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Families' comfort with LGBTQ2s+ picturebooks: Embracing children's critical knowledges

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Abstract

This article shares conversational research (Thomson et al., 2012) that we undertook with parents in one of children's primary education settings: the home. We investigated the question: what are the comfort levels of families, with young children, as they encounter picturebooks featuring diverse gender and sexual identities? Over the past 10 years in Canada, including New Brunswick, these picturebooks have increased in production (Bouchev, 2021; Miller Oke, 2019) complexity (Sullivan & Urraro, 2017) and circulation. Yet some educators in the early years of school remain uncomfortable reading these texts with young children, their concerns, in part, related to imagined backlash from heteronormative families (Goldstein 2021) and deeply entrenched constructs of childhood innocence (Kintner-Duffy et al., 2012; Martino & Cumming-Potvin, 2011, 2016; Robinson, 2013). Scholarship and our research confirm that most children know and can communicate their sex and gender identities by two years of age (Pastel et al, 2019; Stevenson, 2019) and are able to engage critically with picturebooks featuring diverse gender and sexual identities as they get older. Through our conversations with mothers, we learned that all families were comfortable with each picturebook category presented: gender expression, gender identity, gender harassment, and family composition. Interpreting our conversations through Queer Theory (Butler, 1990, 1993), we also learned how particular picturebooks serve as entry points to family discussions about diverse gender and sexual identities and how important access to diverse picturebooks is to provide these opportunities. Specifically, each of the nine mothers shared picturebooks that supported their child/children/families with being and knowing related to gender variance, who you can love, and/ or what games, hobbies and clothes are acceptable.

Keywords

Gender, early childhood; picturebooks; innocence

A shifting context

Over the past 10 years in Canada, including the province of New Brunswick, picturebooks featuring expansive gender and sexual identities have increased in commercial and self-published production,



(Bouchev, 2021; Miller Oke, 2019) complexity, (Sullivan & Urraro, 2017) and circulation (Personal communication: New Brunswick Public Library Services). In her visits to schools across Canada, author Robin Stevenson has spoken with thousands of children and young people about LGBTQ2+ books and the issues they foreground. LGBTQ2+ stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer and two-spirited. These conversations highlight the power of recognition that children and young people experience when encountering LGBTQ2+ characters in picturebooks. Thus, books such as these can act as mirrors, windows or doors (Bishop, 1990) to expand representation and disrupt identity hierarchies, power relations, and binaries including male/female or heterosexual/homosexual. Bishop (1990) cautions, when children and young people from dominant social groups only find representation of themselves in books they “will grow up with an exaggerated sense of their own importance and value in the world - a dangerous ethnocentrism” (p. 1). This is, in part, why engaging with diverse children’s literature in classrooms is used to teach critical literacy, empathy and social awareness (Burke et al., 2017).

Concurrent with LGBTQ2+ representation in picturebooks becoming more present, so too have LGBTQ2+ human rights and education policies. In 2017, gender identity and expression were added to Canadian federal protection within human rights legislation. In addition, provinces have produced policy documents that support educators teaching LGBTQ2+. This includes New Brunswick’s most recent policy 713 Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity, effective August 17, 2020, GNB, K-12, which commits to creating safe, welcoming, inclusive and affirming environments.

Some educators in the early years remain uncomfortable reading gender and sexually diverse picturebooks with young children, partially because of perceived and actual backlash from heteronormative families (Goldstein 2021, Janmohamed, 2010; Malins, 2016; Martino & Cumming-Potvin, 2011, 2016). Sharing stories of two Australian elementary educators, Martino and Cumming-Potvin (2011) note that the teachers were cautious of texts that were “in your face” (p. 16) and pushing a “gay agenda” (p. 486). They also raised questions related to the age-appropriateness of some of the books. Conversations with five Canadian elementary educators raised similar concerns, where one participant believed that “this will bring up a fear and a reaction in some parents that you couldn't imagine could happen” (Malins, 2016, p. 133). Janmohamed (2010) attended to the “limited definition of diversity represented by difference in culture and immigrant status, but absence of gender identity, sexuality, and family composition” (p. 307). In New Zealand, Gunn and Surtees (2009) interviewed 33 parents in 19 families, most of whom were lesbian-led. They found that “in early education settings, heteronormativity materialized as a lack of recognition and representation of their kind of family” (p. 8). As they learned, with and from these families, homophobia was both anticipated and present. At the same time, families also experienced classrooms where gender and sexual diversity was affirmed.

