

# CHALLENGING GENDER ROLE STEREOTYPES IN ‘PIGGY BOOK’: A VISUAL LITERACY APPROACH ON FAMILY ROLE EQUALITY

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## Abstract

In this study, we explore the diverse ways that children can think and learn in terms of images they encounter in Antony Browne’s ‘Piggy book’, along with the related implications for learning and teaching, through an interdisciplinary inquiry-based approach of a picturebook that conveys both textual and visual messages about gender role equality within the family. The article presents a reading of how both textual and visual representations define the different gender roles that the members of a family have or should have. Household chores are portrayed as feminine, nevertheless, during the narration, a shift in this definition and in the family dynamics is implied. An expansion and complementarity between the visual and the textual mode impact gender role equality implications that this picturebook offers. The way in which the visual narrative frames and defines the male character’s appearance and behaviour in terms of gender role equality is analyzed. In supporting teachers’ attempts on approaching gender equality within family dynamics in kindergarten settings, the article presents an interdisciplinary teaching proposal by using ‘Piggy book’ as a means for encouraging discussion and promoting the notion of gender role equality. The contribution of the current work is that it raises discussion on and proposes approaches of gender role equality within family relations. The interdisciplinary teaching proposal could inspire teachers to engage kindergarten children in developing their own understandings of what constitutes a feminine and a masculine household role. Furthermore, children would be challenged to shape their own definitions of equality in gender roles within the family, while attempting to answer the question ‘*Does gender role equality start at home?*’.

**Keywords:** ‘Piggy book’, gender stereotypes, gender role equality, visual literacy, kindergarten.

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## 1. Introduction

Educational research related to visual literacy and its connections to children’s reading and literature has flourished over the last two decades. Twenty years ago, research landscape had surfaced only a few systematic attempts to ask children about their reading/viewing of pictorial text in terms of their understanding of visual art, and appreciation of artistic techniques and their implications for the teaching and learning of visual literacy (Arizpe & Styles, 2003). After years of research, recent studies reflect on what could be described as an ethical or more explicitly political turn discernible within visual reading research that includes the foregrounding of issues of authenticity, inclusion and representation of socially marginalised communities, groups or even genders concerning children’s literature and reading (Farrar, Arizpe, & Lees, 2024).

Taking into consideration that children’s books play a key role in shaping children’s gender perceptions and expectations (Lee & Chin, 2021), the exploration of the way children can think and learn in terms of images they encounter in Antony Browne’s ‘Piggy book’, along with a proposal of an interdisciplinary inquiry-based approach of the messages conveyed by picturebook’s both textual and visual modes about gender role equality within the family is ventured in this study.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Visual literacy: Children’s responses to visual texts and the related significance to their learning

Visual literacy can be defined as ‘the abilities to understand (read) and use (write) images, as well as to think and learn in terms of images’ (Avgerinou & Pettersson 2020, 439). Visual texts for children might include picturebooks (both wordless and with words), comic books, posters, advertisements, art, film

or video games, that could be separated into two classifications: analogue (print-based) and digital (code-based).

Given the complex range of multimodal texts, Arizpe and Styles (2003) in their earlier work highlighted the sophisticated nature of children's responses to visual texts, and showcased the indispensable role that visual literacies can play in developing and supporting creative and critical thinking. This need has also been highlighted by Farrar, Arizpe, and Lees, (2024) who had supported the need to reframe traditional understandings about the relationship between words and pictures within education, through the skills that visual literacy offers.

Anthony Browne's works – as others created by those who serve as authors and illustrators, belong to those picturebooks that raise questions among adult readers, teachers and parents given the complex nature of some of the literary and aesthetic features that appeared in the play between words (or lack of words) and images, such as the use of irony, metafiction, metalepsis or symbolism (Arizpe & Styles, 2003). Regarding children's meaning-making process Arizpe and Styles (2003) showed that, after reading and discussing picturebooks enveloped to this category, the children were not only capable of understanding most of these features but were also able to engage in deep reflection about some of the more subtle aspects, such as the affective relationship between characters, ethical dimensions, gender and the environment. In recent research on the topic by Arizpe, Noble, and Styles (2023), it was found that children lack a vocabulary to describe the visual features and that, when supportive spaces were opened for sharing observations among peers and for learning some visual concepts and metalanguage, the children's understanding increases. Furthermore, these new findings examining children's responses to visual multimodal texts highlighted that the understanding of visual codes could help readers move beyond more literal responses and deepen engagement with a picturebook.

