

Fall 2016

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## Original Publication Information

Whitmore, Kathryn F., Christie Angleton, and Emily L. Zuccaro. "Picturebooks and gender: Making informed choices for equitable early childhood classrooms." 2016. *Mid-South Literacy Journal*, 2(1): 14-20.

## ThinkIR Citation

Whitmore, Kathryn F.; Angleton, Christie; and Zuccaro, Emily L., "Picturebooks and gender : making informed choices for equitable early childhood classrooms." (2016). *Faculty Scholarship*. 341.  
<http://ir.library.louisville.edu/faculty/341>

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## Picturebooks and Gender: Making Informed Choices for Equitable Early Childhood Classrooms

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We examine picturebooks through a feminist lens, understanding that children's literature and media can limit and expand how young children access gender representations. We describe four categories that increase teacher knowledge to select books with multiple and varied gender representations for children in their classrooms. These four categories are *gender binaries*, *discourses of childhood innocence*, *intersectionality*, and *heteronormativity*. We illustrate each category with two quality books that maintain and disrupt each theme. We hope teachers will find the categories useful for thoughtfully selecting books for classroom libraries, read aloud, and discussion.

*Keywords:* gender, early childhood, children's literature, book selection



*Figure 1.* Leila poses provocatively for a fashion photo.

*The children in Angleton's preschool classroom are tending to their pre-nap tasks of stretching sheets over their cots and finding a book to read while they settle into rest. Leila, the child pictured in Figure 1, pulls the corner of her fitted sheet over her head and wraps it around her body. As she shifts her gaze and juts her hip into a provocative pose, she asks Whitmore, who often takes photos in the classroom, to take her picture. "Take a picture of my fashion," she says.*

Our goal in this article is to share our recent thinking about gender and children's literature in early childhood classrooms. We are researchers who recognize the importance of a feminist perspective (Blaise, 2005; Davies, 2003; Jacobson, 2011) as part of creating equitable early childhood learning spaces. We recognize that our attention to gender, sexuality, and other social issues, and their influence on children's identities, is necessary to "bring about social change and improve the lives of all children" (Blaise, 2005, p. 6). Although a fair amount of research and thinking about gender and literature is available with older elementary and secondary learners (Schmidt, Thein, & Whitmore, 2013; Thein, 2005; Van Horne, 2015), we offer insights about gender and picturebooks with preschool learners.

Most much-loved children's books limit gender representations in themes, plots, and characters and maintain status quo gender categories for readers. Such problematic limitations are easily visible in classic fairy tales like Cinderella. In most versions, Cinderella is modest and obedient; she is represented as white, blonde, and beautiful, with a tiny waist and tiny feet. Although enslaved by her evil stepmother, Cinderella works hard and does not despair. She can only achieve "happily ever after" in marriage, after she dresses in a ball gown and is rescued by a prince.

What "Cinderella" lessons has Leila learned from books available for her nap time reading? How have these and other media contributed to her performance of her identity as a girl—which in the opening vignette can be described as "seductive" and "coy," and related to fashion and posing for photographs. How might early childhood teachers select books for classroom libraries and read alouds that expand how to be girls and boys; in other words, books that offer children images that are situated and fluid on a continuum of gender identities and expressions?

We recently completed a two-year qualitative research study about disrupting preschool children's working theories about gender roles with quality children's literature. Whitmore and Zuccaro worked with Angleton in her preschool classroom at a university-affiliated child development center to learn how four and five-year olds respond to literature and curriculum that interrupts typical, binaried gender representations that are common in the media. Angleton read a variety of quality picturebooks with strong gender themes and invited children to respond. Our data sources were fieldnotes, transcripts of book discussions, photographs, and scans of children's written and drawn creations. We learned in our research that our preschool informants "initially thought that gender is determined by and visible in appearance (especially clothing and hair) and activities (marriage, occupations, and toy selection)" (Whitmore & Angleton, 2017, p. 58). However, as they engaged in curriculum around the literature the children "broadened their thinking of what it means to be boys and girls" (p. 58).

Iorio and Visweswaraiah (2011) said a "teacher is positioned to be the catalyst in [gender norm] disruptions, offering children alternative ways to portray gender beyond accepted and limited societal viewpoints" (p. 72). In this article, we focus on just one of teachers' roles as

catalysts—book selection—as we share ways our awareness has grown about explicit and implicit gender messages conveyed in picturebooks.

