

Be Who You Are: Exploring Representations of Transgender Children in Picturebooks

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Conducting a critical content analysis, the author highlights picturebooks featuring transgender child protagonists and problematizes representations of race, social class, gender identity, and gender performance.

THE PUBLICATION of children's and young adult literature inclusive of LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer) characters has steadily increased in recent years (Möller, 2014; Naidoo, 2012; Sapp, 2010). Such texts provide windows and mirrors (Bishop, 1990) for children to see reflections of themselves, to have their or their loved ones' identities validated, or to learn about others who may be different from them.

Research points to the need for and benefits of heightened inclusion of books with LGBTQ characters and content in schools to foster increasingly welcoming and supportive spaces for all young learners (e.g., Ryan, Patraw, & Bednar, 2013; Schall & Kauffmann, 2003; Souto-Manning & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2008). A crucial first step is to consider what literature is available, which identities are being portrayed or excluded, and what explicit and implicit messages are conveyed. Although research in the field of LGBTQ-inclusive children's literature and its use in classrooms has risen within the 21st century, the majority of studies focus primarily on texts featuring gay or lesbian protagonists, likely due to the wider availability of these texts.

While news and other media increasingly portray transgender individuals in mainstream society, stories featuring transgender people and characters, even when

they are published, are often less visible in classrooms or on library shelves (Crisp et al., 2016). In an analysis posted to her personal blog, Lo (2011, 2014) reported that 75% of the LGBTQ-inclusive literature published for young adults in the first decade of the 21st century had cisgender protagonists—characters whose gender identity and performance aligns with their sex assigned at birth. Only 4% are about characters who identify as transgender—characters who identify and perform their gender differently from that assigned at birth (Lo, 2011). In an analysis of 68 queer-themed picturebooks (Lester, 2014), only nine depicted gender-nonconforming characters, and only three of these had transgender protagonists. In a longitudinal study of children from ages 5 to 12, Olson, Key, and Eaton (2015) found that the children consistently self-identified as a particular gender, even when the gender identity differed from their sex assigned at birth. This speaks clearly to the need for increased publication of literature that reflects the range of children's gender identities.

GLSEN (originally the Gay, Lesbian, & Straight Education Network) noted that compared to LGBQ cisgender students, transgender, genderqueer, and other non-cisgender students faced more hostile school climates (Kosciw, Greytak, Giga, Villenas, & Danischewski, 2016).

GLSEN reported that 54.5% of students hear negative remarks related to gender expression (such as not acting “masculine” or “feminine” enough) from their peers, and 75% of transgender students report feeling unsafe at school because of their gender expression (Kosciw et al., 2016). Such experiences adversely affect children’s self-esteem, school attendance, and grades (Kosciw et al., 2016). In addition, transgender individuals’ life expectancies are shorter on average due to murder or suicide, and these numbers are even higher for those who also identify as people of color (Human Rights Campaign, 2017; Trans Student Educational Resources [TSER], 2017b). Though such figures are representative of individuals in the middle grades and higher, studies with children in third through sixth grades also demonstrate marginalization and targeting related to gender nonconformity (GLSEN & Harris Interactive, 2012). It is imperative that educators counter this devastating narrative.

In this study, I explored representations of transgender individuals in picturebooks—a rare subject, as Naidoo (2012) and Sullivan and Urraro (2017) have noted. Questions guiding my work included the following: (1) What representations of transgender child characters are depicted in picturebooks published through 2016? and (2) What is the significance of these representations? To answer my questions, I conducted a critical content analysis (Short, 2017) of nine realistic (both realistic fiction and autobiography) picturebooks featuring children whose gender identities were different from the gender assigned at birth. I was interested in whether the corpus included diversity in terms of characters represented and life stories told or whether the books perpetuated dominant narratives related to race, social class, gender identity, and gender performance. I begin by discussing terms and concepts related to transgender identities and their use in this article. Subsequent sections describe my methodology and textual analysis. I conclude with implications and considerations for readers, educators, and publishers.

