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# What's in a Picture? Exploring Children's Picture Books with a Focus on Gender

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WHAT'S IN A PICTURE?

EXPLORING CHILDREN'S PICTURE BOOKS WITH A FOCUS ON GENDER

by

Siyang Jiang

A Major Research Paper

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Windsor, Ontario, Canada

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EXPLORING CHILDREN'S PICTURE BOOKS WITH A FOCUS ON GENDER

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## ABSTRACT

This paper explores the relationship between children's books and gender with a particular focus on images. The aim is to explore gender constructions found in images in children's books. In the first chapter, the concepts related to gender, children's books and gender education, as well as the importance of gender education of preschool children are introduced. The second chapter surveys the relevant literature to explore what is a children's picture book, and the three historical stages of development of children's picture books: Embryonic period, Growth period and Boom period. The third chapter analyzes two picture books that have gender education significance. Finally, at the end of the paper, as a progressive way forward, I design a curriculum framework that I hope will help educators and others better understand how to choose picture books for preschool children.

***Keywords:*** gender education, picture books, preschool children, gender stereotypes

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction

Following the second wave feminist movement from the mid-20th century, various countries such as Canada gradually began to realize the importance of gender equality, much more than in the past. Today, as a woman living in the 21st century, I still deeply feel the “unequal requirements” of society for men and women, such as men being expected to be physically strong, aggressive and active and women being encouraged to be docile, passive and gentle; men are imagined to be rational, and women are thought to be too emotional. Gender ideology of today also positions men as more independent and women as more dependent and has negative impacts for some women when it comes to areas such as leadership. Men as a group are thought to be superior to women and women as a group are thought to be inferior in many ways. These gender inequalities make me pay special attention to gender issues, in particular when it comes to children’s books.

Children’s books have a place in many peoples’ personal history. For example, most people can list a few of their favourite children’s books from when they were young. *I Love You Forever?* *Green Eggs and Ham?* *Good Night Moon?* The list could go on and on. The picture books are full of fantasy plots, beautiful illustrations, and the philosophies contained in them are, for many people, unforgettable. However, as readers we often fail to recognize how gender is coded into picture books. We rarely, for example, question why it is that many of the representations of girls include the characters wearing traditional feminine clothing like dresses or engaging in traditional feminine activities like cooking. For example, in

Cynthia Rylant's 2009 classic fairy tale picture book *Walt Disney's Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* and her 2017 work *Sleeping Beauty*, the female characters are beautiful, gentle and weak. On the other hand, we fail to recognize how masculinity is represented in children's books in a way that often reinforces traditional gender norms. Boys are often represented as able bodied, active, and courageous with a high degree of physicality. For instance, in Mark Teague's 1999 work *The Secret Shortcut* and Billy Wrecks' 2013 work *Superman!* the male characters are portrayed as brave and strong heroes. While the children are enjoying the book, these implicit gender concepts are passed on to children. Some of these ideas can play a positive role in the mental health of young children, and some of them will have a negative impact on their psychology, at least when it comes to gender and gender relations.

Considering that there is a wide range of picture books, the discussion in this paper mainly focuses on the picture books with gender education significance. This paper will combine the literature, through an analysis of picture books that contain typical gender stereotypes, summarizing the elements of picture books that imply the gender concept, so that educators and others can understand how to distinguish a picture book with gender significance. Moreover, this paper will refer to high quality picture books' techniques and explore the performance strategies and methods for children's "gender education." This paper aims to provide a valuable reference for teachers, parents and others. I hope more people will care about gender education for preschool children and provide effective help to children's



educators, not only to develop young children's literacy practices, but also to help them navigate a gendered world.

To be honest, I never seriously thought about gender equality before I came to Canada. Because I used to live in an environment full of gender bias, for example, my parents have high expectations of my twin brothers. They hope that he can become a policeman who protects more people and the expectation for me is just own a stable job. For another example, I found that most of the leaders in the manage level are male. These gender inequalities have always occurred in my life, but since I lived in such an environment from birth, my subconscious mind mistakenly thought that male seems to play a more important role in society than female. When I came to Canada, the inclusive and open environment overturned my thoughts, especially after I took Dr. Greig's course "Issues in Education". I understand the importance of gender issues in today's society, so this paper can also be considered as the testimony of my thoughts' transformation.

### **Understanding Children's Books**

Before entering a gendered analysis, it is important to first define children's books. Children's books are books that are written and produced for information or entertainment for children (Cullinan & Galda, 2002). Children's books may function as a social transmission of cultural tools, and they are also an important part of the "spiritual food" that children need to grow up (Peterson & Lach, 1990, p. 185). The meaning and role of children's books refers not only to the way in which they can help develop children's literacy practices, but also to its social role. Children's books, and the power that they have, rely on children's reading,

appreciation and acceptance of works, psychological satisfaction, and positive influence on their thoughts and feelings, thus giving children's books material and symbolic power.

The influence and power of children's books can be summarized as cognitive function, educational function, aesthetic function, and entertainment function (Peterson & Eeds, 1990; Lehman 2007). Additionally, some researchers advocate that children's books are a benefit for children in helping them to locate, explore, and critique their own cultural identities and views of the world as the basis for social understanding and change (Lewison, Leland, & Harste, 2008). Turner-Bowker (1996) points out that children may imitate the character of the book while listening to or reading books; for example, in Cornelia Funke's 2004 work, *The Princess Knight*, the protagonist Violetta is a "special princess." She is not as gentle as a princess in a traditional picture book. Instead, she is brave and confident, and insists on her own life. This heroic protagonist can easily become a subject that many children would be eager to imitate. The storyline in a book can also provide guidance for children's life experiences (Turner-Bowker, 1996); for instance, in Trudy Ludwig's 2013 work, *The Invisible Boy*. The text encourages children to pay attention to and help other students, but also conveys various messages including the importance of being kind, thoughtful and sensitive to other people's issues. This picture book is very close to children's real lives; therefore, children may find it easy to emulate the character. However, perhaps most importantly, and it certainly reflects some of my own personal experiences, children's books may play a vital role in "providing children with some of their earliest and longest lasting perceptions of gender, race and class" (Filipović, 2018, p. 312). For example, I was

impressed when I read Jose Cardona's 2013 work *Mulan* when I was a child. One of the key lessons that I learned from this particular children's book was the way in which women were limited in what they could do. I learned that women could only weave at home in ancient times, and even as a child I felt this was unfair. Therefore, when I read *Mulan*, I saw a female character who went bravely into a battlefield and defended the motherland, something that women were rarely ever encouraged to do. Certainly, Mulan displayed attributes like courage, bravery, strength that made me pleased as a reader. That is the first time I thought that women could be powerful, brave and courageous.

Children's books can be part of fiction or nonfiction genres. However, these books are further categorized by the target age of the reader and other details, such as the number of words or the subject matter (Summer, 2013), although this is not meant to be rigid. For example, high quality children's books could also be read to adults, simply as literature. Among the different types of children's books, the picture book is more in line with young children's physical and mental development characteristics and is suitable for young children's reading habits. Picture books are so called because the illustrations dominate the text or are as important. In fact, the hallmark of a good picture book is that the illustrations and the text accompany and complement each other to the extent that the text would be incomplete without the illustrations. This is to say that the pictures play an equally important role as the text in telling the story (Lukens, 1999). For example, David Shannon's 1998 work, *No, David!* is interesting because the text and illustrations were created by the author when he was only five years old. The illustrations in this book contain saturated colours, and the

colours are very bright and vibrant. The overall hue of the artwork is light and fun. The illustrations and texts are integrated, David's tender handwriting and each of his scenes complement each other, the text become a part of the illustration, and the illustrations perfectly explain the text. It is not uncommon for every single page of a picture book to be illustrated (Sipe, 1998). Picture books are illustrated using a wide range of media, from watercolours, acrylics, and coloured pencils to collage, photography, and digital illustration (Sipe, 1998). For example, the illustrations in Beatrice Alemagna's 2017 work *On A Magical Do-Nothing Day* are a collection of the richness of the subject matter, the interest of the content, the portability of the language, and the difference in the format, so that the children gain both knowledge and aesthetic taste in a pleasant atmosphere.

