

Breaking Gender Norms Through Representation in Picturebooks

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Abstract

This FOU thesis examines how gender roles are portrayed in contemporary children's literature and more specifically in picturebooks. Gender roles and gender representation are thus key terms for this research article. The term *gender* has taken a new turn in recent years, as studies of gender in children's literature are often complicated by other intersectional identities, such as race, ability, or class (Marshall, 2021, p. 81). I have in this research conducted a qualitative approach, by choosing three picturebooks that focus on gender identity. In the method I focus on mainly the visual analysis to answer my research questions. This discussion responds to my desire, as a teacher, to advocate diversity and representation, making us less vulnerable to the *single man story*. The single man Story is a Ted Talk by Adichie (2009), here she describes the danger of only knowing one story of one group (TED Talks, 2009). This describes the results when lack of representation occurs. This for me set forward an objective to study representation deeper within a topic I myself have had a lack of exposure to growing up.

Introduction

Concise presentation of research content and motivation

In the new and updated Norwegian curriculum LK20 (2020) there are several different core values to consider in all subjects. On point number 1.2 Identity and cultural diversity (regjeringen, 2017), within the curriculum's ground values, it is stated that: "The school should give their students historical and cultural insight and anchoring, as well as contribute to each and every students development of own identity in an inclusive and diverse community" (regjeringen, 2017). Gender representation is a central topic concerning children's identity. Examining gender representation within children's literature has been the main focus for this research paper. Doing this research paper has opened my eyes for a more critical view on children's literature and its effects on children's viewpoints regarding gender and gender norms.

Within my field of work as a future teacher in the EFL-classroom, using literature will play a central role, especially as a language teacher. I wish to get a deeper understanding of contemporary children's literature that is available, and how I can transfer this literature to my future students. The pedagogical approach towards the students will be to have an inclusive educational approach for our students. Multimodality are text that combines written text with design elements and visual elements. Picturebooks are considered as a multimodal resource in addition to newspapers, cookbooks and museums displays (Serafini, 2014 p. 2).

As for my research question I will narrow it down and highlight the work I have done with picturebooks. Picturebooks are a great resource to use in the classroom when working with younger learners (Birketveit & Gweno, 2013). For my research question, I would like to look into how picturebooks can be used as resources to convey important topics, such as gender norms. I also want to emphasize the importance of representation of gender roles and diversity in contemporary picturebooks for children. Specifically, I will examine the representation of gender roles and diversity in the picturebooks; *Julian is a Mermaid* (2018), *The Boy & Bindi* (2016) and *I am Jazz* (2014).

It is especially the aspect of representation that has driven my interests for taking on this topic of gender roles in my FOU. Giving children a role model, someone or something that can represent a resemblance of themselves can help form young learners' assumptions of gender roles (Filipović, 2018). Through literature children gain new knowledge about any sort of themes that the books chooses to confront as an example in this research it is gender representation through children's literature. Through media we often see more awareness

regarding gender roles and representation (Filipović, 2018), but stereotypes still persist (Bang Svendsen & Røthing, 2009).

This thesis responds to my desire, as a teacher to advocate diversity and representation as a tool to make us less vulnerable to the *single man story* (2009). Adichie, begins with telling about her own experiences as a young student coming to the US from Nigeria and what negative biases she experienced by her peers being from an African country by her peers. She also adds on the expectations she had for herself growing up as a girl formed by her impressions reading children books (TED Talks, 2009). This video was published when I was in middle school and opened my eyes to realizing how representation affects us as individuals. Focusing on gender roles is however important, because in recent years there has been improved awareness to ensure that these representations do not reproduce inaccuracies and stereotyping stops (Coats, 2021 p. 99).

