the multiple student groups within the classroom, whether they are Latino or they have a disability.



**Disability in the Classroom**

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2013), there were approximately 6.5 million children being served under the Individual with Disabilities Education Act, part B in the 2010 to 2011 school year. This is a significant increase from the approximately 3.5 million that were served during the 1976 to 1977 school year, which is the year after the enactment of IDEA (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013). Although this number has dropped off from its peak in the mid-2000s, it can be seen that the overall population of students with disabilities is growing, not diminishing. This does not take into account the number of people with special needs that have exited the school system and entered U.S. American society but still require special services. As their numbers grow, the resources for these students continue to grow. Many of these students can now be given support through direct instruction, either in the general classroom or through pull-out programs implemented throughout the school. This allows students to interact with their non-disabled peers more frequently than before. This also means that the teacher must teach these disabled students the skills they need as well as teaching the other mix of children in the classroom the skills that they need.

**Latinos in the Classroom**

In similar fashion to the growing population of disabled students, the population of Latino students is also growing. Whether they are here legally or illegally, more Latino students than ever before are being taught within the United States school systems. Areas that have been typically dominated by Caucasians, such as Iowa, have started to see a significant influx of Latinos. According to “Latinos in Iowa: 2014,” a publication made by the State Data Center of Iowa in September 2014, there were an estimated 168,806 Latinos living in the state of Iowa, which is a 104.7% increase from the year 2000. Of that population, 11.8% or nearly 1 out of every 10 Latinos was under the age of five. The article says that “Latinos have a higher concentration of preschoolers among the [Iowan] population than any other race or ethnic group” (p. 1). This is coupled with the fact that 51,089 students were enrolled in Iowa’s K-12 education system, which is

a 208.4% increase from Latino enrollment in the 1999-2000 school year (p. 2). Because of this population shift, teachers are now responsible for a population that they themselves may have no experience with because of their upbringing. Educators must then go out and find materials to teach all their students, which includes the use of literature.

### **Latinos and Disability**

The Center for Disease Control and Prevention lists several statistics concerning Hispanic/Latino youth and disability. One chart from July 2011 surveyed families of different economic backgrounds and ethnicities. The results exposed that non-Hispanic white children were more likely at every income level to be diagnosed with a learning disability. The levels for the Hispanic children with disabilities were as followed: 9% for families above the poverty line, 8% for Hispanic families between 100% and 199% of the poverty line, and 5% of those greater than or equal to 200% of the poverty line (QuickStats, 2011). According to another part of the CDC's website, listed under a webpage titled "Minority Health", the CDC lists statistics collected from the U.S. Census Bureau. Hispanics, defined by the CDC as persons of "Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South or Central American, or other Spanish culture, regardless of race". Hispanics make up approximately 17% of the U.S. population, which makes them the largest ethnic or race minority. By 2060, the Hispanic population is expected to grow to 31% of the U.S. population. It also says that 23.3% of children in the elementary and high school setting are Hispanic (Minority Health, 2011).

### **Need for Research about Latinos and Disability**

The need for research of the Pura Belpré Award and disability should be at high priority. Other award-winning literature has been scrutinized for the portrayal of disability by its characters, but the Pura Belpré Award has not been studied in the same way. Given that the Hispanic population is on the rise, and that almost one-fourth of children in the elementary and high school setting are Hispanic, investigating literature concerning this ethnic group is now imperative. There was limited research for disability on the CDC website, and what was found showed that this

minority group did not have substantial diagnosis of learning disabilities. The lack of this research could be for several reasons. It is true that there could not be many Latinos diagnosed with disability. However, as this group grows within the country and the public school system, the possibility for diagnosis of learning disabilities grows. Because the Hispanic cultures often differ from American culture on many points, there may some disconnect between diagnoses of disability. Researching the portrayal of disability in award-winning Latino children's can serve several purposes. If the Latino disabled youth numbers grow, this knowledge will give us the information about what books best represent Latinos within this group. If the Latino disabled youth population does not grow right away, this research can help to guide future literature for these people so that it can best serve it in the portrayal of its characters.

These two populations, the overlap that is between them, and the other types of students present within schools are very unique. Each child will have stories and experiences that they bring to school. However, those experiences might not involve the other populations that are present within their classroom or their school. Teachers can increase this understanding through the usage of books that teach about each person's identity and experiences. Often teachers will use award winning literature in their classroom. Educators use this type of literature because of the following reasons: they are often found in bookstores and libraries, the reputation of the award precedes the book, and the teacher thinks the book applies to their classroom and will be well-received. Websites, such as Scholastic, aid teachers and parents in picking out these books for their children in order to widen their experiences and knowledge base (Teach with Award Winning Books, 2014).

### **Methodology**

Each of the Pura Belpré Award Books from the inception of the award in 1996 was analyzed for the inclusion of any characters with disabilities. This was done because the focus of the Pura Belpré is more on high quality writing and illustrations following the Latino culture, not disability. This research analyzed each book from all of the categories and noting the mention,

however slight, of disability. The disability categories were defined based on how the legislation within IDEA 2004 defines disability, since this is how disability is defined within the United States school system. These categories, as listed by the National Dissemination for Children with Disabilities in their March 2013 document titled “Categories of Disability under IDEA” include: autism and the autistic spectrum, deaf-blindness, deafness, emotional disturbance, hearing impairments, intellectual or learning disability, multiple disabilities, orthopedic impairment, other health impairment, specific learning disability, speech or language impairment, traumatic brain injury, or visual impairment including blindness. Characters with disabilities that are important to the story were noted, as well the display or mention of disability in the background. Refer to Appendix A for a list of how IDEA defines each of the disabilities.