Over time, a large number of excellent children's picture books have appeared and contain positive guidance for children. Some books reveal the topic of friendship, such as Jane O'Connor's 2005 work *Fancy Nancy*, and some books encourage children to be confident and brave, such as Mary Hoffman's 2007 work *Amazing Grace* and Karen Beaumont's 2004 work *I Like Myself*. Therefore, choosing a high-quality picture book is good for a child's physical and mental development, along with simply being a pleasure to read.

Interestingly, children's picture books for adults have become something of a new genre. This particular genre uses the format and style of traditional children's books, to poke a little fun at, and perhaps satirize elements of adult life. The contents and illustrations of these picture books are certainly not suitable for children. These books are meant to be read

by adults and are for adults to put something of a humorous spin on traditional children's stories. For example, Brandon Rhiness's 2016 work *You're the Reason Mommy Drinks*, Avery Monsen's 2010 work *All My Friends Are Dead*, and Adam Mansbach's 2014 *Go The F\*\*K to Sleep*, are good examples. Therefore, not all children's picture books are suitable for children to read. If educators want to choose picture books for children appropriately, they need to deeply understand the content of children's picture books. In this way, the educational function of the picture books can be maximized.

### **Understanding Gender**

As mentioned earlier, this paper concerns children's books and gender, so this is a good point to explain what I mean by the concept of gender. Gender is a social, historical and cultural construct. Gender is best understood as a social process. It is built, maintained, and sustained through relations of power and social practices. Gender is also best understood to be a practice. By this, I mean that gender is performative, an enactment. Gender scholars explain that gender is not grounded in biology; rather it is an enactment, an ongoing identity construction that one performs for others, on a moment-to-moment basis (Diamond, 2002). For example, to be an 'appropriate' boy means that the young man must 'act' according to the appropriate gender rules; boys are not allowed to display an interest in poetry, as that particular genre has been coded feminine. A boy who likes poetry has his masculinity called into question by other boys. A boy who loves to wear the colour pink may come under scrutiny from other boys, as boys are only encouraged to wear dark colours, blues and grays and browns. To wear pink may signal to other boys that the wearer of pink is not a 'real

boy,' and this is also true of girls. According to the gender rules that govern the lives of girls, a girl must not be too physically aggressive, too vocal, or too opinionated. If she is some of these things, her femininity will be called into question.

But where do children learn gender? Researchers interested in issues of gender have long pointed it out that gender role models that affect young learners include role models in school, from peers and books to the media. Of course, children learn how to do gender from families, parents in particular. Halim and Rube (2010) believe that parents are the primary means of children's social language; their speech (directly) and behaviour (indirectly) have an important impact on the formation of children's understandings of gender. It has also been the case that gender stereotypes—boys this, girls that—have been modelled by parents influencing children's perhaps narrow view of gender. Therefore, parents have played a significant role in the formation of children's gender stereotypes. I now take a brief look at the influence parents have when it comes to children's understandings of gender.

Children's parents begin at birth to treat them in a gender-specific manner, from names, costumes, and toys to behavioural requirements, lifestyles, and more; for example, parents usually buy dolls for girls and car models for boys. Researchers found that caretakers often strengthen this inherent gender model when guiding children's activities, usually giving children toys in a gendered way, using biased language in communicating with children, such as calling little girls "Sweetie" and little boys "Bud"(Chick, 2002). They often talk about girls' dresses and highlight the role of girls as assistants to boys. In both cases, traditional femininity is emphasized for girls, including the implicit message that boys are natural

leaders, and girls are not. In a similar way, parents and caregivers often evaluate and praise a boy's height, weight, and physical motor skills. This particular emphasis on boys' physicality, provides boys with the confidence that they can then take into the world, which in its own way, strengthens the boy's control behaviour and instills in him the idea of "leadership" (Chick, 2002).

Part of the problem that parents and other adults face is that they often fail to recognize how early children begin to learn how to 'do' gender. Many parents believe that gender issues are difficult for children to understand, and adults often choose to ignore child gender education (Ruble, Martin, & Berenbaum, 1998). In fact, children's gender cognition and gender differences have already begun to appear in very early childhood, as young as three years old. Calvert and Husto mention that children can identify with male or female commercials as young as six years old (as cited in Bedore, 1992, pp. 185-197). With age, children's recognition of gender stereotypes is stronger (Ruble & Martin, 2003).

However, researchers have also shown that while many children adopt and perform an 'appropriate' gender identity, some children do not. This so-called 'failure' to perform gender adequately can trigger being bullied by other children. For instance, a survey on child violence shows that 25% of 100,000 young people in 18 countries around the world have been bullied because of their gender or sexual orientation (United Nations Children's Fund, 2016). Children with non-conforming sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression or who do not meet traditional gender norms are much more likely to suffer from school violence than others. The survey found that 13 to 20-year-old lesbian, gay, bisexual or

transgender (LGBT) students were 82% more likely to be harassed by others because of their sexual orientation. The data from the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN, 2012) shows that 33% of students said that this kind of injury often occurred; up to 90% of LGBT students felt that they were intentionally isolated. Not only do LGBT students suffer from school violence, but students who are not LGBT but are considered by others to be non-compliant with gender norms are also targets of homophobic violence. In Canada, 33% of male students are subjected to verbal violence because of their actual or perceived sexual orientation. This data includes those who do not consider themselves homosexual or bisexual (The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2016).

But talking about gender is not all doom and gloom. Some progress has been made. For example, many schools now in Canada and elsewhere have gay straight alliances (GSAs), clubs that work towards creating safe spaces for all students in schools, including addressing issues of homophobia. There has also been much more awareness and some acceptance around transgendered identities. Some of this has been filtered through the media. For example, *National Geographic* magazine first published a transgender child on a cover in January 2017. The child on the cover was Avery Jackson. She spent the first four years of her life as a boy, and she has since lived as a transgender girl. From Figure 1, we can see that Avery leans against the sofa. She is wearing a pink t-shirt, and her whole state appears to be very relaxed. Avery says, “Everything about being a girl is great” (Jackson, 2016, para.3). Avery chose to live as a girl, and she is confident and brave. She affirms her self-gender identity and dares to express herself, to some degree challenging transphobia; however, we



also need to ask the question of how many children or adolescents are able to express themselves like Avery?



Figure 1 (Robin, 2016)

Developing gender awareness, creating positive spaces and places where children and young adults can express themselves freely, helps children to establish an improved outlook on life and works to achieve the broad aims and goals of social justice. Gender education also plays an indispensable role in children's future psychological and physiological development, in a way that encourages positive self-esteem.

### **What is Gender Education?**

I feel strongly that we as classroom teachers and educational stakeholders must recognize, address and work hard to overcome the systematic and structural barriers that exist for marginalized groups and individuals. This is why gender education is so important. As a branch of education, gender education is based on the concept of how gender functions in a specific social context and penetrates all aspects of education in tangible and intangible ways.

This is a socialized educational process that allows students to develop gender perceptions and gender perspectives, and to generate gender behaviours (Fennell & Arnot, 2007). People often confuse sex education with gender education. Different from the focus of sexual education on sexual knowledge, behaviour and ethics, gender education refers to the gender perception and gender concept of educators based on gender differences and according to certain social and cultural norms. Sex education is the instruction of issues relating to human sexuality, including emotional relations and responsibilities, human sexual anatomy, sexual activity, sexual reproduction, age of consent, reproductive health, reproductive rights, safe sex, birth control and sexual abstinence. Sex education that covers all of these aspects is known as comprehensive sex education. Common avenues for sex education are parents or caregivers, formal school programs, and public health campaigns (Lindberg, Santelli & Singh, 2006), while gender education is more esoteric than sex education, and it is more focused on the education of gender perspectives. By exploring the interrelationships between the three dimensions of gender (body, identity, expression), children are allowed to reflect on their own physical gender, gender identity and gender expression patterns, thus helping children to establish positive gender perceptions and gender values (Oakley, 2016).

