

FRAMING FAMILY DIVERSITY IN EARLY YEARS: AN INQUIRY-BASED INTERVENTION ON APPROACHING SAME-SEX PARENTING THROUGH PICTUREBOOKS

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Abstract

The article presents a critical reading of four selected PreK-2 picturebooks which narrate and depict family diversity in terms of a same-sex parenting content. More specifically, the following picturebooks: *My two moms* (2015), *Stella brings the family* (2015), *The girl with two dads* (2019) and *Who's your real mum?* (2020), were chosen among a variety of LGBTQI+ picturebooks to represent disruptions of the heteronormative family. Discourses on exclusion from and inclusion in what is defined as normativity and equity are analyzed. Issues of how children who grow up in a diverse family with same-sex parents are treated among their peers within the school settings are raised. Most importantly, definitions of parenting from children raised from same-sex parents are addressed. In supporting kindergarten teachers' attempts on approaching same-sex parented families within early years settings, this article, also, proposes an intervention which outlines an inquiry-based methodology. An interdisciplinary approach of the notion of family diversity is applied through literature, mathematics, natural and social science, arts, and ICT learning areas. The same picturebooks, used for critical reading in the first part of this paper, are recommended in the second part as means for encouraging discussion, promoting empathy and gathering information during the inquiry-based intervention. The contribution of the current work to both the social sciences and the early childhood education fields is that it raises the recognition and at the same time addresses the pervasive social context of family heteronormativity by engaging young children in developing their own understanding of what constitutes a family and attempt their own definitions of parenting. Finally, the paper presents a pedagogical methodology, based on the inquiry method, to approach social issues such as the concept of family diversity.

Keywords: *Family diversity, same-sex parenting, picturebooks, inquiry-based intervention, early childhood education.*

1. Introduction

Attention to gender diversity and non-normative ways of being and doing family has lagged in attention compared to other aspects of difference notable in the sector of early childhood education (Cherrington et al., 2020). Representations of families must be considered in any diversity analysis to ensure all children are capable of seeing families as they appear in our communities. The ways family members' abilities are portrayed, and depictions of parents' gender/ sexuality, are terms that should be acknowledged and analyzed to the extent they are co-informed (Lo, 2019). Contemporary research should recognize the importance of a diverse perspective as part of creating equitable early childhood learning spaces. Attention to gender, sexuality, and other social issues, and their influence on children's identities, is necessary to "bring about social change and improve the lives of all children" (Blaise, 2005, p. 6).

2. Literature review: A reading of picturebooks on family diversity and same-sex parenting topics

Four PreK-2 picturebooks which narrate and depict family diversity in terms of same-sex parenting content were selected for sampling. More specifically, the following picturebooks: *My two moms* (Harrington, 2015), *Stella brings the family* (Schiffer, 2015), *The girl with two dads* (Elliott, 2019), and *Who's your real mum?* (Green & Zobel, 2020), were chosen among a variety of LGBTQI+ picturebooks to represent disruptions of the heteronormative family. All four picturebooks were published within a five-year period and dated from 2015 to 2020. Two of them present a two female parent family and two of them present a two male parent family.

2.1. A reading of picturebooks on family diversity and same-sex parenting topics

2.1.1. The case of “*Who's your real mum?*”. A story of Elvi who has two mums and her friend Nicholas who wants to know which of the two mums is her real mum. What prevails in this narrative is the prejudice young children carry of who a real parent is. Implications of who constitutes a real parent are raised through the dialogue between the two children. Although Nicholas still can't work out the existence of two mothers, Elvi appears to know just how to explain it to her friend. Confrontation and discourse of the term “real” is presented throughout both modes, the text and the picture. The question the narrative attempts to answer is if the real parent can be as sufficient as the adopting or the non-biological one. The framing of the non-traditional family life is captured through the humorous implications of the definition of the real mum, which in this case means every loving, caring, fun, adventurous, extraordinary mum.