It is thus important to position myself correctly so that I can convey a message of a community that I do not belong to as a cisgender heterosexual woman, to do so in a rightful matter. Coming from a minority background, I do feel some resemblance to this group, since minority groups can often experience undignified stereotypes and stigmas, some are direct and others indirect (Bang Svendsen & Røthing, 2009). Because of increased awareness and a movement over the recent years, we see less and less of direct negative comments to being a minority, but microaggressions are still very much alive. One example is the lack of representation in children's literature, as children are often indirectly shown in what a normative family, boy or girl should look like (Bang Svendsen & Røthing, 2009). In my thesis statement I wish to present my position and intention in my arguments in this research paper. For this FOU I am focusing on gender roles and diversity where representation in children's books, more specifically contemporary picturebooks is what I have narrowed it down to. Gender diversity and representation amongst young learners comes with great responsibility. The responsibility lies within different environments. However, the school and the teacher do have an obligation of making sure that there is a diverse representation for their students. Tools such as children's literature and teachers' critical perspective is what will be examined throughout this research. This has formed my research question to; How can contemporary children's literature, in particular picturebooks, represent gender creativity and challenge gender norms?

Theory

Central Terms

In this section, I wish to define a few central terms in this research thesis. There are several complex terms that are used and should not be taken out of context, which is why I find it fitting to specify which definitions I will undertake.

Looking into children's literature we can see an representations of histories of racist thinking (Capshaw, 2021 p. 364). There are examples found of children's books containing race-based stereotypes. Moving on ward to the term that is often confused with race is *diversity*. Identity and location are the factors for determining diversity in children's literature (Thomas, 2021). Diverse children's literature is a term that has evolved from multicultural and multiethnic, it represents a shift in the educational world. The term diverse emerges as a way to include a broader range of identities in literature (Thomas, 2021, p. 64-65).

The main topic of this paper is gender representation and we can begin with splitting the term into two. We often use gender "to assign or attribute gender to" (OED). This is used as a social classification concept, where for the most part we assign the gender boy and girl, but leave out the LGBTQ community (Marshall, 2021 p. 81). In the book *I am Jazz* we meet a young trans girl, which is what the T stands for in LGBTQ.

When I speak of gender representation, I focus on how the different gender roles are being portrayed to young learners because I am discussing the role and place of children belonging to the LGBTQ + community, as well as children belonging to a minority. Historically, groups as women, racial, ethnic and sexual minorities have been marginalized (Bang Svendsen & Røthing, 2009, s. 58). Marginalized to a point where their value is not validated at the same level as the opposite sex for example.

Theoretical framework

In this section, I will provide relevant theory that can support my thesis as well as trying to answer my two research questions. The theoretical framework has been based on a collection of theory on gender positive literature, and by using the new Norwegian curriculum (2020).

As a starting point, I have used the curriculum and taken the core values into main consideration. The theoretical framework is based on research done on gender in children's literature, within the genre of picturebooks. The theory discusses gender positive literature, gender education, breaking gender norms and the need for representation amongst young

learners. Another aspect of this research is to look into how picturebooks work as an educational resource regarding the topic of gender roles. The first core value from the curriculum (2020) that will be forming my first research question is “*human dignity*”. This core value teaches young learners that we are not to violate any person and their worth for who they are. This is a universal value that applies to anyone and is part of our human rights. In my research question I want to look at how gender roles are presented in children’s literature.

The core value of 1.2 “Identity and cultural diversity” (regjeringen, 2017, p. 6) reflects my chosen topic quite nicely. In this element the school is supposed to make sure that each student has the opportunity to evolve their own identity in an inclusive and diverse community, as well as having historical and cultural insight and anchoring (LK20). To have a common reference point is important for each and everyone’s sense of affiliation in society. One of the main purposes with this core element is to make sure that the students become comfortable language users and are able to develop their language identity. Language is one of the factors that says something about where we are from and gives us a sense of affiliation. For the research question connected to this core value I would like to ask; How does the language in these books represent gender positivity for young children.

The informal accessibility for young and new English readers makes picturebooks a great tool in the classroom with young learners. Multilingual students can take advantage of the illustrations in a more supportive manner, as these will enhance the verbal text, help point out different emotions such as humor, irony and help gain understanding for second language learners. Picturebooks can help us lead into an ordinary form of talking around topics and texts that can be viewed as sensitive or challenging. Readers are also led to reflect around color, layout or fonts (Birketveit & Gweno, 2013) Picture books are viewed as amusement for many young learners, and is great for socializing. With books children have access to different social situations and roles, as well how to inhabit them. Queer children’s literature gives children a chance to imagine and perform gender identity without the worries of stereotypes. Dresses are no longer just for girls, it opens up for a more free gender expression and identity. Through queer literature one is rejecting the inherited world of gender norms (Miller, 2018).