Gender education has long been the focus of many countries. Sweden pays special attention to gender education for children. In 1933, the Swedish Association for Sexuality Education (RFSU) was established, and sexual education was widely practiced in schools. At present, Sweden not only conducts gender education in primary and secondary schools, but also sets the curriculum content of gender education in pre-

schools. In its *Guide to Pre-school Education* promulgated in the late 1980s, an important part of pre-school education is gender equality education (Paeker, Wellings & Lazarus, 2009). In order to solve the problems of teenage pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, help adolescents understand homosexuality and bisexuality, and to promote students' physical and mental health development and academic progress, the United States created the National Education Standards in 2011. These standards provide children and primary and secondary school students with the most basic and core knowledge framework for gender education and continuous learning guidance that is clear, understandable and age-appropriate (Future of Sex Education Initiative, 2012). The New Zealand Government stated in the Early Childhood Curriculum that children should be guaranteed equal opportunities for learning, and that they should not be restricted by gender, region and economic conditions. In the national curriculum of 2007, it is further clear that the curriculum should be free of discrimination based on gender and race (Crown, 2007).

In Canada, British Columbia (BC) has issued a *Gender Education Guidance Manual* for public schools in 2008, which promotes gender inclusion and treats all students equally, creating the conditions of success for students of different genders. The handbook clearly defines a gender-equitable environment for school administrators and teachers and recommends educational activities that benefit gender equality. In addition, Ontario (ON) is also actively responding to the need for gender education. Launched in 2009, *Ontario's Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy* aims to build a gender-

inclusive campus environment and works to ensure the rights and interests of gender minorities. This particular policy document also helps those who find themselves in the education community identify and address discriminatory biases and systemic barriers in order to support the achievement and well-being of all students.

### **The Importance of Gender Education for Preschool Children**

Children's gender education can promote the physical and mental development of children's self and the steady development of society. The benefits of gender education for preschool children can be summarized in two ways. The first aspect is also the most direct, that is, the benefits of gender knowledge to children themselves, helping them understand their gender identity. Second, gender education can benefit others by teaching children to respect different gender groups and promote gender equality.

**Clarifying Self-Gender Identity.** One of the main tasks of early gender education is that children develop a good sense of self-gender identity. Studies have shown that gender is the first and most significant social feature of preschool children's development and plays an important role in individual self and social identity (Shively & De Cecco, 1977). Gender identity refers to the individual's understanding of one's own gender, which is the character, attitude, value orientation and behavioural characteristics formed under the influence of the gender norms of certain social cultures (Morrow & Messinger, 2006). The content of gender education can help children understand gender roles, gender behaviours, and gender expression so that they can further understand their gender positioning (Zelnik & Kim, 1982).

Gender education is also about inclusive schooling, in that it seeks to actively carve out

safe spaces in classrooms where all students are comfortable to speak out, reveal and discuss how they want to present themselves as gendered beings. Gender education, then, works to help children to perceive and understand their own gender, and enables them to fully express their gender identity. For instance, through the process of gender education, which aims at allowing children to adopt multiple identities, children can better and increasingly understand that they no longer have to operate within the gender binary. They themselves can express who they are as individuals without being locked into assumptions about being a particular kind of boy or a particular kind of girl. In addition, a sophisticated approach to gender education will also help those children who are questioning their gender identity. It would provide affirmation and validation, often in the face of social pressure. For transgender children, through gender education, they can bravely recognize their gender status, acceptance and expression, rather than be under social pressure to hide their true gender expression. Murchison et al. (2016) mention in “Supporting and Caring for Transgender Children” the serious consequences of children who cannot freely express their gender identity:

It is not uncommon for a child to feel pressure — at home, school or elsewhere — to hide their gender-expansive traits. This social pressure, when it exists, can be intense and very painful, leading children to hide their “true gender selves” altogether.

Families may even encourage the child to do so, hoping to protect them from bullying. Unfortunately, hiding one’s identity or gender-expansive traits can cause serious problems during childhood and later in life — including depression, anxiety, self-harm

and even suicide. (para. 8)

The research is quite clear, in that children who do not feel comfortable, safe, and confident in the way in which they represent gender often face challenges that other children do not. These particular challenges can lead some in this population to have mental health issues such as depression. Gender education therefore is crucial as the foundation for children to grow up happily. The benefits of gender education are not limited to this, and they also play an indispensable role in promoting gender equality in society. This is the topic I turn to now.

**Promoting Gender Equality.** Pre-school gender education can effectively prevent gender discrimination and promote children's awareness of gender equality. Often children are exposed to gender inequalities at home and in the communities where they live – through textbooks, the media, and the people who care for and support them; for example, unequal household assignments make children think that the only task for women is to do housework or that the only work appropriate for a man is yard work, barbecuing, fixing the car, or building something. Taken together, children who view these tasks as gendered on a daily and ongoing basis, may operate in the world from childhood to adulthood with limited ambitions. Gender discrimination is the unequal treatment and prejudice of one gender against another (Runyan & Peterson, 1999). UNICEF (n.d.) emphasizes gender equality that “Every child should have the opportunity to realize his or her full potential, but the gender inequalities they and their caregivers encounter in their lives prevent them from realizing their potential” (para. 1).

Wrigley (2003) believes that gender education is a fertile ground for children to grow up healthily and a major means for gender socialization. Gender education cannot only prevent the perpetuation of gender inequality, but also provide more development opportunities for girls. UNESCO (2007) points out that gender discrimination is a major obstacle to the realization of the equality of the rights of children, and the elimination of gender discrimination and the realization of social gender equality are fundamental objectives of child sex education. Gender education for preschool children can guide them to master scientific gender knowledge as early as possible, face up to the differences between different genders, reduce gender stereotypes, and finally promote gender equity.

In addition, early childhood gender education also plays a role in re-educating children's parents. A study shows that at the physiological age limit of preschool children, their cognitive level is not enough to fully understand the relevant concepts of gender education, so this requires the help and guidance of parents (Piaget, 1964). Does teaching preschool children gender education provide a re-education for parents? It can be seen that gender education for preschool children can alleviate the gender stereotypes of adults to a large extent.

### **The Predicament of Preschool Children's Gender Education**

A large number of preschool children's gender education studies have shown that there are deep-rooted gender stereotypes and gender biases in the environment in which young children live.

**Gender Stereotypes of Educators.** Hilliard and Liben (2010) found that teachers in early education institutions are the key influential factors for children to establish their own positive attitudes (pp. 1787-1798). If they are familiar with the rules of sexual identity and gender development, they will understand the active formation process of children's internal gender and will be more effective in eliminating gender bias in the educational environment and preventing the formation of gender stereotypes in children. Another study has shown that in highly gender-modelled classrooms, teachers using gender-based language to intervene in small-scale games for children aged three to five will significantly increase children's gender stereotypes, with less positive evaluations of other genders and reduce the frequency of games played by boys and girls together (Aina & Cameron, 2011). Because teachers have different gender expectations for children's behaviours, and according to these expectations, different rewards or punishments are given to boys and girls, the relationship between the quality of preschool teachers and the ability of children to adapt to caretaker schools highlights significant gender differences (Ewing & Taylor, 2009).

Teachers also 'do' gender. The gender stereotypes of teachers in the instruction of children's teaching are ultimately due to their own gender stereotypes. Ewing and Taylor (2009) found that most preschool teachers have gender stereotypes about the characteristics of male and female children. In a country-specific comparative study of teachers' gender perceptions, preschool teachers in Greece and England believe that gender education is important, but teachers in both countries believe that family is a



suitable place for gender education in young children. The responsibility of gender education for young children is mainly borne by parents (Menmuir & Kakavoulis, 1999). The gender stereotypes of preschool teachers and their gender stereotypes in teaching behaviours undoubtedly pose challenges to the development of gender equality education for preschool children.