As Morgan & Surtees (2022) put it, picturebooks that challenge the status quo can support anti-heteronormative practices. From a list of external characteristics which anyone can have, passing to fantastic acts which no-one can perform, and ending with nurturing and caring attitudes which every parent is supposed to have, the unfolding of definition of the real parent and the act of parenting is presented. A climax of anticipation for the big revelation appears to lead to the following critical thinking: it does not matter who the biological parent is, if they provide for every need of their children (Kelly, 2012).

2.1.2. The case of “*Stella brings the family*”. The story is about Stella who lives with her two dads while her class is celebrating Mother's Day. Stella doesn't have a mum to invite to the party, hence she feels excluded. Definitions of normativity and equity are raised only in terms of a specific social occasion in this narrative. According to Crisp (2018) children's literature discusses political and literary considerations for authentic representations of gay males rather than stereotyped anachronisms. In accordance to that, the narrative portrays her diverse family as equal to others in everyday routine, but when it comes to a culturally and socially constructed institution, the absence of normativity appears to be a problem. The question of whether the nuclear family is suitable to adapt to social constructions, is raised.

Sandretto (2018) talks about the normal/abnormal binary, and how teachers can use queer intent with the deliberate teaching strategy of questioning this binary logic, to allow a different kind of meaning-making to flourish in children's minds. In the same meaning, the solution to Stella's problem is given by the school setting itself where the teacher defines her situation as non-unique since there are a lot of peers who live in diverse families. Towards this direction, framings of the notion of broader family, where relatives act and serve as care givers, are presented. The broader family's responsibilities are referred to as the care and support of making one feel special. But how do these responsibilities differ from those of the parents? Stella is depicted as the child who considers every person who loves and supports her as family, so the narrative redefines Mother's Day, the day when the most precious person in a child's life is celebrated, according to the protagonist's point of view. The shift of the child's perception regarding the meaning of family is implied to be the reason for Stella's inclusion within her school setting.

2.1.3. The cases of “*My two moms*” & “*The girl with two dads*”. The first narrative tells the story of a normal day in Elsie's life, when classmate Lenny as the class reporter visits her home and discovers Elsie has two moms. While Lenny makes his project for Elsie's life, he realizes how daily life with two moms is. The second narrative unfolds the story of Matilda and her friendship with Pearl, who notices her new friend has two dads. As their friendship begins to grow Pearl realizes that Matilda's family is not that different from her nuclear family after all.

What captures the attention in these two cases is that in both narratives it is another child (a peer) not the protagonist, who defines the notion of same-sex parenting. In each case, the framing of diverse family, like the one the protagonist has, is perceived from a child's perspective coming from a heteronormative family. In the first narrative same-sex parenting is portrayed as a documentary -for everyone to learn-, while in the second narrative same-sex parenting definition lies in terms of the anticipation of a different parenting approach. It could be said that a promoting of understandings in variant modes about same-sex parented families occurs here (Kelly, 2012).

Discussion is raised of the extent to which a family with same-sex parents is a diverse one in terms of daily routine, moral and ethical values, attitudes, and habits. Issues of normativity versus extraordinary are implied. Should a family with same-sex parents be different from a heteronormative family? The conclusion the children protagonists draw is the similar ways of parenting in terms of nurturing and caring, in nutritional attitudes and proper behavior manners. In this way, the notion of same-sex parents' family differentiation is contradicted, which agrees with Sandretto's (2018) postulation of which is the better way to create opportunities to revise restrictive norms that constrain the ways we love and live.

2.2. LGBTQI+ picturebooks in early childhood settings

Kelly (2013) has investigated the use of picturebooks to encourage critical thinking and enhance young children’s understanding of queer families. The researcher discussed how children’s books can encourage children to ponder the existence of social justice issues and their thoughts around these. According to Souto-Manning & Hermann-Wilmarth (2008), children are better able to understand others’ perspectives through tools such as picturebooks and this increased awareness can encourage them to act towards social justice and equity. DePalma (2016), also, valued the use of picturebooks in exploring gender and sexuality diversity. She aimed to address sexualities equity in primary schools due to concerns over school-based homophobic bullying.

