Representation of Girlhood in Picturebooks for Young Readers

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Abstract

This FOU thesis examines the positionality of young female protagonists in three contemporary picturebooks. Female representation in children's literature has been found to be lacking or misrepresented (Hamilton et. al., 2006). However, in newer published picturebooks, the representation of female protagonists has evened out compared to male characters (Sunderland, 2012, Bartholomaeus, 2016). For this thesis, I have conducted a qualitative method, by examining three picturebooks that focuses on various girlhood identities. In the method, the main focus is surrounding the visual modes present in the dual narrative, as the illustrations help to visualize and compliment the written modes. To help examine the gendered details in the picturebook narrative, I have called on the work of the influential feminists, Judith Butler and Simone de Beauvoir. While preforming a close reading, and a visual and textual analysis of the three contemporary picturebooks, I found that they all challenge the gendered norms of girlhood in different ways. They do not only have female protagonists, but they are multicultural and represent diversity. These picturebooks provide an opportunity for the young readers to encounter strong female voices in a variety of contexts and roles.

Introduction

Concise presentation of study, content, and motivation

According to A. Jesús Moya-Guijarro & Eija Ventola (2021) picturebooks have great potential in representing and dealing with diverse topics, such as gender issues. However, previous studies show that picturebooks traditionally have a challenge when it comes to gender stereotyping and underrepresentation of different social groups, such as female characters (Hamilton et. al., 2006). Based on these studies, we can therefore acknowledge that some picturebooks tend to stray from their full potential. Children's experiences and exposure to variations of characters in literature may contribute to how they view society and the people in it. Susan Knell and Gerald Winer's study (1979) showed that young readers who read about gender-stereotyped characters, increase their sexist beliefs. These findings imply that literature has the potential to teach and extend people's ideas of gender norms. However, as picturebooks are becoming more progressive and inclusive, children's ideas of gender norms might incline. Progressive picturebooks have a great potential in educating children to be more open and acceptive of the various types of living, as they work to challenge the traditional gender norms. Therefore, gender bias in children's literature matters. A stereotyped portrayal of characters and gender can contribute negatively to children's development, in aspects such as career aspirations, future gender roles, and their identity characteristics (Hamilton, et.al, 2006, p.756). My interest in the topic of gender representation in picturebooks came from a wish I have as a teacher-to-be. I want all the students in my class to identify and feel resemblance to some of the characters that are represented in our classroom library; literature used for pleasure, and for educational purposes. This thesis is therefore a product of my interest.

This FOU focuses on the representation of gender in picturebooks for young learners. More specifically, an investigation of the position of young female protagonists in three picturebooks; *The Proudest Blue* (2019), *Not All Princesses Dress in Pink* (2010), and *My Name is Not Isabella* (2010). The three picturebooks analyzed in this thesis are contemporary picturebooks that portray different representations of girlhood. They also challenge the stereotypical representation that has been found of female characters in the genre. For this case study, I have conducted a visual and textual analysis of the picturebooks mentioned above. To be able to hopefully grasp the gendered details of the picturebook narrative, I have situated and examined scholarly articles, book chapters, and single-authored texts that focus on gender theory, picturebook scholarship, and visual methodology. The research question in

this thesis is framed around and based on the gender representation present in the picturebooks, as well their ability to challenge gender norms in society, focusing on girlhood. This has formed my research question to: "How can picturebooks challenge representations of girlhood and gendered norms?". When analyzing the picturebooks, I have investigated the position of the female protagonist by 1. questioning the concept of girlhood, 2. social expectations, and 3. gender stereotyping.

Research Method

In this section of the study, I will present how I collected the data being used, and how it has been analyzed. For this study I have conducted a qualitative approach, as the topic presented is broad, and there are a lot of information and previous studies on the topic. A qualitative method of research is based on collecting primarily textual data, which differs from a quantitative approach based on collecting numbers and data (Walliman, 2011, p.130). Qualitative method is beneficial in educational research as it addresses the "how" and "why" questions and it enables a deeper understanding of experiences, phenomena, and context (Cleland, 2017). This method also allows you to examine and research questions that are not easily put into numbers to understand human experience. A qualitative research method is better suited in this study, as the study relies on text and images from the chosen picturebooks. The data collected will be examined by using interpretive analysis, meaning that the researcher will try to discover patterns by acting as the interpreter of the data.