The need for diversity

Diversity has become an old term, but we use it differently today in children's literature. In contrast, European nations tend to discuss diversity in terms of "integration" or "assimilation" within an individual nation, and in their senses of national identity, the populations of European countries seem comparatively more homogenous, often making diversity a topic outside of the norm, and a continuing need to inclusion (Thomas, 2021).

In two of my case studies we meet boys coming from a minority background. As mentioned earlier there is a responsibility to showcase diverse literature to students. In doing so to create an inclusive environment. The use of diversity as a term to describe children's literature is relatively recent, conversation about diversity in children's literature are not new. When characters of color appear in children's publishing and media, many are often demeaning, as recent controversies about picture books featuring smiling slaves demonstrate. The stereotyping and marginalization of people of color, poor and working-class children and families gender and sexual minorities, immigrant and other minority groups have persisted throughout children's literature (Thomas, 2021). The shift in terminology from *multicultural and multiethnic* to diverse children literature mirrors similar shift in the larger educational world as well as in the North American academy. Multicultural was initially intended as a term inclusive of cultures beyond race and ethnicity, but it did not sufficiently address recent attention to growing awareness of differences in gender, sexual orientation. This shift in terminology is notable, but it also fails in our supposedly post racial era to challenge white privilege and structures of race and power (Thomas, 2021).

Gender positive literature

Studying the books of *I am Jazz* (2014), *Julian is a mermaid* (2018) and *The Boy & The Bindi* (2016) has been interesting, since these three books within the same genre differ and are alike. In two of the picturebooks we met a cisgender boy protagonist and one transgender girl, but they vary in how they represent themselves. When we see a boy protagonist there are certain expectations, in the same way we have thoughts about childhood we do to *boyhood*. It is a central definition to children's literature. Even though we do not use an exact term in Norwegian for boyhood, the same expectations do still apply. To be a boy means to be flawed, incomplete, or incomplete man, and boyhood involves the fundamental paradox between the privileges of maleness and the subaltern status of youth, class or race" (Tribunella, 2021, p. 35). Today's impression of the boy character is considered both a

problem and need for correction, as we often see the boy character being the *quintessential bad boy* (Tribunella, 2021, p. 35). It is important to remember that not only boys are affected by the standard boy protagonist we often see in literature they play out to be in literature, boyhood fiction is consumed by both boys and girls. The boy protagonist within fiction is represented as a strong hero like figure (Tribunella, 2021). Girls tend to read boy books more frequently given that fantasy in books with boy protagonist are more powerful and unavailable to living children, which often what kids seek in entrainment. In contrast using the book *I am Jazz* represents *girlhood* with her identity, and her interest such as doing makeup, drawings and soccer (Herthel, 2014).

Gender representation in Children's literature

One of the biggest challenges regarding picturebooks for children are gender stereotyping and underrepresentation of generally female characters. Children often become bound to receive the impression that girls are not very important because no one has bothered to write books about them. Gender representation becomes a growing topic despite diversity in education. Future research will be necessary for educators to become more aware of the possible underrepresentation and stereotyping in children's books

Gender underrepresentation is common in children's reading material, so educators do not find gender representation in books to be impactful on the child's construction of gender. Educators can potentially use this influence to include more gender diversity and fight stereotyping in children's books, and understand them as potentially harmful, and make a conscious effort to transform harmful materials into gender-sensitive narratives. Books that are perceived as having low potential were mainly concerned about the stereotypes in the environment outside the early childhood. In professional practice these important issues can be addressed through honest and open discussions and professional reflections.

Queer children's literature is what we referred to as a subgenre of children's literature. In the case studies we see how queer youth is represented in today's society, and this can help us understand the queer present. Picturebooks have become a great growing subgenre for "new queer children's literature" (Miller, 2018). An important point to highlight is that often cisgender heterosexual parents with queer children do not have any relations with queer youth or queer adults (Miller, 2018). A way in to address the subject can be through literature as opening for dialogue.

Earlier on I have brought up the need for diversity. In two out of the three case studies we find a protagonist with a racial minority background has a minority background. However, in *I am Jazz*, there is a lack of representation when it comes to racial diversity. To normalize queer youth representation is somewhat new within literature, and that could be a factor in itself for *I am Jazz* to be lacking a racial diversity.