The same rating scale that was used in the study “Portrayal of Characters with Disabilities in Newbery Books” was used in this study. This rating scale was a 2008 adaption of the *Rating Scale for Quality Characterization of Individuals with Disabilities in Children’s Literature* by Tina T. Dyches and Mary Anne Prater (Pehrson, 2011, p. 6). This had been used in studies by Dyches and Prater that studied mental retardation, autism, and developmental disability in children’s literature (Pehrson, 2011). The parts of the story the rating scale assesses include: personal portrayal, social interactions, sibling relationships, exemplary practices, impact of disability on plot, impact of setting on disability, and point of view. Because of its focus on disability portrayal as well as the relationship between the disability and other parts of the book, it was deemed to be useful for this type of research. The front rating scale was used for all books, but only completed for the books with disabled characters, as it only applied to those books. The front page of the rating scale was a general overview of the books, including the title of the book, general impressions about the book, and if the book should be recommended to others. The first section of the second page was the personal portrayal of the character(s) with disability. The most important rating for this section was if the character’s disability would fit into a definition from the IDEA law. Using the definitions, which can be found in Appendix A, the character would be rated a 1 if

they did not meet the disability definitions. They would be rated a 2 if they did not meet the disability definition but with more knowledge about the character they might. The characters were rated a 3 if they did meet the disability criteria of the IDEA law. Ratings for the other questions of the other sections were given on a 1, 2, 3 rating scale, with 1 being negative, 2 being neutral, and 3 being positive. I modified this to use a Likert scale. The five ratings were: strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree, and strongly agree. For the purposes of averages, the ratings were given numerical values. Strongly disagree was 1 while strongly agree was 5. The other numbers fall in between these two numbers. Doing it this way, it gives the ratings more shades of meaning. The shades of meaning can be further explained in the comment sections. The ratings were given on the best judgement of the researcher. A comments section was included at the end of each section, where the researcher could further explain ratings.

It was recognized that the unseen disabilities would be harder to observe in literature than the more visible physical disabilities. The usage of the rating scale and the definitions from the IDEA law were meant to guide the research for the fewest errors in the identification of the characters within the Pura Belpré Award winners.

### **Results**

After reading the books that had been awarded the Pura Belpré award, it was concluded that only a few books had any characters with disability in their writing or illustrations. To further complicate the matters, the characters that were disabled were not usually of Latino descent, but of some other cultural group. The table below displays all 26 of the Pura Belpré Award-winning books. The table tells if disability was displayed in the book and if so, what disability was displayed.

Table 1: List of Pura Belpré Award winners, their display of disability, and what disability is portrayed

Title	Disability Portrayed?	What Disability is Portrayed?
<i>Yaqui Delgado Wants to Kick Your Ass</i>	No	N/A
<i>Niño Wrestles the World</i>	No	N/A
<i>Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe</i>	No	N/A
<i>Martín De Porres: The Rose in the Desert</i>	No	N/A
<i>Under the Mesquite</i>	No	N/A
<i>Diego Rivera: His World and Ours</i>	No	N/A
<i>The Dreamer</i>	Yes	Possible Dyslexia/Reading Impairment
<i>Grandma's Gift</i>	No	N/A
<i>Return to Sender</i>	Yes	Physical Impairment
<i>¡Book Fiesta!: Celebrate Children's Day/Book Day; Celebramos El Día de los niños/El día de los libros</i>	Yes	Physical Impairment
<i>The Surrender Tree</i>	No	N/A
<i>Just in Case</i>	No	N/A
<i>The Poet Slave of Cuba: A Biography of Juan Francisco Manzano</i>	No	N/A
<i>Los Gatos Black on Halloween</i>	No	N/A
<i>The Tequila Worm</i>	No	N/A
<i>Doña Flor: A Tall Tale about a Giant Woman with a Great Big Heart</i>	No	N/A
<i>Before We Were Free</i>	No	N/A
<i>Just a Minute: A Trickster Tale and Counting Book</i>	No	N/A
<i>Esperanza Rising</i>	No	N/A
<i>Chato and the Party Animals</i>	No	N/A
<i>Under the Royal Palms: A Childhood in Cuba</i>	No	N/A
<i>Magic Windows</i>	No	N/A
<i>Parrot in the Oven: Mi Vida</i>	No	N/A
<i>Snapshots from the Wedding</i>	No	N/A
<i>An Island Like You: Stories of the Barrio</i>	Yes	Autism
<i>Chato's Kitchen</i>	No	N/A

**Summary of Books with Disabled Characters**

The following paragraphs are a summary of each book that portrayed at least one character with disabilities. A table below the summaries shows if the character is a primary character, secondary character, tertiary character, or just a background character.

***The Dreamer.*** *The Dreamer* is a fictional biographical book by Pam Muñoz Ryan about young Neftali, who later adopts the pen name Pablo Neruda and becomes a Nobel Prize winning poet. Neftali is a creative soul who yearns to write poetry. He sees it around him while he grows up in Chile. His strict father has other plans for him, as he wants Neftali to become a doctor. Neftali struggles to become his own person while still being loyal to his family. The book concludes with Neftali's uncle, a journalist himself, helps Neftali to follow his heart's desire and show his father how good he is at poetry.

