

Rohrman, Tim & O'Donoghue, Clare (2017). **Otherness in children's picture books.**

Exploring issues of gender and migration through children's picture books.

Presentation on the 27th EECERA Annual Conference, 31.8.2017, Bologna, Italy.

Abstract

This cross-country study compares undergraduate students' attitudes to children's picture books (1) promoting alternative images of gender, and (2) tackling issues of migration and flight. The research points out how children's books can be used for awareness raising for pro-active inclusion. The study continues research in the UK, Germany and Spain, looking at EYs students' attitudes towards issues of inclusion in children's books (O'Donoghue & Rohrman 2016). It builds up on intersectional/gender theory and concepts of inclusion and gender sensitive education (Rohrman & Wanzeck-Sielert 2014) as well as on recent political developments. Sustained shared thinking is used as a means for developing awareness for issues of gender and migration.

A quantitative questionnaire developed by the authors was used with students in England and Germany. Students analysed children's picture books promoting aspects of gender and migration, rating them in terms of acceptability and usability. An individual/pair response was followed by group discussions where further notes were taken. To allow cross-country comparison, the book sample included books available in English and German. Respondents were informed of the purpose of the activity, gave their consent, and were informed about results. Questionnaires were submitted anonymously.

Results show that books confronting gender stereotypes can be a challenge for ECEC students, especially when it comes to issues of sexual orientation. Regarding flight and migration, some respondents tend to avoid difficult and frightening aspects. It is concluded that students and ECC staff can develop sensitivity for issues of gender and migration by critical reflections on children's books.



Keywords

gender, migration, children's books, inclusion, gender sensitive pedagogy

Authors

Clare O'Donoghue, Middlesex University, London, United Kingdom



Tim Rohrman, Dresden University of Applied Sciences, Germany



OTHERNESS IN CHILDREN'S PICTURE BOOKS

Exploring issues of gender and migration through children's picture books

Tim Rohrmann
Dresden University of Applied Sciences, Germany
Clare O'Donoghue
Middlesex University, London, United Kingdom



Starting point


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Research on children's picture books has revealed that many of these books present stereotyped images of family, gender, abilities, culture and race etc.


At the same time, book lists with titles that feature alternative images are popular in projects for inclusion in educational contexts.

But do these lists really serve the intended goals:

- Does the work with "good" books promote inclusion among children...
- ...and what is the role of trained practitioners in this process?



The research project




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... started in London 2015 with the attempt to explore future childcare professionals' attitudes to using children's picture books which promote acceptance of diversity.


The original study focused on *disability*, *family structure* (incl. gay couples), *we are all the same under the skin*, and *anti-xenophobia* (incl. refugees).

2016 the study was expanded by a Spanish sample of future childcare professionals and a German sample, including children.

The 2017 study was conducted in Germany and the UK, focusing on *gender* and *migration/refugees*.



Theoretical background: Children's picture books



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Children's picture books are an important aspect of literacy development in early childhood.

Research shows that reading books is not only fostering language development, but also cognitive development, emotional and social learning, and not least for imparting values (Lieber, Jahn & Danner et al. 2009; Albers 2015).

There is a special focus on "good" books for children in the context of various aspects of inclusion, although there is little research on the effects of such books on children's development.



Why focus on migration and gender?



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The first two rounds of the study showed two fields of controversy among the students:

- Books showing stories of flight and migration were rated differently depending on how “dark” they were – or, maybe, how realistic they displayed severe experiences, and also xenophobia.
- Books challenging stereotyped gender roles, and especially those featuring homosexual relationships, led to contrasting views – some very positive, some critical.

We wanted to deepen our understanding of these reactions.



Theoretical background: Xenophobia and the refugee crisis




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Inclusion of migrants, especially refugees, is a challenging task for ECEC institutions (Lunneblad 2017; Wagner 2017).


In many European countries, a growing proportion of children has a migrant background, e.g.:

- In Germany, 34% of children in ECEC centers;
- In the UK, 25% of all school children are BME (Black and Minority Ethnic) with greater numbers in primary school sector;
- In all London boroughs the proportion of BME pupils is > 50%; in the boroughs of Newham and Tower Hamlets > 90%.



Theoretical background:

Migration and children's books




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The use of picture books is seen as especially relevant in the context of (delayed) language development of migrant / multilingual children.


