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"I can be a girl if I want to": Supporting or silencing children's working theories during counter-heteronormative picturebook sessions in early childhood education

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Abstract

Prevailing heteronormative discourses in early childhood education in Aotearoa New Zealand present difficulties for upholding the right of gender diverse tamariki (children) and lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, intersex and queer-parented families to experience belonging in equitable, inclusive early childhood settings. The purposeful use of picturebooks that disrupt these discourses can go some way towards mitigating against exclusion. This article draws on the findings of a small-scale qualitative research project that explored early childhood teachers' use of picturebooks that included gender diverse children and lesbian- and gay-parented family content. In highlighting teacher support for or silencing of children's working theories about possibilities for gender change and two mother or two father parents during the picturebook sessions, the article makes a case for expanding the curriculum beyond the limits of heteronormativity. Some practice recommendations for facilitating picturebook sessions are offered to this end. Importantly, teacher preparedness to manage discomfort arising through discussion of topics perceived to be dangerous or risky during such sessions is critical.

Key words

Early childhood education; heteronormativity; picturebooks; working theories

Introduction: Setting the scene

Gender diverse children[i] and lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, intersex and queer-parented families[ii] are increasingly visible in contemporary Aotearoa New Zealand, including in early childhood education (Gunn et al., 2020; Surtees, 2020). Despite the presence of these tamariki and *whānau* (family) in early childhood settings, attention to gender diversity and non-normative ways of being and doing family has lagged behind attention to other aspects of difference notable in the sector (Cherrington et al., 2020). Given the sector is obliged to address equity and social justice agendas for all, this lag is concerning.

While there is considerable variety in the early childhood services available in this country, each service is bound by the national early childhood curriculum. First published in 1996, *Te Whāriki: He whāriki mātauranga mō ngā mokopuna o Aotearoa* (Ministry of Education, 1996, 2017) provides a

bicultural framework for English-medium services and an indigenous framework for Māori-medium services. Significantly, *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017) makes explicit the right of diverse tamariki and whānau to experience belonging in equitable, inclusive early childhood settings. Anti-heteronormative teaching practices are essential if this aspiration is to be realised.

Sharing picturebooks that challenge the status quo within early childhood programmes can support anti-heteronormative teaching practices. This article is based on the findings of a small-scale qualitative research project focused on early childhood teachers' sharing of picturebooks foregrounding gender diverse tamariki and lesbian and gay-parented family themes, undertaken by the first author, Kate (Morgan, 2020).[iii] In drawing attention to *kaiako* (teacher/s) support for or silencing of tamariki working theories about these themes as they emerged during a series of picturebook sessions, the article highlights the need to expand the curriculum beyond the constraints of heteronormativity. It concludes with practice recommendations for kaiako that will support efforts to challenge heteronormativity through the deliberate use of picturebooks as pedagogical tools.

Framing the study

Both the concept of heteronormativity and the heterosexual matrix framed the study. Queer theory was also significant. Following their introduction here, the merits of picturebooks for developing children's critical thinking and the role of working theories in supporting such thinking will be briefly outlined.

Heteronormativity

The concept of heteronormativity is used to denote the repeated construction of heterosexual sexuality as an institutionalised, superior and privileged standard, or the "natural", "normal" sexuality (Warner, 1993). While heteronormativity is present in early childhood settings in various ways, it frequently goes unnoticed by kaiako and others making up these settings. Nevertheless, it has captured the interest of scholars writing from the Aotearoa New Zealand perspective (see for example, Cherrington et al., 2020; Cooper, 2017; Gunn, 2015; Gunn & Surtees, 2011; Kelly, 2012, 2013; Kelly-Ware, 2016; Morgan & Kelly-Ware, 2016; Surtees, 2012).