Visual and textual analysis

Picturebooks can be defined as "a narrative or non-narrative book in which words and images form an artistic whole" (Hintz & Tribunella, 2019, p.192) Considering that picturebooks have a dual narrative, I have conducted a visual and textual analysis to examine the positionality of the female protagonist in the narrative. The dual narrative, both the visual and the textual modes in the narrative can help the reader experience the protagonist. The relationship between the images and the written text can either complement each other or be contradicting, which I will discuss more later in this thesis. The protagonist can therefore be experienced differently by examining the dual narrative in the picturebooks. The images can show a different side of the protagonist than what the written text presents. This methodology requires an understanding of pictures, language, and symbols as a multimodal literacy.

In a visual analysis of images and multimodal texts, such as picturebooks, there are three essential components that needs to be examined. They are introduced by Frank Serafini

in his article, *Expanding Perspectives for Comprehending Visual Images in Multimodal Texts* (2011). The three components are (1) composition, (2) perspective, and (3) visual symbols. This thesis will consider how the objects are organized and positioned, and how the viewer is positioned in relation to the objects. Being closely positioned to the narrative can create a stronger relationship with the characters in the picturebook, and in contrast, the further away, the less readers will connect to them (Serafini, 2011, p. 346). Visual symbols, such as a character, setting, or other motifs, are used to convey meanings that are beyond the written literal. By examining the visual symbols present in a picturebook, the reader might uncover a deeper understanding of the protagonist in the narrative.

In a textual analysis, there is a need to understand language, symbols, and pictures that are present in text to gain information and messages (Allen, 2017, p.1754). Everyone has their understanding of the world and will bring that with them when reading texts. How individuals interpret text will be affected by this. When conducting a textual analysis, different components influence the interpretation. It is influenced by (a) the analyzer's worldview, as previously mentioned, (b) the cultural, historical, political, and social context in which the text was created, and (c) an attempt to understand the author's intent when creating the text (Allen, 2017, p. 1755). Understanding a text within the context the text was created is the key. There may be hidden messages in the texts, influenced by the time, place, and culture in which the text has been created. As everyone has their own interpretation, the receiver might not receive what the creator intended, but by attempting to understand the creator's intent, it may help the receiver, or researcher, to analyze the text.

Close reading

I will analyze the picturebooks by performing a close reading. Mike Allen (2017) states that "close reading is a method of textual analysis which focuses on the relationship between the internal workings of discourse in order to discover deeper meaning" (Allen, 2017, p. 137). By performing a close reading, details and hidden messages that has previously been overlooked or not perceived, may surface. Using this method will help the reader search for meaning of words and their connotations, and how the language is used to produce different meanings. As this study focuses on picturebooks, the visual and written elements of the text will be analyzed by a close reading. Denise I. Matulka (2008) articulates three types of interaction between words and pictures: (a) symmetrical, where the words and pictures have the same message, and the pictures reinforce the words, (b) complementary, where

pictures and text are independent, and fill in each other's narrative gaps, and (c) contradictory, where words and pictures say opposite thing (Matulka, 2008, as cited in Hintz et. al. 2017, p. 197). Seeing that pictures and words can either complement each other, or have contradicting messages, it is necessary to do a close reading of both.

Theoretical framework

In this section, I will provide relevant theory that can support my thesis, and that are useful when discussing my research question. The theoretical framework of this FOU thesis centers on feminist theory. Feminist theory discuss a wide range of societal issues, such as sex, gender, race, discrimination, equality, difference, and choice. I will look at Judith Butler´s theory on performative gender, and Simone De Beauvoir's concept of the woman as the Other.

Performative gender

Judith Butler´s *Gender Trouble* (1990) is considered one of the most influential and revolutionary feminist text. Butler discusses and criticizes the binary view of sex, gender, and sexuality. Essentially, she introduces a distinction between "sex" and "gender", where she argues that gender is culturally constructed, while sex appears to be biological designation based on genetic features and anatomy. Although some might argue for a connection between sex and gender, Butler emphasizes that sex does not determine gender. The construction of "men" will therefore not only interpret males and masculinity, and "women" will not only interpret female bodies and femininity (Butler, 2006, p.9). The term performative is key to her work. Butler argues that gender is constructed through performance, meaning that instead of *being* a gender, individuals *act* as women and men (Butler, 2006, p.25). This means that gender is separate from biological sex and is rather a performance that is made by being reinforced by societal norms. When an individual acts certain behavior, every day or regularly, it creates their idea of what it means to be female or male. These can be different ways of expressing yourself, such as clothing, body language, hair, and more. These performances are not single acts but are repetitive and become rituals in one's life. Perceptions of "normative" gendered behavior are constructed through social ideologies that are often subconsciously imposed in childhood. Observing certain behaviors being performed, repeatedly in society, effects one's idea of what male and female performances are, and what is associated with being feminine or masculine. *Gender Trouble* (1990) argues that gender