***Return to Sender.*** *Return to Sender*, by Julia Alvarez, is a fictional account of a farmer's family in Vermont. The two main characters are Tyler and Mari. Tyler's father, the owner of the farm, was involved in a tractor accident before the beginning of the book. To keep the farm running, Tyler's family hires a family of undocumented workers. Mari's family joins Tyler's family on the farm. Tyler and Mari begin a complicated friendship. Sometimes they are friends. Sometimes they are enemies. All the while, Mari is looking for her mother, who is trying to cross back into the United States from Mexico but has been lost for months. Tyler's family helps Mari get reunited with her mother, but then Mari and her family are arrested and deported back to Mexico. Tyler and Mari continue to write letters and be friends.

***¡Book Fiesta!*** *¡Book Fiesta!* was written by Pat Mora and won the award for Rafael Lopez's illustrations. This book celebrates Book Day and Children's Day. The story shows children reading in many different places and celebrating children from all over the world. The illustrations are very colorful and vibrant. It also is presented in Spanish on the opposite page from the English words, so it brings in another language to the classroom.

***Under the Royal Palms: A Childhood in Cuba.*** The book *Under the Royal Palms: A Childhood in Cuba* is an autobiographical book by Alma Flor Ada about her young life in Cuba. There are different chapters about the periods of her life from about three years old to ten years old. She talks about her family members, the people in her community, and how she interacts with them. This book is also has a companion book that dives in and talks more about her life.

***An Island like You: Stories from the Barrio.*** This book is a collection of stories about children and their families growing up in a New Jersey Latino barrio. It is written by Judith Ortiz Cofer. Each story bring a new character and their life to light. Sometimes, characters are brought into other character's stories, but character is only the main character in one story. The story goes through the trials and triumphs of the neighborhood as the people and the neighborhood grow together.

Table 2: Characters with disability and level of character importance

<b>Name of Character</b>	<b>Title of Book</b>	<b>Disability</b>	<b>Level</b>
<b>Tyler's Dad (No name given)</b>	<i>Return to Sender</i>	Physical Impairment	Secondary
<b>Teresa</b>	<i>An Island Like You: Stories from the Barrio</i>	Vision Impairment	Primary
<b>Valentín</b>	<i>An Island Like You: Stories from the Barrio</i>	Autism/Multiple Disabilities	Secondary
<b>Neftali</b>	<i>The Dreamer</i>	Dyslexia	Primary
<b>Alma Flor Ada</b>	<i>Under the Royal Palms: A Childhood in Cuba</i>	Vision Impairment	Primary



Table 3: Adapted Rating Scale Answer Averages

Section	Questions	Average
<b>A.</b>	1. Reaction	Positive
	2. Recommendation	Recommend
<b>B.</b>	1. Portrays characteristics of disabilities accurately	Agree
	2. Describes the character(s) with disabilities as realistic	Agree
	3. Character(s) with disabilities are fully developed	Strongly Agree
	4. Does not portray only disabilities of the character(s), but portrays abilities, interests, and strengths of the character(s)	Agree
	5. Emphasizes similarities, rather than differences, between characters with and without disabilities	Neutral
	6. Uses nondiscriminatory language that avoids stereotypic portrayals	Neutral
<b>C.</b>	1. Depicts character(s) with disabilities engaging in socially and emotionally reciprocal relationships	Agree
	2. Depicts acceptance of the character(s) with disabilities	Agree
	3. Promotes empathy, not pity for the character(s) with disabilities	Neutral
	4. Portrays positive social contributions of person(s) with disabilities	Agree
	5. Promotes respect for the character(s) with disabilities	Agree
<b>D.</b>	1. Depicts character(s) with disabilities having full citizenship opportunities in integrated settings and/or activities	Agree
	2. Depicts character(s) with disabilities receiving services appropriate for their age, skill level, and interests	Neutral
	3. Depicts valued occupations for character(s) with disabilities	Agree
	4. Promotes self-determination	Strongly Agree
	5.	
<b>E. (when applicable)</b>	1. Sibling(s) of the character(s) with disabilities experience a wide range of emotions, not just all positive or all negative emotions	Strongly Agree
	2. Sibling(s) of the character(s) with disabilities have opportunities for growth that are not typical for siblings of children without disabilities	Neutral
	3. The sibling relationship is reciprocal, given the age and developmental differences between the siblings	Agree
	4. Sibling(s) are not given unusually burdensome household and family duties	Agree
	5. The sibling(s) appear aware of the nature of the disability and its effects on the character with disabilities.	Disagree
<b>F.</b>	1. Main character with disability displays appropriate growth throughout the story	Agree
	2. A main focus of the book appears to be to include a character with disability that:	B) Has no impact
	3. Additional information is provided to help readers learn about the disability	Strongly Disagree
<b>G.</b>	1. The attitudes and practices portrayed are congruent with attitudes and practices for those with disabilities during that era	Agree
	2. The place of the story affects the life of character(s) with disabilities	Agree
<b>H.</b>	1. The point of view, if told by the character with a disability, is realistic	Strongly Agree
	2. The point of view, if told from a character without a disability, is realistic	Agree
<b>I. (when applicable)</b>	1. Portrays characteristics of disabilities accurately in illustrations	Neutral
	2. Portrays assistive/adaptive technology accurately, realistically, and contemporarily in the illustrations	Neutral
	3. Illustrations interpret the story well	Strongly Agree
	4. Style of illustrations is appropriate to the story and age-level	Strongly Agree
	5. Plot, theme, characters, setting, mood, and information are enhanced through the illustrations	Strongly Agree
	6. Illustrations represent quality art	Strongly Agree
	7. Illustrations use color, line, shape, and texture artistically	Agree
	8. Layout and design of illustrations and text are visually appealing	Strongly Agree