Heteronormative discourses predominating in early childhood settings present difficulties for supporting the inclusion of gender diverse tamariki. These discourses are informed by biological determinism or essentialism. Biological determinism constructs gender as a set of either feminine or masculine characteristics linked to sex categories assigned at birth. In assuming gender is always fixed and stable, it reinforces a feminine/masculine binary. More recent scholarship, however, recognises gender as something that is dynamic and fluid. As such, it can be expressed beyond dominant forms of femininity and masculinity (Gunn et al., 2020).

Heteronormative discourses also present difficulties for supporting the inclusion of LGBTIQ-parented families. Constituting nuclear family forms as "proper" families through the privileging of heterosexual couples and their legally and biogenetically related tamariki, these discourses marginalise alternative family forms (Surtees, 2012).

The heterosexual matrix

Butler's (1990) conceptualisation of the heterosexual matrix inextricably links sex, gender and sexuality, producing femininity, masculinity and heterosexuality as the only logical and available options. This system can be understood as a means of regulating bodies to ensure they perform their gender (and therefore their sexuality) in the ways required by a heteronormative society.

As already explained, heteronormativity positions heterosexual sexuality as both "natural" and "normal"; this positioning depends on the existence of the "abnormal" to function—that is, homosexual

sexuality. As a socially constructed binary, the terms heterosexuality and homosexuality mark particular positions, with the first term—heterosexuality—both normative and privileged. Those in this group, Butler (1990) suggests, signal a "proper" female or male performance, by enacting heterosexualised ways of performing desire. She argues this is possible because sex (the physical body) produces gender (the female or male body), which in turn causes desire towards the opposite sex. In contrast, those marked by the second term—homosexuality—signal an "improper" performance.

Like the concept of heteronormativity, the heterosexual matrix is in tension with the inclusionary intent of *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017). When practice is governed by heteronormative discourses and the heterosexual matrix, kaiako may intentionally (or unthinkingly) impose particular forms of gender on tamariki, policing those gender performances considered unacceptable (Gunn et al., 2020). Additionally, some kaiako may simply fail to notice and therefore meaningfully include diverse tamariki and whānau; this has a flow-on effect on the curriculum experiences and resources on offer (Surtees, 2012), including the provision of picturebooks that reflect their lived realities.

Queer theory

Butler (1990) was an early pioneer of queer theory, which emerged in the late 20th century. Drawing from her work, Blaise and Taylor (2012) explain:

> Queer theory is a framework that offers insights into how seemingly 'natural' and 'normal' gender, as constructed by dominant gender discourses, is regulated by being linked to seemingly 'natural' and 'normal' discourse of sexuality. It presumes that we cannot think about gender without simultaneously thinking about sexuality. More specifically, the theory stresses that we behave in stereotypical gendered ways within the framework of heterosexual norms. In other words, dominant gender discourses and the dominant discourse of heterosexuality are inseparable, and we must consider them together to fully appreciate the persistence of gender stereotypes. (p. 91)

If, as suggested, the concept of heteronormativity and the heterosexual matrix are in tension with the inclusionary intent of *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017), then queer theory can support kaiako to engage in thinking and practices that are "at odds" (Gunn, 2015, p. 32) with both. Kaiako can teach with "queer intent" (Sandretto, 2018) by deliberately engaging in "queering processes"—sharing ideas and acting in ways that challenge gender, sexuality, and/or family binaries (Oswald et al., 2005). Queer questioning is a particularly useful strategy (Gunn, 2015).

In combination, heteronormativity, the heterosexual matrix and queer theory are useful analytical tools for understanding the complex meanings kaiako and tamariki bring to picturebook session discussions about gender diverse tamariki and LGBTIQ-parented family themes. These discussions provide fertile ground for illuminating tamariki working theories, as elaborated next.

Picturebooks as pedagogical tools: Fostering working theories

The use of picturebooks has a long tradition in early childhood education. Typically, picturebooks have been used to reinforce and transmit mainstream identities and cultural values. In recent years, however, a growing number of picturebooks purposefully attempt to challenge the status quo by disrupting dominant hegemonic discourses, including heteronormativity. Miller (2019) observes these kinds of picturebooks reflect two distinct strands in the genre; the first (newer) strand of picturebooks portray gender diverse characters whereas the second (older) strand focuses on lesbian- and gay-parented families. Unsurprisingly, given its longer publishing history, the second strand continues to dominate search results for the genre (Hedberg et al., 2020).