identity is not natural, but a product of social protocol. Social protocols about behavior and how people dress, give the appearance of a natural and normative standard. Meaning that naturalness emerges from society; everyone's actions and reinforcements. When individuals act in certain expectations, gender becomes real. This is the process that Butler terms performative; men and women acting as they are socially expected to act, making masculinity and femininity exist.

The "Other" sex

Simone de Beauvoir states in *The Second Sex* (1949), that "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (Beauvoir, 1956, p.273). This single famous assertation has been used by many feminist scholars and portrays a distinguishment between sex and gender. It suggests that gender is an attribute to identity that is gradually acquired, and simply not a biological trait. In other words, gender is not the sex that we are born with, but the gender that we acquire. Femininity is a construction of society, a reflection, the difference in situation between men and women. When born, women are not fully formed, but gradually shaped in childhood. Beauvoir concludes that biology does not determine a woman, but rather that they acquire their role from man and society. Women experience external pressures that encourages individuals to conform to social expectations of behavior that is viewed upon as appropriate and hide behavior that is considered inappropriate. She continues to argue that women are defined by men and are differentiated with reference to the man, "He is the Subject; he is the Absolute. She is the Other" (Beauvoir, 1956, p.16). Men are defined and viewed as the neutral norm, where women are seen as the Other who lacks maleness. Therefore, sexism and oppression continue, as women are being held quiet because of their positioning as the Other. The construction and idea of the Other has emerged from not one single source but from many reinforced factors. Perception is a dominant factor. Beauvoir clarifies that it is not the Other who defines themselves as the Other, but it is the one who positions themselves as the One, who defines the Other as the Other (Beauvoir, 1956, p. 17). In other words, women are being defined as the Other by men who positions themselves as the One. "It is a man's world" a saying that might indicate that life is arranged to the advantage of men. "The representation of the worlds as the world itself is the work of men; they describe it from a point of view that is their own and that they confound with the absolute truth" (Beauvoir, 1956, p.162). Men's definition of themselves and the world, surrounds their own point of view. This statement also shows how female representation has

been shaped for centuries, and it depicts how humans' perception of the world is in the hands of the privileged group. The male perspective of the world shapes and limits the truth.

When analyzing the three contemporary picturebooks, Butler's and Beauvoir's theories on gender can be applied to have a nuanced and critical analysis of how gender is portrayed in the narrative. As previously stated, according to Judith Butler (1990), gender is a social construct. How the reader comprehends the gender being portrayed in the picturebooks, therefore relies on one's perspective of what gender means, and how gender is performed. In the analysis section of this thesis, I will go into further details on how the authors have chosen to present girlhood, and if the gender roles are stereotyped, or if they challenge gender norms in any way. Simone de Beauvoir (1949) also explains how the female gender has been defined and perceived by the male's perspectives. While performing the close reading of the three picturebooks, I will therefore examine how the female characters in the stories are being defined, and what position the authors have, in regards of their lived experiences of being female.

Literature Review

Feminist theory is a largely studied area, where a variety of topics and issues have been addressed throughout the years. This literature review will therefore cover some previous studies and articles that shed light on female representation in children's literature, and feminist perspectives of the concept of girlhood.