Defining “Transgender”

Use of the term “transgender” can be problematic because there are infinite points on the gender identity spectrum. Gender theorist Stryker (1994) described transgender as “an umbrella term that refers to all identities or practices that cross over, cut across, move between, or otherwise queer socially constructed sex/gender boundaries” (p. 251). I am using “transgender” in reference to individuals who self-identify as a gender different from that assigned at birth. “Trans,” a shorthand term for “transgender” (Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation [GLAAD], n.d.), is sometimes used in this article as well. On occasion, I use the terms “trans male” and “trans female.” A trans

male is a person who is and self-identifies as male though his gender assigned at birth was female. A trans female is a person who is and self-identifies as female though her gender assigned at birth was male.

“Trans” is used in this article to distinguish transgender characters from those who are cisgender, since it is a key focus of this study. I acknowledge the contested nature of such terms and the potential danger of categorizations (Butler, 1992). Language is always evolving in how it accurately and sensitively refers to individuals. As a researcher, I am aware of and cautious about the terminology I use to refer to groups of people so that rigid boundaries are not set. I embrace the fluidity and variability of experience, performance, and identity. Maguire (2014) warned, “There is danger in assuming homogeneity in any gender, class, race or cultural grouping” (p. 429), and I approach this study with the aim of being sensitive to and not generalizing about transgender individuals. Additionally, as a person who identifies as a cisgender, gay male, I acknowledge I am not a member of the trans community and thus approach this topic from an outsider perspective.

It is essential to use pronouns that acknowledge and respect people’s identities. In the picturebooks in this study, each character identifies as male or female, so I have used the corresponding pronouns “he”/“him” and “she”/“her” in this article. For the books in which pronouns shift as characters acknowledge, claim, share, and advocate for their gender identity, I have used pronouns aligning with each character’s self-identified gender. Though not the case in my text set, it is important to note that some trans individuals use gender-neutral pronouns such as “zie”/“hir” or singular “they,” or no pronoun at all. In addition, transgender individuals sometimes select a name more closely aligned to their gender identity than the name assigned at birth. In four of the books in this study, characters are introduced by their name assigned at birth, and their name changes over the course of the narrative as they become more public about their gender identity and choose new names for themselves. In such instances, characters will be referenced by the self-chosen names.

Lastly, the term “transition” is sometimes used to describe the evolutionary process of acknowledging, claiming, and advocating one’s gender identity. TSER (2017a) described transitioning as “a person’s process for developing and assuming a gender expression to match their gender identity” (para. 11). The process may include people altering their names, pronouns, and portrayals of gender through hair and/or attire as they reveal their genuine selves to family, friends, and colleagues. Although some individuals who transition take hormones or have surgeries to alter their physical bodies, others do not. Such actions are personal and do not necessarily

indicate whether someone has transitioned. TSER (2017a) emphasized, “It’s best not to assume how one transitions as it is different for everyone” (para. 11). Therefore, the term “transition” is used sparingly in this article, and any references to it allude to name changes, pronouns, and portrayal of gender only.

Resources, such as the glossaries of terms provided by GLAAD (n.d.) and TSER (2017a), provide additional information about the terms described here and other ways to be sensitive, respectful, and supportive of terminology related to trans individuals.

Queer Theory

Queer theory provides the lens that guides this study. Plummer (2013) wrote extensively about the use of queer theory to deconstruct the sex/gender divide, to frame gender performance as fluid and unfixated, to subvert notions of normality, and to analyze textual artifacts. I draw on Plummer’s work to explore and highlight how gender and sex are not synonymous and how gender is sometimes performed in ways not aligning with sex assigned at birth, analyzing the ways characters resist, alter, or perpetuate gender norms. Blaise and Taylor (2012) argued, “Queer theory is ‘queer’ because it questions the assumption that there is any ‘normal’ expression of gender” (p. 88). It offers “new ways of understanding and challenging persistent gender stereotypes” (p. 88). Thus, queer theory is particularly well suited to a study exploring gender—and, specifically, transgender representation—within children’s literature.