### Results of Rating Scale

Overall the books were rated positively and would be given a recommendation to others to use. For section B, which was personal portrayal of the characters, most of the books did have characters that matched the IDEA definitions or inferences could be made to link their disability to the IDEA law. The one outlier was the book *The Dreamer*. Besides the one mention of the floating numbers at the beginning of the book, there is not any other information to discern if the character is indeed dyslexic. Because of this, the “disagree” box was checked. Another question within section B that had disagreement in the data was question 5, about similarities versus differences between the character with disabilities and the other characters without disabilities. The characters in *Return to Sender*, *An Island like You*, and *The Dreamer* focused their characters mostly on the differences between the disabled and the able-bodied. Likewise, in question 6, which was about the usage of nondiscriminatory language towards the character, these characters were more often described using words about the character suffering from their disability instead of being empowered.

In section C, the social interactions between the characters with disability and other characters were rated. The characters generally engaged in reciprocal relationships with others, whether it be friends, siblings, or members of the community, and were accepted by the community. However, question 3, which asks if the story promotes empathy or pity for these characters, shows that some authors write to make their character seem pitiful. In the books *Return to Sender* and *The Dreamer*, the characters were made to be pitiful and not as empathetic as other characters in the stories. The last question of this section asks if the characters’ social interactions promote self-determination. The books *¡Book Fiesta!* and *The Dreamer* promote self-determination in their characters, where they are not babied or condescended towards in terms of their disability.

The last question in section C categorized the relationships between characters with disabilities and those without disability. Such listings included whether the character primarily interacted with friends or siblings, or whether the character was a pupil or instructor. There were also questions asking if others feared being around those with the disability or if the non-disabled

characters experienced guilt related to the character with disability. Overall, the characters with disability either interacted with friends or siblings. Usually the character with disability was a student in some capacity. The other characters did not appear to experience fear around those with disabilities. Some characters experienced guilt because of interactions with disabled characters. In *Return to Sender*, Tyler expresses guilt for not being able to help his father get better and feeling responsible for his father's pain (Alvarez, 2009). In *An Island like You*, Teresa experiences guilt towards her treatment of Valentín (Cofer, 1995).

Section D concerns exemplary practices, which questions whether the disabled characters have the same opportunities as their peers. Overall, the characters are written as having the same opportunities as their peers in terms of schooling, jobs, and making their own decisions. There are a few discrepancies in this data. For question 1, disagree was put for the books *Return to Sender* and *The Dreamer*. In *Return to Sender*, Tyler's father is often in the house being cared for or building up his strength through therapy, so he does not do much around the farm until the end of the book (Alvarez, 2009). In *The Dreamer*, Neftali is sick at the beginning of the book, which causes him to miss school. However, this improves throughout the book as he ages, so it was not included as a chronic illness. He is also not given the same opportunities as his siblings because of his interest in poetry (Ryan, 2010).

This next section was only applied to stories where the disabled characters had siblings that interacted with the disabled character for a majority of the book. This includes the book *The Dreamer* and *Under the Royal Palms: A Childhood in Cuba*. Most of the results were similar in these two books. The siblings of the disabled character often experienced a wide amount of emotions related to their sibling. They also often had a strong relationship with their disabled sibling.

The impact of the disability on the plot of the story was described in section F of the rating scale. Most often, the characters grew throughout the story, with the one exception being *Return to Sender*. The father progressed in his recovery, but did not appear to grow in any other areas. Most of these books contained disabled characters where the disability did not affect the plot. *Return to*

*Sender* was again the outlier because the father's accident was the push to hire Mari and her family, which fuels the whole story. The last question in this section asked if the author included anything about the disability in endnotes or appendices. Some books did have these end pages, but none of them mentioned disability.

Section G talks about the impact of the setting on the disabled child. The rating scale has two questions in this section, one about time and one about the setting. Most of these stories were set in time periods where the disability of the character was known and accepted or ignored. The placement of the story affected the person that was disabled. Sometimes it was because of it seem like there was a limited access to treatment, like in *Return to Sender* or *Under the Royal Palms*. Other times, it seemed to be the setting of the story just affected what the disabled person could or could not do.

Section H studied the point of view and how that affected the realistic feeling of the display of disability in the book. There were two questions, but you only answered one for the book. One question was answered if the story was told from the point of view of a disabled character. If not, you asked the second question, which was about the point of view as told from an able-bodied person. Two of the books, *Under the Royal Palms* and *An Island like You* were told from the view of the disabled character. Overall, they appeared realistic. The other books were told from other perspectives. They were also realistic, although less realistic than the ones told from the disabled perspective.

The last section of the scale was like section E, which was only answered if the disabled character had siblings. This section covered illustrations. The book *¡Book Fiesta!* and *Under the Royal Palms* were the only ones that had illustrations to interact with the story. *The Dreamer* had illustrations, but they were sparse between the other parts of the book, so they were not included. Of these two books, *Under the Royal Palms* did not display the disability in the pictures, but did have good pictures to go along with the text. *¡Book Fiesta!* had good pictures to show the disability, as well as great illustrations.