From a hegemonic perspective, it is often assumed that children are unaware of diverse gender and sexual diversity. The term hegemony describes social control through societal norms or what is deemed common sense. Heteronormativity—when heterosexuality is presumed *normal*—is upheld due to hegemonic discourses surrounding childhood innocence that raises questions on age-appropriate identities (Kintner-Duffy et al., 2012; Robinson, 2013). In interviews with early childhood educators, specifically, Filipović (2018) heard beliefs such as “children should not be prompted to talk about gender” (p. 318). Reasons given for this non-discussion included children were too young and innocent to be discussing gender; we don’t need to bring it to their attention; and children’s innocence ought to be protected—each a hegemonic, dismissive interpretation of age-appropriateness.

Yet research with children affirms that children play in and out of gender, roles and relationships in early childhood (Blaise, 2005, 2009; Renold, 2000, 2006), and that most children communicate their sex and gender identity by age two (Derman-Sparks & Olsen Edwards, 2010; Pastel et al., 2019; Stevenson, 2019). In their interviews with 10 children and their families in Australia, Davies and Robinson (2010) found that “there is a disjuncture between parents’ perceptions of their children’s awareness and knowledge of sexuality and relationships, and the knowledge many children already have

around these issues” (p. 259). Discomfort or avoidance associated with conversations on gender and sexual diversity appears to be with adults, rather than with children.

To deepen our understandings of this shifting and still controversial terrain, we had conversations with parents of young children about their use of picturebooks. Picturebooks can serve as an entry point for adults and children to further understand diverse identities and relationships. Specifically, we investigated the research question: what are the comfort levels of families with young children as they encounter picturebooks that feature diverse gender and sexual identities? Our use of the word *comfort* implies a willingness to read the text and engage in ongoing conversations with the content. Further questions we were curious about included: what do parents feel, think about, and want for their children? What picturebooks were families encountering? How might our conversations with families inform ongoing shifts in policy, curricular and public conversations related to diverse gender and sexual identities, and enacted classroom curriculum? And finally, where and how are picturebooks accessed by families? In this article we discuss findings from our conversations with families.

Theoretical framing

We begin with a strong sense that children come from a place of knowing and are capable of critical understanding when engaging with life, including with picturebooks. James and Prout's (1997) influential text *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood* theorised childhood as a social construction rather than as a linear, natural, biological process. Ryan (2008) details historical shifts in our viewing of childhood, the valuing of children as subjects who participate in their own representation rather than passive recipients of information or innocent beings. Children's critical awareness, participation and knowledge of gender and sexuality has been well researched. Pastel et al. (2019, pp. 67–68) present a guideline of children's understanding of gender, which disrupts the age-related perspectives cited earlier, providing a sense of how early in life young children become aware of gender differences:

- by 12 months children can begin to categorize individuals by gender,
- by 18 months children can understand their own gender identity,
- by 2 years old children can communicate if their gender identities are incompatible with legal designations (See also, Steensma et al., 2011; Steensma, et al., 2013).
- By 4 years old children can construct personal belief systems on gender and gender roles.

In addition, the researchers propose that children's gender fluidity is more prevalent than many may realise since, “intersex people make up about 2% of the population—about the same percentage as left-handed people, and redheads” (Pastel et al., 2019, p. 36; see also Hida, 2015). Intersex references physical bodies and physiology, including chromosomes, hormones or sensitivities.