Several new picture books were published which deal with the situation of refugees.

On the other side, many traditional children's books don't show migrants and/or people of colour, or display stereotyped images.



Theoretical background:

Gender & Sexual Orientation





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Early childhood is an important age for the development of gender knowledge and gender identity (Ruble, Martin & Berenbaum 2006; Rohrmann & Wanzeck-Sielert 2014).

In the ages of 3 to 7 children learn to understand gender cues in their environment, and tend to develop gender stereotyped behaviour.

Research has repeatedly shown that many children's books feature traditional gender stereotypes (Juergens & Jaeger 2010; Burghardt & Klenk 2016).

 **The social context:
Gender & Sexual orientation** 

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- In the last decade, same-sex marriage was introduced in the legislation of many European countries: Spain (2005); UK (2014, except Northern Ireland); Germany (2017)
- The situation of intersexual and transgender children is more openly debated, also in educational contexts
- At the same time, there seems to be a „backlash“ of heavily stereotyped gender images in childhood, visible e.g. in toys, media and fashion for kids (→ campaign *Pink Stinks* against stereotyped gender marketing)

Nominated for a prize for the “most absurd gender marketing” by the campaign *Pink Stinks*



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Source: <http://ich-mach-mir-die-welt.de/2017/02/goldener-zaunpfahl-die-nominierten/>

Tim Rohrmann: Alles Gender
oder was?



Research method




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Bachelor students (ECEC or similar Bachelor courses) 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, then discussed in groups of four, and finally discussed in the whole group.

Field notes were taken during group discussions.





Sample: book ratings



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	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17
UK	130 (95)	-	20 (14)
Germany	-	50* (62)	24 (26)
Spain	-	240 (85)	-




(number of book ratings in brackets)
* including a sample of practitioners and parents


 **Sample: the books** 

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	2015	2016	2017
We are all the same	6	4 (0)	-
Disability	3	6 (0)	5 (2)
Diverse families	3	4 (0)	6 (3)
Gender	3	2	9 (3)
Anti-xenophobia/ Migration/refugees	6	5 (2)	7 (4)

in brackets: books available in English *and* German

-  **Results: Inclusion** 
- 14
- Most books were not well-known to participants. Although some of them had been available for some years, most participants had not read these books to children before.
 - Although participants had basic knowledge on legal obligations on inclusion (in all three countries), they could only partly apply this to childrens' books.
 - Participants did not always recognise that that the featured books dealt with issues of inclusion, even if the issue was key to a story, e.g. male care-giver parents in *Mister Seahorse*.
- 



Results: Overview Continued



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- Participants were more comfortable addressing some aspects of inclusion (*disability, we're all the same under the skin*) than others (*sexual orientation and gender identity/performance*).
- Books displaying agency and tomboyishness in girls were all well received and not seen as transgressive, whereas books displaying „feminine“ behaviours in boys had mixed reception.
- Books on homosexual orientations received controversial comments.
- Participants in all three countries did not like „dark“ themes in stories for children.



Xenophobia and refugees



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Armin Greder


THE ISLAND





MY TWO
BLANKETS


IRENA KOBALD & FREYA BLACKWOOD



ehs

Xenophobia and refugees


Yes, but ...



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Many books on anti-xenophobia were well received. It was seen as an important topic to address with children but not too darkly:


- Several anti-xenophobia books were in the top ranking (*My Two Blankets*, *This is Our House*, *Mr Big*)
- Books with strong images of the “dark side” of xenophobia (aggression and fear) were rated controversial or negative and led to critical debate.




ehs

Xenophobia and refugees

Example for positive rating



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Kobald & Blackwood: *My two blankets*
A refugee child finds her way into the new culture and new language. Cold and warm colours are contrasted to represent different climates. Words and illustrations are simple, and the story has a positive ending.


My Two Blankets was acceptable for most participants, and top rated for adaptability for follow-up activities.

„This book went under my skin. I felt with the girl.“ (Germany)
“She feels alone, everyone can identify with her”
(N.B. the whole 2017 UK cohort were BME-origin students.)

“The overt [message] is that she is a migrant but covertly there is no reason given why she migrated” (UK)




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Xenophobia and refugees


Example for negative rating




Greder: *The Island*
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'. The images express fear and aggression.