Research Method

Here I will present how I have collected my data, and how it has been analyzed. Essentially there are two different approaches to use when doing this type of research, some will also use a mixed approach of qualitative and quantitative method in this study I have conducted a qualitative approach, since the topic for this paper is quite large, and there is a lot of information available to sort through. There are several aspects that needs to be considered in a text; it needs to be understood and valued when it comes to determining in what the main essence and message is through a text (Allen, 2017).

Qualitative approach

In this research article I have decided to conduct a qualitative research, which is the form of conceptualizing the research project. By definition qualitative research, is where the researcher tries to understand participants' experiences (Heigham & Crocker, 2009). This is usually done in a natural setting and benefitting from approaches such as *case study* or *ethnography*. Instead of collecting numbers, the data consists of texts and images. In the research one is looking for common patterns (Heigham & Crocker, 2009, p. 320). Qualitative method is considered a vast field, but my research has been specifically focused on the three chosen books. In this method the process of getting the results is what is important, how the study has been completed. In the process there is usually a multiple data collection, this could be interviews, observations or open-response questionnaires. In this study there has been a combination of textual analysis and a visual analysis to explore the different perspectives can be explored in the three books (Crocker, 2009, p. 8). Having a framework to work by will be important, as the initial focus of interest is what drives the research, more so than the research question. This is to not expose to much of the research context. In contrast to a quantitative research method where each stage is being carried out one after another, data is collected and statistically analyzed then after the finding are written down. Using a more nonlinear approach such as qualitative will mean that the data has been collected, analyzed and interpreted. However in this case findings the chosen content has not been complete random,

as I specifically chose these three books keeping in mind of my topic and thesis. Through analyzing the data I have also interpreted the content (Crocker, 2009, p. 10).

When researching it is also important to include my position in the study. My intellectual bagging being that I am a student within the teachers field focusing on children's literature in an EFL-classroom. In this case what my personal background is, ethnicity and gender (Crocker, 2009, p. 11). Within my qualitative research approach what we call a case study, here I have done an in-depth description and analysis of a three single book. The learning process has been about looking at the representation of gender roles within children's literature and a thorough look into picturebooks. The theory to help understand the analysis does come from various different sources, which have combination of qualitative and quantitative method (Crocker, 2009, p. 14).

Research methods

As mentioned earlier in this section, I have conducted a visual and textual analysis of this case study, but I have mainly been done a visual analysis of the three picturebooks given how this aspect of the books do takes up much of the space and form a greater context to the story. The analysis is a methodology that involves understanding symbols, language and pictures as multimodal literacies. Through the cues that are provided in text there is a message that is trying to be sent. The message of the story might be historical, cultural, political, ethical contexts for which they exist. In this case, I have experienced an ethical and cultural message being sent through the various texts (Allen, 2017). While investigating the context and experience of the text, I have not been able to investigate the experiences of the texts through young learners.

In a visual analysis of contemporary picturebooks one would look for a perspective, composition and visual symbols (Serafini, 2011, p. 5). How are the objects organized, the placements of various elements can determine the importance of an image. In this first aspect of doing a visual analysis, I am studying the size of an object, color contrast as well as foregrounding and focus. The perspective is what will affect the viewers' relationship to characters in the images. When characters are positioned closer to the viewers, readers tend to form a closer relationship to them (Serafini, 2011, p. 5). The way a character is positioned can say something about their status; if a character is positioned to where the reader needs to look at them, it could be a sign of power. Picturebooks work as visual tools and use visual

symbols. An example of a visual symbol is a dove, which can represent peace and compassion, or for example, a rose that can be symbolizes for love (Serafini, 2011 p. 5).

With an textual analysis one will explore textual elements. Focusing on to the physical effects of visual stimuli, the reader should be able to construct own meaning considering if is a good picturebook (Ghosn, 2002). The dynamic between word and pictures can be quite subtle. We see in *Julian is a Mermaid* (2018), for example, that there are pages with no text. In turn *I am Jazz* (2014) uses text on every page.

