

APPROACHES OF GENDER DIVERSITY IN KINDERGARTEN: A LITERATURE INTERVENTION THROUGH PICTUREBOOKS

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Abstract

The aim of the current research is to explore if it is possible for preschool students to alter their perceptions of gender stereotypes, through a literature intervention. A sample of thirty kindergarten students participated in a semi-structured interview which primarily focused on the impact of gender stereotypes on a) colours, b) clothing, c) toys, d) sports, e) occupations, and f) appearance. Students were equally divided into a Control and an Experimental Group, with the latter participating in a literature intervention. The intervention consisted of five phases with activities based on five different picturebooks. The selection of the picturebooks was based on their depictions and portraits of diversity on gender issues. The findings corroborate the existing literature, indicating that the majority of preschool students have already internalized numerous stereotypes before entering the school environment. A notable deviation in Experimental Group's answers at post-intervention was observed. Their answers and positive attitude to the possibility of change, could be interpreted as the shift in Experimental Group's perceptions regarding gender diversity. This shift in perspective reveals the impact of the intervention, given the lack of any deviation in Control Group's perceptions about gender stereotyped roles. Discussion on findings, highlights the fact that literature interventions using gender diversity-themed picturebooks in the preschool setting can bring about significant changes and prompt students to reconsider their perspectives on gender roles.

Keywords: *Gender diversity-themed picturebooks, literature intervention, gender role perceptions, gender stereotypes, kindergarten.*

1. Introduction

Rooted in societal norms, gender is expressed through various means, shaping behaviors and perceptions from early childhood. Babies and toddlers rapidly form ideas related to gender, influencing their choice of activities, exploration of interests, and pursuit of objectives. In essence, preschoolers already possess firm understandings of gender, which serve as fundamental prior knowledge (Stangor & Ruble, 1987). Leveraging this prior knowledge, our brains efficiently gather and process pertinent information, facilitating quicker and simpler classification learning when presented with stimuli (Paetcher, 2003). Levy and Carter (1989) in their study of gender schema theory emphasized preschoolers' cognitive processes in shaping gender-role stereotype attributions. Contemporary perspectives, drawing from information-processing frameworks, delve into children's acquisition of gender roles, underscoring subconscious motivations to conform to societal norms. While theories may differ, scholars advocate for a nuanced understanding that integrates cognitive processes and sociocultural influences in shaping gender identity (Levy & Carter, 1989; Paetcher, 2003).

2. Literature review

2.1. Gender stereotypes in early childhood

By around age 2, children begin to develop notions of gender, and typically, by age 3, most children can identify themselves as either a boy or a girl. Between the ages of 3 and 5, children begin to form their gender identity and start to understand what it means to be a girl or a boy. As they strive to fully understand themselves, children begin developing stereotypes, which they apply to themselves and others. By the age of 5, gender stereotypes are typically quite established, and they tend to solidify even further between the ages of 5 and 7 (Martin & Ruble, 2004).

A child's perceptions of gender roles may be influenced by family as well as school environment, which are considered the direct factors of socialization. Further parameters that can affect those perceptions are media, religion and cultural norms, which are termed as indirect actors (Stangor & Ruble, 1987). Expanding upon previous critical insights, contemporary perspectives on early gender role development now focus on understanding children's acquisition and application of gender roles, through an information-processing lens (Liben et al. 2002; Martin & Ruble, 2004).

Gender role expectations may vary and include physical characteristics, as well as many activities, skills, interests, and occupations (Liben et al. 2002). Boys and girls obtain different kinds of treatment in various areas, such as academic performance, verbal interaction and acceptable behaviors (Riley, 2014). This pattern is also observed in cultural constructions like toys, books, movies and TV series. Toys, being cultural artifacts, are undeniably shaped by gender stereotypes. Those intended for girls often emphasize nurturing roles, while also focusing on appearance. Conversely, toys targeted at boys tend to emphasize action-oriented themes, as well as activities like sports, construction, and vehicles. Gender-typed toys are linked with distinct pro-social behaviors observed between boys and girls (Blakemore & Centers, 2005). Girls are often expected to exhibit pro-social tendencies through care giving and empathy, whereas boys tend to express theirs through defense and assertion. Moreover, given Disney's extensive marketing and product campaigns, children are regularly presented with opportunities to reinforce the gender stereotypes portrayed in the movies and books. Being exposed in that kind of environment as a kid, teaches young girls that attractiveness is a necessary quality of their biological gender. This also applies to young boys, as the pressure these movies and books exert, when portraying muscular and tough males is equally strong (Sherman & Zurbriggen, 2014).

