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## Missing Persons' Report! Where are the Transgender Characters in Children's Picture Books?

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# Missing Persons' Report! Where are the Transgender Characters in Children's Picture Books?

*Ashley Lauren Sullivan and Laurie Lynne Urraro*

When thinking about the factors that impact early childhood education, we invariably reflect on how the curriculum represents (or fails to represent) issues of gender, and specifically how gender is portrayed in classroom picture books. What role does reading curricula play in relation to gender? Does the corpus of books available in the classrooms provide an accurate representation of the gender spectrum? That is, does the elementary classroom book selection include non-heteronormative gender ontologies? What trends or patterns of gender emerge in the picture books selected for the early childhood/elementary education classroom?

These queries drove our research to investigate the holdings of picture books for children ages three to eight that contain characters who exhibit a range of gender identities. We specifically queried what, if any, transgender characters appear in these texts. Because there are 56.6 million Spanish-speaking individuals<sup>1</sup> living in the United States as of 2015 (U.S. Census Bureau), and, 3.4% of Spanish-speaking individuals identify as LGBTQ, we found it imperative to consider the number of texts available in both English and Spanish (Gates & Newport, 2012) and those that are bilingual. Additionally, regarding LGBTQ issues that affect Spanish-speaking individuals, to quote Samantha Rosenthal in *LGBT Hispanics Juggle Heritage and Sexuality*, “According to the U.S. Census Bureau, Spanish-speaking individuals constitute 17 percent of the U.S. population as of July 2013, making them the largest ethnic or racial minority. It is estimated that by the year 2060 that proportion will increase to 31 percent. Among the total population, a report from the UCLA Williams Institute found that an estimated 1.4 million U.S. Spanish-speaking adults—or 4.3 percent—are LGBT.” Our overarching research project seeks to answer the question: In what manner are English- and Spanish-speaking trans characters represented in children's books?

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<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this paper, we shall use the term ‘Spanish-speaking individuals’ instead of ‘Hispanic individuals’, due to the negative impression the latter term often connotes.

## **LGBTQ Issues in Education**

Although there is increasingly more acceptance of LGBTQ issues in educational curricula today, transgender characters continue to escape representation in picture books (Naidoo, 2012). This is the case not only with children's books written in English, but also in Spanish. To date, there are very few trans characters in picture books in English, almost none in Spanish, and no bilingual English-Spanish children's picture books. Research tells us that a lack of representation of minority groups in picture books is harmful to the children who belong to that group (Hamilton, Anderson, Broaddus & Young, 2006).

Our study aims to query this lacuna, in order to describe a phenomenon that we refer to as the "spectral status" of trans characters in children's bilingual picture books. We gathered over 60 English, Spanish, and English-Spanish children's picture books and examined them critically for multiple components, such as instantiations of trans characters, plot arcs, characters' gender identities and expressions, character race, and the function of other characters present in the texts.

This paper discusses our findings with regard to the types of transgender individuals present in children's books, what their roles were within the texts, and what the overarching ramifications of inclusion in these texts were for readers<sup>2</sup>. Our project ultimately seeks to promote understanding of and sensitivity toward multiple gender ontologies, particularly with regard to trans characters, in the hopes of advancing societal acceptance and approval of such gender identities and expressions.

## **LGBTQ Facts and Statistics**

One in 500 children in the U.S. identify as 'transgender' (Brill & Pepper, 2008) and 1.4 million U.S. Spanish-speaking adults identifying as LGBTQ (Gates, 2011). With this upsurge of out LGBTQ individuals, there has been an expressed need for recognition of such individuals in children's books. Research as early as the 1970s (Ashton, 1978) has demonstrated that stereotypical presentations of gender in children's books negatively influence readers' behaviors and attitudes (Ashton, 1978; Schau & Scott, 1984; Anderson & Hamilton, 2005; Hamilton, Anderson, Broaddus, & Young, 2006). Over the last forty years, very little research has been devoted to LGBTQ youth of color, and even less to transgender youth of color (Cahill & Holmes, 2004) indicating that research that identifies such deficiencies and seeks to ameliorate them is a priority.

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<sup>2</sup> The thrust of this paper is to present the data from our findings which pointedly signal certain conclusions when it comes to the make-up of children's picture books that contain non-normative gender ontologies. These findings will be discussed later in this paper.

## Theoretical Underpinnings of LGBTQ Ontologies

While society has historically pressured children to arrive at conclusions about their gender, “young children are still actively in the process of constructing these concepts” (Casper & Schultz, 1999). LGBTQ youth have faced a great many obstacles. For example, there is little acknowledgement of trans youth in school curricula and daily education (Singh & Burnes, 2009). LGBTQ youth at school are two times as likely to be bullied than their heterosexual counterparts, often times are more harshly disciplined by schools, and are at increased risk for issues with mental health, truancy, and attaining higher education (GLSEN Survey, 2017). As a result of school-related difficulties, LGBTQ youth are two times as likely to be placed in juvenile detention, with 20% of those in the juvenile delinquent system identifying as LGBTQ and 3.2 million LGBTQ youth at risk for ending up in the juvenile and criminal justice systems (GLSEN Survey, 2017). Transgender children are particularly likely to experience these difficulties due to heterosexist worldviews and the influence of rigid gender role dichotomies that do not allow for gender variations (Baker, 2002; DePalma & Atkinson, 2009).