Images in picturebooks play a key part in creating ideas that are beyond the meanings that the textual or visual modes can convey each on their own (Moya-Guijarro & Ventola, 2021, p. 2). A characteristic of picturebooks is that they have a potential of dealing with diverse and controversial topics, and gender issues is among these topics expressed in picturebooks. Gender representation in children's literature has been a widely discussed topic by feminists since the 1970s. Liberal feminist articles criticize how children's picturebooks provide very few female characters and for gender stereotyping girls as passive and domestic (Clark & Fink, 2004, p.103). Studies such as Weitzman et al. (1972) showed that once female characters appear, they are most likely to be portrayed as dependent on masculine assistance for getting them out of trouble. Liberal feminist content analyses of children's books can therefore tell us that female characters are underrepresented and stereotyped. Studies done explicitly on picturebooks featuring boys and girls challenging gender stereotypes, has also proven that characters in children's literature traditionally have been constructed based on

established stereotypes (Sunderland, 2012, as cited in: Moya-Guijarro & Ventola, 2021, 2021). Jane Sunderland (2012) found that male characters usually have active roles and are generally more represented, both in linguistic and illustrative modes. Female characters on the other hand, are being portrayed as more focused on being affectionate and pleasing of others. Clare Bartholomaeus (2016) found when examining several studies, that female characters in picturebooks have behavioral restrictions, and that they are generally outnumbered by male characters. More recent studies show that it is still common for picturebooks to contain sexist or stereotypical content, but that picturebooks have progressed when representing male and female characters, and that the ratio is similar, at least in quantitative terms (Sunderland, 2012, Bartholomaeus, 2016).

Sexism and gender stereotyping in children's literature is commonly discussed in research, however, there is less research about feminist or anti-sexist picturebooks (Bartholomaeus, 2016, p.935). Feminist picturebooks are picturebooks that attempt to challenge dominant discourses, particularly about gender. In feminist picturebooks, the reader will experience a portrayal of various alternative ways of being, which may help children consider their own positioning. On sites such as good-reads.com, we can explore user-compiled lists that includes feminist picturebooks. There are a variety of lists, such as "Children's books that break gender stereotypes", and "Children's picturebooks with strong females". The few analyses of feminist picturebooks that exist, show that compared to non-feminist picturebooks, they usually include independent and strong female characters, who display what is stereotypically viewed as male characteristics and roles. Bartholomaeus states that feminist picturebooks have been criticized for using gender role reversals, and that there is an assumption that these stories will get dismissed by children (Bartholomaeus, 2016). To consider if this is the case or not, studies such as Bartholomaeus' are important, as her research centers around children's understanding of feminist picturebooks. Feminist picturebooks allow for a productive discussion of gender, as they raise questions about gender and stereotypes. However, how children and adults understand texts are reliant on their access to specific discourses. As Linda Parsons (2004) writes:

"We can only take up reading positions that exist within our discursive histories. Therefore, we must know the discourse within which the text is written if we are to recognize and understand the text, and we can only challenge the text based on discourses to which we have access" (Parsons, 2004, p.141).

This means that readers who are not familiar with feminist ideology are likely to encounter more struggle with accessing feminist messages, in contrast to those who are. Even though the focus in this thesis does not center around how EFL students understand feminist discourse, it is still of relevance to this study. The analysis and examination of the feminist picturebooks are based on my discursive knowledge and could therefore have a different outcome if the discussion of the picturebooks where to take place in a classroom setting. The picturebooks presented in this thesis are contemporary picturebooks, meaning that the social and cultural contexts in the books, reflect the present society to a greater extent. In that way, the reader might be able to construct the meaning of the messages even if they are not greatly familiar with feminist ideology, or other discourses implemented.

In *Twenty-First-Century Feminisms in Children's and Adolescent Literature*, Roberta Trites questions how feminism has defined what being a female/woman/girl means in various ways. They state that girlhood can be received: "1) as a physical reality that is defined in opposition to maleness; 2) as a social construct; 3) as a gendered performance; and 4) as a process-of-becoming through which material bodies interact with discourse to enact the lived reality of gender" (Trites, 2018 p. 5). Historically, female representation has often been divided between those who define female in terms of *matter*, or in terms of *discourse.* Those who view female in terms of matter, argue that there is an "essence" of being female, that is biologically different from the "essence" of a man. By positioning 'female or feminine' traits to 'male or masculine' traits, there is an underlying implication that sex and gender are predetermined by biology. By contrast, a discourse definition of female focuses on gender as a social construct. The category of 'women' is created by societal norms and expectations. The third definition of female and gender is centered around Judith Butler's interpretation of gender as performativity. Gender is not a fixed material, but rather a doing. The final perspective of girlhood that Trites introduces, explains how the female material body, is constructed, and preserved through gender discourse. "Gendered bodies are not simply material objects, they are constantly redefined as agents through the discursive processes of mattering" (Trites, 2018, p.12). Materiality and discourse are intertwined in creating and upholding gendered bodies. As soon as one is born, their gender is assumed and prescribed to them, and their gender develops and becomes as the material body interacts with social discourses.