Picturebooks can encourage critical thinking (Lambert, 2015; Meléndez, 2015). When used as pedagogical tools, picturebooks offer possibilities for supporting tamariki to explore a range of challenging social justice topics (Meléndez, 2015), including topics pertinent to this study. A shared, interactive approach to reading experiences, rather than the more traditional passive reading experience, is key for fostering dynamic discussions (Lambert, 2015). Such discussions provide space for tamariki to develop and refine working theories.

Working theories are described in *Te Whāriki* as "the evolving ideas and understandings that children develop as they use their existing knowledge to try to make sense of new experiences" (Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 23). As a central learning outcome of the curriculum, the onus is on kaiako to value and utilise working theories in ways that foster ongoing theorising and knowledge building, including modelling inquiry skills and problem solving (Hedges, 2019). As Areljung and Kelly-Ware (2017) point out, however, there is limited understanding about which working theories kaiako choose to respond to and extend and why; some are supported, while others are silenced. Those that are silenced, they conclude, may be considered too risky to acknowledge, unpack or challenge. The findings of the study central to this article suggest this can indeed be the case, as illustrated later in the article.

The study approach and methods

As previously mentioned, this article draws on findings from a small-scale research project conducted by Kate, focused on early childhood teachers' use of picturebooks with gender diverse tamariki and lesbian- and gay-parented family themes. Qualitative methodology informed the project. This form of methodology enables researchers to generate rich, descriptive data that supports in-depth interpretive study of phenomena, including the meanings people attach to these (Gray, 2018; Taylor et al., 2016). In this case, it supported exploration of the meanings given to the picturebook themes during a series of picturebook sessions.

Mindful of the possibility that some kaiako might decline to participate in the study on the basis that the picturebook themes could be considered controversial, Kate chose to conduct the project in the kindergarten where she taught. Her well-established relationships with the kaiako and their familiarity with her social justice agenda ensured support from the team for the project. While this choice did pose some ethical issues as outlined shortly, the advantages outweighed the disadvantages.

After obtaining the appropriate permission to proceed with the project in her kindergarten, Kate secured the participation of six qualified, experienced kaiako and 14 tamariki who ranged in age from 3-years 5-months to 4-years 11-months. The kaiako gave their own informed consent, whereas parental consent was required for the tamariki in the first instance. After parental consent was gained, tamariki then gave verbal consent and completed their own assent forms.

The participating kaiako facilitated a total of six picturebook sessions with small groups of participating tamariki in a quiet room at the kindergarten over a two-month period, video recorded by Kate. The kaiako chose which picturebooks they would share with the tamariki for any one session from a selection of 15 relevantly themed options provided to them prior to data gathering beginning.[iv] In addition to the data collected during these sessions, the kaiako noted down relevant conversations they had with tamariki outside of the sessions for informal follow up discussion with Kate. A thematic analysis of the discussions during and outside of the sessions then took place.

The study was granted ethics approval from the University of Canterbury Educational Research Human Ethics Committee. While ethical requirements were adhered to, conducting the project in the kindergarten where Kate taught posed some ethical issues as mentioned. In particular, Kate understood protection of the kindergarten name and teachers' and children's identities could be problematic given the early childhood education community is relatively small; should readers of publications arising from the study ascertain her workplace, identification of participants would not be a complex task. Although

pseudonyms were used, complete anonymity could not be guaranteed, as stipulated in the information sheets and consent forms.[v]

Additionally, Kate recognised the potential for her teaching colleagues to feel pressured to participate and/or for parents to feel pressured to consent to their children's participation on the basis of their pre-existing relationships. For this reason, she distanced herself from the recruitment process where possible, enlisting the support of others to, for example, give out information sheets and consent forms.