Nonetheless, with a higher level of societal tolerance than ever before, more young people are able to identify with and embrace identities that are non-normative, non-binary, or queer. One of the theoretical underpinnings that helps to elucidate understanding of a more fluid gender ontology is queer theory. Emerging in the 1990s, queer theory arose from postmodern theory in response to socio-political currents and events in the previous decades as well as psychological and psycho-social studies of the self. From queer theory, we have gained a deeper understanding of the fluidity and socially constructed nature of gender.

Postmodernists such as Judith Butler (2006), Monique Wittig (1992), and Kate Bornstein (1994) stress the importance of shifting interest in signification from the middle to the margins, where interstitial gender ontologies are located and negotiated. Such theories of gender have made it possible to explain and argue for non-cisgender subjectivities that do not always subscribe to the heterosexual binaries in society.

For our project, we are especially interested in the tenets of queer theory that view the subject not as biologically predetermined but socially constructed, meaning that bodies are open to social forces and currents that act upon them, and that there is no one definable or static means by which bodies can or should be defined—they are multiple, varied, and diverse.

## **Actualizing our project: From book collection to data analysis (see Appendix)**

In the summer/fall of 2015, we sought to locate all existing Spanish, English, and bilingual Spanish/English picture books for 3- to 8-year-old children containing transgender characters. We began with a search on Amazon.com and a basic Google search. We utilized a list of LGBTQ books located in the *Rainbow Family Collections* text (Naidoo, 2012). From the lists of LGBTQ books, we selected only the picture books that contained transgender characters. We also gathered information about independently published books from transgender support groups on social media.

Upon completion of these searches, we had a short list of texts in English, and none in Spanish. Although we believe that we located all books that exist in English, we acknowledge that there may be books that we did not find. However, if we were unable to locate them with all of our connections and resources, it would probably be even more difficult for a young child or a parent without university resources to find them.

We remained curious about whether any Spanish-language picture books contained transgender characters. As we could not locate any in the United States, we began contacting bookstores and libraries in progressive cities in Spain. This search yielded little, but led us to believe that we had located all books in Spain on this topic.

At the conclusion of our search, we had located 65 texts. We finished our project in October of 2015. Any books published after that date were not included in our study.

### **Initial Data Collection**

Using inductive content analysis (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008), we categorized data from the books using an Excel spreadsheet. We began with basic, demographic categories. These included: title of the book, publication year, author, language in which the text was written, assumed biological sex of main character/s, gender identity of main character/s (i.e., one's internal cognitive and emotive identification with a particular gender), and gender expression of main character/s or the external ways in which characters express their gender.

## Identification of Themes

Then we sat together and read the books. We noticed some common plot themes. As these themes emerged, we incorporated associated categories into our data collection. The following areas were examined: whether or not the characters were human; the level of support (supportive, non-supportive, bullying, eventual acceptance) of parents, peers, and siblings; whether the character demonstrated a special talent or saved the day before being accepted; and whether there was a medical professional present to explain the main character's gender transition to others and encourage support for this transition (thus instantiating what we refer to as the 'hero narrative').

## Finding a Rainbow: Categorizing the Characters

We acknowledge the richness and complexity of the gender spectrum (Bornstein & Bergman, 2010). Interestingly, the books we analyzed likewise depicted characters occupying different loci on this spectrum of gender. This was surprising, as we had not imagined how varied the characters' genders would be. Four major trends emerged with regard to gender identity of the characters in the 65 books.

We identified one group of characters as "non-binary," referring to a proclivity towards items and/or interests that are usually associated with a gender that is not assigned to them at birth. However, these individuals appear comfortable in their assigned birth gender, as indicated by utilizing names/pronouns/attire typically associated with their birth gender. An example of a text with non-binary characters is In *Christina's Toolbox* by Dianne Homan (1981), in which a young girl, Christina, enjoys making functional objects such as a bird feeder with tools. For example, "Christina loved to work with things in her toolbox. She could lift the smooth wooden lid and see her shiny tools inside ready to help her build things and fix things" (p. 4). Twenty-seven (42%) of the sixty-five books contained non-binary characters.

For the purpose of this article, we have excluded the findings related to only the non-binary texts. While they give us a more complete look at characters across the gender spectrum, we wanted to focus on transgender and gender-creative characters as well as characters whose gender is undisclosed and who, in the larger world, continue to struggle with bullying, lack of access to medical care, and increased rates of suicide (Kosciw, Greytak, Diaz, & Bartkiewicz, 2010).