In concert with reconceptualist perspectives of childhood and the knowing child, our research is also grounded in Queer Theory, which arose from post-structuralism and disrupts norms and assumed stability of categories such as male or female—and the binarized nature of these terms—and heteronormativity. Through Queer Theory, Butler (1990, 1993) recognises gender as a performance, one that requires constant construction and repetition. By challenging socially constructed gender and sexual identities and categories, Queer Theory makes space for identities that are fluid and constantly evolving, such as non-binary, while cognisant of structures that reproduce limited identity options. Thinking with Queer Theory, and concepts such as binarisms, normativity and categorisation, we have developed an extensive and ongoing list of children's picturebooks featuring diverse gender and sexual identities that represent a range of identity options. Malins began the list several years ago during her doctoral studies and, together, we sifted through children's literature scholarship to substantiate and add books. In addition, we visited various websites where recommended best LGTBQ2+ picturebooks were compiled. As a result of the substantive growth of the list, and in light of the scholarship and our initial conversations with librarians, we categorised the books across four themes: gender expression, gender identity, gender harassment and family composition. *Gender expression* speaks to the ways children

present who they are to others, while *gender identity* is what we know to be true about ourselves, our internal sense of who we are. *Gender harassment* speaks to the ongoing discrimination children experience when gender presentation is evaluated through a hierarchical, hegemonic and binary lens. The category *family composition* references books that animate relationships disrupting heteronormative family structures. We wondered if different categories would elicit different degrees of parental dis/comfort in reading and discussing these picturebooks with children. For example, perhaps discussing gender harassment would feel more comfortable than discussing gender expression, or the categories gender identity or family composition might be left at the margins.

A conversational approach

Because we wanted to work in community, we approached New Brunswick Public Library Services to discuss libraries as sites for informal drop-in sessions to highlight LGBTQ2+ children's picturebooks and recruit participants. While the purpose of our conversations with librarians was to gauge interest, support and input for these sessions, we also learned that the purchase and circulation of LGBTQ2+ books have increased substantially in New Brunswick in the last five years and that the library has also hosted events such as LGBTQ2+ evenings and *Drag Storytime*. The provincial library supported us with space in libraries and promotion of our events on their social media sites. We then proceeded to obtain approval from the University Research Ethics Board.

For the informal drop-in session, we designed a table display featuring an informational poster, handout, research materials and sample picturebooks of gender expansive and sexually diverse characters. Books from each category on our book list were selected to depict a range of stories and probe potential dis/comfort. These materials were intended to promote conversations between parents, community members and ourselves. Our onsite conversations were varied, informal and reciprocal. Conversations were provoked by the display: some people knew we would be there and had questions and others just happened by; some people were curious about the books and materials; some had specific questions or information for us; and some wanted to share their thoughts and experiences; some wanted to browse books; and others wanted to read books to their children. Specifically, we spoke with a children's book author whose intent was to broaden ideas of what it means to be a princess; self-identified bi and queer parents with two children, one of whom presented as gender creative; a Chinese mom of two who had never encountered any books like this; an older woman whose niece is a lesbian and who was looking for ideas to challenge hegemonic families; a mother with her daughter who had recently begun to identify as non-binary; a dad with a boy who noticed *Ninja Red Riding Hood* with enthusiasm; a mom with a daughter presenting femme despite mom's best efforts to challenge gender binaries; and an older gentleman who asked what we were doing, and replied "I support it" and kept walking. While these interactions at the library were the beginnings of our data collection, two mothers signed consent for follow-up in-depth conversations that contributed more fully to our data.

Although we had scheduled pop-up sessions at other libraries, the onset of COVID-19 required a shift to virtual research settings and re-approval by the University Research Ethics Board. Once COVID measures were enacted in March 2020, we focused upon shifting our informational material to online formats to virtually locate parents-caregivers interested in entering into more in-depth conversations. To this end, we created a poster (Figure 1) and a YouTube video outlining the project, with the video link embedded in the poster. These virtual invitations were shared through social media channels, email list-serves and university web pages. Snowball sampling enabled community members and participants to share the project invitations on their social media channels. We recognise that this method of recruitment likely resulted us being contacted by families who were supportive or had specific stories to share. An

additional seven participants volunteered to talk with us—all of whom were mothers and one grandmother—for a total of nine participants.