Analysis and Discussion

The three picturebooks that I have chosen in my analysis, all challenge the norms of girlhood in different ways. They do not only have female protagonists, but they are multicultural and represent diversity as well. Kay Vandergrift argues that "contemporary picturebooks provide opportunities for young people to encounter strong female voices in a variety of times, places, roles, and literary styles" (Vandergrift, 1995, s. 63). Throughout the picturebooks we are given both subtle and evident cues of the message(s) being sent by the authors. For this upcoming section of the thesis, I will examine and discuss these messages in detail, by performing a close reading, and an analysis of the visual and written modes.

The Proudest Blue

The first picturebook I have decided to analyze is *The Proudest Blue* (2019) written by Ibtihaj Muhammad and illustrated by Hatem Aly. *The Proudest Blue* (2019) follows Faizah and Asiya, the two sisters' day at school. It is Faizah's first day in school and her older sister's first day of wearing a hijab to school. Some of the kids are curious and excited about her sister's hijab, while others are laughing and saying mean things about her. Faizah and Asiya have a wise mother who taught them to stay away from bullies and their hurtful words, and to proudly express themselves and their beliefs. Asiya, therefore, continues to wear her hijab proudly throughout the day, with a little sister just as proud.

While analyzing the textual modes in the picturebook, we can depict that Faizah and Asiya's mother is a strong female role model for the girls; "The first day of wearing hijab is important, Mama had said. It means being strong." (Muhammad, 2019). The visual modes show that the two sisters are excited and proud to be able to wear a hijab at school. However, not all people are well receptive to Asiya's hijab. The images and text are symmetrical (Matulka, 2008), as the readers are shown illustrations of kids laughing and saying: "I'm going to pull that tablecloth off your head" (Muhammad, 2019). *The Proudest Blue* is a feminist picturebook that addresses the issues and oppression that minority groups experience from the majority group. As a Muslim female, who wears hijab, she experiences oppression and ethnocentric ideology. Roger Clark & Heather Fink (2004) present that multicultural feminists have shown concern for the multiple systems of oppression that exist in our society. This means that there are several groups of oppression, such as sexism, racism, classism, and heterosexism, which can lead different women to experience oppression or subordination differently (Clark & Fink, 2004, p.103). Seeing that we have several groups of oppression,

some people also fit in multiple of them, and therefore experience oppression differently. The mother in the picturebook acts as a role model for her daughters, encouraging them to be strong and proud of their religious beliefs. She also reinforces them to take the high road, and not "carry around hurtful words that others say" (Muhammad, 2019). The picturebook has an empowering message, while also showing religious and cultural representation. The female characters have an active role in the narrative, as well as they are strong and independent. Therefore, *The Proudest Blue* is breaking the traditional and stereotypical girl in picturebooks, that studies have previously found (Weitzman et al. 1972; Sunderland, 2012; Bartholomeus, 2016).

The bright blue hijab is an important symbol used in this picturebook (Serafini, 2011). First, the color blue itself is a widely described symbol, where the author uses similes. The blue is described as: "The color of the ocean", "like the sky on a sunny day", and "like the ocean waving to the sky. It's always there, strong and friendly" (Muhammad, 2019). The blue color is symbolic of Asiya's pride. When choosing her own hijab, she specifically wanted the blue one. The blue shade that is illustrated is a refreshing and confident blue, that is being reminded and compared to the sky and the ocean. There is a symmetrical, and somewhat complementary relationship between the iconotext (Matulka, 2018). When the hijab is being described as above, the images illustrate a close up of Asiya and her hijab, flowing and looking like the sky, covered in a few clouds and seagulls. The hijab is also a central symbolic (Serafini, 2011) part of the picturebook. A hijab is a symbol, a visual representation of a female's religious beliefs and belonging. The author, Ibtihaj Muhammad, does wear a hijab herself, which might be the reason she decided to portray them in the picturebook as well. The images illustrate very well the cultural tensions from the other characters based on the hijab and xenophobia. Wearing a hijab can be difficult, and this picturebook illustrates that gently by showing children bullying because of ethnocentrism and racism. "Strong" is a word that gets repeated a lot throughout the picturebook. Even though they experience difficulties and adversity, they are continuing to be strong females, that are proud of their own identity and the fact that they are different, which also might be the main message that the author wants to convey.