Despite these (and other) issues, there were advantages for Kate to conduct the project in her kindergarten, not least the trust engendered through her pre-existing relationships with kaiako. Drawing from Britzman's (1998) concept of difficult knowledge, Robinson (2013) argues the topics of gender diverse tamariki and LGBTIQ-parented families can be understood as difficult or dangerous knowledge. Observing these topics have been censored in early childhood education, she notes they are perceived by kaiako as neither relevant to nor appropriate to discuss with tamariki. Unsurprisingly, therefore, kaiako can have reservations about introducing them, as has been well documented (see for example, Bentley & Souto-Manning, 2016; Chapman, 2021; Gunn, 2015). Doing so deliberately involves risk— or in other words, consideration of the consequences of disrupting taken-for-granted norms. For many kaiako—including those in this study—learning how to meaningfully introduce and build on these topics is an ongoing and risky journey. While endeavouring to engage in this work, the kaiako in the study were grappling with the pervasiveness of heteronormativity without access to relevant professional development to support their efforts. In this context, their willingness to open up their teaching practice to detailed scrutiny speaks to their courage, commitment to social justice issues and to the sound relationships within the kindergarten.

Findings

During the picturebook sessions, kaiako and tamariki reinforced and challenged heteronormative understandings of gender diversity and family diversity through discussion of children's in-progress and sometimes contradictory working theories. Kaiako played a key role in choosing which working theories were supported or shut down. The themes of gender change and lesbian- and gay-parented families were central to the discussions that took place. These themes are explored next.

Gender change

The gender change working theory discussions introduced here feature Robyn, a kaiako, and five tamariki—Jack, Bob, Suzie, Sahara and Viv. Together, they debated possibilities for gender change across several picturebook sessions. While tamariki learn to police their own and others' gender expressions early on, reinforcing hegemonic masculinity in those assigned male, and femininity in those assigned female (Bryan, 2019; Mayeza, 2018), Jack, who was four years old and gender diverse, repeatedly disrupted heteronormative concepts of fixed gender. This is illustrated in an exchange with Bob, who was also four years old, as they responded to *Introducing Teddy* (Walton, 2016), a picturebook focused on Thomas, a toy teddy bear, who realises they are really Tilly, a female teddy bear:

> Jack: Know what? I'm a girl teddy.
>
> Robyn:[vi] Are you a girl teddy?
>
> Bob: And I'm a boy teddy.
>
> Robyn: And you're a boy teddy?
>
> Bob: I'm a black, brown teddy.
>
> Robyn: It's ok to be whatever kind of teddy you want.

Jack opens this extract by volunteering he is "a girl teddy", perhaps indicating that he considers gender change a positive possibility. Jack was assigned male at birth, but during the research his mother explained while he usually identifies as a boy (Jack), he sometimes identifies as a girl (Peachy). Jack's mother suggested using the pronouns he/him for Jack/Peachy in this article, as Jack (currently aged eight years) now identifies full-time as a boy.

As a counterpoint, during the same picturebook session, Jack characterised gender change as negative while Bob and Suzie (three years old) listened:

> Robyn: *Today teddy felt like a girl teddy.*[vii] Not a boy teddy. Not a boy teddy. *I wish my name was Tilly, not Thomas.* Teddy wanted to change his name to Tilly. Cos teddy wanted to be a girl. Is that good?
>
> Jack: No!
>
> Robyn: Is that ok?
>
> Jack: No, it's not!
>
> Robyn: Why is it not ok?
>
> Jack: Cos … he's naughty. (Lying on back with Bob, holding hands to face)
>
> Robyn: No, he's not. Teddy's just feeling different.
>
> Bob: And he's [unintelligible] other people.
>
> Robyn: [To Jack and Bob] If you wanted to be a girl today and you were a boy, would that be ok? [To Suzie] If you wanted to be a boy today would that be ok? [One second pause] That's ok, you can be whoever you want to be.