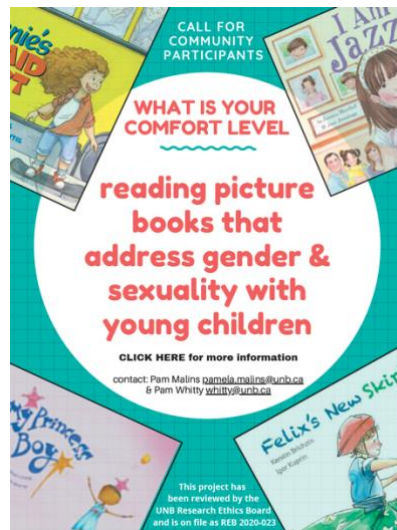


Figure 1. Online recruitment poster.

We engaged in conversational research (Thomson et al, 2012) via a platform chosen by the participant including Zoom, Teams or telephone. Patton (2002) theorises that the conversational interview sometimes called “ethnographic interviewing” is a style of interviewing that allows topics to emerge. In keeping with Denzin and Lincoln’s (2011) observation that knowledge is constructed through lived experiences and interactions, we conducted open-ended conversations with guiding questions and probes intended to allow the participants’ experiences and stories to emerge. Eliciting people’s personal perspectives and experiences has the potential to provide rich understandings of the participants’ individual realities. Our nine conversations were intentionally not recorded, and this was made clear to each participant. For us, this was one way to maintain a more comfortable dialogue. We each took notes throughout the conversation to document the insights and experiences shared. With two of us present, we found we were able to be quite reflective in the moment as one of us was always a listener, while the other could clarify and extend. The conversations often felt quite intimate, in part, because of the content, and because we were spatially located, virtually, with participants in their homes, sometimes with their children. All identities have been kept anonymous.

During and after our conversations, we wrote up our notes individually, compared and consolidated them, and then shared them with the participant to review and approve. In addition to our in-the-moment reflections during the conversation and our co-created and approved formal record of the conversation, we kept ongoing reflections on emerging insights across conversations. We found that each conversation was unique with particular life experiences discussed and specific children’s literature referenced. Flyvbjerg (2011) suggests when writing up research the authors may choose to tell a complex story that reveals its diversity and many sides. To honour this sensibility of each conversation being unique we share our findings in the context of conversational moments (Whitty, 2009; Young-Bruehl, 1987). This collection of moments reveals the intentional stories participants wanted to share about their parenting, children’s identities and their interest in children’s literature. We share findings within and through each of the four categories as books and stories were shared that reflected each topic: gender expression, gender identity, gender harassment and family composition.

Findings and discussion

All parents brought forward books for our joint conversations. Some of the shared books highlighted by parents were on the listing we had distributed, and in several instances, parents introduced us to new books, which we subsequently added to our ongoing book list. In relation to our primary research question, what are the comfort levels of families with young children as they encounter picturebooks that feature diverse gender and sexual identities, we learned that all adults were comfortable with the picturebook categories. Furthermore, none of the four categories of picturebooks were deemed less or more comfortable than another. Mothers were supportive of their children being exposed to these books, although some acknowledged uncertainty of whether this would be possible in schools due to *other* parents' potential views. Some mothers gave examples of their children being challenged on the playgrounds at schools, related to clothing or points of view. Books were celebrated as entry points to informed conversations about gender variance, what you can wear, what you can play and who you can love; libraries were celebrated as sites to access these materials. Lastly, as illustrated in the conversational moments below, children's attunement to diverse gender and sexual diversity was evident as well as their assertion of distinctive ways of being and knowing.

Gender expression: Movement and materiality within *My Princess Boy*

She kept saying that's not a boy mom, that's a girl. And I asked her what makes someone a girl. She couldn't answer. But I really enjoyed that challenge. So, in my mind, I've got gender fluidity there, but to explicitly teach it to my kids, how can I teach that?