When it comes to gender performativity (Butler, 2006), the main aspect of the protagonists that can be examined, is their appearance. The reader is not presented with a lot of behavioral components, except that Faizah draws, does cartwheels, and races her friends. These are regular kids' activities, that could be considered traditionally gender neutral. How they express themselves appearance wise, is that they are wearing casual clothing, with jeans,

regular shirts and sweaters, that could easily be the clothing of any gender. Social protocols, like behavior and how they dress, give the appearance of a normative standard (Butler, 2006). Seeing that they dress "gender neutral", can help the reader to increase their ideas of gendered norms, and not feel the social pressures of performing "correct" female behavior (Beauvoir,1956). The main traits expressed visually and textually, that can be used to judge the gender of the characters, is the hijab and their names. Hijabs are a piece attire that only females wear, as well as the girls use their names, Faizah and Asiya, are traditionally female Arabic names, most often used by Muslims (Hawramani, 2020). Also, one episode that is illustrated in the picturebook, is that Faizah draws herself and her sister, having a picnic and wearing crowns. She also describes the pictures: "two princesses in hijab having a picnic..." (Muhammad, 2019). She does refer to herself and her sister as princesses several times in the story. This could also be a way of expressing and portraying gender performance, as they identify with and sees themselves as princesses.

Not All Princesses Dress in Pink

The second picturebook analyzed in this case study is *Not All Princesses Dress in Pink* (2010) written by Jane Yolen and Heidi E.Y. Stemple, illustrated by Anne-Sophie Lanquetin. This is a picturebook that portrays princesses that come in all kinds, with both racial diversity and a variety of interests. Illustrated are all types of princesses playing soccer and baseball, doing gardening, driving dump trucks, and fighting a "knight" in armor (Yolen & Stemple, 2010). This picturebook challenge the gender norms that have been found in traditional princess stories, and it shows the reader that girls can wear whatever they like and do whatever they like, and not only wear pink dresses in order to be a princess.

The "sparkly crown" is a symbol used repeatedly in this picturebook (Serafini, 2011). The crown is both visually represented in the illustrations, as well as it is described in the textual modes. A princess crown is traditionally a symbol of royalty and power, however, in this illustrated book, it might be a more general symbol that symbolizes a princess, that is a female. The crown can be an important symbol used to emphasize the contrasts that exists in comparison to the traditional princess stories. There might be a message to the young reader that it is still possible to do "non-princess-like" things, while still wearing a "sparkly crown" and being a princess. They do not have to wear pink and dresses, they can still have fun and get dirty, while still being a princess. *Not All Princesses Dress in Pink* teaches the young reader that gender roles and stereotypical images of princesses does not apply to all girls.

"Non-girly" activities and interests are normal, despite them being traditionally viewed inappropriate for females, and is considered boy behavior (Beauvoir, 1956).

There are two scenes in particular from the picturebook that are challenging the stereotypical representation that have been found in previous picturebooks. Weitzman et al. (1972) found that girls usually have been representation as passive, and that they need male assistance and a male savior when trouble arises. On one of the pages in the picturebook, there is illustrated a girl playing and fighting "an evil sorcerer or knight" in the bedroom, while a boy is hiding behind a chest, looking scared (Yolen & Stemple, 2010). As previously mentioned, the female characters have been the ones in need of help, being passive and scared when danger arises. Female characters have been described in relation to the man, where the man is the Subject, and the women is the Other (Beauvoir, 1956). However, this picturebook illustrated a change in roles; now the boy is the one in trouble and in need of rescue, and the girl is the active role, saving and helping the boy. The other scene that also challenges the traditional stories is when there are illustrations of several girls escaping a "stony tower", displaying all their "princess power" while wearing a "sparkly crown" (Yolen & Stemple, 2010). Fairy tales such as Rapunzel (1812), tell the tale of a child being locked in a tower, who eventually meets a prince that tries to save her by climbing up her long hair. In this picturebook, the princesses are in no need of a male rescuer, as they have their own "princess powers" and can escape the stony tower on their own. Once again, this picturebook challenges the traditional idea of the need of a male hero.