We termed a second set of characters "gender-creative," that is, those individuals who blur gender boundaries by engaging in activities, wearing attire, or expressing interests in areas usually denoted as

clearly masculine or feminine. These characters may not necessarily wish to transition and also may feel comfortable with the name assigned to them at birth. They may also be gender fluid, not adhering strictly to typical gender bifurcations. An example of a text with gender-creative characters is *My Princess Boy* by Cheryl Kilodavis (2011), in which a young boy (referred to using male pronouns and adjectives) enjoys wearing dresses and looking like a princess. For example, the mother in the story states, “When we go shopping he is the happiest when looking at girls’ clothes” (*My Princess Boy*, para. 7). Gender-creative characters made up 19 (29%) of the books analyzed.

We termed a third group of characters “transgender.” We used this descriptor to discuss the characters that will transition, are in the process of transitioning, or have transitioned from their assigned birth gender to another gender. An example of a text with transgender characters is *I Am Jazz* by Jessica Herthel and Jazz Jennings, in which the main character (Jazz) was assigned male at birth but is in the process of transitioning to female, uses a female name, wears feminine clothing, and has a feminine identity. Quoting the text, “Mom and Dad told me I could start wearing girl clothes to school and growing my hair long. They even let me change my name to Jazz” (*I Am Jazz*, para. 16). Transgender characters were present in only 12 (18%) of the 65 books.

The remaining seven books (11%) contained characters whose gender was undisclosed, or contained multiple characters with varying gendered ontologies.<sup>3</sup> For example, in the book *Are You a Boy or Are You a Girl?* (Savage & Fisher, 2015), a friend of the main character Tiny (whose gender is never disclosed) asks: “Tiny, are you a boy or are you a girl?” Tiny responds, “I am me!” (*Are You a Boy or Are You a Girl?*, para. 21, 22). In *All I Want To Be Is Me* (Rothblatt, 2011), multiple characters express the need for acceptance for who they are: “Don’t call me he. Don’t call me she. Please don’t assume who I must be. ‘Cuz I don’t feel like just one of these. I want to be all of me. All I want to be is me” (*All I Want To Be Is Me*, para. 5).

Of the 65 books, the following were available in Spanish: one gender undisclosed book, three gender non-binary books, two gender-creative books, and one transgender book. We did not find any bilingual Spanish-English books containing non-binary, gender-creative, or transgender characters.

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<sup>3</sup> For the purpose of discussion and ability to compare samples of more similar sizes, the books containing characters with multiple genders and the books containing characters with undisclosed genders are often combined.

## Findings: Basic Demographic Information

Demographics of the 12 Transgender Books			
<b>Dates of Publication</b>	10/12 (83%) 2010-2015	2/12 (17%) 2007-2009	
<b>Language</b>	11 English	1 Spanish	0 Bilingual
<b>Perceived Race</b>	1 African-American	1 Spanish-speaking	10 White
<b>Assumed Biological Sex</b>	7 Male	4 Female	1 Undisclosed
<b>Gender Identity</b>	7 Female	4 Male	1 Transgender
<b>Human or Non Human Characters</b>	10 Human	2 Non-Human	

\*The above chart reflects the basic demographics of the transgender books only.

Of the 12 books containing transgender characters, only one book was written in Spanish and there were no bilingual texts. The Spanish book is only available in Spain, and it took nearly nine months to obtain a copy, even with the help of Penn State’s extensive library system.

There were 19 books with gender-creative characters, two of them in Spanish, and none were bilingual. There were five books with characters whose gender is undisclosed.<sup>4</sup> One of these books was available in Spanish and no books were bilingual. Two books contained multiple characters (with different gender identities).<sup>5</sup> No books were written in Spanish or contained bilingual text.

The stark absence of transgender books was startling to us. Over 20,000 children’s books are published each year in the United States (American Library Association, 2010). We expected (perhaps hoped) to find more. The books written about transgender characters represented roughly 0.015% of the books published in 2014. Yet, transgender people account for 0.3 % of the population (Gates, 2011).

### Publication Dates

There have been transgender people since the beginning of time (Borstein & Bergman, 2010). However,

4        Such as *Meet Polkadot*, in which the main character’s gender is never specified clearly

5        Such as *All I Want To Be Is Me*, that presents multiple characters, each of which possesses a different gender constitution



until quite recently, trans people were unable to find representations of themselves within English and Spanish children's picture books. Of the few books that do exist, most of them were published quite recently. The first book containing a transgender character was published in 2009.

## Quality of Books/Accessibility

Of the 12 books that included transgender characters, the majority were published utilizing small, independent, or self-published presses. *I Am Jazz* is the only book that we found to be widely available at mainstream bookstores and libraries in the United States. This is likely due to Jazz Jennings's exposure as a public figure in the media and its association with a reputable press (Herthel, Jennings & McNicholas, 2014). We were surprised that several of the books contained glaring grammar and spelling errors. Several of the books had rudimentary illustrations, much less eye-catching and enticing than those created by artists utilized by large presses. This poor quality of several of the texts is important to note. Perhaps for reasons of content that was deemed controversial, lack of quality, or both, none of the books about transgender characters have won any major children's picture book awards.