From an ethical point of view, with this research I want from this research to make sure that the students are being exposed to as much diverse literature where everyone is able to meet a character who is similar to their personal self. Not only meeting characters that share same traits with one group of students, but also to give a representation to create understanding for different groups in society, focusing on gender positive literature as I am researching in this case study.

Analysis

The book – *Julian is a Mermaid*

For my analysis of the three multimodal text, the focus will be on composition, perspective, visual symbols and text for all of the three picturebooks. The first book I have chosen to analyze is *Julian is a Mermaid* (2018), written and illustrated by Jessica Love. In this picturebook we meet a boy named Julian, whose age is not mentioned but one could think that he is between 6-8 years old. Julian is on his way home on the bus with his grandmother. On the bus, they see three ladies fully dressed as mermaids, and this becomes very intriguing to Julian who loves mermaids. He becomes inspired by the ladies on the bus, and decides to design his own mermaid costume at home. When his grandmother sees him in his costume, Julian becomes a bit embarrassed. The grandmother then brings some accessories for Julian to add on. This show acceptance from his grandmother, by the one who stands who stands closest to him, and she soon enough gives him the courage to enter the parade with everyone and including the mermaids from the bus at Coney Island.

There are few objects in the images throughout the pages in the book, there is a minimum of text and overload of great illustrations. It is as if we are completely drawn into the images, and there is some text to help us understand what is being said on a selection of the pages. There is a brown color as base for most of the pages giving a warm feeling when opening the book. On the first two pages, we meet Julian in a swimming pool with what

seems to be his grandmother and her friends gathered. They are dressed in fabulous swimsuits with different designs and colors. Julian is eagerly swimming underwater between the ladies.

The main characters, Julian and his grandmother, are centered in the illustration. There are not too many details in the illustration, but a great focus on the characters. In the illustrations we get to see Julian grow and develop, he moves from one page to another as he shifts from a little boy to a colorful mermaid with long curly hair underwater. This is where readers get to join Julian's imagination of becoming a mermaid, after seeing the ladies on the bus all dressed up. One detail that I have noticed in regards to composition is that whenever Julian is at his most happiest, for example in his fantasy world or at the carnival, the background becomes that much more colorful. With the warm brown color, there is a nice safe feeling, but it is also a bit dull. We are missing something special, and whenever Julian has the chance to dream or express his gender creativity, the illustration gets a spark of color and brings his identity back to life. His grandmother is a safe base for him, and gives him the courage and acceptance to be his true self, just like the brown base in the book.

It is very clear that Julian is the main character of the book, but does not narrate his own story. The way we follow his thoughts and journey is showed through several images of just him on one or two pages for example as shown on page 18 and 20. Here Julian has just arrived home from seeing the ladies on the bus, and he becomes creative and begins to make his own mermaid costume out of what he finds in the house. There are in total 9 images of him on these two pages, and each of them shows a part of his thought process in becoming a playful mermaid while his grandmother is away and he has the place to himself. In the book there are quite large images of the character, signaling where our focus should lie. His grandmother is naturally bigger than him, but she most defiantly has protective role over Julian and his worries of dressing up in public. However they enter the parade, where there are lots of different people dressed in different costumes with all sorts of patterns and vibrant colors. People in the crowds become quite large compared to Julian and his grandmother, and particularly their costumes are very visible, making the reader want to join into the vibrant fest. At the very end of the book, we see Julian again with his grandmother and her friends. This time they are all under water, and all are mermaids. Julian is the one that seems the most pleased and at his happiest. At this time we see him being gender creative and true to himself.

As mentioned earlier, there are not many objects to choose from, but each and every one of them are meaningful. The visuals that I am looking for should have some sort of connection to sociocultural contexts. From my interpretation, the head piece that Julian

makes out of plants reminds readers of the feathers from a peacock. The headpiece is feathery with its leaves and a variation of colors, yet not too much looking like pattern similar to the peacocks. The peacock symbolizes, among other things self-expression which is essential for Julian as well as integrity, pride and love (Clifford, 2021). Reading the story of Julian's gender identity it makes perfect sense for him to wear a headpiece that represents his qualities.