**Gender Stereotypes in Children's Literature.** In addition to the gender stereotypes of educators, gender bias in children's literature is not uncommon. Flannery Quinn (2009) found that since the 1970s, gender stereotypes remain pervasive: men are often portrayed as active leaders, while women are portrayed as passive followers; men usually have vocational skills, while women are responsible for housework; even if women are engaged in the same profession as men, their personality traits, character literacy and behavioural characterization is still profoundly gender stereotyped. This is not to say there has not been some change in a positive way. In the mid-1990s, children's literature increased the proportion of women as protagonists, women occasionally appeared as workers in the workplace, and fathers were responsible for caring for children. However, at least on this particular issue, gender still remains a problem—the number of fathers who took care of their children in the books was significantly less than that of the mothers (Gooden & Gooden, 2001, pp. 89-101).

Gender patterning still prevails in children's literature (Gooden & Gooden, 2001; Quinn, 2009; Adams & O'Connell, 2011). According to a survey of award-winning children's literature, the ratio of male to female characters who are depicted as leaders in

the workplace is 3:1, and most women are described as wearing aprons (Narahara, 1998). This of course has a number of implications for children's reading of particular books like this. Representations of female characters grounded in traditional gender stereotypes may have the power to reduce girls' expectations of life (Narahara, 1998).

Let me just expand briefly on some of the other gender stereotypes found in children's books. Taylor (2003) found that characteristics of children's literature tend to have serious gender biases, aside from the ones mentioned above. For example, women's gender models are often portrayed as obedience-dependent, weak-shy, and male gender models are independent-strong, intelligent-rational, strong-brave. The Fitzpatrick (2010) study analyzed 889 characters in 56 colour picture books in the United States and found that most men were described as brave or as superheroes, that neutral sex behaviour is more likely to come from men, and that women are likely to be depicted as weak.

Halim and Ruble (2010) point out that children's stereotypes are often influenced by social culture. A psychologist, Shaw (1998), believed that children take the initiative to learn about gender in a way that shows they are active learners when it comes to understanding the social world:

Children are not passive observers. As they develop, children look for structure in their lives and are driven by an internal need to fit into this structure. They observe the world and try to develop sets of rules that they can apply to a wide variety of situations. A child's knowledge of his own gender and its implications is known as gender identity. As children acquire gender identities they also acquire stereotypical

ideas about what it means to be a boy or girl. (p. 24)

Educator's attitudes and behaviour, as well as the presence of stereotypes in children's literature, have seriously affected the normal cognitive development of some children. Studies such as Leinbach, Hort, and Fagot (1997) have found that preschool children have certain gender stereotypes for toys with certain gender meanings, such as bears and building blocks (male tendencies) or ribbons and butterflies (female tendencies). In addition, some researchers have found that children also have gender stereotypes in terms of occupations and emotions. Wilbourn and Kee (2010) who conducted a study in which they gave children gender-oriented names (such as Mary or Henry) and gender-oriented occupations (such as doctors or nurses or teachers). The results show that children have a certain degree of gender stereotypes that they have internalized. These studies show that the impact of gender stereotypes on young children often begins when they are very young, and powerfully shapes how they think about themselves, what school subjects to take and what careers to follow. With the influence of the surrounding environment, children can easily produce gender stereotypes. To avoid this phenomenon, children's gender education should be carried out as soon as possible as a way to get them to challenge gendered stereotypes so they can live fuller and richer lives. Children's gender education cannot be delayed.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Literature Review**

Through the exploration of gender education in the previous chapter, it can be seen that gender education plays a major role in both children's physical and mental development and social equality. In the following, I will go deep into the world of children's picture books, explore the history and importance of children's picture books, and how the concept of gender is reflected in the picture.

### **What is Children's Picture Book?**

Children's picture books are the art of conveying information or telling stories through a series of pictures combined with a few words or no words at all (Nodelman, 1988). Lukens (1999) mentions that in a high-quality picture book, the pictures will explain all. Picture books are profusely illustrated books in which both words and illustrations contribute to the story's meaning (Lynch-Brown, & Tomlinson, 2005). Michael Rosen (2007), poet, author, UK Children's Laureate 2007–9, gives a wonderful, passionate paean to the picture book in his 2007 Patrick Hardy lecture. Here is an extract:

I'm talking about — the picture book. There it sits like some massive inflorescence, budding and flowering and reproducing in all its delightful, complex and beautiful ways, all freighted with the same impulse – how to please, intrigue, and amuse young children and their careers and teachers. And it does this... in many different ways: visually, orally, textually and in any combinations of all three. Eye and ear are constantly challenged to look and listen here, there and everywhere. (para. 3)

From these elaborations, it is not difficult to see that the pictures in the picture book are not the attachments of the words, and the words are not the accessories of the

pictures: they are a whole of each other. That is to say, the pictures and texts in the picture book bear the task of narrative sensation and expression. David Lewis (2001) called for the use of the compound word "Picturebook" in his book *Reading Contemporary Picture Books*. He believes that only this word can reflect the overall sense of the picture book. The title of "picture-book" divides the essence of the picture and text in the picture book. David Lewis's point of view points out the most important features of the picture book.

Moreover, Perry Nodelman's (1988) book *The Language of Picture: The Narrative Art of Children's Picture Books* is still regarded as the theoretical basis of the most authoritative value in the picture book world. He gives a general summary analysis of various kinds of picture books for all ages, elaborates on creative design techniques, literary features, and picture features, and for the first time mentions the importance of the "pictures" in the picture books. The relationship between "text" and "picture" in the picture book shows that the picture is not an accessory to the text, but an additional "language" that complements the text and explains the contents of the book.

After Perry Nodelman (1988), Maria Nikolajeva (2000) once again elaborates the relationship between "picture" and "text" in picture books in her book *How Picture Books Work*. She believes that "pictures" are an important medium for the expression of children's literature and an important tool for children to access literature and culture. In her book, she further clarifies the theory of Perry Nodelman and formally introduces "graph theory," which means that "pictures" in picture books are not just explanatory

words but are telling the story. However, at this point in time, I think it will be worthwhile to provide a short history of children's books. I begin with what researchers have called the embryonic period.

### **A Short History of Children's Picture Books**

**Embryonic period.** Before the concept of children's education was developed, children always existed as an accessory to adults. Children at that time could not be the target of literature. Between the 14th and 16th centuries, the European Renaissance was occurring. While the value, dignity, and human beings became fully affirmed in their position in the world, they also formed a strong trend of respecting children. This trend of thought prompted some educators and thinkers to gradually consider reforming children's books. In 1658, the founder of the children's education concept, the Czech educator Comenius's, *World Illustrated* was published in accordance with his book on adapting to nature and intuitive teaching, using both pictures and words. This is considered the world's first illustrated children's book, and it also laid the foundation for European children's illustrated books. In the following century, from the 17th to the 18th century, with the popularization of engraving technology, children's books with a lot of illustrations appeared in Europe. However, the illustrations were black and white woodcut prints.

At the same time, the idea of "children's standard theory" began to grow and develop. In the 18th century, Jean Jacques Rousseau introduced the concept of children as a group of human beings that must be treated specially, so children's books must be specially made (Reynolds, 2014). In 1762, he first proposed in his book *Émile, ou De l'éducation* that

education should conform to the children's nature and should be personalized according to the physical and mental characteristics of children at different ages. This view directly affected the development trend of children's picture books, and gradually pushed children's picture books into the direction of "fun" and "children's perspective."