The remainder of this article presents four categories that teachers will want to be aware of in order to offer children multiple and varied presentations of gender in children’s books: *gender binaries*, *discourses of childhood innocence*, *intersectionality*, and *heteronormativity*. Each section defines a category and describes two quality picturebooks—one book illustrates and perpetuates the challenges inherent in the category and another treats the issues in the particular category well. Our intention is not to label these exemplar picturebooks as “bad/negative” or “good/positive,” which would oversimplify complex and contextualized issues. Rather, we intend to identify and unpack some of the complexities of book selection for teachers who want to become more intentional about gender as they make book choices. This complexity includes the reality that the books we present portray gender in mixed ways, simultaneously providing readers with expansive gender messages, and perpetuating limiting ones.

### **Gender Binaries**

The most visible and central consideration for book selection with a gender lens is how a book maintains and disrupts *gender binaries*, which we describe as “the identity limits that construct and are constructed by young children as strictly ‘male’ or ‘female’ and reinforce expectations for ways of being that govern membership in each category” (Whitmore & Angleton, 2017, pp. 49-50). Media and literature often encourage young children to be the “right” kind of “male” or “female” with a limited representation of gender identities (Wohlwend, 2012). Through such representations, boys implicitly learn to take action as white knights rescuing damsels in distress, and are encouraged to become doctors or mathematicians. They are discouraged from caretaking, art, or sewing, roles stereotypically reserved for women. Girls are encouraged to take interest in their appearance and to accept a destiny to marry and have children. They are discouraged from enlisting in the army or becoming scientists, roles stereotypically reserved for men.

*Alice the Fairy* (Shannon, 2004) is an example of how popular children’s literature can perpetuate gender binaries. Alice is a little girl who tells her story about practicing to be a real fairy. She dazzles readers with her magic wand and shows off her flying skills. While this story is entertaining, it maintains gender binaries by portraying little girls as liking pink and pretending to be fairies. Alice’s mother bakes cookies for her and her father, furthering the idea that a mother is the homemaker of a family.

Other stories encourage readers to think beyond the boundaries of gender binaries. *Max* (Isadora, 1984) is a boy who tags along to his sister’s ballet class before a baseball game. He participates in the class and realizes he loves to leap like a ballerina. When he subsequently hits a homerun he realizes the best way to get ready for baseball is to dance beforehand. Max’s dancing disrupts gender binaries, suggesting that boys can be ballet dancers. However, even as the book introduces us to a boy who dances, readers can be left with the impression that Max only does ballet to hit more homeruns. Like Alice, Max demonstrates the multi-layered and sometimes contradictory gender issues in many children’s picturebooks.

### **Discourses of Childhood Innocence**

*Discourses of childhood innocence* refers to the idea that young children need to be protected from mature topics like sexuality, violence, family members in jail, and

nonconforming gender identities until they are older and are more capable of examining and expressing their beliefs and opinions about them. Ritchie (2017) explained that “discourses of childhood innocence create a climate of fear . . . , even though there is much evidence that children can handle the complexity and real-life issues in books that address these topics” (p. 61). Because children are capable of examining these issues, we are obligated to provide spaces for such exploration.

Children’s literature can create opportunities for discussion about issues of gender and sexuality so all children may grow up understanding and supporting the gender nonconforming people in their lives, as well as see themselves in books. Krywaczyk’s (2016) experiences as a transgender teacher allowed him to broach the sensitive topic of gender and sexuality with his students in a way that increased understanding and compassion. He explained that all “teachers have an unparalleled opportunity to foster this kind of awareness and critical thought about gender and sexuality” (p. 285). Every teacher shares the responsibility of exploring gender and sexuality, regardless of their own gender or sexual orientation.

*I Love You Like Crazy Cakes* (Lewis, 2000) is a beautiful, but innocent account of adoption. Through soft, colorful illustrations and tender language, Lewis described her firsthand experience adopting a daughter from China and the start of their life together. However, the background details about why Lewis chose adoption, which might include reproductive health, a lack of partner, or other mature topics, are absent. Many kinds of people rely on adoption for having children, and children are capable of understanding the different reasons to adopt a child.

*I am Jazz* (Herthel & Jennings, 2014) also illuminates the complexities and the challenges of sensitive family topics. The story is told through the eyes of Jazz, a transgender girl who was born a boy. Very early in her life Jazz insisted that her parents and friends treat her as a girl and participated in activities that were “girl-appropriate.” Eventually, Jazz’s parents supported her transition, involving her teachers and classmates in the process. This book introduces the word “transgender” to children. Interestingly, even while disrupting discourses of childhood innocence, Jazz’s desires to wear dresses and be a mermaid, and her love for pink, maintain a gender binary of performing the “right” kind of “female,” once again illustrating the complexity of these issues in books.