The book – *The Boy & Bindi*

The second case study is the picturebook *The Boy & the Bindi* (2016), written by Vivek Shraya and illustrated by Rajni Perera. I have chosen this particular book because of its storyline being similar to *Julian is a Mermaid*, but with an important contrast. Here the boy meets some difficulties when openly expressing his gender and cultural identity with his peers. In the book, there are no names, the mother is called Ammi's which is the same as mother, I will then only refer to Ammi's as mother and the boy. In the same way as Julian is with mermaids, the young boy is fascinated but by his mother's dot on her forehead. The mother explains to her son how the bindi is of high value to her. He later receives a bindi from his mother and wears the bindi proudly. However, there are some rude comments made by his classmates. Discrimination and bullying based on gender or gender expression (Bang Svendsen & Røthing, 2009) is in a way a norm, this is the underlying reason for Julian to feel embarrassed or scared to go out in public dressed as a mermaid. They are scared of the outside reaction. The boy with bindi is however unaware of the backlash that would come for him. He is not able to answer the bullies, but finds comfort and strength in wearing the bindi, just as his mother. The picturebook introduces us to hindu culture.

The first character we meet is the boy's mother; there is a large close up of her face covering almost two pages in the picturebook. She has long black hair that flows and wears a nose piercing, red lip stick and the red bindi, which might be the first thing one notices. Moving on to the next page, after the first impression there are two pages with only detailed illustrations of the bindi on the mother's hands. From the beginning of the picturebook, we are presented with the bindi's importance, by various visual techniques. The boy is the one narrating the story, but we do not see him before several pages in the book, except for on the cover. In the first picture where he is portrayed, he is fascinated by his mother while she puts on her bindi. He is quite small, so one could guess his age to be around five years old. The images showcases the close relationship to the boy and his mother. They are often close to

each other, including at the end of the book, after the boy has been through some difficulties wearing the bindi in public. The mother and boy share a strong connection putting their foreheads against each other and each of their bindi's touching. In the picturebook when explaining the bindi, and its importance there are not that many illustrations of the characters. The bindi becomes a singular force on its own that gives strength in difficult situations for both the boy and his mother.

The main visual symbol in this picturebook is the bindi itself. The bindi that the mother places on her forehead is widely worn by women from many different religious and cultural communities in India (Ramachandran, 2017). As the mother explains to her son, "*the bindi keeps me safe and true*" (Shraya, 2018), and it also represents where she is from, so she is nostalgic about her own mother. There are various sorts of bindi's with different color, designs and shapes throughout the book. This can also represent that each bindi is different can be customized to each and everyone's personalities, and gender.

The book – I am Jazz

My third choice of case study, is the book *I am Jazz* (2014), written by Jessica Herthel and Jazz Jennings, and illustrated by Shelagh McNicholas. In the book we met a young girl named Jazz. In her story we follow her in explaining how she became Jazz, "Jazz has a boy body, but a girl brain", (Herthel & Jennings, 2014). As a transgender girl, we access how she fits naturally in with her peers through her own eyes, but also an insight into how the family was secretive in Jazz's desire to dress and act like a girl. The family would not let her dress up as a girl in public for example. They visit a doctor that introduces them to the word transgender, and after that, it makes sense to the family and life begins to fall into place as Jazz fully begins to live as a girl.

I would say that the pictures in this book remind more of traditional picturebooks, whereas the content is somewhat different. As of the composition, we are very clearly introduced to Jazz, the main character, with two single pages of just images of her. In contrast to *Julian is a Mermaid*, this book has a complete neutral background, it is mostly just white with images of the characters. There is a picture of Jazz on every page, emphasizing that readers are taken step by step in her narration through her experiences and thoughts of being a transgender girl. This is a pointing pin for the reader to identify her.

Using images of Jazz on every page does gives us as readers a closer relationship to her. We also get glimpse of every aspect of her life, when she is playing with friends, in

school and by herself as well as impact worthy moments with her family. There are also images of her being a boy and times where she dresses up as a girl, which helps readers take a more personal and closer look into how it has been to become Jazz. Bringing it back to perspective, we Jazz's size does varies from image to image; when playing with friends, she is the same size as them, which makes her equal to them. However, in the beginning when Jazz only gets to dress up as a girl and is still perceived as a boy, she is more focused in the image to make sure readers have a clear view of that this has been her true self from the beginning.