Elizabeth, one of the mothers whom we later interviewed, and her child Anna are sitting on a couch during our initial in-person library pop-up. They have browsed many of the books in the display and together are reading *My Princess Boy* (Kilodavis & DeSimone, 2009). As Elizabeth turns each page, Anna comments on how the protagonist—a person dancing their way across the pages of the book, illustrated in pink and a tiara—is not a boy. The naming of the princess character as princess boy is creating one kind of challenge for four-year old Anna and another for her mom. From Anna's perspective, the dancing, vibrantly pink-clad being is definitely not a boy, and even though she cannot or does not answer her mother's question as to why not. The pink-sparkling-dancing expressiveness may well signify "girlness" for her.

Elizabeth's question "how can I teach gender fluidity?" is one that explicitly and implicitly resonated throughout our research project. The adults whom we spoke with were deeply affected by the limiting of gender expression. At the library and within our interviews, adults shared examples of how early in life colour, language, clothing, toys, play and popular culture media worked to keep girl-boy binaries in place, typically citing movement, materials and play as designating boundaries and binaries. These adults were aware of how easily and adamantly young children come to experience and express the girl-boy binary, wondering with deep concern how they could move particular children and adults in their lives out of binaries and into a more complicated understanding of gender actualities and possibilities.

Another participant, Ellen, spoke with us about her grandchild Robin and their experience with *My Princess Boy*. She described Robin as a gender-creative child who makes flamboyant movement and material choices similar to those expressed by Princess Boy. Ellen shared this family moment with us:

When he was four, at Christmas, the family bought him *My Princess Boy*. He opened it and immediately put it aside; there was a palpable silence. When his mom talked to him at bedtime about why he didn't want to read the book. He said: because I'm a girl.

In their conversational moments relating to *My Princess Boy*, both adults, Elizabeth and Ellen, connected the movement and materiality within Princess Boy with their adult desires and actions to open up gender expression—possibly enacting what Miller (2019) refers to as queering the domestic space. Each child responded to the picturebook differently than their adult family member, and differently from each other, indicating that they carried their own understandings of how gender could be expressed. Anna identified the protagonist as female apparently based upon the embodied materiality, whereas Robin identifies Princess Boy as male, perhaps as a consequence of the word “boy” overriding materiality. Gender identity, then, cannot be inferred from gender expression, and although *My Princess Boy* disrupted each child’s knowing differently, each child made clear an internal sense of knowing different than that of the adults and different from the author’s presentation of her princess boy’s gender expression.

In our LGBTQ2+ picturebook listing, we have categorised *My Princess Boy* as signifying gender expression. These children show us that such categorical boundaries are permeable and can be read differently. They also show us that children and adults have different knowings, and these can open up conversational spaces between them and that we need a variety of books to make available a variety of stories and representations. With LGBTQ2+ picturebooks increasingly presenting more fluid depictions of the deeply entangled nature of gender expression and identities options, multiple knowings are possible for children and adults alike.

Gender identity: *Hula Warrior* and our authentic selves

When she was four or five, she talked about marrying her girlfriend and adopting children and saving animals. That was normal for her.

Erin shares this conversational moment to illuminate how her daughter, Evie, normalises her desires to just be and like what she likes. She talks about her desire to be in a same-sex relationship in the same breath as she describes her love of animals, moving beyond the human to more-than-human relations. While children may not know their sexuality at such a young age, this story illustrates children’s imaginings and opportunities to share love wherever love may go. Erin also recalled a time when her daughter, now eight, was into pink and princesses, but then wanted to surf and was into blue and purple. While this seems to hang on the binary of pink versus blue, this also seems to speak to significant moments of experimentation to feel and find our most authentic selves. During a week where students were invited to choose a book to share at school, her daughter chose *Ho'onani: Hula Warrior* (Gale & Song, 2019). Erin explains, “It’s about a child who is introduced as a girl but doesn’t feel like a girl either, just herself. Hula competitions are only for boys, but she wants to enter.” This choice seems in line with the ways Evie aims to just be as she is, refusing restrictions or stereotypes shaping what she might like or how she identifies.