The books included in this study were largely inaccessible to children due to limited printing and because libraries, bookstores, schools, and childcare centers typically do not stock them on their shelves. They are available for purchase on the internet (where we located several of them), but this is prohibitive for many families, due to cost and limited access to online book selling websites. Some of the books were available through our large university's extensive interlibrary loan system. In most cases (with the exception of *I Am Jazz*, which we were able to find at our local public library), the "more trans"/less heteronormative the books, the harder they were to find.<sup>6</sup> Children in the United States without local advocates for the inclusion of these books might encounter few, if any of these texts during their early childhood years.

## Perceived Race

Determinations of race in each text were made according to our own perception of the race of the characters. And as is true in the majority of children's picture books published in the United States, the majority of the characters from the books in our study were white (67%) (see Figure 1). Of the 12

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<sup>6</sup> Examples of 'more trans' and 'less heteronormative' books would include *Piratrans Carabarro*, or even *When Kathy is Keith*, both of which (especially the Spanish title) were difficult to locate. Such books present characters who do not at all fit within the gender binary of 'masculine' or 'feminine' but rather blur such boundaries and proffer characters with more fluid gender ontologies

books containing transgender characters, only one included an African-American character and only one contained a Spanish-speaking character (and this was the book only available in Spain). When children of color are underrepresented in children's picture books, it sends the message that these children have less value; their stories are less important to tell (Creany, 1993).

#### Figure 1. Perceived Race of Transgender Characters

- White – 8/12 books (66.7%)
- African-American – 1/12 books (8.3%)
- Spanish-speaking – 1/12 books (8.3%)
- N/A – 2/12 books (16.7%)

#### Perceived Race of Gender-Creative Characters

- White – 9/19 books (47.4%)
- African-American – 1/19 books (5.3%)
- Spanish-speaking – 1/19 books (5.3%)
- N/A – 8/19 books (42%)

#### Perceived Race of Multiple Gender and Gender Undisclosed Characters

- White – 3/7 books (42.8%)
- Spanish-speaking – 1/7 books (14.3%)
- Many races – 2/7 books (28.6%)
- N/A – 1/7 books (14.3%)

#### Perceived Race of All Characters (including Non-Binary)

- White – 36/65 books (55.4%)
- Spanish-speaking – 5/65 books (7.7%)
- African-American – 4/65 books (6.2%)
- Many races – 3/65 books (4.6%)
- N/A – 17/65 books (26.1%)

## Assumed Biological Sex/Gender Identity

Of the books where characters' biological sex was known, the majority were assigned male at birth.<sup>7</sup> In

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<sup>7</sup> We acknowledge that chromosomes and biological sex are one piece of the complex ontology of human beings. We

the books with transgender characters, this was particularly telling. Seven out of 12 characters (58.3%) were assigned male, while only 4 of 12 characters (33.3%) were assigned female at birth. One of the 12 characters had a biological sex that was undisclosed by the author. In the United States, data shows a higher prevalence of male-assigned transgender persons than female-assigned transgender persons (Beemyn & Rankin, 2011). However, this bias towards male-assigned characters leaves female-assigned transgender children less able to find representations of themselves in books.

#### Transgender Characters<sup>8</sup>

- Female – 4/12 books (33.3%)
- Male – 7/12 books (58.3%)
- Undisclosed – 1/12 books (8.3%)

#### Gender-Creative Characters

- Female – 8/19 books (42%)
- Male – 11/19 books (58%)

#### Undisclosed/Multiple Characters

- Undisclosed – 5/7 books (71%)
- Multiple – 2/7 books (29%)

When seeking to identify the characters' gender identities, we looked for preferred pronouns, chosen as opposed to given names, and gender expression. Unlike biological sex (usually) and gender expression, gender identity is unseen. It is only truly known by the individual, it can be impacted by biological sex, and it can impact gender expression; however there is not always a direct correlation between gender identity and these characteristics. For example, in the gender-creative books we studied, 8/19 books (42.1%) of the characters were assigned female at birth, 6/19 books (31.5%) had a feminine gender expression, and 10/19 books (52.6%) identified as male.

#### Gender Identity of Transgender Characters

- Female – 7/12 books (58.3%)
- Male – 4/12 books (33.3%)
- Trans – 1/12 books (8.3%)

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recognize that children are mis-gendered at birth, and assumptions are made based on genitalia alone. We understand the challenges around the term “biological sex,” and use it for ease of discussion, although we agree that the term can be problematic.

<sup>8</sup> For all statistical charts, the first number is the number showing the present evidence, and the second number is the total number of books. For example, under ‘Transgender Characters,’ and ‘Female,’ 4/12 means that, of 12 books, 4 of those characters were female. All of our charts follow this model.