**Growth period.** According to Walter Crane, the picture and text of the picture book are in harmony (Hutton, 2010). His picture book style also follows this concept, paying attention to the fine binding design, delicate lines, and calm style. The representative works include *Baby's Opera* and *Children's Aesop's Fables* series (Hutton, 2010, pp. 27-43). Randolph J. Caldecott was dedicated to exploring the special relationship between the picture and the text in the picture book and practiced it many times. He emphasized that texts become visually integrated with pictures (Cech, 1983). In 1878, he painted illustrations for Edmund Evans's *The Diverting History of John Gilpin*. Among them is an illustration of John riding on a horse, which eventually became the symbol of the American Caldecott Medal (Kiefer, 2011). He created sixteen picture books in his life, which built the foundation of modern picture books and was praised as the "father of modern picture books" (Cech, 1983, p. xx). In 1877, Kate Greenaway's work *Under the Window* caused a sensation when it was published. The pictures she painted were not only fresh and cheerful, but also rich in content. Every detail in the painting complemented the plot, which let readers read the content of the story and also produced the pleasure of carefully reading the picture (Danger, 2009).

The works of these three children's writers influenced the creation of children's

picture books of later generations with their strong artistic charm. The creative process of this period fully demonstrates the influence of children's education and children's psychology on children's picture books. Writers began standing in the children's position to create their own ideas, trying to reflect children's thoughts. They valued children's thinking characteristics and children's worldview, and truly created literary works belonging to children.

**Boom period.** The 20th century was a glorious period for the creation of children's picture books. The women's liberation movement made people pay attention to women's rights and also to the importance and protection of children's rights. The children's picture book thus developed into an important branch of the field of children's literature and became one of the symbols of civilization in major countries.

In 1902, the work of the British painter Beatrix Potter, *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* was officially published (Mackey, 2003). The protagonist Peter Rabbit is vividly like a miniature of children: naughty and cute, and full of curiosity about everything. The story is full of childlike interest, the pictures are warm and classical, and the pale yellow main colour processing is just right for the reader to create a warm world. The book sold out on the market, and the publisher had to print another 20,000 copies, which was almost unprecedented in that era. The book quickly gained a worldwide reputation and became a masterpiece of early childhood literature (Taylor, Whalley, Hobbs, & Battrick, 1987).

During the two world wars, people's spiritual needs grew stronger. In order to help children get out of the shadow of war as soon as possible, the momentum of the picture



book did not diminish, but became more prosperous. Examples of wartime picture books are Ludwig Bemelmans's 1939 work *Madeline*; Esphyr Slobodkina's 1940 work *Caps for Sale* and Dubose Heyward's *The Country Bunny and the Little Gold Shoes*, which has never been out of print and has come to be regarded as a feminist and anti-racist statement (Kelly, 2010). In these excellent picture books, Wanda Gag's 1982 work *Millions of Cats* is a picture book with intergenerational significance (Kissel, 1989). This book has been widely circulated even until now for three reasons: first of all, she created a horizontally long picture book, which greatly expanded the image of the whole book. This was considered brave or unprecedented behaviour, but now it is widely borrowed and widely used. Secondly, she realized the theory of "illustration" with her original artistic expression technique. The pictures and texts in the whole book were integrated with each other, and truly reached the realm of "integration of images and texts"; third, she did not draw the book into a picture book that children read themselves. Instead, she drew a picture book that guides the adult to read it to the child. It can be said that she once again pushed the role of the picture book to a deeper level. It was no longer confined to the "children's position" but stood on this position to open the door to "parent-child education" (Brown, 2008, p. 84).

By the second half of the 20th century, children's picture books in Europe and the United States achieved a high level of sophistication. The Newbury Children's Literature Prize, Caddick Literature Prize, Kate Greenway Prize and International Andersen Prize had been established to highlight and reward, including public recognition, some of the

best in children's literature. This not only represented the world's recognition and attention to the status of children's picture books, but also motivated a group of literary artists to compete in the children's picture book business. Since then, there have been outstanding works such as Maurice Sendak's 1963 work *Where the Wild Things Are* and Eric Carle's 1969 work *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*. Sendak won the annual Caldecott Medal from children's librarians in 1964, recognizing *Wild Things* as the previous year's "most distinguished American picture book for children." He showed the same theme through a series of three works (*Where the Wild Things Are*, *In the Night Kitchen*, *Outside Over There*), that is, "How do children master various feelings – angry, boring, frustrated, jealous and trying to accept the facts of life" (Schnatz, 2015). *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* uses distinctive collage illustrations; it was a new style at the time, 'eaten' holes in the pages and simple text with educational themes – counting, the days of the week, foods, and a butterfly's life stages.

There have been a large number of related books and other products, including educational tools, created in connection to the book. The caterpillar's diet is fictional rather than scientifically accurate, but the book introduces concepts of Lepidoptera life stages where transformations take place including the ultimate metamorphosis from 'hungry caterpillar' to 'handsome butterfly', and it has been endorsed by the Royal Entomological Society. Under the influence of these excellent picture books, children's pictures and paintings in Europe and the United States were gradually becoming much less constrained by theme, unconstrained by style, and not restricted by size, becoming

one of the most individualistic literary genres (Russell & Anderson, 1994).

Throughout the development of picture books in Europe and America, the success of picture books not only depended on the efforts of artists and literary authors, but also many children's educators and child psychologists who promoted the creation and progress of children's picture books. In the world of children's picture books, pedagogy, psychology, literature and art became no longer just separate fields, but were integrated. This allowed readers to enjoy works that would become classics, such as Janette Sebring Lowrey's 1942 work *The Poky Little Puppy*; this curious little puppy was the star of the single all-time best-selling hardcover children's book in the US, having sold nearly 15 million copies by 2011. Sam McBratney's 1994 work *Guess How Much I Love You* was a 1996 ALA Notable Children's Book, has sold more than 28 million copies worldwide, and has been published in 53 languages (National Education Association, 2007). In addition to these classic works of the 1990s, some outstanding works in recent years have also become classics of a generation. For example, Oliver Jeffers' 2005 work *Lost and Found*, which won the Nestlé Smarties Book Prize Gold Award and was the Blue Peter Book of the Year. Another example is Elisha Cooper's 2017 work *Big Cat, little cat*, which was a 2018 Caldecott Honor. There are still many excellent classic picture books like this, so what are the positive effects of these excellent picture books on preschool children? This is what I want to explore in the next part.

### **The Influence of Picture Books on Preschool Children**

As the first literature in children's lives, picture books play an irreplaceable role in

preschool children's early reading education (Jalongo, 2004). The reading of picture books plays an important role in improving children's language learning ability. It is also the key to developing children's imagination and aesthetic ability (Huck, 2004; Johnston, 2000; Wells, 1985;). In picture books, there are the colours, the lines, the visual impact, the story, and the beauty of the language. Through these elements, picture books can stimulate children's curiosity and enhance children's interest in early reading. Of course, not only does high quality children's literature provide good stories for children, but also improves children's language skills, a topic I now turn my attention to.

**Improving language skills.** Picture books provide an aid to the teaching of language skills (e.g., Crain-Thoreson & Dale, 1992; McCormick & Mason, 1986; Stevenson & Fredman, 1990; Wells, 1985). The literacy skills of young children have been the focus of many families before they go to school (Teale & Sulzby, 1986). An excellent children's picture book not only pays great attention to the picture, but also painstakingly arranges the text. In order to cater to the artistic effect of the picture, the words are often accompanied by poetic temperament. Numerous studies have shown that the frequency of picture book reading in families and children's language skills are mutually reinforcing (e.g. Mason, 1980; Payne, Whitehurst, & Angell, 1994; Wells, 1985; Wells, Barnes & Wells, 1984). Children's picture books encourage parent-child readings, to enable children to slowly accept words in a relaxed and pleasant environment, and more importantly, to help parents better express the feelings in the story when they read aloud. Picture books let the children who are listening be able to

immerse themselves in reading more deeply. Because of this, the words in children's picture books are especially easy to remember for children, and every strange word is very likely to create an opportunity for learning. Moreover, children can understand the text themselves through the explanation of the picture and can also ask the adults who are reading it to them at any time. When children accumulate a certain amount of reading experience, they can improve their vocabulary. Experiments have shown that reading picture books can improve the vocabulary of preschool children (e.g. Elley, 1989; Jenkins, Stein, & Wysocki, 1984; Sénéchal, Cornell, 1993; Sénéchal, Thomas, & Monker, 1995; Vivas, 1996) and their narrative skills (Harkins, Koch, & Michel, 1994; Zevenbergen & Wilson, 1996). In addition to the improvement of language skills, the help of picture books on children's imagination is also indispensable.