### **Intersectionality**

The term *intersectionality* refers to a focus on one aspect of identity (i.e., gender) while ignoring others (such as race, class, economic status, body type, or ability). When, for example, an author creates a character who is implicitly or explicitly disrupting predictable gender roles but maintains all other aspects of identity that are privileged as “normal,” there exists a lack of intersectionality. A typical problem with books with strong gender themes is that they showcase children who appear to be white, middle class, thin, able-bodied, and uphold the beauty ideals most often portrayed in media.

One of our favorite books with a gender theme, *The Paper Bag Princess* (Munsch, 1980) is an example of a lack of intersectionality. It tells the story of Princess Elizabeth, who is attractive, blonde, able-bodied, and prior to losing her clothes and castle, well dressed and “presentable.” While Elizabeth’s heroic journey to rescue Prince Ronald departs from the “damsel in distress” narrative, her appearance—even in her dirty, ash-covered state—does not reflect the wide population of readers and listeners in many classrooms. Princess Elizabeth’s tale

is one that can be problematized for its lack of intersectionality while at the same time viewed as an exemplary book that pushes against a narrative that says girls cannot save themselves.

Conversely, *The Princess and the Pony* (Beaton, 2015) is an example of a book that disrupts some of the “norms” that are prevalent in children’s literature. It tells the story of Princess Pinecone, who considers herself a warrior princess. For her birthday, she wants nothing more than a horse fit to be the stallion of a warrior. Instead, she receives a plump, stinky, tiny pony. In this tale, the heroine is dark-skinned, plump, and not waiting to be rescued. Pinecone is a problem solver who is full of agency and determination. Just as with the other books we describe, Pinecone presents conflicting images, however. In the midst of Pinecone’s story, women warriors are portrayed in scanty clothing, including one in fishnet stockings. We recognize the important work this book does to address intersectionality, and regret that it also sexualizes secondary female characters.

### **Heteronormativity**

*Heteronormativity* refers to normalizing heterosexual pairings and families (one man and one woman, one father and one mother) as the standard and regarding others as deviant. Even when a main character is gay, lesbian, or transgender, background characters are likely to be straight, married, and performing activities within stereotypical gender expectations. We agree with Robinson (2016) who said:

Even ideas and messages presented in texts that seem culturally and behaviorally normative *can* and *should* be called into question...All texts are snippets of the greater dialogue—and how we speak back to these texts shapes the course of that dialogue. (p. 12, emphasis in original)

Speaking back to heteronormative portrayals in books can offer children the opportunity to think critically about the images they encounter (Van Horn, 2015).

*Olivia and the Fairy Princesses* (Falconer, 2012) is an interesting example. Olivia fights against the assumption that all girls must like princesses, but her family—a mom, a dad, Olivia, and her two brothers—implicitly conveys the ideal of the heterosexual family unit as the norm. Although Olivia does much in this story to disrupt the idea that there is only one “right” way to be a girl, her nuclear family—as background characters—maintains heteronormativity.

In contrast, *A Tale of Two Mommies* (Oelschlager, 2011) disrupts heteronormativity by departing from the ubiquitous hetero family dynamic. In it, a young boy answers his friends’ questions about his two-mother family. The illustrations depict the family engaging in everyday activities, such as riding bikes and eating dinner. This book also serves to disrupt gender binaries, as the mothers engage in stereotypically masculine activities, such as fishing and camping. Additionally, it accomplishes intersectionality with a main character who has dark skin, and disrupts discourses of childhood innocence as the main character is a very young child and the board book design is appropriate for toddlers and preschoolers.

### **Conclusion**

We recognize there are many criteria for teachers to take into account when selecting children’s literature for early childhood classrooms, and that most important criterion is the overall quality of the books. All children deserve books that are beautiful and engaging, that evoke curiosity and inquiry, and in which they see themselves reflected in the images and words. We further recognize that all children’s literature carries various degrees of implicit and explicit

gender messages. The books in this article are just a few that we appreciate for their gender informative themes that also call attention to the need for more books that offer the stories and images that support equitable early childhood curriculum. We offer teachers the filters of gender binaries, discourse of childhood innocence, intersectionality, and heteronormativity as means to further monitor the book choices they make for the children in their classrooms.

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