\*In one book, a character explicitly stated that their gender identity was “transgender.”\*

#### Gender Identity of Gender-Creative Characters

- Male – 10/19 books (52.6%)
- Female – 8/19 books (42.1%)
- Neither – 1/19 books (5.3%)

#### Gender Identity of Gender Undisclosed/Multiple Gender Characters

- Unknown – 4/7 books (57.1%)
- Multiple – 2/7 books (28.6%)
- Neither – 1/7 books (14.3%)

#### Gender Identity of All Characters (including Non-Binary)

- Female – 25/65 books (38.5%)
- Male – 29/65 books (44.6%)
- Trans – 1/65 books (1.5%)
- Multiple – 3/65 books (4.6%)
- Undisclosed – 4/65 books (6.2%)
- Neither – 2/65 books (3.1%)
- Both – 1/65 (1.5%)

### Human/Non-Human Characters

Fascinatingly, just over one quarter (26.2%) of the 65 books contained non-human characters. Specifically, 2 of 12 transgender books contain non-human characters. For example, *When Leonard Lost His Spots* (the only text about a trans parent) is a book about a transgender/transspecies male leopard who becomes a female lion (Costa & Shupik, 2012). To quote the text, “I’m not a lion. To this I must confess. My name is now Leona and I am a lion-ESS” (*When Leonard Lost His Spots*, para. 11).

Some of the non-human books do not explicitly reference gender, but are metaphors for gender. In *Goblinheart: A Fairy Tale*, (gender undisclosed) there are two types of characters—fairies and goblins. Julep (whose gender identity is never revealed), is born a fairy but wants to be a goblin. When Julep does not grow claws like the other goblins, this character creates gauntlets with claws for digging. Julep

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9 “Trans kids like me are real and normal and awesome!” (*Meet Polkadot*, para. 25).

also uses a vest to bind fairy wings that have sprouted (Axel & Bidlespacher, 2012). Quoting the text, “That night Julep made a vest that would hold wings down, then a pair of gauntlets with stone claws for digging” (*Goblinheart: A Fairy Tale*, para. 15).

One of the most clever and recent books we came across was titled *Red, a Crayon’s Story* (Hall, 2015). In this book, a blue crayon with a red label struggles with identity. (In the text, Red is assigned a male gender evidenced in the use throughout of the pronoun “he.”) The other crayons try to help Red become redder. They suggest that he needs more practice and encourage him to draw red things. The characters begin to question whether or not Red is indeed red. One crayon states, “Don’t be silly. It says so on his label” (*Red, a Crayon’s Story*, para. 16). Another replies, “He came that way from the factory” (para. 16). Some crayons question his character and others suggest simply giving him time. A variety of office supplies attempt to fix Red. The Masking Tape suggests that Red is “broken inside” (para. 20). The crayon is then wrapped in tape. The Scissors say his label is too tight and snips it. None of the help changes him. Finally, a crayon named Berry comes along and helps Red to realize that he is in fact blue. The other crayons question how they did not know all along (para. 32).

### Findings: Plot Arcs

Table 2. Transgender Book Themes (12 Books)			
Plot Theme	Yes	No	N/A
Medical Professional	6 (50%)	6 (50%)	
Special Talent/ Saving the Day			N/A
Peer Bullying	5	5	1 No peers
Parental Support	9 Supportive/Eventual Acceptance	1 Unsupportive	2 No parents
Teacher Support	3 Supportive	1 Eventual Acceptance	8 No teachers
Sibling Support	4 Supportive/Eventual Acceptance	1 Bullying	7 No siblings

## Medical Professionals

Six of the 12 (50%) books about transgender characters contained a medical professional. This medical professional was usually a psychiatrist/psychologist who helped the parents of the transgender child understand her/him. This was often a critical moment in the character's transition. Prior to meeting with the doctors, the characters were often forced to wear clothing, respond to names, and use pronouns that were uncomfortable because they did not match the characters' gender identities. After meeting with the doctors, the children were then able to live as their genuine selves.

The doctors were always portrayed positively and held in high esteem. It is as if these doctors were the "heroes," the saviors without whom the child would have been doomed to live an inauthentic life. This quote from *I Am Jazz* does well to explain what we call "the hero narrative:"

Then one amazing day, everything changed. Mom and Dad took me to meet a new doctor who asked me lots and lots of questions. Afterward, the doctor spoke to my parents and I heard the word "transgender" for the very first time. That night at bedtime, my parents hugged me and said, "We understand now. Be who you are. We love you no matter what" (Herthel et al., 2014, para. 14).

## Special Talent/Saving the Day

A common theme in the gender-creative books and the non-binary books as well is that characters are bullied, teased, and/or unaccepted until they demonstrate a special talent or save the day. It is almost as if it is not acceptable to deviate from gender norms unless you have something to offer to those who do conform. These characters were not "enough" just being themselves, they had to be extraordinary.

