

O'Donoghue, Clare & Rohrmann, Tim (2016).

**Issues of diversity and inclusion in children's books: results from the UK, Spain and Germany.**

Presentation on the 26th EECERA Annual Conference, 2.9.2016, Dublin, Ireland.

### ***Abstract***

This paper compares and contrasts undergraduate EYs students' attitudes to children's picture books promoting inclusion and diversity in the EYs setting in three countries (England, Spain, Germany). This work builds on an earlier paper looking at EYs students' attitudes in England, developing this research through connections made at EECERA.

White, monolingual, middleclass, able-bodied, heterosexual culture is dominant in EYs teaching body and children's literature, necessitating awareness raising for pro-active inclusion (Pinsent 2013; Villegas & Lucas 2002). The EU Equal Treatment Directives, further reinforced by the Paris Declaration (2015), obliges member states to actively promote diversity and inclusion in educational contexts. However, recognition in the legal code does not always mean social acceptance or inclusion in everyday practice. Furthermore, EU countries interpret equality differently.

This quantitative, questionnaire based study looks at how EYs students in three countries respond to representations of diversity in children's picture books. Students analysed children's picture books promoting aspects of inclusion and diversity, rating them in terms of acceptability and usability. The individual/pair response was followed by group discussion where further attitudinal notes were taken. Further data was collected from children and parents in Germany. All respondents were informed of the purpose of the activity, gave their consent, questionnaires were submitted anonymously.

Respondents were positive about books that promoted some aspects of diversity and inclusion but not others. There was some slight variation between countries. The method can be used in research and teaching to raise staff awareness to actively promote inclusive attitudes.

### ***Keywords***

inclusion, diversity, children's books, literacy, students' attitudes

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## ISSUES OF DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION IN CHILDREN'S BOOKS

### Results from the United Kingdom, Spain and Germany

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## Origin of the Study

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- The original study was carried out in London in 2015
- Suitable cohorts of students were then identified in Spain and Germany to further explore future childcare professionals' attitudes to using children's picture books which promote acceptance of diversity.
- 4 types of diversity focused on: disability, family structure including gay couples, we are all the same under the skin, anti-xenophobia and refugees. The German sample also addressed gender stereotypes.
- The rating activity also assessed participants' knowledge of local law and / or the 4 EU Equal Treatment Directives promoting inclusion.



## Methods (1)



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*Students and practitioners* answered a questionnaire with 14 questions.

The questionnaire consisted of simple choices, ratings, and open questions (O'Donoghue, 2015, translated to German and a bilingual Spanish / English version).

Books were read and rated by couples of students and then discussed in groups of four.



## Methods (2)



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The German sample included *parents and children*.

*Parents* answered an adapted shorter version of the questionnaire with 9 questions. (only Germany)

*Children* rated 2 questions by sticking a point to an image of the book (only Germany).

- Questions: „Did you like the story?“ – „Did you like the pictures?“
- Ratings: green – „yes“, red – „no“, blue – „don't know“
- Books were read and rated individually; often books were read to the children by their parents.



## The UK Sample



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Approximately 130 final year BA Education Studies / Early Childhood students or BA Primary students rated 16 children's picture books with stories round 4 themes of inclusion:

- Anti-discrimination stories on grounds of difference / xenophobia (*6 books*)
- We're all the same under the skin (*3 books*)
- Different types of family set up (*3 books*)
- Storylines involving a disabled character (*4 books*)



## UK Results – Positive Attitudes



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Stories showing we are all the same under the skin & stories inclusive of disability were positively received by all groups:

- Some readers did not realise from the picture clues in the books that Dan (*Dan and Diesel*) and Lucy's grandfather (*Lucy's Picture*) were blind. The denouement of *Susan Laughs* is much more obvious: after pictures of Susan doing everyday activities without difficulty, the final picture shows Susan to be a wheelchair user with the caption, "That's Susan through and through, just like me, just like you".
- *Looking after Louis* (an autistic boy at school) was rated as worthy but boring with a dull, if realistic, ending.

 **How is disability represented?** 

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 **8** 

That is Susan  
through and through –  
just like me, just like you.