Butler (1990) notes that people assume that gender nonconformity equals a wish to be the opposite sex, which is not the case. *Not All Princesses Dress in Pink* shows different girls and their interests and hobbies. The girls are playing football, doing crafts with tools, and playing in the mud. These are all very normal girls' activities; however, they might have been traditionally viewed as activities for boys. Throughout the book, all the girls wear crowns. By illustrating all the girls with crowns, the author might have tried to challenge the traditional and stereotypical view of a princess. Although that might have been the intent of the girls' crowns, you could also argue that the crowns are stereotypical and not necessary. It may seem as if the author does attempt to challenge the stereotypical princesses that are portrayed in fairy tales, but in order to do so, they could also have left out the crowns. Not all contemporary princesses and girls necessarily wants or needs to wear crowns to feel like a princess. As Judith Butler said, acting like socially expected makes gender real. (Butler, 2006). Girlhood in this picturebook challenges the traditional and normative gendered behavior, as it steers away from the traditional norms and representations of how girls dress

and behave, hobbies, and interests. By examining Disney Princesses such as Cinderella (1950), Sleeping Beauty (1959), and Snow White (1937) for example, you can see that they are performing traditional domestic "female" chores, like cleaning, cooking, and sewing. When these folk tales spread and originated, the cultural and social context that they were in, framed the female protagonists and their gendered behavior. Equally, picturebooks and other literature published in the present modern society, are also framed by their context. This means that the female protagonists are portrayed based on and inspired by the modern view of females. Beauvoir (1949) stated that the world's perspective of what it means to be female, was based on the male's perspective, and that the female body is described in relation to the man. Seeing that *Not All Princesses Dress in Pink* has purely female authors, the female protagonists in this picturebook are framed by their perspective of the female experience. This is an aspect that can be found in *Not All Princesses Dress in Pink,* as the girls show a variety of interests, appearances, and behavior, illustrating that not all girls are the same.

My Name Is Not Isabella

The last picturebook analyzed in this thesis is *My Name Is Not Isabella* (2010) written by Jennifer Fosberry, with illustrations from Mike Litwin. This is a contemporary picturebook that tells the story of the imaginative girl, Isabella, who spends her day pretending to be different historical pioneering women. At the end of the day, she is empowered to be herself. Throughout the picturebook, the young reader is presented with various strong female role models, while showing and inspiring them to dream big, and to be strong and powerful women themselves.

Having representation of female role models in children's literature is important. Research shows that gender stereotypes have a negative effect on girls' self-esteem and self-worth (The Fawcett Society, 2020). Literature plays an important role in children's development, and they are exposed to large amounts of literature throughout their childhood, ideally both at home and at school. This emphasizes the need for positive female role models in the stories that they read. In *My Name is Not Isabella*, the reader is introduced to the influential and historical women, Sally Ride, Annie Oakley, Rosa Parks, Marie Curie, and Elizabeth Blackwell. At the end of the book, there is also included a biography of them for the reader to explore more of their roles in history. Isabella describes and uplifts the women as she pretends to be them. She says that Sally is the "greatest, toughest astronaut who ever was!", that Annie is the "greatest, fastest sharpshooter who ever was!", that Rosa is "the greatest, bravest activist who ever was!", that Marie is the "greatest, smartest scientist who

ever was!", and that Elizabeth is the "greatest, kindest doctor who ever was!" (Fosberry, 2010). She also pretends to be her own mother, and says that she is "the greatest, sweetest mother who ever was!". This shows that she views her mother as a strong role model as well. Isabella's mother seems very supportive of her, as she goes along with her imagination and plays along with humor. She supports Isabella in being who she is and encourages her to dream big.

Seeing that Isabella talks warmly and expresses the females' strong traits, it encourages the young girl readers to dream big and to become anything that they want to be. The excerpts from the book above, show the use of repetitive text. The repetitive text serves to drive and strengthen the message that girls can do and accomplish anything that they want. Studies done by examining and analyzing school textbooks found that women are underrepresented, negatively represented, and misrepresented in relation to men (Chisholm, 2018). *My Name is Not Isabella* is therefore a useful picturebook to use in the classroom, as it illustrates and talk about female pioneers that might usually be excluded in school textbooks, according to the study.