At this point it can be strongly argued that children need 'visual literacy skills, the ability to understand, to interpret, to engage critically and to create multimodal visual narratives.' (Arizpe, Noble, & Styles, 2023, 96). Those skills seem to be vital and urgently needed for the young citizens of the twenty-first century.

## **2.2. Gender role equality: Reading of textual and visual representation of gender roles in "Piggy book"**

The tool 'Multimodal Social Semiotics' offered by Painter, Martin and Unsworth's (2013), is used in this study to explore the verbal and visual strategies that Anthony Browne, author and illustrator of 'Piggy book', has used to generate progressive messages. The analysis of text and images in this picturebook case shows that distinct sets of semantic features (i.e., repetitive words framing males' superiority, impersonal references to the female figure, choice of colours and details depicting male and female figures, repetitive facial expressions or absence of faces, etc.) are selected in multimodal constructions of husband, wife and sons, forming a consistent pattern of gender inequality across the pages of this picturebook. The gender-biased semantic choices make experiential content of family life unevenly distributed, where husband/wife roles are limited to restricted settings and household activities -chores in that case-, resulting in the perpetuation of gender role stereotypes as certain semantic features tend to be fossilised into gender specific ones.

Lee and Chin (2021) noticed the two sexes' differences in visual representations in terms of their interpersonal relationships. Their findings show stereotypical descriptions in male and female framings and, in particular, apparent gender differences in the child-father/mother relationship preventing gender equality in sexes relationships. The cover picture of "Piggy book" depicts a woman who carries in her back a man and two boys. The picture defines the inequality within their interpersonal relations. The message of the visual narrative is straightforward: the gender roles are non-equal, and the family balance is disrupted. The difference between the facial expressions of the male family members and the only female member implies the emotional extensions of this role inequality. The members of this family are depicted in different postures, with contrasting feelings, being unfairly treated. The poor treatment of the female family member is also implied by the absence of red checks – a sign of health- which, in contrast with the other three male members, can be interpreted as the lack of well-being.

Prior, Willson, and Martinez (2012) showed that children are drawn to images depicting characters' actions, facial expressions, body posture, colour and lines to explore characters' feelings. Based on these findings much information about gender inequality and its emotional consequences can be drawn by analysing 'Piggy book'. Males of this family are depicted performing the same actions, talking with the same imperative, and having similar dressing codes. What the pictures reveal more, by focusing on details like the figures with their mouths open in the newspaper Mr Piggott reads, is the universality of the definition of male gendered behaviour: males shouting and demanding from the female seems universal; seems natural. The textual narrative lists the household chores done by Mrs Piggott, while the visual narrative depicts in a stop care sequel of images a woman with her face hidden, executing one household chore after the other. The hazy colours in the female character's dressing combined with the monochrome background lacking details could imply the woman's assimilation with the house itself, like being part of

the furniture or the wallpaper; like being inanimate. The woman's visual depiction in the last two images implies that her equal treatment by the male members of her family has influenced her essence (face and feelings). The shift in gender roles which addresses mostly to males doing the chores that only the female was supposed to do, is extended towards the ending by the female doing something that didn't belong in the list of daily chores. Fixing the car could be also interpreted as a gender associated chore which is now feasible to the other gender as well. Ultimately, the narration ends with both genders expanding their abilities, skills and prospects; equally and fairly.

Regarding the analysis of text-image interaction, according to Moya-Guijarro's (2019) taxonomy, an expansion and complementarity between the visual and the textual modes is apparent. The gradual and imperceptible transformation the visual narration reveals could be read as a parallel narrative. Only the pictures show the male family members' transformation into a different nature, like the one their name implies. This transformation may be interpreted as either a natural outcome to which their manners and habits led to, or as the interpretation of the males' non-equal treatment towards females. The relationship between text and image is worth noticing for images fill in the gaps and messages of the text. At some points, visual text offers such levels of complementarity that function as an autonomous, independent narration. Males' visual transformation into pigs, a change which can be interpreted as appropriate and expected punishment due to their behaviour could be implied as the behaviour's impact on appearance. So, is it the message conveyed by the visual representation the affirmation '*we are what we do*'?.