In *Roland Humphrey is Wearing a What?*, the main character is not accepted until he becomes confident and decides to stand up for himself against the children who are trying to force him to assimilate to male culture (Kiernan-Johnson & Revenaugh, 2012): "What matters to me is whether you're kind. The friends I deserve truly won't mind if I choose sparkly nail polish, skirts or clogs, they'll like me for me, not for my togs" (*Roland Humphrey is Wearing a What?*, para. 21).

In *Morris Micklewhite and the Tangerine Dress*, the main character paints a beautiful picture of himself in a dress: "And who's that?" his mother asked, pointing at the little boy in the tangerine dress riding

atop the big blue elephant. Morris was hoping she'd ask. "That's me," he said" (para. 17). He creates an engaging play-based activity for the other children: "Eli and Henry followed Morris to a planet they had never visited before. As they explored, Morris swish, swish, swished" (para. 20). It is only then that his bullies accept him (Baldacchino & Malenfant, 2014).

When the prima ballerina is injured during a performance in *Dogs Don't Do Ballet*, the main character, a male dog who loves to dance and wear pink tutus, gains respect when he steps in to dance the lead: "And Biff dances like no dog has ever danced before," (Kemp & Ogilvie, 2010, para. 21). In *Nice Little Girls*, the main character is only accepted by a peer once she stands up to an oppressive teacher. Her bravery as well as her ability to build things inspires the friendship: "I'm not a boy!" said Jackie. "Don't be so angry" said Susie. "I just think you're pretty brave, that's all" (Levy & Gerstein, 1974, para. 24).

The main character in *Yuck! That's Not a Monster* scares away a large and potentially ill-intentioned monster: "The Big Monster wailed and dropped Little Shock in horror. He was so afraid that his fur turned to frizz and his bristles fell out" (McAllister & Edgson, 2010, para. 19). Only then is the character accepted by its siblings, who say, "Maybe being cute is useful after all" (*Yuck! That's Not a Monster*, para. 21).

## **Peer Bullying and Peer Support**

Roughly half of the books contained portrayals of bullying by peers. For example, more than half the characters in the gender-creative books were bullied. Some books have unsupportive peers who disagree with the characters' gender identity/expression, but we segregated these disagreements from acts of bullying, such as harassment, name-calling, violence, or fear of violence, for coding purposes.

*The Adventures of Tulip, the Birthday Wish Fairy* (2012) is about a magical fairy named Tulip who grants birthday wishes. One wisher in New York is a male-assigned child named David who wishes to be a girl named Daniela. The fairy consults with the Wish Captain who explains that though someone is born "looking like a boy" that person might have the "heart and mind and soul of a girl on the inside" (para. 7). Tulip dips Daniela's wish in "bravery broth," puts extra luck in her pockets, places "teaching paste" on her family's toothbrushes (to help her teachers and her doctors understand her), and sprinkles "clear sight sparkles" (para. 9) on her entire family. Later in the book, the fairy addresses a wish from Daniela's mother. Her mother wishes for her child to be free from bullies. Tulip dips the wish in "confidence cream," so her mother "would feel strong when she helped Daniela to face her bullies" (para. 13).

As critical as the discussion of bullying, the discussion of peer support is equally important. Five of the 12 (42%) transgender books included supportive peers. These characters defended and encouraged the transgender characters. We know that these supportive peers greatly impact the school experiences of transgender children (Sullivan, 2009).

## Parental Support

When parents were present in the books, they tended to be supportive or were unsupportive at first but eventually accepted their children—this was true of 75% of the transgender books, 74% of the gender-creative books, and 57% of the undisclosed/multiple books. The implications of their parents' support impacts transgender children in perhaps the most critical way (Sullivan, 2009), providing such inquiries for both parents of trans children and trans children themselves, such as: Are children allowed to transition? Are they forced to retain given names, play with uninteresting/embarrassing toys, and wear uncomfortable clothing?

## Teacher Support

There were fewer teachers in the books than we had expected. When teachers were present, they tended to be supportive in the transgender and gender-creative books. Interestingly, more teachers were included in the multiple/undisclosed books than in the transgender and gender-creative texts. Teachers in the multiple/undisclosed books tended to be either supportive, or they were unsupportive at first and eventually accepting of the children.

## Sibling Support

When textually present, siblings tended to be supportive or demonstrated eventual acceptance. We found that the majority of texts did not contain siblings. This was a startling finding, as many children in the United States do, in fact, have siblings.<sup>10</sup>

### Transgender

- › 4/12 books (33.3%) – Supportive Sibling/Eventual Acceptance
- › 1/12 books (8.3%) – Bullying Sibling
- › 7/12 books (58.3%) – N/A or No Sibling Present

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10 A recent article showed that four out of five American families, 80%, have more than one child (Olson, 2015).