Similarly, Jenna told us about her nine-year-old son Mark who she acknowledged “likes to test boundaries generally” and “is interested in hair, jewellery, and wears pink” and “gets really impatient with other kids” if they try to police him. Mark relishes being who he is and Jenna said, “I worry a bit about being cis and communicating intelligently. This is why we would turn to books.” Another participant, Heather, shared:

You do have to think developmentally; you’re not going to go into a conversation about sex but you can help them figure themselves out, such as what they like, how they want to dress, who they love. We don’t want to put our kids in boxes.

Another mother, Ava, told us about how her child “dresses pretty funky. He picks the brightest and wildest patterns, and doesn’t care if they clash. He wears tight pants and pink and purple and does not

know boys' clothes are usually brown and gray", and he requests to wear dresses and nighties saying, 'I want to wear dresses, Mom, and when I dance, I want it to twirl.'"

While these mothers shared stories of their children disrupting gender norms, we also heard from Elizabeth who was concerned that her daughter was reinforcing them. She told us her daughter loves to wear dresses, and this brought her on a journey of whether it is okay for girls to be "girly".

I'm a mom of girls only, so I felt like I should be raising tomboys as an expectation of a feminist, but social influences are strong. My daughter is three and a girly girl. My daughter went to daycare, loved pink and sparkles and high heels, and I felt I had done something terribly wrong. But I had to re-evaluate whether those things were less than. Rita J. King did a presentation to NASA [National Aeronautics and Space Administration] in a sparkly dress as a scientist; we don't have to lose femininity to be equal.

A common response to embracing gender inclusivity is gender neutrality or a move away from girliness or boyness. We return to Elizabeth's initial question: "How can I teach gender fluidity?" Perhaps the goal is to create spaces where all genders can appreciate and identify with pink, sparkles and twirls, if desired, and express themselves accordingly without fear or judgement. This leads us to the next category of books classified as gender harassment.

Gender harassment: *The Cardboard Kingdom*—creating gender friendly spaces for everyone

Gender harassment should be a priority. Just the violence that comes with it. And it's more public. Identity, expression, family can be handled at a private level before being handled with the public. But harassment happens everywhere in public—grocery stores, school...

This story from Stacey suggests that while categories such as gender expression and gender identity could be conversations kept in the home, gender harassment requires everyone's attention. In her research, Thorne (1993) identified the labels children use, such as "sissy" and "fag", to police one another to ensure gender play is maintained within gender binaries of masculine and feminine. Many other education scholars have articulated the self-surveillance that occurs among young children in order to avoid gender-harassment (Bailey, 1993; Blaise, 2005, 2009; Davies, 1989; Janmohamed, 2010; Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2003, 2005; Renold, 2000, 2006). Ava told us, "Last week a friend told a story about a girl teased for holes in her pants; they made fun of her. Kids can be so mean and once kids are teased they drop that part of themselves." This is of particular concern for Ava as her son began expressing gender fluidity by age three. Ava said, "It's upsetting recognising how gendered everything is. It messes with your head how programmed we are with gender." She has appreciated the home-schooling opportunities through COVID so her child could be their authentic self without harassment.

Many schools have anti-bullying campaigns such as Day of Pink or Pink Shirt Day. Naming the specifics of discrimination is important in order to make change for minoritised identities and families, including LGBTQ2s families (see also Janmohamed, 2010, 2014). Jenna, as mentioned earlier, has a nine-year-old son Mark who is "interested in hair, jewellery, and wears pink", and she corroborates this saying, "There was a discussion on Pink Shirt Day" but that "Pink Shirt Day tends to focus on bullying and glosses over homophobia." This is particularly problematic given that Pink Shirt Day originated from student activism against homophobic bullying specifically. Jenna spoke appreciatively of the book *The Cardboard Kingdom* (Sell, 2018). In the story, children transform ordinary boxes into colourful costumes and props and relish the notion that they can be anything they want. These actions resonate with those discussed by Canadian researchers Hewes et al. (2016), who described how pre-determined costumes for fantasy play in early childhood education settings were replaced with a trunk of fabric,

which then “opened up the possibilities for play, drawing more children in—including boys—and leading to new adventures” (p. 13). Creating spaces that are acceptable for all sexes and genders is one step towards addressing gender-based harassment.