Miller (2019) identified and analysed an emerging category of children’s literature representing transgender and gender creative child characters. She suggested that an ambivalent reading of these texts and images can help children understand the queer present at its most affirmative. That lies in accordance with Sandretto (2018) who argued that when queer theory and critical literacy band together they can be used by teachers and students to resist Warner’s “regimes of the normal” (1991, p. 16). Taking all of the above into consideration, it seems that a great number of researchers support the use of picturebooks on approaching social matters, such as family diversity, and that they value picturebooks’ potential as powerful teaching tools to shape attitudes and behaviors among children of early ages.

2.3. Aim of the current study

The article aims to frame definitions and notions of family diversity in early stages through a critical reading of four selected PreK-2 picturebooks which narrate and depict same-sex parenting content. In supporting kindergarten teachers’ attempts on approaching same-sex parented families within early years settings, the article, also, proposes a teaching intervention, based on an inquiry-based methodology, which can be applied in early childhood education and can bridge the gap between theory and practice.

3. Methodology

For the purposes of the study an inquiry-based intervention is proposed. The inquiry-based teaching method unravels through 5 phases: orientation, conceptualization, investigation, conclusion, and discussion (Stacey, 2018; Siraj-Blatchford, 2010). Through these phases an interdisciplinary approach of the notion of family diversity is applied. More specifically, students attempt to explore the notions of family diversity through literature, mathematics, natural and social science, arts, and ICT learning areas (Institute of Educational Policy, 2021). The same picturebooks, used for critical reading in the first part of this paper, are recommended in the second part as means for encouraging discussion, promoting empathy, and gathering information during the intervention. A detailed outline of the structure of the intervention phases is proposed, as an inquiry-based teaching approach in early years.

3.1. Framework: An inquiry-based intervention on family diversity and same-sex parenting

Table 1. The inquiry-based intervention phases.

INQUIRY-BASED INTERVENTION						
Orientation/ Observation	The topics of “Family Diversity” and “Same-Sex Parenting” is addressed by using specific LGBTQI+ picturebooks. The books can be either placed in the library corner to offer the students the space to explore them, or they are used in read-aloud sessions by the teacher.					
Question/Conceptualize	Literature	Mathematics	Social Science	Natural Science	Arts	ICT
	<i>What does family diversity and same-sex parenting mean?</i>	<i>In what ways heteronormative parenting differs from same-sex parenting?</i>	<i>How many types of family exist nowadays?</i>	<i>Does same-sex parenting exist in the wild?</i>	<i>How is family diversity depicted through art?</i>	<i>Are there any documentaries and videos presenting notions of parenting?</i>