Throughout Isabella's journey in the narrative, she is accompanied by her stuffed mouse. Her plushie might be a symbol (Serafini, 2011) which acts as her helper, her right hand. Having a helper, either human, animal or magic, is a common trait used in fairy tales. The motive behind using this trait in the picturebook, could be to have it as a tool to reinforce Isabella's imagination.

By examining Isabella as a character, we can try to understand her gender performance (Butler, 1990). Physical appearance-wise, she is illustrated with purple hair, that has bangs and is tied up with a green hair-tie. She is wearing regular, casual clothing; a yellow t-shirt, a pink skirt, paired with green and black-striped leggings. The colors purple and pink are traditionally viewed as typical girl colors, as well as wearing a skirt is viewed as girls clothing. However, Isabella does not seem overexaggerated to look feminine, which can mirror her identity. Simone de Beauvoir also stated that femininity is a social construction, where women are expected to be feminine, to portray an "essence" that is contrasting to the man (Beauvoir, 1956). Her overall illustrated appearance does however make her look confident. She has a non-natural hair color, and she likes to mix colors in her outfit. Her outfit stays consistent throughout the narrative, except for when she pretends to be someone else. Both her outfits and the scenery changes as she changes her roles. While pretending to be Sally, the astronaut, she is illustrated with a space suit, floating around in space, which is in reality her hallway stairs. The room looks like a purple and black galaxy, with stars and

planets, as well as an alien plant with two huge eyes. Similarly, the scenery and outfits change as she changes roles. Later, when she is Rosa Parks, she is riding her school bus, looking out the window. She is still wearing her own clothes, except that everything on her and her surroundings are in black and white. This is probably an illustrative move inspired by, and to refer to the famous photography of Rosa Parks, where she is sitting in a bus, looking out the window. The relationship between the visual and textual modes are complementary, as the illustrations add to the gaps of the narrative (Matulka, 2008). In the textual narrative, Isabella pretends to be someone else, but the illustrations show Isabella being physically different, and in a different setting, which mirrors her imagination.

The women that are illustrated and talked about in *My Name is Not Isabella*, are not described and depicted in relation to the man (Beauvoir, 1949). All the female pioneers are described by their own powerful traits, and their own accomplishments. They are all strong female role models who followed their dreams. They have not let themselves feel the pressure from the society to act out on gendered norms (Beauvoir, 1956), but rather stayed true to themselves and pushed away skeptic people who did not believe in them or tried to keep them silent.

Conclusion

While conducting this study, I experienced some limitations. This thesis is conducted on my interpretation of the picturebooks and the theoretical framework, based on my prior experiences and knowledge of the subject. Therefore, young learners may have other interpretations of the picturebooks and might see them in a different light. Even though that was not the focus of the study, of young learners' interpretations of the picturebooks, it is still something worth mentioning, as it does influence the analysis and discussion. As Bartholomaeus (2015) stated in her study, there are different understandings of the same story, depending on the reader's access to discourses. This emphasizes the need for more research on children's experiences of feminist picturebooks, as well as it highlights that the picturebooks analyzed in this study, might have been interpretated differently by a child reader.

The Proudest Blue (2019), *Not All Princesses Dress in Pink* (2010), and *My Name is Not Isabella* (2010), are three contemporary picturebooks that portray girlhood in various ways. They illustrate and tell young readers that as a girl you can be whoever you want to be, wear what you want, and achieve what you want. The three picturebooks presented in this thesis do

not only portray female protagonists, but also multicultural protagonists. Faizah and Asiya in *The Proudest Blue* showcases how you can stay strong and secure in your own identity and stand against negative comments. With *Not All Princesses Dress in Pink*, they are free to dress and play with what they want and challenges the gender norms in the way they behave and express themselves. Lastly, Isabella retells the story of strong female pioneers from history, as well as being acceptive and proud of herself. As previously stated in this thesis, female representation has lacked in children's literature in the past. More and more picturebooks are becoming progressive and touch on the subjects from feminist ideas, such as the picturebooks used in this case study. Feminists like Judith Butler (1990) and Simone de Beauvoir (1949) explains how gender norms are being created and maintained in our society. Being continuously exposed to and seeing stereotypical gender performative representation, can contribute to upkeeping our idea and view of "normal" gendered behavior. Using these picturebooks in the EFL classroom will help challenge the performative norm and will show young readers that gender comes in many shapes and sizes, and that all gendered expressions are accepted.

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