 **Clues: 'Dan feels the world'** 

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 **UK Results – Contentious Issues** 

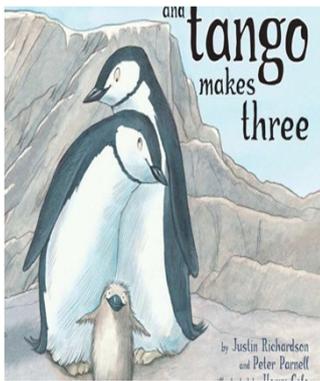
10

Most books on family diversity and anti-xenophobia were well received, except:

- *And Tango Makes Three* (a true story of gay penguins in New York Central Park hatching a donated penguin egg and raising a chick, Tango) which polarised opinion due to a minority of religiously-motivated, socially-conservative attitudes in the cohort.
- *The Island* in which the islanders force a migrant back onto his raft (and to probable death), burn the fisherman's boat and build 'a great wall round the island' was regarded as too bleak. There were also objections to the migrant's nudity in the pictures.

 **Controversial Books** 

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 **UK Results - Darkness** 

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Students thought anti-xenophobia was an important topic to address with children but not too darkly:

- Two anti-xenophobia books were in the top ranking (2<sup>nd</sup> - *This is Our House* and joint 3<sup>rd</sup> - *Mr Big*) and bottom ranking (last /16<sup>th</sup> - *The Island* and 14<sup>th</sup> - *Something Else*).
- *This is Our House* and *The Island* have similar story lines about letting other people come in and whether to share resources; similarly, *Mr Big* and *Something Else* both address exclusion and loneliness. However, in each pair one book is darker and less humorous than the other; it is this darkness, not the message itself, the respondents did not like.



## The Spanish Sample - Procedure



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- The data were collected over a week in September 2015 as part of ERASMUS staff mobility workshops.
- The Spanish students are studying on a bilingual programme (Spanish / English) so the workshops and the questionnaire used both languages
- 6 seminar groups (x3 final year BA 'Educación Primaria' = Primary; x3 first year 'Infantil' = Early Years) totalling approx 240 students
- English language versions of 15 of the original 16 books on inclusion were used.
- *Looking After Louis* was dropped for logistical reasons (a library copy) and for being rated as a dull story.



## Results: Spain - Overview



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- The students were not familiar with the picture books in any language.
- The students were able to pick out the inclusive themes of all the books.
- The groups mostly favoured books on the 'We're all the same under the skin' theme, plus the least challenging of the anti-xenophobia books (*Mr Big*).
- The 3 bottom ranked books were anti-xenophobic books, 2 of which were the same as the UK sample (*Something Else* and *The Island* = too dark) but with even lower scores. The groups also disliked *Frog and the Stranger* partly because it has a lot of text.
- Like in the UK sample, some students needed it pointing out to them that Lucy's granddad and Dan were blind before they realised the message of the book. Despite this, *Dan and Diesel* was the most popular disability inclusive book, rather than the more obvious denouement in *Susan Laughs* as in the UK.



## Results: Spain – Controversy

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- *Tango Makes Three* (gay penguin family) did not appear to be as controversial a book as in the UK in class discussion. However, it was ranked overall lower than in the UK (12<sup>th</sup> v. 7<sup>th</sup>). Groups that ranked the book numerically high wrote positive comments such as,
  - “We should normalise the situation of families that are not 'usual' for us. There is a gay couple of penguins so let's try to normalise the situation.”
  - “It's a book which needs a base in reading and after reading, there is much potential for working on new concepts and values.”
- In contrast, responses with lower numerical scores for the book left evaluative comment sections blank.



## The German Sample

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19 books featuring different aspects of inclusion were used in the research. The books differed from the UK and Spanish research samples due to availability in German. The selection included books on *being different* (6 books), *disability* (3), *anti-xenophobia* (6), *family structures, including a gay couple* (3), and *gender* (3).

1. Students' sample (student lecture):  
28 book ratings.
2. Mixed sample (open house day of university)
  - parents: 24 book ratings
  - practitioners, teachers and students: 10 book ratings
  - children: 40 book ratings.