The Island was at the bottom ranking in all countries, and received critical and controversial comments.
"The illustrations are dark, mournful and depressing; despite this the story is moving." (Spain)
"The very negative ending leaves no way out for the reader who has identified with the migrant main character."

Many participants said it was not suitable for children. Nevertheless, some participants disagreed:
„A very moving, but also distracting book, that probably will raise discussion with children“ (Germany)



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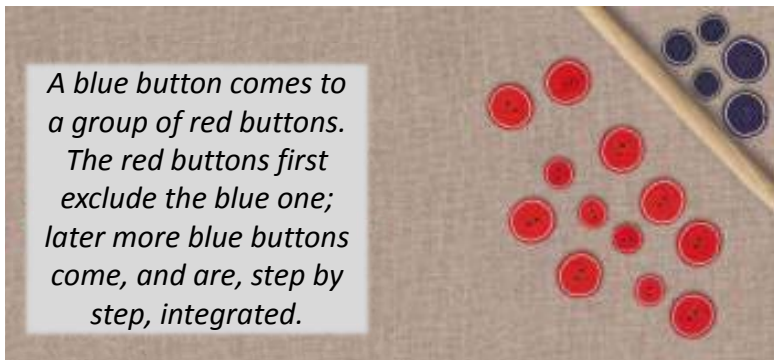


Xenophobia and refugees



Abstract Representations

Prévot: *Alles lief gut (Everything went well)*

A blue button comes to a group of red buttons. The red buttons first exclude the blue one; later more blue buttons come, and are, step by step, integrated.


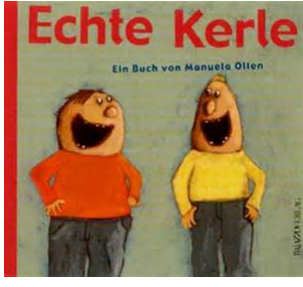




The art style of the book was rated very differently by students – ranging from „easy presentation of the topic“ to „too abstract for children“.

 **Gender performance:
New images for girls and boys?** 

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Books that challenged gender norms in terms of rejecting “macho” male, or dependent and passive girly role models were generally well received.


 

 **Gender performance:
New images for girls...** 


22

Cole: *Princess Smartypants* does not want to get married, sees off her suitors and lives alone with her pets happily ever after. A classic book from the 80ties. “Happiness is in you not others; encourage independence in young girls.” (UK)

Funke: *Princess Pigsty* doesn't want to behave like a princess, counteracts female stereotypes. Most adults like it and 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.“ (Ger)



Gender performance: New images for girls... but...




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Funke: *Princess Pigsty* ...
Most adults like it, but some children, especially girls, are irritated. How can a girl NOT want to be a princess?

Cole: *Princess Smartypants*
Many adults like it, but an UK participant commented:
"May be sending the wrong message to children at a young age not to listen to their parents' advice that may be helpful concerning their development."

And... what about the boys?



Gender performance: New images for boys...



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Cole: *Prince Cinders* *is little and skinny but he, not his macho brothers, wins the Princess' heart.*
"Gender equality book for boys too; very funny book." (UK)

Fierstein & Cole: *The Sissy Duckling* *does not like playing baseball but likes cooking and art and gets teased by the bully. In the end he saves his rejecting father's life.*
"Good for boys to see they don't have to be macho." (UK)



Schmitz: *David und sein rosa Pony*. *David gets bullied because he brings his pink pony to kindergarten; but finally he gets accepted by his peers.*
"It's no problem to be different". "It's brave to stand up for what you like." (Germany)

 **Gender performance:
New images for boys... but...** 

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Baldacchino & Malenfant: *Morris Micklewhite and the Tangerine Dress* divided opinion in plenary (UK).

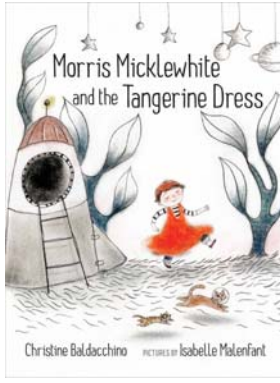
 **Gender performance:
New images for boys... but...** 

26

- Students recognised that in UK ECEC all children are allowed to play with whatever toys they like including any of the dressing up garments.
- However, students working in ECEC settings reported evidence of parents coming in to say that their son was not allowed to dress up in girls' dresses, or even play with dolls, or that other ECEC work colleagues discouraged boys from wearing princess dresses.
- Some students rated the book positively but others thought it would encourage socially stigmatised behaviour in boys, so might not be suitable.