The visual symbols in this book work as are visual objects that have been used to classify Jazz as a girl in terms of gender. Throughout the book, it is mostly Jazz doing what is considered girly activities. One of the most visual tools used is on the pictures where Jazz is young and in the beginning of her transition. When she dresses as a girl, she wears a dress with a tiara, but she has short hair to signal that this was a time when she was perceived as a boy. A tiara is originally worn by princesses and queens, which are for many little girls their female role model.

Discussion of the books

In my two first case studies *Julian is a Mermaid* (2018) and *The Boy & Bindi* (2016), the characters have quite similar roles. They are young children that enjoy being gender creative in a complete innocent way. They both have support from their families in expressing who they are which gives them more confidence in evolving their gender creativity. The one thing that clearly separates the books, is how the outside world responds to their gender expression. In *The Boy & The Bindi* (2016), the reader has a more realistic reaction to him wearing a bindi, which is most commonly worn by females only. The boy receives a few comments from his classmates, but for him it is hard to respond. He has no response to something that feels natural to him. Even though he seeks comfort in his bindi and gets support from home we can feel the discomfort in his experience by having to defend something as simple and natural as wearing a bindi.

With the stereotypes given to young learners through traditional fairy tales and stories, such differences can cause a reaction when someone different is seen on the playground, in school or on team trainings, for example. Subtle stereotypes exist in the form of only girls like playing with mermaids. It is never said directly to the reader, but the fact that only girls play in such ways implies that this is meant for girls. With "*Julian is a mermaid*" we do not see

any negative reactions to him dressing up as mermaid. The story does a great job at normalizing gender creative children in our modern societies. He is met with joy and is being included as an equal. There are no comments as to why he wishes to dress up or even what gender he identifies with. This might be something worthy of discussing with the students, but then again we are highlighting how Julian being a boy is not socially accepted to dress as a mermaid. To address an issue or stereotype, so that in the future, the students can be aware of not acting in this way.

I am Jazz (2014), is however, different compared to the two first books analyzed. Thus, all three books are considered to be gender positive literature. It is clear to readers that Jazz is transgender and her having girl interest is what validates her female gender. When Jazz clarifies her being transgender, she validates her female gender as a girl based on her interests, such as dressing up as a princess, loving the color pink and having girl best friends. In one of the illustrations Jazz actually dresses up as a mermaid, just like in my first case study in *Julian is a Mermaid* (2018). When Julian feels embarrassed by his wishes to dress up this way, his grandmother could have easily told Julian no to do it and given him and given him a cowboy outfit for example to dress more “manly”. However, as these two boys are able to fully express their gender curiosity. Jazz is able to be gender expressive and find out she identifies as a girl and not a boy. It is never explicitly mentioned whether Julian or the boy with bindi are queer, trans or just gender creative. The terms are not that important in the first two case studies, but allowing them figure it out in an inclusive environment is important.

Conclusion

When reading *Julian is a Mermaid* (2018) and *The Boy & Bindi* (2016), they both like to dress up in what is considered girl interests. Julian likes to dress up as mermaid, and the boy likes to wear the bindi which traditionally is worn by just women. These interest does not however make them any less as boys, but they are breaking some gender barriers/norms. In perspective the justification in *I am Jazz* (2014) for her to identify as a girl, supports these gender norms of only girls liking to play dress up. However, the picturebook does give as an representation of a young transgender girl, and was early on in this subgenre.

Circling back to my research question and the relevant theory that has been presented. We see that contemporary literature is making a move when it comes to representation, while I was looking for picturebooks to analyze with characters who were gender creative, there

were options to look through which is a positive. In the analysis of the three contemporary picturebooks, there is not only representation of gender but also children with diverse backgrounds, it can be easy to forget that representation comes in many forms, and not only separated within topic by topic. All three books have challenged gender norms in their own particular way. With *Julian is a Mermaid* he is free to dress as he wants, and breaks a personal barrier as well as being a representation for other young boys who wishes to be mermaids. The boy with bindi showcases how one can be safe from within and stand against negative comments and still stay true to their gender identity. At last with Jazz, who makes a full transition in becoming a girl and introduces young learners to the terminology of transgender can be eye-opening for many figuring out their gender identity. The representation these books provide can help change many perspectives in the classroom.

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