Children are constantly participating in making meaning of their gender identities, as they consider what are acceptable or unacceptable performances. MacNaughton (2000) wrote, “The child is an active player in gender identity formation, but not a free agent” (p. 28). Wohlwend (2012) discussed how “young children strategically play in and out of these gender identity texts in ways that affect their status as students in school culture but also their affiliations in peer culture” (p. 597; see also Dyson, 2003; Marsh, 2002; Wohlwend, 2011). Recent Canadian research by Reddington (2020) shows the ongoing need for educators to witness and intervene in gender play among young children to disrupt binaries and exclusive play behaviours. Furthermore, it is important educators feel prepared to do so. Participant Heather declares, “It’s too risky for kids if adults aren’t comfortable; we need to react appropriately.” For example, how we react to families and books about family composition demonstrates children and adults’ comfort levels, as is shown in the final book category.

Family composition: *Prince and Knight*—Moving towards rainbow families

I guess one time ... a little over a year ago ... they had a ‘bring your own books from home’ day—a literacy day promotion—and I brought my two books: *Prince and Knight*, and *Mary Wears What She Wants*. I had just discovered them. I had to leave to go to work but my husband was there and conveyed that he gave the books to the group to read and at the third or fourth page of *Prince and Knight*, the reading time leader stopped the book. I found that upsetting ... Stopping the reading of that book could have been interpreted in negative ways; what if a kid or parent was there who was LGBT? How would they have interpreted that? The staff member said “the book was too long and they ran out of time”.

Laura, with her two children and husband, participates regularly in a drop-in centre for families with young children in the town where they live. The two books she brought to the drop-in centre’s reading time in response to the centre’s invitation for books to share had been borrowed from the local library. At the library, Laura had encountered a book display highlighting examples of picturebooks presenting a range of gender expression, identity and family composition options. *Prince and Knight* (Haack & Lewis, 2018) is the one that she spoke about extensively in our conversation. *Prince and Knight* takes up the form of a classical fairy tale, telling the story of a prince who is not at all interested in the many princesses introduced to him by his royal family. As the author narrates, the prince walks to a different tune. He falls in love with a knight when the two meet as they are capturing a dragon. As the adventure concludes, they fall in love instantly. The knight is welcomed by the royal family as the prince’s true love and the story closes with the two living happily ever after.

Laura believes picturebooks can help children see diverse selves and diverse families. She relayed several instances to us of disrupting heteronormativity within her community, the challenges with these actions and the desire, in her words, to have the place of rainbow families more widely recognised and accepted. She expressed concern over the educator at the drop-in centre’s decision to stop reading *Prince and Knight*, as the book was long and time was short. Laura’s sense was that although the book appeared to be a traditional fairy tale, heteronormativity was about to be disrupted. Where Laura was comfortable with this, it is possible that the educator was not.

Laura had observed that the books typically read at the drop-in programme were traditional early childhood books such as *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* (Carle, 1969) or *Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What do you See?* (Martin Jr. & Carle, 1967). Seemingly, these are the books that the educators were familiar with that met their level of comfort. LGBTQ2+ books were not present, suggesting that educators in this

community setting have less experience with LGBTQ2+ books, with reading them aloud with children and adults present raising questions about what support and resources are required in community education settings to raise the profile of diverse families. In their research interviews with lesbian parents of young children in Australia, Cloughessy and Waniganayake (2019) noted that although parents felt that picturebooks with differing family compositions need a presence in early childhood classrooms, presence alone is an insufficient condition for changing assumptions about heteronormativity and family structure—an experience similar to the one reported by Laura.

In closing

As we have addressed the comfort level of the participants throughout, we now turn to the remaining questions about what parents want for their children, what books parents are encountering, how public conversations relate to shifts in policy and curriculum, and how books are accessed.