## Discussion

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the portrayal of characters with disabilities in the Pura Belpré Award winning books from the inception of the award in 1996 to the 2014 award winners. Out of 26 award winning books, only 5 of the books displayed a character with disability. This means that only 19% of the award winning books displayed a portrayal of disability. A discussion of the results with examples from the books, limitations of the study, and suggestions for future research follow.

### **Portrayal of Characters with Disabilities**

The most common disabilities portrayed in the Pura Belpré Award winners were physical disabilities. For example, in the book *¡Book Fiesta!* by Pat Mora (2008), there is an illustration of a child in a wheelchair going to the library. In the book *Return to Sender* by Julia Alvarez (2009), Tyler's father becomes physically impaired and cannot run the farm as he could before the start of the story.

Of the two above displays of physical impairment, only one was shown in a positive light. In *Book Fiesta!*, the child is shown smiling and happy while being a wheelchair going to the library. However, this seems to be the theme of the book, since it is about a holiday. In the book *Return to Sender*, Tyler's father is generally shown as grumpy, depressed, or unhappy that he is not the able-bodied person he once was. Since the book has a timeline that spans several months, this is a more realistic depiction of someone that is physically impaired. The depression of the father shows that being able-bodied is the ideal body type, while being physically impaired in any way is cause for depression and other negative moods. This is also seen when someone is "rid" of their disability. For example, in *Return to Sender*, Tyler's dad starts to get healthier through physical therapy and rest. This is cause for celebration, as he is returning to the able-bodied person, which is the ideal body in this book.

There were some displays of disabilities other than the physical impairments. In the book *An Island Like You: Stories from the Barrio* by Judith Ortiz Cofer (1995), one of the teenagers named Teresa works with a "mentally challenged" individual named Valentín at a swimming pool

and park. Teresa herself wear glasses, so she has a vision impairment. Described by their boss, Valentín is Puerto Rican, thirty years old, and has the IQ of a “bright” third grader. Valentín may have a form of autism or intellectual disability. It is mentioned that he has a low IQ, which would point to an intellectual disability. He also keeps to himself and does not talk much to Teresa until he becomes more comfortable around her. This fact would point to a type of autism, since those with autism have trouble interacting socially. It is also possible that Valentín can have both of these, but more observations would be needed to make that decision.

### **The People around the Disabled**

Previously, we talked about Valentín and how he interacts with Teresa. Teresa has her own feelings towards Valentín. While Teresa seems to think of herself as a person that “doesn’t have anything against these handicapped people,” she doesn’t want to spend her whole summer working with such an individual (Cofer, 1995, p. 115). As the story progresses, we can see the work relationship that forms between Teresa and Valentín. The story ends with Valentín saving Teresa, who was herself trying to save a little boy, from the swimming pool. Teresa agrees to continue working with Valentín when they are placed somewhere else in the park to work during the fall season (Cofer, 1995).

This mini-story presents an interesting juxtaposition. Although Teresa herself is disabled, because as it says in the story, her “eyesight is so bad that the minute [she] takes off [her] glasses to get in the pool, everything becomes a blob of color” (Cofer, 1995, p. 112), she does not initially like working with Valentín, who is also disabled. Although she does like working with Valentín at the end, it does take her time. It is amazing to see someone who is disabled to not be sympathetic to someone else that is disabled.

One reason for this might be there is more stigma attached to mental disability than physical disability. Cooney, Jahoda, Gumley, and Knott (2006) studied sixty young people with mild to moderate intellectual abilities and their experiences with schooling in Scotland. These individuals

were either in mainstream classrooms or in segregated schools. Contrary to what may be popular belief in the educational community, those disabled students in the mainstream classroom scored higher on the self-report measures of stigmatized treatments. They believed it usually came from their non-disabled peers. Their non-disabled peers would call their disabled peers names, ignored their disabled peers, or even act violent towards their disabled peers in certain instances. Teachers also played into this, by giving disabled young adults unwanted extra help or refusing to give help. However, each group reported similar stigmatized treatments outside of school. This relationship means that integrated schools may force disabled students into stereotypes instead of helping them to gain peers and acceptance. Referring back to the earlier literature by Smith-D'Arezzo and Moore-Thomas (2010), literature may be able to help those non-disabled peers gain acceptance of their disabled peers.

Another book that displayed possible disability is *The Dreamer* by Pam Muñoz Ryan (2010). This is historical fiction about the Noble-Prize winning poet Pablo Neruda and his childhood in Chile. At the beginning of the book and at the end of the book, there is writing by the author that suggests that the numbers or letters on the page are moving around or floating off the page (Ryan, 2010). This could be related to dyslexia. This would be an extension of the some characteristic signs of dyslexia, such as reversal of letters. No records of Pablo Neruda having dyslexia were found, so it could be that the author just used the wording of floating numbers and letters to create imagery. This would also make sense, because Pablo Neruda was a brilliant poet. Further studies of both his life and his works would be needed in order to understand if he did indeed have any disability.