**Developing imagination.** Another great benefit of children's picture book is the value of cultivating children's imagination. Studies have shown that children often start to make up their own stories when they look at children's picture books (Christina & Scott, 2002). There are two reasons for this phenomenon: first, the content of the story is beyond the scope of children's knowledge and experience; therefore, children only understand the story from their own perspective; second, the content of the story is beyond the range of emotions that children can bear, or the children are not satisfied with such story content, so they begin to imagine their own favourite storyline. That is to say, children's picture books can also stimulate children's desire to create stories. As children's knowledge and experience increase and their understanding becomes stronger,

children's imaginations will be developed. Peterson and Lach (1990) mention that picture books provide a macro resource for young children, through which they can discover the world outside their living space.

Imagination is not innate. It is acquired through direct or indirect experience and training (Vygotsky, 1990). As a perfect combination of literature and art, picture books provide children with a rich experience, which helps develop the imaginative capacity in children. The illustrations in the picture books can help children build an intuitive image, and children need to imagine the outline of the story and produce the plot content. On the basis of reading a large number of picture books, the children's imagination will develop rapidly.

Johnston (2000) explains the relationship between picture books and imagination:

Picture books anticipate and extend worldview, promote intellectual activity rather than passive viewing, and stimulate the creative pulling together of links as an act of making meaning. They leave gaps for readers to fill in their own images, to read and write their own story. These gaps breed literate behavior and grow the imagination. (para. 24)

When it comes to imagination, I have to mention Corinna Luyken's 2017 debut *Book of Mistakes*. The book says "set your imagination free" on the back cover. The author compensates for the ink dots and imperfect strokes that appear in the book in another way, making the illustrations full of creativity and fun. This book encourages children to try boldly, to not be afraid to face mistakes, and imagination makes everything possible. Moreover, JiHyeon Lee's 2015 work *Pool* is also a perfect combination of imagination and art. Through the author's bold imagination of the underwater world of the pool, the readers are led into a

virtual and dreamy world, which can stimulate children's imagination and activate children's thinking. It can be seen that picture books also play an important role in helping to develop children's imagination. Of course, the benefits of picture books for preschool children are not limited to this; they also contribute to the cultivation of aesthetics.

**Cultivating aesthetic ability.** Picture books foster children's aesthetic ability by combining literary and visual art forms (Huck, 2004). The illustrations in the picture book are works of art designed by the illustrator. The colour matching and spatial relationship can provide guidance for children's artistic appreciation, thus enhancing children's appreciation of art. O'Neil (2011) notes that children's aesthetic activities often rely on perceptual images. Picture books simply use pictures or combine images and texts to express content, which is in line with the young children's level of understanding. The picture book forms a complete story through vivid colours, unique composition, and dynamic images, which directly affects children's experience of the beauty of the art and helps them cultivate their aesthetic ability. Pripor et al. (2012) explored teachers' use of illustrations to develop children's visual literacy. They point out that children understand literary themes through visual language such as colour, line, shape and texture. They also learn how to mix and use artistic elements to form visual expression effects. Child (1964) found that prolonged exposure to visual art can enhance an individual's ability to appreciate beauty. The illustrations in picture books provide visual stimulation to children and establish a basic experience of visual beauty, so reading picture books can also be said to cultivate children's initial aesthetic feeling.

To sum up, the value of picture books for preschool children is not limited to the text

content, but more reflected in the unique expression through text and pictures. Picture books are close to children's lives and in line with children's cognitive levels. Picture books can enhance children's language skills, enrich children's imagination, and promote children's aesthetic ability.

### **How is the Gender Concept Reflected in the Picture Book?**

Children are active readers of literary works. Children's books enrich social awareness, values and beliefs, and are a vehicle for children to understand society and culture. Children's picture books are also a powerful tool for the socialization of gender roles (Bender & Leone, 1989). The distinctive character of the picture book provides a role model for children to form a specific gender concept, which has an important impact on the development of children's gender consciousness. The gender consciousness of preschool children occurs simultaneously when they read their favorite picture books (Easley, 1973). Therefore, parents and teachers must carefully help children to choose a picture book that is conducive to their physical and mental development. Because the picture book is the perfect combination of picture and text, the integration of gender education in the picture book can start from both illustration and words.

**Colour.** In an excellent picture book, illustrations can impress the reader. Colour is essential regardless of the cover or the illustrations of the inside pages. The connection between colour and gender has been the subject of research since the middle of the last century. It is often believed that pink and blue are usually gender-related (Frassanito & Pettorini, 2008; Huun & Kaiser, 2001; Paoletti & Kregloh, 1989). These stereotypes are



ubiquitous in childhood (Picariello, Greenberg, & Pillemer, 1990). For example, parents of newborn babies will choose toys and outfits for their children according to their gender. As society progresses, the environment in which children live is full of gender stereotypes: boys wear blue clothes, girls wear pink clothes (Bridges, 1993; Picariello et al., 1990; Pomerleau, Bolduc, Malcuit, & Cossette, 1990; Shakin, Shakin, & Sternglanz, 1985). Hurlbert and Ling (2007) argue that human preference for colour is determined by physiological factors. They suggest that women prefer pink because, in ancient times, women were mainly responsible for picking fruits, and they needed to distinguish red maturity from green plants, so they were naturally sensitive to pink.

Merchants also seized on this topic and began to create gendered marketing. Some publishers use “gender-specific colours” in the colour design of children’s picture books to classify children's books by colour. Such an approach would give children a gender bias in colour, which would create a stereotype that, for example, pink is a colour for girls, and blue is a colour for boys.

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## Figure 2

The picture books *Pinkalicious* and *Peterrific* were once controversial. Victoria Kann is the illustrator of both books. The two cover characters in Figure 2 are the protagonists in the picture books. The cover of *Pinkalicious* is mainly pink, featuring a cute little girl wearing a beautiful pink dress, a magic wand waving in her hand, a crown on her head, and a pink cupcake with a bite in her hand. *Peterrific's* cover is dominated by blue tones, and he holds

binoculars and blocks. Regardless of the content of the storybooks, the covers of these two picture books easily give strong gender cues to preschool children that pink is a “girl colour” and the blue is a “boy colour.”

In fact, for preschool children, there is no gender difference in colour preference (Burkitt, 2003). It is just that children's cognitive ability with colour is not mature enough, and bright colours can attract their attention. With the development of age, gender awareness, and cultural education, children actively seek and value gender-related information. The gender division of colour in society can lead to gender stereotypes in children (Burkitt, 2003; Silver et al., 1988). Colour should not belong to one sex or another, and picture books should not be divided between boys and girls.

Therefore, when parents choose a picture book for children, they cannot ignore the gender cues contained in the colour; they should try to choose a multi-coloured book instead of one that is a single colour, which may prevent children from reproducing gender stereotypes.

**Picture content.** As mentioned earlier, illustrations are a very important part of the picture book. Because of the limitations of children's ability to understand, illustrations are often more important than words for preschool children, and illustrations can effectively interpret the meaning of words (Lukens, 1999). Bodmer (1992) points out that illustrations' roles are to “expand, explain, interpret, or decorate a written text” (p. 72). The characterization and storytelling in children's picture books rely on illustrations, so the design of the illustrations largely reflects the theme of the picture book. Gender development is an

important part of the child's growth process, and children's picture books will provide a model for learning (Peterson & Lash, 1990). Therefore, whether the illustration content in the picture book contains positive guiding significance is also an important factor that every parent should consider.