## Results: Germany - Overview



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- Most books were not well-known among participants, although some of them had been available for some years. Most participants had not read these books to (their) children before.
- Although participants had basic knowledge on legal obligations on inclusion, they could only partly apply this to childrens' books
- Participants only partly recognized that the featured books dealt with issues of inclusion, even when this was clearly visible in the pictures (e.g., a boy sitting in a wheelchair).
- Participants did often not agree about which aspects of inclusion were covered by the books.



## Results: Germany – Controversies



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- Participants often thought that children would like the books they thought to be suitable for children but would dislike other books; the children who participated liked most books.
- Participants did not agree about the appropriate age range of the books. Often they tended to say that books are better suitable for older children (6-10), not for kindergarten (3-6), especially books about controversial issues. This was also true of UK and Spanish findings.

 **Results: Germany** 

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- Some books were rated very positively by most participants in regard to several questions of the questionnaire.
- There were other books where the ratings were inconsistent. These were books
  - about „difficult“ issues, especially *xenophobia* and *homosexuality*
  - with „dark“ colours and/or more abstract design.
- This reflects the findings from the UK and Spanish studies.

 **Results: Being Different** 

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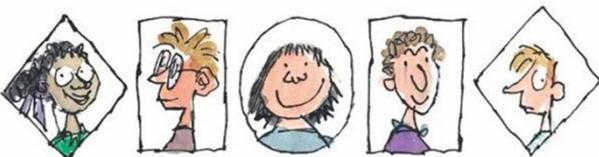
*Example for positive rating:*  
**Cave & Riddell – Something else (Irgendwie anders)**  
A strange figure is rejected by peers, but finally meets another strange figure and recognizes himself... A popular book for all ages.  
*„We must make children understand that it is not the appearance which is crucial, but character, to accept and get along with each other.“*



 **Results: disability** 

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*Example for positive rating:*  
**Blake & Keen: Freddy und die fantastischen Fünf (The five of us)**  
Five children work together to rescue an adult. It is said that they are „fantastic“ – it is *not* mentioned that they are diverse and have several handicaps (one sits in a wheelchair, one is blind, etc.). Rated highest in the student group. „A book about inclusion, solidarity, readiness to help, and the uniqueness of the individual.“

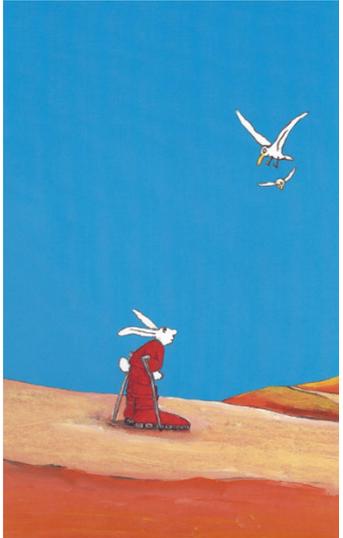


 **Results: disability** 

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*Example for inconsistent rating:*  
**Solotareff: Rollstiefelchen (Roller boots kid)**  
A hare with „roller shoes“ meets a bear who brutally mocks him, but finally they become friends. The story is „about being different and how to overcome the fear“.

Controversial judgements by participants: „very suitable for children, moral but also entertaining“ vs. „incomprehensible for children, illustrations not suitable for children“.





## Results: Refugees



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*Example for negative rating:*

**Greder: The Island**  
A dark but realistic story about a boat refugee who is rejected by the local community. Sad ending.  
Many adults think story and paintings are too dark for children. Interestingly, some parents thought the book is suitable for their children. „A very moving, but also distracting book, that probably will raise discussion with children“.