Here, perhaps influenced by Robyn's question "Is that good?", Jack conflates a desire to be a different gender to being "naughty". This is a tension, given Jack's own fluid gender identity. As mentioned earlier, gender policing begins at an early age. Jack may be policing himself. Meanwhile, Robyn tries to explain to Jack, Bob and Suzy that Teddy's wish to change from a boy to a girl is not "naughty". Instead, she concludes, "Teddy's just feeling different." Although Robyn asks questions about gender change, none of the tamariki respond to her questions. Perhaps they were picking up on some subtle clues in her facial expression, body language and intonation. Her overt introduction of the judgement "good"—implying its opposite "bad"—may have led the tamariki to wonder (in their own terms) whether gender change is a forbidden topic. She then reassures them: "That's ok, you can be whoever you want to be." Perhaps Jack absorbed this message, as later, when looking at this same picturebook independently, he was overheard stating, "I'm a girl. My name is Peachy. I can be a girl if I want to."

Kaiako were often caught off-guard by tamariki comments around possibilities for gender change and sometimes seemed at a loss as to how to respond. One example of this occurred when Robyn shared the picturebook *Families, Families, Families!* (Lang, 2015). Although only tenuously related to the content, which depicts animals in family groups in framed portraits, four-year-old Sahara stated that she wanted to change into a boy:

> Sahara: Yeah, and I wanna change into a boy.
>
> Robyn: You can change into a boy any time you want.
>
> Suzie: And, and boys have penis, eh?
>
> Robyn: They DO have penises.
>
> Suzie: And you're gonna have a penis one day, Sahara.

Robyn: [Glancing momentarily at Kate—embarrassed] Oh I don't know about that [Laughing].

Robyn reacted positively to Sahara's statement about gender change, but seemed embarrassed by Suzie's working theory that to be a boy you must have a penis—thus if Sahara was going to be a boy, then she would "have a penis one day" too. Robyn introduced some doubt about Suzie's working theory by saying "Oh I don't know about that" whilst laughing nervously. At this point, the conversation seemed to have veered into dangerous territory for Robyn. Perhaps she understood childhood as a time of innocence and one that was therefore in tension with Suzie's ideas.

Robyn later told Kate that she felt out of her depth unpacking Suzie's working theories. She also confided that she was still developing her own working theories around the differences between sex and gender and their relationship to human reproductive organs. Robyn's discomfort saw her silence this working theory by reverting to the more comfortable activity of reading the picturebook aloud. Returning to Areljung and Kelly-Ware's (2017) point mentioned earlier, kaiako teaching strategies around children's working theories are often guided by the riskiness of unpacking and extending these. As they suggest, less risky working theories are more likely to be extended than those perceived as risky.

During another picturebook session, Robyn and four-year-old Viv talked about gender change:

Viv: I'm going to change into a boy.

Robyn: Are you going to change into a boy? Why would you wanna, why would you want to change into a boy?

Researcher: Oh?

Viv: Cos my brother says I want, I want me to change into a boy.

Robyn: He wants you to change into a boy, or you want to change into a boy?

Viv: Toby change into a girl now.

Robyn: Really? Do you swap roles sometimes? Sometimes you're the boy and sometimes Toby's the girl? … That's fun, that's good to do that isn't it? That's ok to act like a boy and then act like a girl sometimes. And, I wonder how girls act and I wonder how boys act? … Cos we do diff— Do we do the same things sometimes?

On seeing the transcript of this exchange, Robyn was struck by the way her response to Viv's interest in changing genders called this possibility into doubt. She said:

So, as I see it written down and I think I probably could have asked it … so that's *me* having an almost, um, not that I thought it at the time, but when I see that written down it's like *me* having a wee bit of a negative connotation to that but I didn't, I don't feel that. I think that if a child needs to be or ever wants to be a boy, they need to do that.