2.2. Approaching gender stereotypes through picturebooks

Kelly (2013) and Kalaitzi (2024b) discussed how children's books can encourage children to ponder the existence of social justice issues and their thoughts around these by investigating the use of picturebooks to encourage critical thinking and enhance young children's understanding of family diversity. 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. According to Moya-Guijarro and Ventola (2022), 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. Taking the above into consideration, picturebooks' potential to shape gender attitudes and behaviors among children of early ages is notably highlighted. Nevertheless, in Kalaitzi's (2024a) recent study regarding factors that affect Kindergarten teachers' use of picturebooks with gender non-conforming fictional characters, findings showed that the specified methodological teaching framework, their own personal beliefs, and parents' influence are crucial influences. As Kalaitzi (2024a) also noted highly qualified teachers -even those with the least working experience- are open to gender diversity, are not discouraged by the parents' influence and take advantage of both the variety of LGBTQ picturebooks and the methodological framework of Early Years Curriculum to deconstruct gender binaries.

2.3. Rational, aim and objectives of the current research

The aim of the study is to explore how to promote kindergarten students' awareness on gender role diversity through the use of gender diversity-themed picturebooks. Although previous research has been conducted on either kindergarten or primary settings regarding approaches of gender stereotypes (Chung & Huang, 2021; Spinner et al. 2021), there is a lack of applied intervention studies within kindergarten utilizing gender diversity-themed picturebooks. Therefore, this study is based on a hypothesis that a literature intervention could impact kindergarten students' perceptions regarding gender stereotypes. Specifically, the study aims to address the following research questions:

- *To what extent gender diversity-themed picturebooks affect kindergarten students' perception of gender-typed appearance, objects, behavior and roles?*
- *To which level is it feasible for a literature intervention to produce measurable results, which could subsequently be used for comparisons between groups of preschool age?*

3. Methodology

3.1. Sample

Two groups of children of balanced mixed gender between the age of 5 and 6 years old (1 group/ kindergarten classroom) participated in the study (15 participants/ group) with a total number of 30 participants. The participants were not previously exposed to gender-diversity or gender-inclusive picturebooks. The groups were randomly differentiated to Experimental Group (E.G.), which participated in the intervention, and to Control Group (C.G.), which followed the curriculum and functioned as a weighing tool for the data evaluation (Kallio et al. 2016). Written consent was acquired from the parents (or legal guardians) of the children in both groups. A separate written consent was acquired from E.G.'s parents prior to conducting the intervention. This research was approved by the Ethics Board of the University of Derby (UK), collaborative partner of the Mediterranean College.

3.2. Data collection tool

Previous research by Spinner et al. (2021) used as framework for designing the semi-structured interview. The interview tool was composed by 12 questions (2 questions for each of the 6 categories: 1A&1B_colours, 2A&2B_clothes, 3A&3B_toys, 4A&4B_sports, 5A&5B_occupations, 6A&6B_appearance). Each question had two parts. In the first part of each question participants were asked to identify the indicator of each category (e.g., 1A_Colour for boys), while in the second part of the question they were asked to state if their choice can change.

3.3. Framework: A literature intervention on gender roles diversity

The framework of the intervention was based on prior intervention studies (Chung & Huang, 2021; Spinner et al. 2021). The intervention was conducted within a five-week period with an average of six class hours per week (3 days/week, 2 hours/day). When devising the activities, objectives, concepts, and methodological recommendations regarding the learning fields, the Greek curriculum for preschool education (Curriculum for preschool education, 2022) was considered. The procedural practices were divided into five phases, each focusing on a different gender-typed category using a picturebook addressing to this specific gender diverse portrayal. All picturebooks were selected from lists including gender-inclusive picturebooks in terms of their scopes (Moya-Guijarro & Ventola, 2022). Table 1 below outlines the content of all five intervention phases.

Table 1. The literature intervention phases.