In 1970, *I'm Glad I'm a Boy! I'm Glad I'm a Girl!* was published. The illustration of this book is boldly gender-segregated, and it is called the most gender-discriminating in the history of children's picture books (Peters, 2014). The illustrations in the book have a clear gender discrimination and stereotype of the image of boys and girls. As shown in Figure 3, the girl in the picture likes dolls, while the image of a boy likes a car. Studies show that as more boys choose to play in a selection activity that proves to be a traditional male role, more girls choose to play in a selection activity that proves to be a traditional female role; very few boys and girls choose to play in a choice that is proven to be neutral (Gwendolyn, 2000). This illustration subconsciously may convey the problematic gender orientation to the child that dolls are the exclusive toy for girls, and cars are the exclusive toy for boys.

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Figure 3

In another illustration, Figure 4, the girl appears as a stewardess (or flight attendant) and the boy is a pilot. This kind of typical gender discrimination is not uncommon in the current society. Most of the professional roles of women are the role of service, while the

professional roles of men tend to be leaders. This typical gender discrimination in children's illustrations can easily mislead preschool children into gender stereotypes.

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#### Figure 4

Deaux and Lewis (1984) propose four dimensions of gender stereotypes, in which the role behaviour dimension and career dimension point to gender stereotypes that lead people to think of a profession, or an item, as a gender-specific. This gender stereotype is a product of social culture. If a large number of children's picture books use pictures with gender bias or gender discrimination, it will cause irreparable misguidance for children, especially for preschoolers. In the preschool stage of active learning, there is no ability to know whether the book shows gender stereotypes or not.

In addition, the number of male and female characters in the picture also explains to a certain extent whether a picture book emphasizes the gender concept. Numerous studies have shown that the number of female characters in children's illustrations is much lower than that of male characters (e.g. Fisher, 1976; Nilsen, 1971, 1978; Weitzman et al., 1972). Although this situation improved in the 1980s, the ratio of male to female is still as high as 2:1 (e.g. Collins, Ingoldsby, & Dellmann, 1984; Dougherty & Engel, 1987; Kinman & Henderson, 1985; Williams, Vernon, Williams, & Malecha, 1987). The ratio of male and female characters in picture books is a point that parents may overlook, but the lack of female characters in the picture may further aggravate children's understanding of gender stereotypes. The books may lead children to believe

that men are more dominant in life, and women are usually silent.

The concept of gender can be reflected in the colour design and illustration content of picture books. For preschool children, illustrations and colours are more influential than words as a medium for transmitting information. Parents should avoid choosing a picture book with stereotypes in colour design and picture content.

**Text.** Text is also an important part of the picture book. Words and illustrations complement each other (Lynch-Brown, & Tomlinson, 2005). The text can express the author's thought more directly. If the author has a gender stereotype, it will be displayed in the text, thus affecting the child. The text content determines the content of the entire picture book. Parents can intuitively judge whether a picture book has gender education significance from the text content. A useful historical example is the text part of *I'm Glad I am a Boy! I'm Glad I am a Girl!* (Darrow, 1970):

Boys have trucks. Girls have dolls.

Boys are Cub Scouts. Girls are Brownies.

Boys are strong. Girls are graceful.

Boys are handsome. Girls are beautiful.

Boys are doctors. Girls are nurses.

Boys are policemen. Girls are meter maids.

Boys are football players. Girls are cheerleaders.

Boys are pilots. Girls are stewardesses.

Boys are heroes. Girls are heroines.

Boys are Presidents. Girls are First Ladies.

Boys fix things. Girls need things fixed.

Boys can eat. Girls can cook.

Boys invent things. Girls use what boys invent.

Boys build houses. Girls keep houses.

Boys are grooms. Girls are brides.

Boys are fathers. Girls are mothers.

I'm glad you're a girl. I'm glad you're a boy.

We need each other. (pp. 1-20)

Although this text is an older one, published in 1970, it does serve as a very good example that clearly illustrates how gender has been encoded in children's books in a way that supports a gender dichotomy. The text of this book is based on clear gender dualism, which makes a detailed distinction between boys and girls from eating habits to career choices, but in a way that serves the interests of boys and men. The occupations and hobbies elaborated in the sentences perfectly explain the gender stereotypes that position men as active doers in the world, with women as largely passive observers. This book was read by children, who are now adults, narrowing the option of who they think they can be (Gazda, 2015). Although this book is no longer in print, it can be used as a negative textbook to warn publishers and parents. Books containing gender stereotypes are destined to be eliminated by the times.

In addition to the intuitive textual content that may contain erroneous gender

orientation, the words used in the text may also have gender biases, which are often not easily detected. A summary of the texts of 30 award-winning children's books by Turner-Bowker (1996) found that there are many high-frequency words used in children's books to describe female characters and male characters. The top three adjectives describing the most frequently used women are 'beautiful,' 'frightened,' and 'worthy'; the top three adjectives used to describe men are 'fat,' 'big,' 'hungry'; these words reflect the current society's shallow cognition of female and male traits as shown in following table:

Twelve Most Commonly Used Adjective for Female and for Male Characters			
Female Adjectives	Frequency	Male Adjectives	Frequency
beautiful	17	fat	15
frightened	8	big	9
worthy	7	hungry	9
sweet	6	horrible	8
dear	5	fierce	7
weak	4	great	6
angry	4	tired	5
Heart-loving	3	terrible	5
wicked	3	sad	5
sick	3	furious	4
kind	3	brave	4
scared	3	proud	4

(Turner-Bowker, 1996, p. 473)

Helmreich and Stapp (1974) point out that the external dimensions of gender stereotypes suggest that women should be gentle, beautiful, and quiet, while men's appearance dimensions suggest that men should be tall and strong. These seemingly safe vocabularies potentially express the gender temperament expectations of the mainstream society. These expectations may limit the development of children's gender cognition.

To sum up, the gender concept can be reflected in the colour design, illustration and text content of picture books. Picture books with gender stereotypes will limit the development of children's gender awareness and influence their correct understanding of gender. Kite (1993) mentions that the acquisition of both gender and gender stereotypes is a gradual process. If children read the picture books with gender stereotypes from an early age, the biased gender concept in the picture book will subtly influence children's behaviours and thoughts, which will adversely affect their future life and growth. Therefore, when parents choose picture books for children, they should carefully screen them to avoid choosing a book with gender stereotypes, so that the picture books can achieve real educational value.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Discussion**

#### **Picture Books Analysis**

Gender stereotypes appear in picture books because of the influence of traditional gender concepts on authors or illustrators; that is, in most cases book writers are not likely



aware of gender stereotypes. Although the author may not have this intent when it comes to gender, this concept will be further strengthened in children's literature, thus forming a circular mechanism of gender stereotypes. When parents choose picture books for children, in addition to avoiding these "non-gender-conscious" picture books, they can also choose picture books that are consciously integrated into the gender concept. The picture books *Oliver Button is a Sissy* and *Princess Smarty-Pants* respectively, had two images that are regarded as "heterogeneous" for the "boys" and "girls" under the traditional definition. In both cases, these books work to undermine traditional gender stereotypes in way that opens up possibilities for children to think differently about their lives. Therefore, this paper selects these two picture books. These books are example to analyze the establishment of traditional children's gender awareness. As an attempt, this kind of picture book tries to subvert the traditional child gender consciousness and pay attention to the growth of children in marginal positions, which provides us with a good reference.

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Figure 5

*Oliver Button Is a Sissy* by Tomie dePaola (1979) tells the story of a little boy, Oliver, who does not do "normal" boy things. He is not very athletic, but he likes to walk in the woods, draw pictures, wear costumes and put on plays, read, and most of all, dance. His parents enroll him in a dance class, "...for the exercise," says his father. The other boys tease him and call him names, and the girls have to come to his rescue. Oliver practices and practices his dancing, and in the end, even though he does not win the local talent show, everyone realizes that Oliver is special and a star. Like in the majority of children's books,

the protagonist in *Oliver Button* is a child, presumably the same age as the reader, but not necessarily. Tunnell and Jacobs (2008) believe that this characteristic of children's literature is in direct correlation with the "importance of identifying with one's own life" (p. 129) when reading texts. Because Oliver Button is likely the same age as the reader, he is a relatable character, even to those children who do not identify with his personality traits and interests.