### Gender-Creative

- › 3/19 books (16%) – Supportive/Eventual Acceptance
- › 1/19 books (5%) – Unsupportive
- › 15/19 books (79%) – N/A

### Multiple/Undisclosed

- › 2/7 books (29%) – Supportive
- › 5/7 books (71%) – N/A

## Implications and Future Research

Our study shows that there are very few transgender books in English, fewer in Spanish, and no bilingual (English-Spanish) texts.<sup>11</sup> In the books, a majority of trans characters are white, were assigned male at birth, and transition to female. All of the texts containing trans characters are didactic in nature, seeking to educate a perceived cisgender audience on what it is like to be ‘trans’, that is, emphasizing the main character’s ‘trans-ness.’ As such, these texts mark the inception of the trans character’s journey toward changing, with salient themes highlighting love, diversity, and acceptance of trans children.

There are limited representations of trans characters in children’s books, and of these very few are individuals of color, Spanish-speaking or bilingual, or biological females transitioning to males. Few of the books offer plot arcs that go beyond being educational tools for the cisgender reader.

In sum, with over \$1 billion of children’s books purchased each year (Anderson and Hamilton, 2005), it is hard to ignore the enormous impact children’s literature has on both children and adults. Historically, children’s literature has presented characters that reinforce gendered stereotypes, with males as dashing princes or hard-working providers for families, and females as performing traditional tasks at home such as child-rearing, or playing with dolls and dresses (Anderson & Hamilton, 2005). Even when books are deemed “non-sexist,” in their portrayal of female characters, very rarely do any male characters play traditionally female roles (Diekman & Murnen, 2004).

With a growing number of Spanish-speaking Americans in the U.S., and more visibility and acceptance of trans individuals nationwide, a clear necessity exists to tell the stories of these LGBTQ individuals

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<sup>11</sup> The dearth of these books in actual classrooms around the country represents another problematic issue, which we intend to examine in a future study.

as children. Citing Hermann-Wilmarth (2010): “While literature alone might not alter students’ systems of belief about those different from them, it can help facilitate discussions about systems of oppression that are at work in our society.”

## Conclusions

Our project seeks to promote understanding of and sensitivity toward multiple gender ontologies in children’s books, particularly transgender characters. We hope that not only will trans children see themselves accurately represented in picture books, but also that there will be an increase in societal acceptance and approval of non-binary gender subjectivities. We hope too that someday the notion of a ‘spectral status’ of transgender characters in bilingual children’s books will be referenced as a chimerical ‘ghost of the past,’ relegated only to the shadows.

## Appendix

### Books Reviewed by Gender of Characters

#### Transgender

Title	Author	Year	Publisher
<i>10,000 Dresses</i>	Marcus Ewert	2008	Seven Stories Press
<i>Backwards Day</i>	S. Bear Bergman	2012	Flamingo Rampant
<i>Be Who You Are</i>	Jennifer Carr	2010	AuthorHouse
<i>But, I’m Not A Boy!</i>	Katie Leone	2014	CreateSpace Independent Publishing
<i>I Am Jazz</i>	Jessica Herthel and Jazz Jennings	2014	Dial Books
<i>Meet Polkadot</i>	Talcott Broadhead	2014	Dangerdot Publishing
<i>Piratrans Carabarro</i>	Manuel Gutierrez and Silvia Rivera	2015	Asociación de Transexuales de Antequera
<i>Rough, Tough Charley</i>	Verla Kay	2007	Tricycle Press
<i>The Adventures of Tulip, Birthday Wish Fair</i>	S. Bear Bergman	2012	Flamingo Rampant
<i>When Kathy Is Keith</i>	Wallace Wong	2011	Xlibris
<i>When Kayla Was Kyle</i>	Amy Fabrikant	2013	Avid Readers Publishing Group
<i>When Leonard Lost His Spots</i>	Monique Costa	2012	Dodi Press

## Gender-Creative

Title	Author	Year	Publisher
<i>Are you a Boy or a Girl?</i>	Karleen Pendleton Jiméneez	2000	Green Dragon Press
<i>Bonnie Does Not Like Dresses</i>	M.F. Keene	2015	N/A
<i>Dogs Don't Do Ballet</i>	Anna Kemp	2010	Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers
<i>Elena's Serenade</i>	Campbell Geeslin	2004	Atheneum Books for Young Readers
<i>Jacob's New Dress</i>	Sarah and Ian Hoffman	2014	Albert Whitman & Co.
<i>Jesse's Dream Skirt</i>	Bruce Mack	1979	Lollipop Power Inc.
<i>John Jensen Feels Different</i>	Henrick Hovland	2011	Eerdmans Books for Young Readers
<i>Melinda and the Class Photograph</i>	Deborah van der Beek	1991	Carolrhoda Books
<i>Morris Micklewhite and the Tangerine Dress</i>	Christine Baldacchino	2014	Groundwood Books, House of Anansi Press
<i>My Princess Boy</i>	Cheryl Kilodavis	2010	Aladdin
<i>Nice Little Girls</i>	Elizabeth Levy	1974	Delacorte Press
<i>Odd Bird Out</i>	Helga Bansch	2011	Gecko Press
<i>Play Free</i>	McNall Mason and Max Suarez	2012	Max N'Me Studio
<i>Princess Max</i>	Laurie Stiller	2001	Random House Australia
<i>Pugdog</i>	Andrea U'Ren	2001	Farrar, Straus and Giroux
<i>Roland Humphrey is Wearing a WHAT?</i>	Eileen Kiernan-Johnson	2013	Huntley Rahara Press
<i>The Girl WHO Would Rather Climb Trees</i>	Miriam Schlein	1975	Harcourt Children's Books
<i>White Dynamite and Curly Kidd</i>	Bill Martin Jr. & John Archambault	1986	Holt & Rinehart
<i>Yuck! That's Not a Monster</i>	Angela McAllister	2010	Little Tiger Press