The characters displayed in the texts that had disabilities were also not always of Latino descent. Tyler's father was a Caucasian, probably of mostly European descent. The character in the illustration in *¡Book Fiesta!* by Pat Mora (2008) was of tan skin and dark hair, which may be an indication of Latino heritage, but may also point to other cultures that have gained the dark skin

trait, such as some Asian or African cultures (Mora, 2008). Thusly, the characters that are portraying the disabilities are not relatable to the Latino youth that may be reading the books.

### **Need for Latino Disability in Literature**

While there are few books awarded the Pura Belpré Award that display disability, this should not serve as discouragement but rather encouragement for books to be written about the experiences of being disabled while also being from the Latino culture. The Pura Belpré Award winners covered a multitude of topics beside disability, including poverty, migration, and homosexuality. It is understandable that this newer award would want to be broad in their scope of books when handing out the awards to books. The Latino culture has so much history for writers and illustrators to cover. There is also the significance today in the United States with their population growing. Because of these reasons, it would make sense that the selection committee for the award would look for books that showcase important historical events or relate to the Latino youth in the United States. However, these threads could also include a character with disability in the main part of the story in order to provide a brilliant and thought-provoking story for children as well as adults.

These portrayals of characters with physical disabilities clash with the populations of special needs children found in the United States school system. Most of the students in schools are receiving services for specific learning disabilities, speech or language impairment, mental retardation, and other health impairments (USDE, 2013). Because the characters in the Pura Belpré books did not appear to showcase any of these disabilities, they are not serving all of the populations in schools like they should be. The Caldecott and Newbery medals have, until recently, served a large population of the United States school population. The research done over these two medals served to further enhance how these books can serve the disabled populations within the schools in the United States. With the Latino population on the rise, it is time for the award for Latino books to step up and serve as many people within this population as they can. Disability in the Latino community is another area that both the Pura Belpré Award should try to promote as it



hands out awards. If many students have disabilities like autism or dyslexia, then the literature with disabled children should mirror that statistic.

If more books are made to show Latino children with disability, it could also provide a bridge between them and their classmates. Children will be able to identify with these characters from the books and learn from the characters' experiences. These books could not only introduce the children to disability, but also to the Latino culture. There is a wealth of Latino experience for writers and illustrators to choose from in their search for the next great story. The Pura Belpré Award is a great way to encourage these authors and illustrators to work to incorporate a diverse amount of people into their literature and illustrations. Students need to see people like them in books. Otherwise, they might feel left out and unworthy of being in literature. We need to show the students that not only are they wanted in literature, but they are needed as well to give us the breadth and scope of the human experience.

### **Limitations and Potential Future Studies**

Even with the rating scale and guidelines in place for analyzing the characters in the books for disability, there may be a slight margin of error. Because there was only one reader of the books, there could have been some misinterpretation of the literature. This means that a character may have been misdiagnosed or may have been missed in being defined altogether. In the future, research with inter-rater reliability tests is called for. Multiple readers analyze the books and use the guidelines found in this study. If the researchers use the same guidelines, their research will be a continuation of this research. The researchers could then cross-check their answers and discuss any differences that may have occurred.

The rating scale itself was limited in its scope. Because it had been originally geared towards the Newbery Award, it did not take into consideration the Latino culture and how it might view or display disability. If this research is to continue, a more detailed adaptation should be made

concerning ideas about the Latino cultures. Since there seemed to be more friendships in these stories, perhaps there could be a friendship section added as well.

Because the characters within the literature are from a different cultural and linguistic background than the researcher, the characters may have been misdiagnosed. When Spanish wording is translated into English for the English readers, there may be something lost in translation for those are analyzing the book. In *Return to Sender*, Mari is speaking and writing in Spanish, but the wording of the book is English so that the English reader can understand what she is saying (Alvarez, 2009). Thus, it can be hard to tell if there is any speech impediment. It could be that the speaker just does not know enough English to be fluent. There could also be a speech impediment in Spanish, but the researcher might not know how to identify it. A future study would require someone who is well-trained in Spanish linguistics and speech impediments because they would know what to look for in these books in terms of speech disabilities.

This study, unlike the other studies done to study award-winning literature and disability, did not research the honor books. This was due to a time constraint on the researcher in this study. For future research, the books award the Pura Belpré Honor should be analyzed for any characters with disabilities. If disabilities were to be found within the Pura Belpré Honor books, the case could be made that these books should have had more weight to them, as they help to expand to encompass both special needs students and racially diverse students.

Another expansion of this study would be to interview teachers that live in different teaching environments. These teachers could be asked question, such as if they a) know of the Pura Belpré Award, b) if they would or already do use the Pura Belpré Award-winning books in their classroom, and c) how they would use them to teach about diversity, not only of students of different cultures, but also different abilities. These results would be compiled in order to see general trends both at a global and local level. These results of teacher usage of the Pura Belpré Award-winners could then be turned over to the ALA to help them in selection of the Pura Belpré Award-winners in the future and to help promote usage of the books award this prestigious award.

### **Conclusion**

Unlike the Caldecott Award and Newbery Award, the Pura Belpré Award has not garnered as much attention and thus has not been throughout cataloged in terms of themes within the books. This research was groundbreaking and hopes to serve the educational community, as well as the books readers in the global community. Throughout this research, the emphasis has been on locating high-quality and award-winning Latino literature to positively portray Latinos with disabilities to young Latino children with disabilities. Not many stories won the Pura Belpré Award displayed disability. Even fewer talked about disability in a realistic, positive way. I hope the results of this research draw attention to the lack of Latino books about disability awarded the Pura Belpré Award. In the future, perhaps more Latino authors and illustrators will work on their books in mind. I also hope that the selection committee for the Pura Belpré Award will attempt to consider the disability aspect as they choose books for the 2016 award year. When more books show Latinos and disability in a positive light, it will help to serve the small but potentially growing group of Latinos with disability.