Although Robyn acknowledged her response was underpinned by a "negative connotation", she denied conscious feelings of negativity towards gender change. Either way, and despite her efforts to use questioning to explore Viv's thinking, she missed opportunities to fully engage with that thinking, by diverting discussion towards the less risky essentialising discourse of gender role-playing. Peters and Davis (2011) describe episodes like this as "hijacking the direction of children's theorising" (p. 12).

Despite the stated intentions of the kaiako, it was sometimes difficult for them to interrupt heteronormativity and to teach with queer intent. Reflecting after their picturebook sessions helped them realise how their teaching practice sometimes stifled the development of children's working theories related to gender change and/or lesbian- and gay-parented families while reproducing heteronormativity. This self-reflection is difficult and often uncomfortable work, but it is essential if meaningful change is to occur.

Lesbian- and gay-parented families

In addition to Robyn, two other kaiako—Janice and Frances—feature in the lesbian- and gay-parented family working theory discussions described in this section. Bob, previously introduced, is involved in some of these discussions too. He is joined by several of his peers in various configurations—Viv, Suzie, Boom Boom and Pink. For these and other tamariki, same gender relationships can be a difficult concept to comprehend.

During a picturebook session, Janice read Viv and Suzie *A Tale of Two Mommies* (Newman, 2016). This picturebook, comprised of questions and answers such as "Which mom helps out when kitty goes missing? … Both mommies help when kitty goes missing", prompted the following exchange:

> Janice: So this child here, he has one mum, two mums.
>
> Viv: He has two!
>
> Janice: What about your family? Who's in your family?
>
> Viv: I have mum and dad.
>
> Suzie: Mum and dad.
>
> Janice: Do you know in my family I have one mum and one dad, then my mum died and I got a new mum, so I had two mums!
>
> Viv: Yeah!

At the start of the study, Janice indicated she was keen to teach in a way that minimised heteronormativity. However, in relating the picturebook context to her lived experience of having a mother followed by a step-mother, Janice silenced the fact that the child in the picturebook had two mothers from the outset. While discussing step-parent experiences is valuable, these discussions should not be used as an explanation for the existence of same gender parents.

Janice also shared *A Tale of Two Daddies* (Oelschlager, 2010) with the tamariki. Following a similar question/answer format to the picturebook above, the content prompted Bob to assert that the two men depicted were "two daddies". This led to a conversation about how you might know a parent's gender:

> Bob: That's the … those are two daddies.
>
> Janice: How do you know?
>
> Bob: [Pointing at book pages] Cos, cos, cos that one's got jeans on and that one's got shoes on and that one's got pants on and that one's got shoes and clothes.
>
> Janice: So, do mums wear jeans sometimes?
>
> Many children: No.
>
> Janice: No? Whose mum wears …? D-do mums wear jeans?
>
> Many children: No.
>
> Bob: Yup—my mum does sometimes.

When Janice asked Bob how he knew the men were "two daddies" he described their clothing to explain his gender assumption. Janice did not build on his comments or confirm the men were a couple despite knowing an aim of the picturebook sessions was to encourage children's working theory development relevant to lesbian- and gay-parented families. Instead, she again bypassed a chance to

resist heteronormative discourses by questioning queerly. As a result, the tamariki present missed out on opportunities to refine their working theories.

When Robyn, Suzie and Boom Boom who, like Suzie, are three years old, were enjoying the picturebook *Families, Families, Families!* (Lang, 2015) the conversation quickly veered into a discussion of nail polish:

> Robyn: Some children have two dads, like Thomas has two mums. And some boys have two dads. Some have one mummy. Just one mummy. I know lots of children that just have one mummy. Do you know any?
>
> Boom Boom: [Showing fingernails] Yeah, I got nail polish coming off!
>
> Robyn: You've got, yes look it's coming off, you could put some more on.
>
> Suzie: [Showing toenails] I got some too!
>
> Robyn: Yeah, I see your coloured toes.
>
> Boom Boom: Look—I got nail polish.
>
> Robyn: Do you know some children that just have one mummy?