### 2.3. Aim of the current study

Gender stereotypes, gender equality and inclusion are concepts to be addressed from childhood in school and family settings. Certainly, picturebooks are, without a doubt, essential resources to familiarise young children with these aspects and, in turn, develop their visual literacy (Moya-Guijarro & Ventola, 2022). Aligning with this assumption, in this study we explore the diverse ways that children can think and learn in terms of images they encounter in Antony Browne's 'Piggy book', along with the related implications for learning and teaching, through an interdisciplinary inquiry-based approach of a picturebook that conveys both textual and visual messages about gender role equality within the family.

### 3. Methodology

For the study, an inquiry-based curriculum is proposed. The inquiry-based teaching method unravels through the following phases: orientation, conceptualisation, investigation, conclusion, and discussion (Stacey, 2018). The notions of gender role equality within the family are explored through literature, mathematics, natural and social science, and ICT learning areas (Greek Curriculum for Preschool Education, 2022). 'Piggy book', used for critical reading in the first part of this paper, is recommended in the second part as means for encouraging discussion, promoting empathy, and gathering information during the inquiry. A detailed outline of the structure of the inquiry-based teaching approach is presented below.

Table 1. Interdisciplinary teaching proposal of gender role equality using 'Piggy book'.

INTERDISCIPLINARY TEACHING PROPOSAL					
Orientation	The topic of gender role equality is addressed by the picturebook "Piggy book". The book can be either placed in the library corner to offer the students the space to explore the pictures, or it can be used in read-aloud sessions by the teacher.				
	Literature	Mathematics	Social Science	Natural Science	ICT
Conceptualisation	What does gender role equality mean?	How can household chores be equally divided between members of the family?	Household chores in the past and in the present – Occupational gender roles and gender career prospects. Similarities and differences?	Does gender role equality exist in animal species?	In what ways has technology improved household chores?
Investigation	Literature	Mathematics	Social Science (1/2)		
	"Piggy book" read aloud. Brainstorming definitions of gender role equality. <hr/> Creating a family collage of household chores [Students assembly photos, drawings and texts presenting their family's daily household routine]	Sorting cards with household chores according to genders. <hr/> Dividing and matching chores to all members of one's family to equally distribute them	Exploring similarities and differences between household chores in the past and the present. (e.g., household in the past: cleaning the freezer, cooking in the wooden stove, washing the carpet, ironing with the charcoal iron, washing dishes/clothes in the vessel, etc.) <hr/> Exploring posters showing household chores & occupations – discuss the stereotyped representations		

	Social Science (1/2)	Natural Science	ICT
	<p>Exploring gender equality in occupations. Sorting cards of professionals with their heads covered according to genders. Revealing of heads – resorting the cards and discuss each gender’s career prospects.</p> <p>‘The occupation I would like to do / The occupation I wish I could do / The occupation I can do’</p> <p>Depicting the occupations of one’s own choice before and after the read aloud</p>	<p>Exploring gender role equality in wild species.</p> <p>Gathering information about the roles of female and male lions, penguins &amp; seahorses, their mating rituals, incubating of eggs and newborns, feeding responsibilities, construction of the nest, etc.– Creating an album for wild animals’ gender roles.</p>	<p>Watching documentaries of traditional household chores (e.g. washing of clothes in the river, drying the meat in the cellar).</p> <p>Exploring pictures of new technological appliances that transformed household chores. (e.g. non-frost fridge, ceramic stove, electric iron, robot vacuum, dish-washing machine, washing and dryer machine, etc.)</p> <p>Watching ‘Married life’- short film – Discuss on gender role equality</p>
Conclusion	<p>Conclusions are drawn regarding:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The transformation of household roles from the past to the present</li> <li>• Definitions of gender role equality within the family</li> <li>• Equality’s significance in occupational roles and career prospects</li> </ul>		
Discussion	<p>Intervention’s outcomes could be shared in the following ways:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Exhibition of household chores/ gender roles within their family collage &amp; occupation choices board</li> <li>• A digital poster of gender roles in wild species.</li> </ul>		

The interdisciplinary activities described above were implemented in a Greek public kindergarten classroom of nineteen children. Provided that the article primarily focuses on proposing an inquiry-based teaching using the picturebook ‘Piggy book’ to approach the topic of gender role equality in early childhood education, there is no analysis of results. Due to the word limit, the study only includes discussion of some of the most indicative tokens of children’s performance on the activities.