**Appendix A: Special Education Categories as defined by IDEA 2004**

Below are the definitions of each category within the IDEA 2004 legislation as provided by the National Dissemination for Children with Disabilities (Categories for Disability under IDEA, 2012).

- Autism: “a developmental disability significantly affecting verbal and nonverbal communication and social interaction, generally evident before age three that adversely affects a child’s educational performance. Other characteristics often associated with autism are engaging in repetitive activities and stereotyped movements, resistance to environmental change or change in daily routines, and unusual responses to sensory experiences. The term autism does not apply if the child’s educational performance is adversely affected primarily because the child has an emotional disturbance, as defined below”
- Deaf-Blindness: “concomitant [simultaneous] hearing and visual impairments, the combination of which causes such severe communication and other developmental and educational needs that they cannot be accommodated in special education programs solely for children with deafness or children with blindness”
- Deafness: “a hearing impairment so severe that a child is impaired in processing linguistic information through hearing, with or without amplification, that adversely affects a child's educational performance”
- Emotional Disturbance: “means a condition exhibiting one or more of the following characteristics over a long period of time and to a marked degree that adversely affects a child’s educational performance” “The term includes schizophrenia. The term does not apply to children who are socially maladjusted, unless it is determined that they have an emotional disturbance”:
  - “An inability to learn that cannot be explained by intellectual, sensory, or health factors”

- “An inability to build or maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships with peers and teachers”
  - “Inappropriate types of behavior or feelings under normal circumstances”
  - “A general pervasive mood of unhappiness or depression”
  - “A tendency to develop physical symptoms or fears associated with personal or school problems”.
- Hearing Impairments: “an impairment in hearing, whether permanent or fluctuating, that adversely affects a child’s educational performance but is not included under the definition of “deafness”
  - Intellectual Disability: “significantly sub average general intellectual functioning, existing concurrently [at the same time] with deficits in adaptive behavior and manifested during the developmental period, that adversely affects a child’s educational performance”
  - Multiple Disabilities: “concomitant [simultaneous] impairments (such as intellectual disability-blindness, intellectual disability-orthopedic impairment), the combination of which causes such severe educational needs that they cannot be accommodated in special education programs solely for one of the impairments. The term does not include deaf-blindness.”
  - Orthopedic Impairment: “a severe orthopedic impairment that adversely affects a child’s educational performance. The term includes impairments caused by a congenital anomaly, impairments caused by disease (e.g., poliomyelitis, bone tuberculosis), and impairments from other causes (e.g., cerebral palsy, amputations, and fractures or burns that cause contractures)”
  - Other Health Impairment: “having limited strength, vitality, or alertness, including a heightened alertness to environmental stimuli, that results in limited alertness with respect to the educational environment, that:”

- “is due to chronic or acute health problems such as asthma, attention deficit disorder or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, diabetes, epilepsy, a heart condition, hemophilia, lead poisoning, leukemia, nephritis, rheumatic fever, sickle cell anemia, and Tourette syndrome; and...”
- “adversely affects a child’s educational performance”
- Specific Learning Disability: “a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, that may manifest itself in the imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or to do mathematical calculations. The term includes such conditions as perceptual disabilities, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia. The term does not include learning problems that are primarily the result of visual, hearing, or motor disabilities; of intellectual disability; of emotional disturbance; or of environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage”
- Speech or Language Disability: “a communication disorder such as stuttering, impaired articulation, a language impairment, or a voice impairment that adversely affects a child’s educational performance:
- Traumatic Brain Injury: “an acquired injury to the brain caused by an external physical force, resulting in total or partial functional disability or psychosocial
- Impairment, or both, that adversely affects a child's educational performance. The term applies to open or closed head injuries resulting in impairments in one or more areas, such as cognition; language; memory; attention; reasoning; abstract thinking; judgment; problem solving; sensory, perceptual, and motor abilities; psychosocial behavior; physical functions; information processing; and speech. The term does not apply to brain injuries that are congenital or degenerative, or to brain injuries induced by birth trauma”

- Visual Impairment/Blindness: “impairment in vision that, even with correction, adversely affects a child’s educational performance. The term includes both partial sight and blindness”

**Appendix B: Adapted Rating Scale**

**Newbery Rating Scale for Quality Characterizations of  
Individuals with Disabilities in Children’s Literature**

Rater’s Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Book Title: \_\_\_\_\_

Author: \_\_\_\_\_ Publication Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Type of Book: Picture Book or Chapter Book Age Level: \_\_\_\_\_

**A. Overall Reaction**

1. Rate your overall reaction to the book:

1	2	3
Negative	Neutral	Positive

2. Would you recommend this book to be read to or by children/adolescents?

1	2	3
Not Recommend	Recommend	Highly Recommend

3. Please describe what you liked *most* about this book:

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4. Please describe what you liked *least* about this book:

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**B. Personal Portrayal**

1. **Portrays characteristics of disabilities accurately** (e.g., abilities, and disabilities are consistent with descriptions from IDEA; abilities/disabilities are consistent throughout the story; if label is used, it is accurate and current).
2. **Describes the character(s) with disabilities as realistic** (e.g., not superhuman or subhuman; avoids miraculous cures).
3. **Character(s) with disabilities are fully developed** (e.g., credible, multidimensional, show change or development throughout the story).
4. **Does not portray only disabilities of the character(s), but portrays abilities, interests, and strengths of the character(s)** (e.g., avoids undue emphasis on the disability; characters have unique personalities, interests, and struggles that may not be related to the disability; characters experience success as well as failure).
5. **Emphasizes similarities, rather than differences, between characters with and without disabilities** (e.g., similar physical and personality characteristics are described with equal emphasis).
6. **Uses nondiscriminatory language that avoids stereotypic portrayals** (e.g., does not use language such as *suffers from*, *afflicted with*, *stricken with*, *confined to a wheelchair*. **This criterion includes the use of person-first language** (e.g., uses language such as *person with mental retardation* rather than *retarded*)

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree

Comments:



6. **Depicts various relationships between character with a disability and others.**  
(Please circle all that apply.)
- a. Character with a disability has primary relationship with:  
Friend      Sibling      Paid Personnel      Other
- b. Character with a disability is primarily:  
Victim      Perpetrator      Protector      None
- c. Character with a disability is primarily:  
Dependent      Caregiver
- d. Character with a disability is primarily:  
Pupil      Instructor
- e. Do other characters fear associating with the character with a disability?  
Yes      No
- f. Do other characters experience feelings of guilt related to the character with a disability?  
Yes      No
- g. What changes take place in characters without disabilities as a result of their interaction with the character with a disability?  
Positive      Neutral      Negative

Comments:

**D. Exemplary Practices**

1. **Depicts character(s) with disabilities having full citizenship opportunities in integrated settings and/or activities** (e.g., school, church, neighborhood, work, recreation/leisure).

2. **Depicts character(s) with disabilities receiving services appropriate for their age, skill level, and interests** (e.g., teaching strategies depicted meet the needs of the character; therapies needed are provided).

3. **Depicts valued occupations for character(s) with disabilities** (if appropriate) (e.g., vocations of their own choice according to their abilities and interests; wages paid are comparable to those without disabilities in similar vocations).

4. **Promotes self-determination** (e.g., character(s) are allowed to make decisions that impact their lives, solve their own problems, choose their own friends and activities as appropriate to their age and developmental level), **where choices are similar to the types of choices given to nondisabled peers.**

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree

Comments:

**E. Sibling Relationships** (if applicable)

1. **Sibling(s) of the character(s) with disabilities experience a wide range of emotions, not just all positive or all negative emotions** (e.g., pride, joy, respect, love, embarrassment, frustration, over identification, guilt, isolation, resentment, anxiety regarding achievement, fear of future).

2. **Sibling(s) of the character(s) with disabilities have opportunities for growth that are not typical for siblings of children without disabilities** (e.g., maturity, self-concept, insight, tolerance, pride, vocational choices, advocacy, loyalty).

3. **The sibling relationship is reciprocal, given the age and developmental differences between the siblings.**

4. **Sibling(s) are not given unusually burdensome household and family duties** (Engage in family work that is typical for children of the same age and gender that do not have a sibling with disabilities).

5. **The sibling(s) appear aware of the nature of the disability and its effects on the character with disabilities.**

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree

Comments:

**F. Impact of Disability on Plot**

1. **Main character with disability displays appropriate growth throughout the story** (e.g., character is not stagnant, but learns, changes, and grows as a result of life experiences).

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree

2. **A main focus of the book appears to be to:** (circle the one that applies the best)

- (a) Teach about a disability
- (b) Includes character with a disability whose presence does not or minimally impacts the story
- (c) Includes character with a disability whose presence and disability impacts the story
- (d) Includes character with a disability whose presence impacts the story, but the disability is irrelevant.

3. **Additional information is provided to help readers learn about the disability** (e.g., author’s notes, internet addresses, professional organizations).

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree

Comments:

**G. Impact of Setting on Disability**

Setting: \_\_\_\_\_

1. **The attitudes and practices portrayed are congruent with attitudes and practices for those with disabilities during that era** (e.g., services available, treatment by others, terminology used).

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree

2. **The place of the story affects the life of character(s) with disabilities** (e.g., rural/urban, developed/developing nations).

Comments:

**H. Point of View**

1. **The point of view, if told by the character with a disability, is realistic** (e.g., thought processes and language of a character with cognitive disabilities are realistic).

2. **The point of view, if told from a character without a disability, is realistic** (e.g., a brother/sister's attitudes/perceptions about the sibling with disabilities).

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree

Comments:

**I. Illustrations** (if applicable)

1. Portrays characteristics of disabilities accurately in illustrations.
2. Portrays assistive/adaptive technology accurately, realistically, and contemporarily in the illustrations.
3. Illustrations interpret the story well.
4. Style of illustrations is appropriate to the story and age-level (e.g., representational, expressionistic, surrealism, impressionistic, folk art, naive art, cartoon art, photography).
5. Plot, theme, characters, setting, mood, and information are enhanced through the illustrations.
6. Illustrations represent quality art (rhythm, balance, variety, emphasis, spatial order, unity).
7. Illustrations use color, line, shape, and texture artistically.
8. Layout and design of illustrations and text are visually appealing.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree

Comments:



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