Robyn's intention was to foster discussion about family diversity consistent with the picturebook content. While she attempted to bring the talk back to this topic, she chose to ask a "safe" question related to family type—solo parenting—rather than risk a question about lesbian- or gay-parented families. Boom Boom, however, responded by stating her nail polish was "coming off". Robyn immediately reinforced Boom Boom's notion of appropriate ways to be a girl by pointing out she could "put some more on". Peters and Davis (2011) discuss the dilemmas kaiako face in choosing which working theories to respond to and which to let go. In this case Robyn's responses detracted from a meaningful discussion of family diversity.

In contrast, Frances seized an opportunity to teach with queer intent when she stepped in to challenge four-year-old Pink's working theory about the possibilities of same gender marriage in Aotearoa New Zealand:

> Pink: Bob, you're going to marry Boom Boom's sister.
>
> Bob: No I'm not! Well … you're going to marry a girl.
>
> Pink: [Literally stops in tracks, becomes serious] No I'm not!
>
> Bob: Yes you are, you're going to marry a girl.
>
> Pink: [Angry] No I'm NOT! Because girls are not allowed to marry each other in New Zealand.
>
> Frances: [Interjecting] Actually Pink, they are! Girls can marry each other in New Zealand and so can boys. It's ok in New Zealand. In fact, people come from other countries to get married because it's allowed here.
>
> Pink: [Hands on hips, still angry] No! It's NOT! My mummy and daddy work at the council and they said girls are not allowed to marry girls! [Stomps away.]

Frances deliberately interrupted Pink and Bob's conversation to offer new information for Pink about same gender marriage. Pink's mother later reported they have never discussed this topic at home, and she was surprised about her daughter's opinion. She added that she and Pink's father were supportive of the fact that marriage equality was achieved in Aotearoa New Zealand in 2013.

Pink reacted with anger to Bob's suggestion that she would marry a girl before voicing her working theory on the unacceptability of this option. Pink's opinions were likely influenced by heteronormative discourses that privilege nuclear family forms. Other family forms and types of partnership and marriage are often not noticed or ignored. Bentley and Souto-Manning (2016) argue that lesbian and gay issues—including the ability to marry—"cannot be silenced, regardless of discomfort or lack of readiness" on the part of kaiako (p. 198). To silence such issues would work against the inclusive aims of *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017).

Concluding discussion

Heteronormativity remains deeply entrenched in early childhood education settings in Aotearoa New Zealand, although most kaiako are unlikely to be consciously perpetuating it. Themes of diversity and inclusion are central to *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017); children's picturebooks can be invaluable in supporting these themes by challenging heteronormative discourses and deepening tamariki understanding of themselves and others. The study introduced in this article illustrated that discomfort and lack of preparedness inhibited many of the interactions kaiako had with tamariki during picturebook sessions, despite the fact these sessions were specifically set up to counter heteronormativity. We surmise that in day-to-day teaching where there may not be such an explicit focus on counter-heteronormativity, the silencing of gender diversity and LGBTIQ issues is even more prominent with deep and wide-ranging effects on tamariki and whānau. To mitigate against this, some recommendations for kaiako are offered. These aim to support them in disrupting heteronormativity through deliberate use of specific picturebooks.

Recommendations for kaiako

One-way kaiako can actively teach with queer intent is to "queer up" picturebook sessions using the acronym QUEER:

- QUALITY: Quality picturebooks matter, so choose carefully. A number are readily available, including some from Aotearoa New Zealand e.g., *Things in the Sea Are Touching Me!* (Keegan, 2019). Look for picturebooks that are concise, well-illustrated, show positive representations of gender diversity and/or diverse families and are enjoyable to read. Those listed on the appendix generally reflect these characteristics. Be wary of picturebooks that are didactic or long-winded.
- USE PROPS: Story stones, finger or hand puppets, magnet stories, story baskets and small world settings/backdrops can all help bring a picturebook storyline to life. Tamariki might enjoy making some of these items as part of the process of becoming familiar with a storyline or they may like to act out part of the story, using masks and/or improvised costumes.
- EVERY positive representation counts. Consider the value of picturebooks with gender diverse tamariki and adults, or lesbian and gay parents presented as a natural unhighlighted aspect of the storyline e.g., *Everywhere Babies* (Meyers, 2004) as well as those overtly central to the narrative e.g., *Heather Has Two Mummies* (Newman, 2016); *Morris Micklewhite and the Tangerine Dress* (Baldacchino, 2014); and *Julian Is a Mermaid* (Love, 2018). Both types of picturebook are valid.
- ENSURE ACCESS to a wide range of picturebooks in addition to those with gender diverse characters and different family themes. Consider how other aspects of diversity are portrayed in the picturebooks on offer, e.g., ethnicity, socio-economic status, ability. Work to include positive representations of these differences in the picturebooks on offer.
- READINESS: Become familiar with unfamiliar picturebooks before sharing them, be ready for the assumptions and/or questions that may arise during picturebook discussions and be clear on ways to manage these.

In summary, for kaiako considering how to include counter-heteronormative picturebooks in their teaching practice, we suggest it is important to take a stand and make a start, no matter how tentative the start or how uncertain the outcome. Over time, as kaiako reflect on their efforts and make adjustments to practice, positive change will surely follow. As pointed out earlier, the kaiako in the study courageously opened up their practice to detailed scrutiny. While the benefit of hindsight makes it possible to see what they could have done differently, the point here is that they began the journey. Learning alongside them, the potential power of picturebooks to combat heteronormativity in early childhood education comes into sharp focus.

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Appendix: Picturebook list

NB: The majority of the picturebooks on this list were provided to kaiako for use in the study. Those that were not are marked with an asterisk.

Gender diversity and gender change

Baldacchino, C. (2014). *Morris Micklewhite and the tangerine dress* (I. Malenfant, Illus.). Groundwood Books.

Bone, J., & Bone, L. (2014). *Not every princess* (V. Docampo, Illus.). Magination Press.

Hall, M. (2016). *Red: A crayon's story* (M. Hall, Illus.). HarperCollins Publishers.

Herthel, J., & Jennings, J. (2014). *I am Jazz* (S. McNicholas, Illus.). Penguin Putnam.

Hoffman, S., & Hoffman, I. (2014). *Jacob's new dress* (C. Case, Illus.). Albert Whitman & Company.

Ismail, Y. (2015). *I'm a girl!* (Y. Ismail, Illus.). Bloomsbury.

Kilodavis, C. (2010). *My princess boy* (S. DeSimone, Illus.). Aladdin.

Love, J. (2018). *Julian is a mermaid* (J. Love, Illus.). Walker Books.*

Walton, J. (2016). *Introducing Teddy: A story about being yourself* (D. MacPherson, Illus.). Bloomsbury.

Lesbian- and gay-parented whānau

Keegan, L. J. (2019). *Things in the sea are touching me!* (M. Stapleton, Illus.). Scholastic New Zealand.*

Lang, S. (2015). *Families, families, families!* (M. Lang, Illus.). Penguin Random House.

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Oelschlager, V. (2010). *A tale of two daddies* (K. Blackwood & M. Blanc, Illus.). Vanita Books.

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[i] Children who express their gender in non-conforming ways, including those whose gender expression is inconsistent with the gender they were assigned at birth (Gunn et al., 2020).

[ii] Hereafter referred to as LGBTIQ-parented families.

[iii] A search of appropriately themed picturebooks for use in the project failed to produce any that portrayed other non-heteronormative family forms (e.g., trans or bi-parented families).

[iv] A list of the picturebooks is provided in the appendix.

[v] The kaiako and tamariki either chose their own pseudonyms or asked Kate to choose one for them; these pseudonyms have been used in this article.

[vi] Capitalisation of a name across data extracts denotes this is a kaiako.

[vii] Italics denote actual picturebook text.