 **Gender performance:
Fear of homosexuality?** 

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“Boys dressing up in girls’ clothing is often perceived as a major threat to dominant forms of masculinity, which are linked to heterosexuality. (...) This behaviour elicits great fear in some adults (...). But, while some children who do cross-dress may indeed identify as gay or lesbian adults, others will not; similarly, while some children who strictly confirm to gender norms may also identify as gay or lesbian in adulthood, others will not.”

(Robinson 2013: 139-40)

 **Gay couples/families** 

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Gay couples/families



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Books on gay couples lead to controversial debates.




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.




King and King. A king doesn't want to marry a princess. Finally he marries – and kisses – a prince. The original Dutch book was translated to many languages

These books polarised opinions due to a minority of often religiously-motivated, socially-conservative attitudes of participants especially (but not only) in the UK.



Gay couples/families



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Examples for positive comments:

King & King: "A beautifully designed book about love". (Ger)

Tango: "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." (Spain)

"We have children with same-sex parents and should connect to their reality" (Germany)

"...there is much potential for working on new concepts and values." (Spain)

Critical or no comments:

"Other books are more important for children of this age." (G)

Participants with negative ratings left evaluative comment sections blank.



Gay couples/families



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Tango Makes Three seemed to be more acceptable than *King and King*, at least in the UK group.

A possible explanation:

The anthropomorphization of gender-neutral-looking penguins in a heteronormative family was less challenging than two grown men finding love in a fairytale ending with a kiss –

despite the adoption of equal marriage and the decriminalisation of homosexuality in all participating countries.

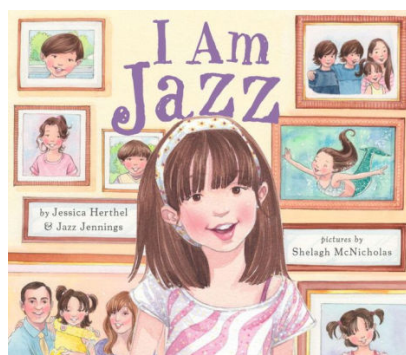
Some participants even didn't realize the penguins were gay and thought it was a book only about adoption!



A new controversy: Trans*



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Jazz was born a boy but was unhappy living as a boy convinced she was a girl, so she transitioned and is much happier now living as a trans girl child.



A Trans Child



33

Herthel & McNicholas: *I am Jazz* caused quite a stir!

- The student pair who rated it liked it very much (9/10) but thought parents and ECEC professionals would be neutral about it (3/5).
- Other peers thought the topic was too complicated / controversial for ECEC, but perhaps suitable for older primary children.
- Other peers thought the book should only be used if there was a trans child in the class, or should only be used in 1:1 reading with a trans child.
(UK sample)



Summary of Consistent Findings



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- 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.



Summary of Consistent Findings



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- Many participants seem to have a romantic view of „innocent and pure childhood“. They tend to avoid dealing with „dark“, challenging and controversial issues in early childhood, e.g. homosexuality; brutal mocking among children; hardships of the situation of refugees.
- Other participants are very capable of dealing with issues of inclusion featured by the books, and have ideas for follow-up activities.





Issues for further research



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- Compare experts', practitioners', and children's perceptions of picture books on inclusion
- Focus on intersections between culture, race, and gender (some books confront stereotypes in one aspect of inclusion, while reproducing them in other aspects)
- Confront differences between “good” books in the eyes of inclusion/gender experts, and in the eyes of other people – practitioners, parents and children.



Questions for debate

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- Should picture books bring up and reflect „difficult“ issues if students / practitioners do not want to confront themselves with these issues?
- Should issues of homosexuality and trans-gender only be brought up when „there is a case“ = if a child has same-sex parents or is trans-gender?
- How should darkness be dealt with if reality is dark?



Conclusion


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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.

“Building a society that is more critically reflective about gendered and sexual relationships, and that contributes to new cultural norms of non-violence and ethical relationships, needs to begin in early childhood.” (Robinson 2013: 131)

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A list of the children's books used in the research is available from the authors → rohrmann@wechselspiel-online.de.