## Multiple/Undisclosed

Title	Author	Year	Publisher
<i>All I Want to Be is Me</i>	Phyllis Rothblatt	2011	CreateSpace
<i>Are you a Boy or are you a Girl!</i>	Sarah Savage	2015	Jessica Kingsley Publishers
<i>Call Me Tree/Llámame Árbol</i>	Maya Christina Gonzalez	2014	Children's Book Press
<i>Goblinheart: A fairy tale</i>	Brett Axel	2012	East Waterfront Press
<i>Red, A Crayon's Story</i>	Michael Hall	2015	Greenwillow Books
<i>This Day in June</i>	Gayle E. Pitman	2014	Magination Press
<i>X: A Fabulous Child's Story</i>	Louis Gould	1978	Daughters Pub. Co

## Non-Binary

Title	Author	Year	Publisher
<i>A Fire Engine for Ruthie</i>	Lesléa Newman	2004	Clarion Books
<i>Amazing Grace</i>	Mary Hoffman	1991	Reading Rainbow Books
<i>Ballerino Nate</i>	Kimberly Brubaker Bradley	2006	Dial Books for Young Readers
<i>Exactly Like Me</i>	Lynn Phillips	1972	Lollipop Power, Inc.
<i>Horace and Morris but Mostly Dolores</i>	James Howe	2003	Atheneum Books for Young Readers
<i>In Christina's Toolbox</i>	Dianne Homan	1981	Lollipop Power, Inc.
<i>Jump!</i>	Michelle Magorian	1992	Walker Books Ltd.
<i>Max the Stubborn Little Wolf</i>	Mario-Odile Judes	2001	Harper Collins
<i>Mercedes quiere ser bombero</i>	Beatriz Monco	2004	Ediciones Bellaterra
<i>Not All Princesses Dress in Pink</i>	Jane Yolen & Heidi E.Y. Stemple	2010	Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers
<i>Not Every Princess</i>	Jeffrey Bone and Lisa Bone	2014	Magination Press
<i>Oliver Button is a Sissy (English)</i>	Tomi dePaola (English)	1979	Harcourt Brace
<i>Oliver Button es una nena (Spanish)</i>	Tomi dePaola & Sandra Lopez Varela, tr. (Spanish)	(En.) 2010 (Sp.)	Jovanovich/Carretera León, La Coruna

<b>Title</b>	<b>Author</b>	<b>Year</b>	<b>Publisher</b>
<i>Pink!</i>	Lynne Rickards	2009	Chicken House/ Scholastic
<i>The Basket Ball</i>	Esmé Raji Codell	2011	Abrams Books For Young Readers
<i>The Boy with Pink Hair</i>	Perez Hilton	2011	Celebra Young Readers
<i>The Boy Who Cried Fabulous</i>	Lesléa Newman	2004	Tricycle Press
<i>The Boy Toy</i>	Phillis Hacken Johnson	1988	Lollipop Power Books
<i>The Only Boy in Ballet Class</i>	Denise Gruska	2007	Gibbs Smith
<i>The Princess Knight</i>	Cornelia Funke	2001	Chicken House
<i>The Sissy Duckling</i>	Harvey Fierstein	2005	Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers
<i>The Story of Ferdinand (English)</i> <i>El Cuento de Ferdinando (Spanish)</i>	Munro Leaf (English) Pura Belpre (Spanish Translation)	1936 (En.) 1990 (Sp.)	Grosset & Dunlap/ Puffin Books
<i>Time to Get Up, Time to Go</i>	David Milgrim	2006	Clarion Books
<i>Toby's Doll's House</i>	Ragnhild Scamell	1998	Levinson Books, Ltd.
<i>Tough Eddie</i>	Elizabeth Winthrop	1985	Dutton Books for Young Readers
<i>Tuts Aren't My Style</i>	Linda Skeers	2010	Dial Books
<i>The Worst Princess</i>	Anna Kemp	2012	Random House Books for Young Readers

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