The specific expression of subversion of the traditional children's gender concept in the book is reflected in the subversion of the traditional boy image. In the traditional sense, the boy is required to be active and brave, but Oliver is very quiet, likes reading and drawing, does not like traditional boys' games, but instead skipping rope and dancing, which are defined as girls' activities. When the surrounding boys laugh at him as a sissy and bully him, it is the girls who help him, which subverts the traditional idea that only boys can protect the weak girls.

Oliver represents a gender temperament that does not conform to the public's aesthetics when it comes to be a boy. Oliver's process from being excluded to being finally recognized and accepted by everyone reflects the acceptance of Oliver's unique gender consciousness by the mainstream gender order in a way that broadens out the definition of masculinity. This book encourages children in the same situation by praising differences, but differences is that matter. Despite powerful cultural messages found in media and elsewhere that tend to reinforce narrow versions of masculinity and femininity, there is nothing wrong with different gender expressions. Everyone should insist on being themselves and follow their own hearts, as the expression of gender can be diverse.

Figure 6

*Princess Smartypants* was written by British children's literature writer and illustrator Babette Cole (1996). She often chooses a unique theme to create, which is different from the traditional values and gives the child a multi-dimensional view of the world (Cole, 2009).

*Princess Smartypants* shows that girls do not have to marry but also can live independently. This story is different from *Oliver Button Is a Sissy* because of its fantasy elements. The story ends with the prince becoming a toad, and the princess returns to her happy life. The author emphasizes the realization of the gender consciousness of the maverick princess in this book.

In this picture book, the subversion of traditional children's gender concept is embodied in the subversion of the image of girls who love beauty. Princesses in fairy tales are beautiful, wearing fancy dresses, with all kinds of elaborate jewelry, even Cinderella finally. Under this influence of such fairy tales, girls also dream that they are the beautiful princess. However, *Princess Smartypants* has completely subverted the image of this beautiful princess. The princess never wears complicated and gorgeous dresses but likes to wear trousers. She wears all kinds of trousers, breeches, bibs, etc. Her clothes seem to be incompatible with the idea of a princess, but they match the actions of Princess Smartypants and lay the groundwork for the story. Moreover, in the traditional impression of people, girls often like all kinds of cute animals, such as puppies, kittens, etc., while the princess in the book likes elephants, frogs, slugs, mice, and crocodiles. These are the animals that girls are afraid of in their traditional impressions. Princess Smartypants does the opposite and treats them as her own pets. This princess breaks the stereotype of females and creates a brave and independent female image

for children.

These two picture books are regarded as a challenge to the traditional gender concept because they try to break the current gender stereotype. Gender stereotypes are the product of social culture (Halim & Ruble, 2010); for example, boys are required to be independent and extroverted, and girls are trained to be gentle and restrained. This gender stereotype makes boys have to hide their soft and weak side, while girls have to hide their strong side. The picture book *Oliver Button Is a Sissy* shows the soft and quiet side of men, and *Princess Smartypants* shows the independent and brave side of women. The protagonists in these two books represent children's unique gender consciousness. It is an attempt to challenge the traditional gender order through its suppression or acceptance in the stories. For children, these two picture books can help them build a more mature and complete gender awareness, provide them with a clearer understanding of their own possibilities, give them a clearer understanding of gender roles, and learn to accommodate each person's different gender expressions, rather than being completely restricted under the constraints of traditional gender order.

### **Proposing a Picture Book Gender Literacy Course for Adults**

Studies show that there are gender stereotypes in a large number of children's books (Turner-Bowker, 1996). Children's stereotypes are influenced by cultural and media information and become more complex as they age (Huston, 1983). As a part of children's literature, picture books shoulder the task of popularizing knowledge and broadening horizons for young children. If there is a gender stereotype in a children's picture book, it

will mislead the child into traditional and unrealistic gender awareness. Preschool children have a limited level of cognition and no independent ability to distinguish whether a picture book is suitable for them. In this case, how should adults ensure that preschool children read a picture book without gender stereotypes? In this section, I designed a course for educators and parents to help them understand the picture book and how to distinguish whether the picture book is conducive to fostering children's gender perspectives.

Teaching steps	Educators	Parents
1.The concept of children’s picture books	Help teachers and parents to clarify the concept of children's picture books and clarify the difference between children's picture books and other illustrated books.	
2. The educational value of children's picture book	Help teachers and parents clarify the educational value of children's picture books. It is suggested to explore the books from the aspects of emotional training, imagination, critical thinking, language skills and other aspects, so that they understand that the educational value of children's picture books is not limited to reading and literacy, but throughout the entire process of children's physical and mental growth.	
3.How to choose picture books for preschool children?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Is there a phenomenon of “girl colour” or “boy colour” in the picture book?</li> <li>2. Does the protagonist in the illustrations have a career or hobby that conforms to gender stereotypes?</li> <li>3. Does the textual content of the picture book reflect the concept of gender equality?</li> <li>4. Is gender biased vocabulary used in the text?</li> </ol>	

	5. Is the ratio of male to female characters in the picture book balanced?	
4.The use of children’s picture books	Encourage teachers to integrate picture books into pre-school education courses, so that picture books can play their greatest educational role.	Help parents understand parent-child reading; let parents participate in the growth of children in the process of guiding children to read.

## Conclusion

With the deepening of human understanding of gender variability, the dualistic gender concept has been greatly shaken around the world. It has been realized that although physiological differences may exist, they are not enough to become the decisive factor restricting individual development and social status. "Gender" is similar to other concepts of human rights, such as religion and race. It is the subjective right and freedom of development for every person in the “gender” dimension in today’s society. Without legal prejudice, a person's choice of any gender image, gender behaviour and gender role should be equally respected. As part of education, gender education has become more and more important to schools and parents. Gender education guidance is conducive to children's physical and mental health. It not only helps preschool children to establish gender awareness and bravely express their gender roles, but also to respect other people's gender choices, thus promoting gender equality development. The theory of gender development proves that children have a

certain gender awareness in their early childhood, and children are susceptible to the surrounding environment (Ruble & Martin, 2003). Therefore, promote gender education for children can reduce the impact of traditional gender stereotypes. The question then becomes how to effectively carry out gender education based on the physical and mental characteristics of preschool children.

Children's picture books are an important way for children to receive knowledge. As a source of children's enlightenment, they can be seen as encyclopedias, transmitting knowledge to children through their rich content, and enhancing children's cognitive ability. The colourful illustrations in picture books and the elaborate storylines not only give children a visual aesthetic feast, but also enhance their language skill and catalyze their imagination and creativity. Narahara (1998) points out that picture books provide models for self-identification of children's gender roles. However, it has been found that not all children's picture books can provide gender guidance to children, because there are gender stereotypes in these picture books. This kind of picture books emphasize that men are engaged in more important work, take more responsibility and are more active, while women are engaged in auxiliary work, which is in a state of dependency and more passive. These gender stereotypes from picture books can seriously affect children's gender perception and gender expression. Children may suppress their gender expression and even discriminate against children who do not meet traditional gender expectations. In the long term, this may cause serious psychological problems during children's growth. Parents and teachers should be careful while choosing picture books for children; additionally, they should look for the books that

consciously integrate gender education.

In conclusion, for preschool children, picture books incorporating gender education are a direct and effective way to convey gender knowledge; moreover, it is an easy way for children to understand and accept gender concepts. Parents and educators should be aware of the importance of gender education and picture books for children. In-depth understanding and analysis of the content of picture books from a gender perspective can help children choose picture books with scientific gender guidance, so that children can get knowledge from picture books and promote their gender concepts at the same time. I know that gender education is difficult to achieve obvious results in a short period of time, but I believe that in the near future, through the attention and efforts of all human beings on gender issues, our descendants will eventually live in an equal, free and harmonious world.

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