PHASE 1	PICTUREBOOK: <i>William's doll</i> (Charlotte Zolotow, 1972)	OBJECTIVE S	- To distinguish gender-typed toys. - To acknowledge that all toys can be played by both genders.
LEARNING AREAS – INTERDISCIPLINARY CONNECTIONS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Personal & Social Development/ Collaboration Language/ Production of oral speech Art & Culture/ Drama 	METHODOLOGICAL APPROACHES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Questions & answers Working in groups KWLH chart
DESCRIPTI	-Picturebook read aloud - questions & answers on 'What is my favourite toy?'. -Two-entrance table depicting students' favourite toys and classroom's play corners. -Play-Pairs: students are divided into pairs matching with a peer with a different favoured toy. Each pair plays for an equal amount of time both toys in turns. -Given that every student tries their pair's toy, students refill the two-entrance table adding to or changing their new favourite toys (if any) and classroom's play corners (if any). -Questions & answers on 'What toys do I like to play with?', 'Do I have only one favourite toy, or do I have more?'		
PHASE 2	PICTUREBOOK: <i>Piggybook</i> (Anthony Browne, 1986).	OBJECTIVE S	- To distinguish gender-typed occupations & activities. - To acknowledge that all occupations & activities can be performed by both genders.
LEARNING AREAS – INTERDISCIPLINARY CONNECTIONS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Personal & Social Development/ Personal identity Language/ Production of oral speech Social Sciences/ Culture 	METHODOLOGICAL APPROACHES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Brainstorming Role play Discussion
DESCRIPTI	-Picturebook read aloud - predictions on narrative's ending. -Open ended discussion on parents/ guardians' occupations. -Distinguish pictures depicting individuals performing various occupations (firefighter, doctor, teacher, cleaner, car mechanic, police officer, etc.) with their heads covered into female occupations and male occupations & justify their decisions. -Revealing of figures' heads. Discussion on misconceptions and relocating any photos (if necessary). -Discussion on the roles of women and men in the past compared to the changes seen today. -Drawing on the subject: 'What I want to be/become when I grow up'.		
PHASE 3	PICTUREBOOK: <i>Pink is for boys</i> (Robb Pearlman, 2018)	OBJECTIVE S	- To distinguish gender-typed colours. - To acknowledge that all colours can be used by both genders.
LEARNING AREAS – INTERDISCIPLINARY CONNECTIONS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Personal & Social Development/ Collaboration Language/ Production of oral speech Art & Culture/ Arts & Crafts 	METHODOLOGICAL APPROACHES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Brainstorming Working in groups Discussion
DESCRIPTI	-Picturebook read aloud without showing the pictures that reveal the protagonists' gender. -Predictions on two figures' gender according to the length of their hair. -Divided into two groups (boys and girls) they colour the protagonist figures with pink or blue acrylics based on their assumption of the figures' gender. -Revealing of the protagonist figures true gender (the long hair figure is the boy while the short hair figure is the girl). -Recolouring the figures in mixed groups with a variety of colours. -Drawing themselves using their favourite colours.		
PHASE 4	PICTUREBOOK: <i>Princess Smartyants</i> (Babette Cole, 1986)	OBJECTIVE S	- To distinguish gender-typed sports & activities-hobbies. - To acknowledge that all sports & activities-hobbies can be performed by both genders.
LEARNING AREAS – INTERDISCIPLINARY CONNECTIONS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Personal & Social Development/ Self awareness Language/ Production of oral speech Physical education/ Gross motor skills 	METHODOLOGICAL APPROACHES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Discussion KWLH chart Role play

DESCRIPTI	-Picturebook read aloud without revealing the ending - predictions on the protagonist's choice. -Open ended discussion on princesses/ princes' appearance, hobbies, and activities. -Displaying a clip from the animation movie 'Shrek' showcasing a different type of princesses and princes -Drawing of princesses or princes of their choice attributing to them gender non-conforming appearance and hobbies. -Role playing of fictional or movie heroes/heroines who display gender non-conforming behaviours (i.e. Brave, Shrek, Fiona, Bob SpongeBob, Mulan, etc.)		
PHASE 5	PICTUREBOOK: My Shadow is Pink (Scott Stuart, 2020)	OBJECTIVES	- To distinguish gender-typed clothing materials & accessories. - To acknowledge that all kinds of clothing materials & accessories can be worn by both genders.
LEARNING AREAS – INTERDISCIPLINAR Y CONNECTIONS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personal & Social Development/ Self-image - Empathy • Language/ Production of oral speech • Art & Culture/ Drama 	METHODOL O-GICAL APPROACH ES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discussion • Role play • Questions & answers
DESCRIPTI	-Watching the picturebook adaptation in YouTube [animation sans mots (no words)] - open ended discussion on protagonist's feelings. -Picturebook read aloud - revealing of protagonist's feelings. -Hidden treasure hunt to find a variety accessories and clothing materials. -'Dress up like your shadow': Disguising using clothing pieces and accessories of their choice. Present themselves in front of class. -Questions & answers on the subject: 'What makes you happy?', 'What colour is your shadow?' -Drawing of their shadow attributing to it any colour, clothes, behaviour, occupation, appearance they choose.		