*Example for positive rating:*

**Kobald, Irena & Blackwood: My two blankets**  
A refugee child finds her way into the new culture and new language. Cold and warm colours are contrasted. Simple words and illustrations, and a positive ending. Acceptable for most participants, and top rated for adaptability for follow-up activities.  
„This book went under my skin. I felt with the girl.“



## Results: Gender and Sexuality



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*Example for positive rating:*

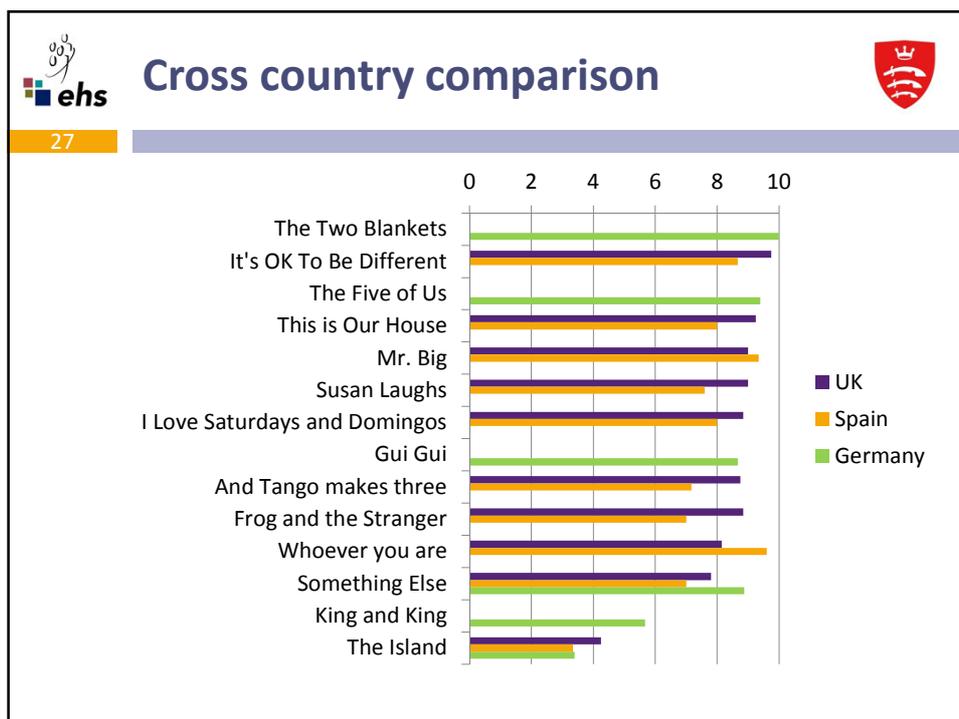
**Funke: Princess Pigsty**  
A princess who doesn't want to behave like a princess, counteracts female stereotypes. Most adults liked it - some children were irritated! Students and practitioners see many possibilities for follow-up learning activities.  
„Really a book for girls!“ – „She is rebellious, but also willing to compromise – a role model.“ – „... that it is good to be different, and everybody is allowed to be different.“

*Example for inconsistent rating:*

**de Haan: King and King**  
A king doesn't want to marry a princess. Finally he marries a prince. Some adults like it very much – others are irritated and don't find it suitable for little children.  
„A beautifully designed book about love“.  
„Other books are more important for children of this age.“

 <b>Cross country comparison</b> 	
UK Ranking	Spanish Ranking
Mean = 8.29 out of score of 10	Mean = 7.89 out of score of 10
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <i>It's OK To Be Different</i> (9.75)</li> <li>2. <i>This is Our House</i> (9.25)</li> <li>3. <i>Mr Big / <u>Susan Laughs</u> / Lucy's Picture</i> (9)</li> <li>6. <i>I Love Saturdays y Domingos</i> (8.85)</li> <li>7. <i><u>And Tango Makes Three</u></i> (8.75)</li> <li>8. <i>Dan and Diesel</i> (8.63)</li> <li>9. <i><u>Frog and the Stranger</u></i> (8.5)</li> <li>10. <i>We all Sing with the Same Voice / The Rainbow Stick Boy</i> (8.33)</li> <li>12. <i><u>Whoever You Are</u></i> (8.15)</li> <li>13. <i>The Family Book</i> (8)</li> <li>14. <i>Something Else</i> (7.8)</li> <li>15. <i>Looking After Louis</i> (7.14)</li> <li>16. <i>The Island</i> (4.25)</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <i><u>Whoever You Are</u></i> (9.6)</li> <li>2. <i>We all Sing with the Same Voice</i> (9.4)</li> <li>3. <i>Mr Big</i> (9.34)</li> <li>4. <i>It's OK To Be Different / Dan and Diesel</i> (8.67)</li> <li>6. <i>The Family Book</i> (8.6)</li> <li>7. <i>I Love Saturdays y Domingos / This is Our House / The Rainbow Stick Boy / Lucy's Picture</i> (8)</li> <li>11. <i><u>Susan Laughs</u></i> (7.6)</li> <li>12. <i><u>And Tango Makes Three</u></i> (7.17)</li> <li>13. <i><u>Frog and the Stranger</u> / Something Else</i> (7)</li> <li>15. <i>The Island</i> (3.34)</li> </ol>