#### 4. Discussion

This study, aligning with previous research by Arizpe and Styles (2003), confirms that picturebooks’ multimodality makes it an indispensable tool for developing and supporting creative and critical thinking, through visual literacy that, according to Farrar, Arizpe, and Lees (2024), offers the skillset to reframe traditional understandings about the relationship between words and pictures. Children’s responses during the interdisciplinary inquiry-based teaching showcase their ability to stand critically towards the notions of stereotyping, gender roles, and family role equality. A characteristic example of that understanding and critical thinking is the outcome in one of the mathematics activities regarding the division and matching of chores to all members of one’s family. Before the ‘Piggy book’ read aloud, children were asked to draw who does the chores in their household. The child’s visual representation depicts family members’ actions, and his vocal justification reflects members’ feelings (Prior, Willson, & Martinez, 2012). The inequality and disturbance of balance is obvious as the child drew only the mother linking her with all the chores and stated that there was no need to depict any other member since no one else does chores in his family. After the picturebook reading, there is a notable difference on the way the child understands the notion of equality within the dynamics of his own family, which confirms, according to Arizpe, Noble, and Styles (2023), children’s ability to understand and create multimodal visual narratives. The shift in the child’s perspective regarding notions of gender role equality can be interpreted by both the visual representation and the justification accompanying it, and it proves the impact of the picturebook message.

	<b>[Before reading aloud the ‘Piggy book’]</b> A_Boy: ‘Mom is doing the laundry, making the beds, picking up my room, washing the dishes, making all the other beds, cooking and mopping. I didn’t draw dad and my brother and me because we are doing nothing.’
	<b>[After reading aloud the ‘Piggy book’]</b> A_Boy: ‘Every two are doing the same chores to help each other. Mom and my brother are making the beds, me and my brother are doing the laundry and mom, my brother, me and dad are cooking all together.’

The imperceptible way in which implications of gender role stereotypes and gender role equality are formed throughout the visual narrative of ‘Piggy book’ confirms Lee and Chin’s (2021) point that children’s books play important roles in shaping children’s gender perceptions and expectations. Their prospects regarding occupations are enriched which is reflected in children’s drawings regarding ‘The occupation I would like to do/ The occupation I wish I could do/ The occupation I can do’. Children depicted the

occupations of their choice before and after their exposure to the picturebook. Their initial choices changed after they discussed both textual and visual messages of the picturebook. Tokens of children's occupation choices below reflect their influence regarding the possibilities of career prospects of their own gender. According to children's justification of their career prospects, the boy's choice of cook occupation and the girl's choice of car mechanic occupation are notable reflections derived from the role models presented in 'Piggy book', a reflection that complies with previous findings that the understanding of visual codes could increase children's understanding of concepts and help them deepen their engagement with a picturebook (Arizpe, Noble, & Styles, 2023).

M_Girl		'The occupation I would like to do: <b>Painter</b> ' / 'The occupation I wish I could do: <b>Pilot</b> ' / 'The occupation I can do: <b>Painter, Pilot, Mechanic, Firefighter</b> '.
N_Boy		'The occupation I would like to do: <b>Police officer</b> ' / 'The occupation I wish I could do: <b>Tailor</b> ' / 'The occupation I can do: <b>Police officer, Cook, Firefighter</b> '.

The impact of visual literacy in terms of gender issues is also highlighted in this study. Visual narratives like Anthony Browne's 'Piggy book' may contribute to the development of young readers' visual literacy and become essential to comprehend discourses which promote social inclusion and equality (Farrar, Arizpe, & Lees, 2024). As Painter, Martin, and Unsworth (2013) put it, children's picturebooks, as models of shared cultural values and meanings, may influence their readers' attitudes and beliefs and boost the acceptance of the non-traditional gender models or family interpersonal dynamics that are progressively emerging today.

## 5. Conclusion

The contribution of the current work to early childhood education is that it raises discussion on gender-typed roles within family relations. The interdisciplinary teaching proposal could inspire teachers to engage kindergarten children in developing their own understandings of what constitutes a feminine and a masculine household role. Furthermore, children would be challenged to shape their own definitions of equality in gender roles within the family, while attempting to answer the question 'Does gender role equality start at home?'

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