4. Results

Participants' answers at pre-intervention level, do not reveal any deviation between groups. Most participants (83,3%) from both groups answered that blue is the colour for boys and pink is the colour for girls. All participants, from both groups, mentioned that boys wear pants and shirts and girls wear skirts or dresses. The 60% from both groups, chose superhero figures as the toy suitable for boys, while 80% from both groups, chose dolls as the toy most suitable for girls. The 56,6% from both groups, stated that basketball is the boys sport, and volleyball is the girls sport. The 60% from both groups, stated that boys would follow the driver profession, while 63,3% from both groups stated that girls would work as teachers. As the appearance is concerned, both groups answered that boys are distinguished by their short hair, while girls for their long hair. The most intriguing part of the interview was the second part of every question, regarding the possibility of change. Most of both groups (64,3%) answered negatively, meaning that colours, clothes, toys, sports, occupations and appearance attributed with each gender could not be changed.

Proceeding to the analysis of findings after the intervention, Control Group's answers reveal no difference compared with pre-intervention and their perceptions regarding the impotence of change remained unaffected. However, a notable deviation in Experimental Group's choices at post-intervention was observed. In their range of answers new ones were added: all colours, all clothes, all toys, all sports, all professions, both types of hair, meaning that colours, clothes, toys, sports, occupations, and appearance that attributed with each gender could be changed. More specifically, 40% declared that all toys are for everyone and 53,3% were flexible to the change. The 33,3% answered that both girls and boys can participate in all sports and do all kinds of jobs. The 33,3% stated that all colours are for everyone, while the rest, who mentioned specific colours were positive to change. The 66,7% stated that a boy and a girl can have both long and short hair. The 20% responded that clothes are for everyone, and the 33,3% stated that a boy can wear dresses or anything they desire.

5. Discussion, limitations & prospects

The results aligned with the literature confirming that kindergarten students have already adopted gender role constructions and are driven from gender role expectations that include physical characteristics, activities, skills, interests, and occupations (Liben et al. 2002). Students' answers revealed embodied perceptions for gender-typed behaviours and objects (Blakemore & Centers, 2005; Sherman & Zurbriggen, 2014; Riley, 2014). Both groups pre-intervention performance corroborated previous findings of Martin and Ruble (2004) stating children's stereotypical acquisition and application of gender roles. The notable deviation in groups' post-intervention performance agrees with Paetcher's (2003) point that by leveraging from prior knowledge children's brains efficiently gather and process pertinent information, facilitating quicker and simpler classification learning when presented with stimuli.

In case that the literature intervention presented in this study could be considered as stimulus, the results, also confirmed, the gender diversity-themed picturebooks' impact on kindergarten students' perceptions regarding gender roles. This study contributes to all previous studies highlighting the use of picturebooks to enhance, enrich, and strengthen the approach of gender diversity in early childhood education (DePalma, 2016; Kalaitzi, 2024a/2024b; Kelly, 2013; Moya-Guijarro & Ventola, 2022).

Some future implications of the current research could involve conducting separate analyses for the views of girls and boys to examine whether there are differences in their level of shaping alternative attitudes. Additionally, a larger sample size, or a diverse sample in terms of ethnicity or socio-economic status would provide more reliable and safe results. Furthermore, it would be interesting to explore additional factors in multiple levels that influence children's perspectives (i.e. demographic background,

cultural context, etc.) (Frenzel, Pekrun, & Goetz, 2007). Also, a comparison of the literature intervention with other forms such as role-playing could identify the effective aspects of this strategy for challenging gender stereotypes in early childhood.

To conclude, given that educators are willing to create an inclusive and gender-sensitive classroom teaching, and exploiting the dynamics of gender issued picturebooks, kindergarten students' perceptions of gender roles could be challenged and reshaped. Thus, the early childhood field needs applied interventions to approach gender norms as they raise critical questions regarding gender.

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