 <b>German Ranking</b> 			
26			
Mean = 7,57 out of score of 10			
rank	title	mean	range
1	<i><b>The Two Blankets</b></i>	10	10
2	<i><b>Princess Pigsty</b></i>	9,67	8...10
3	<i><b>The Five of Us</b></i>	9,4	9...10
4	<i><b>Something Else</b></i>	8,88	8...10
5	<i><b>Gui Gui</b></i>	8,67	7...10
6	<i><b>Little Blue and Little Yellow</b></i>	7,5	6...10
7	<i><b>King and King</b></i>	5,67	3...10
8	<i><b>Rollstiefelchen</b></i>	5,5	3...10
9	<i><b>Alles lief gut</b></i>	4	1...8
10	<i><b>Akim rennt</b></i>	4	3...5
11	<i><b>The Island</b></i>	3,4	1...8
*only books with at least 3 independent rankings are included in the list			



**Cross-country comparison (1)**

**Leoni: Little blue and little yellow**

This story about „children“ from two different-coloured families is a timeless classic. „*Two individuals with different preconditions can create something new...*“ (German student)

Interestingly, German participants did not agree about the book. Although many ratings were positive, others criticized: „*trivial and simple – not much significance*“. The style was judged as „*abstract, needs eventually more explanations*“ versus „*stimulates imagination*“.

One British group was even more negative. Some saw a sexual meaning in the merging of the two colours. Others said they thought it was a very ‘hippy’ book, influenced by drug taking.

Some just said they didn't see the point of the book or just thought it was for teaching about mixing paint colours...



### Cave & Riddell – Something else (Irgendwie anders)

A strange figure is rejected by peers, but finally meets another strange figure and recognizes himself... A popular book for all ages.

The book was very positively rated in Germany and Spain:

*„We must make children understand that it is not the appearance which is crucial, but character, to accept and get along with each other.“ (German student)*

*“This is a book I'd like to work at primary school with” – “Anyone [everyone] is different and all would have friends“. (Spanish students)*

In contrast to this, in the UK the book was perceived as being too dark because the bullies never got punished or repented their actions, and was ranked very low (14<sup>th</sup> of 16 books).



The samples differed in regard of their knowledge on legal obligations.

- UK respondents were familiar with the UK Equality Act (2010) but not with EU directives.
- In Spain, many students recognised the inclusive message of the books, but a minority of students was not sure about legal obligations regarding inclusivity. They either stated their lack of knowledge or left the question blank. Some said the books did not address these legal obligations.
- Similarly in Germany, many students were familiar with German inclusion policy, but could only partly apply this to childrens' books.



- Answers and ratings often seem to depend more on participants' generalized attitudes, not on book contents.
- Many students lack knowledge on issues of inclusion and are only partly able to „see“ these issues in children's books when they are not obvious.
- Some participants have problems „understanding“ more abstract graphic depictions of in- and exclusion.
- Participants prefer to avoid dealing with challenging and controversial issues in early childhood, e.g. homosexuality; brutal mocking among children; hardships of the situation of refugees: A Romantic view of innocent and pure childhood.
- Other participants are very capable of dealing with issues of inclusion featured by the books, and have ideas for follow-up activities.



**Students need a better understanding of how to understand picture books, and how to use them in educational context.**

**Students need to be more knowledgeable about inclusion and about how to use children's books for promoting inclusion.**



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