The participants' stories confirmed children's self-awareness and active participation in their gender expressions and identities. As such, mothers were comfortable about encountering picturebooks featuring diverse gender and sexual identities and sought them out as entry points to critical conversations, embracing children's critical knowledges. They willingly shared and discussed favourite and new picturebooks with us that included expansive gender and sexual identities. For us, this openness and seeking out of books demonstrates their desire for their children to be exposed to diverse identities, and challenges hegemonic norms and sex and gender binaries through the use of picturebooks. Furthermore, the picturebooks that families were encountering not only included expansive gender and sexual identities, but recent picturebooks highlighted greater fluidity. For example, picturebooks about gender identity (Thorne, 2019), gender ambiguity (Moradian & Bogade, 2018), and gender non-conformity (Jackson & Nichols, 2019) move the conversations such as those had around *My Princess Boy* beyond the tensions around the sex and gender labels of the character. In *Felix's New Skirt* (Brichzin & Kuprin, 2018), Felix's name is used throughout, thus avoiding the use of gendered nouns and pronouns found in *My Princess Boy*. In addition, Felix loves their bike, an activity to which many children can relate, unlike *My Princess Boy* where the child loves their tiara—a more narrowly perceived passion.

In reviewing the critical scholarship on what they name as rainbow families, Hedberg et al. (2020) corroborate the recognition of this shift in representation, noting that “an increasing number of articles have engaged in critiquing representations in picturebooks featuring gay and lesbian parents and families for being homonormative and not depicting the diverse spectrum of the queer community” (p. 3). Moreover, another evolution observed among picturebooks is the inclusion of LGBTQ2s+ characters without focusing the story on these identities. One of our participants spoke about her intentionality of writing a book about love and families and different kinds of kids, without a direct focus on LGBT. Similarly, the book *Mighty May Won't Cry Today* (Ocampo et al., 2020) is about May's struggles on her first day of school, and she happens to have two moms who support her. These more expansive books point to the fact that our categories presented in this article served a purpose to organise the texts and conversations but are not mutually exclusive. They are relational and interwoven.

In terms of what these conversational moments suggest for policy and curriculum—both written and enacted, it confirms that that children within their families carry significant knowledge about their gender identities and desires to express themselves. This research project suggests that schools need to have spaces and materials that enable children to be their authentic selves, and for this, educators may require professional learning support. While some research has indicated educators' discomfort discussing gender and sexual identities in the classroom with young children, this research project offers support for educators to engage with books featuring LGBTQ2s+ characters, as they likely will have within their classroom community parents who are comfortable with their children having these conversations. Families' interactions with picturebooks, as we learned about in this project, resonate

with the thinking of Burton (2020), who proposes gender literacy and disruptive storytelling as a way to become comfortable with gender diversity discussions. Moreover, picturebooks featuring expansive gender and sexual identities contribute towards discussions with young children that help to disrupt hegemonic thinking. Curriculum could explicitly make conversations on gender and sexual diversity an expectation of critical literacy prevalent in many curriculum documents. In addition, educators need space and time to contemplate approaches to these conversations, such as the use of picturebooks. As one participant noted, "Simply stating the policy exists is not enough; professional learning will be needed."

Within our research project, we learned that families valued libraries as sites to access LGBTQ2s+ picturebooks. Laura celebrated her local library noting, "Sometimes they put out books on display including *Prince and Knight* and *Mary Wears What She Wants* (Negley, 2019). That's how I discovered those two books." She also pointed out, "They were displayed so that they would be seen. I thought this was pretty hip." Jenna, similarly, was keen to find books in the library that would resonate with her child.

The library is where we would go, especially when he was younger, as it makes sense to borrow picturebooks; however, some books are challenging to find, not because they're not there, but because they're in demand (like books about sexuality). For example, the book *Sex is a Funny Word: A Book About Bodies, Feelings, and YOU* (Silverberg & Smyth, 2015), we had to wait a long time for that one at the library.

Ava tells us,

The library is incredible. We went to a drag queen story hour. The book being read had a boy with a purse and Willow jumped up—and he said he had a purse. The book resonated with him; he just wants to be fancy. So great to have a library that not only has these books but these types of events.

We close with Ava's words that speak to the impact of picturebooks for opening up conversational and imaginative spaces: "People don't always think of the importance of shared attention with a book—a book is the most incredible adventure."

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