	Literature	Mathematics	Social Science	
	<p>Reading LGBT parenting picturebooks and family books.</p> <p>(e.g., picturebooks: “My two moms”, “Stella brings the family”, “The girl with two dads”, “Who’s your real mum?” and knowledge books: “The family book”, “All about families”, “My family your family”, “The great big book of families”)</p> <p>Brainstorming definitions of family diversity and same-sex parenting.</p>	<p>Sorting heteronormative families and same-sex families according to parental responsibilities.</p> <p>Crafting family portraits through tessellation or repeating patterns of the same shape.</p>	<p>Exploring the different types of families through family books and the web.</p> <p>[e.g., traditional nuclear family, symmetrical family, extended family, beanpole family, reconstituted family, single parent, foster parent(s), adoptive parent(s), blended family, unmarried biological parents, polyamorous parents, LGBT parent(s), non-parent- relative(s) as guardian(s)]</p> <p>Taking interviews from same-sex parents’ families within the school setting.</p>	
Investigation	Natural Science	Arts		ICT
	<p>Exploring the true story of two male penguins at the Central Park Zoo who raised a chick together.</p> <p>Gathering information about the wide range of species of same-sex penguin couplings (e.g., Gentoo, Humboldt, King, African, Chinstrap, Magellenic penguins), their performing mating rituals, their incubating of eggs, parenting responsibilities, the chick’s raising – Create an album for same-sex penguin families.</p>	<p>Studying paintings depicting family diversity.</p> <p>(e.g., Diverse Family Christmas Illustrations by Royalty-Free Vector, Artworks That Celebrate The Importance Of Family – Mojarto blogs, etc.)</p> <p>Crafting parent’s awards to nominate the categories of “The loving parent”, “The caring parent”, “The fun parent”, etc.</p>		<p>Watching audiovisual representations of diverse families and notions of parenting.</p> <p>(e.g., CG short film about love and family: “Maĵja”, CGI 3D Animated Short Film HD: “Two Different Kinds of Love”)</p> <p>Creating digital family trees/ genealogy or pedigree charts.</p>
Conclusion	<p>Conclusions are drawn regarding:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The diversity of family types around the world • Definitions of parenting & parenting responsibilities • Inclusion’s significance for children raised in any type of family 			
Discussion/ Sharing	<p>Intervention’s outcomes could be shared in the following ways:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An exhibition of children’s virtual family trees/genealogy charts and family portraits • An open day family fair within the school setting with family activities and workshops • Establishment of Parents’ School with weekly sessions for discussion and therapy 			

4. Discussion

Early childhood education centers are important cultural and social spaces where young children learn to interact with others different from themselves. According to the Curriculum for Preschool Education (Institute of Educational Policy, 2021) themes of diversity and inclusion are central in the meaning that PreK children have a fundamental right to a sense of belonging in early childhood education settings. The new curriculum constitutes an inclusive curriculum and encompasses diversity of family structure and values with the promise that all children will be empowered to learn with and alongside others by engaging in experiences that have meaning for them. One way for early childhood educators to work towards this goal of an inclusive curriculum is, according to previous research (Sandretto, 2018; Kelly, 2013), by actively encouraging acknowledgement of diverse family structures within the school setting. Children’s picturebooks can be invaluable in supporting these themes by challenging heteronormative discourses and deepening young children’s understanding of themselves and others (Morgan & Surtees, 2022).

Given that the potential power of picturebooks to combat heteronormativity in early childhood education comes into sharp focus (Morgan & Surtees, 2022), the critical reading of the selected LGBTQI+ picturebooks offers discourses on exclusion of and inclusion in what is defined as normativity and equity. Through these narratives, issues of how children who grow up in a diverse family with same-sex parents are treated among their peers within the school settings are raised. The highlighting of such discourses and issues could, according to previous research (DePalma, 2016; Souto-Manning & Hermann-Wilmarth,

2008), increase awareness and encourage children to act towards social justice and equity. In addition, definitions of parenting from children raised from same-sex parents are captured. Most importantly, the reading analysis could accompany practice recommendations for teachers who support efforts to challenge heteronormativity through the deliberate use of picturebooks as pedagogical tools (Morgan & Surtees, 2022).

The inquiry-based learning method offers all the necessary stages for children to orientate and observe, question and conceptualize, investigate, conclude, discuss and share their new knowledge and their newly shaped attitudes and behaviors on social matters. Their learning occurs through personal, individual, and co-operative exploration; hence the learning becomes experiential (Stacey, 2018; Siraj-Blatchford, 2010).

5. Conclusion

The contribution of the current work to both the social sciences and the early childhood education fields is that it raises the recognition and at the same time addresses the pervasive social context of family heteronormativity by engaging young children in developing their own understandings of what constitutes a family and attempt their own definitions of parenting. Finally, the paper presents a pedagogical methodology, based on the inquiry method, to approach social issues such as the concept of family diversity.

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