Notions of performativity (Butler, 1990, 1995) inform my work. Butler (1995) wrote that performativity is not about intentional performance, such as a theatrical masquerade that is temporary and enacted on and off at will. Instead, it is about the repetition and resignification of acts and the effects such acts have on self and others; it “involves the difficult labor of deriving agency from the very power regimes which constitute us, and which we oppose” (p. 136). In this study, I explore the performance of gender by protagonists and in relation to supplemental characters. I analyze how trans characters’ depictions are consistent and repeated and how they redefine ideas about gender, emphasizing the ways in which trans characters advocate for themselves in contexts in which supplemental characters constrain and work against them.

In addition, other aspects of queer theory further inform this study, including critiques of normality (Blaise & Taylor, 2012), resistance of binaries (Butler, 1990; Meyer, 2007), and challenging as a political act (Britzman, 1995).

Methodology

To explore my research questions, I conducted a critical content analysis (Short, 2017) of picturebooks with

transgender child protagonists published through the end of 2016. Only books with characters who identified as a gender different from that assigned at birth were included. This criterion excluded books featuring characters that, while transgressing normative conceptualizations of gender, still self-identified with the gender assigned at birth (e.g., *William’s Doll* [Zolotow, 1985]; *My Princess Boy* [Kilodavis, 2010]).

Based on the idea that readers should have access to literature that provides authentic windows and mirrors (Bishop, 1990), I included only realistic picturebooks (fiction and nonfiction) in which children were the main characters. Although fantasy picturebooks with adult and animal main characters—such as *Backwards Day* (Bergman, 2012) and *Introducing Teddy: A Gentle Story About Gender and Friendship* (Walton, 2016)—do exist and can be beneficial, such books may fail to meet the needs of youth who need to see that *their* lives exist and are possible *now* rather than in fantastic worlds or in future lives as adults.

Finally, I limited my search to books published in English, whether initially written in English or translated into English. Though I was open to considering books published anywhere in the world, it happened that the books I found that met the criteria outlined above were published in the United States.

To assemble my text set, I searched compiled lists of LGBTQ-inclusive books in scholarly literature, such as Naidoo’s (2012) *Rainbow Family Collections* and Lester’s (2014) analysis of 68 queer-themed picturebooks, as well as online resources including the Children’s Literature Comprehensive Database (CLCD), Amazon, Goodreads, and my state’s public library online catalog. Searches included combinations of the following terms: “transgender,” “gender identity,” “gender queer,” “gender nonconforming,” “picturebook,” “picture book,” and “children’s literature.” The searches, conducted for books published from 1900 to 2016 and for ages birth through 10, sometimes led to additional recommended titles including similar themes, content, or characters. For example, the Amazon result page for *I Am Jazz* (Herthel & Jennings, 2014) suggested *About Chris* (Benedetto, 2015a), though this title did not appear in the search of keywords within the CLCD. The result was a nine-book text set. Two additional books listed in Goodreads appeared to meet my criteria, but neither was available through booksellers or libraries: *A Girl Like Any Other* (Labelle, 2013) and *A Princess of Great Daring* (Hill-Meyer, 2015). The resulting corpus of books clearly highlights the need for increased publication.

Initially, I read each book and noted demographic information (i.e., the main character’s gender identity, race, social class, and family members) for each. Then, I engaged in a critical content analysis (Short, 2017), which facilitated

my exploration of gender and its representation within language and media images. As Short wrote, “In critical content analysis, the researcher uses a specific critical lens as the frame from which to develop the research questions and to select and analyze the texts” (p. 5). In the case of this study, queer theory provided the critical lens. I drew on content analysis as a tool to investigate norms and meanings embedded in texts through the exploration of written and visual narratives (Lushchevska, 2015). The importance of considering both words and illustrations in picturebooks is well documented, as each influences meaning and a reader’s interpretation (Nikolajeva, 2006; Sipe, 1998). Thus, my analysis explored messages conveyed about transgender protagonists’ gender depictions, performances, and interactions with others through both images and text.

As I read each book at least three times, I adhered to Crisp and Hiller’s (2011) suggestion to move beyond numerical counts in order to focus “attention on the ways in which both ‘male’ and ‘female’ characters are represented and gendered within these texts” (p. 21). I noted additional aspects of each text in response to my research questions. Each subsequent reading led to observations and the development of an iterative coding scheme (Constas, 1992) for written and illustrative elements that led to increasingly abstract analytic coding (Richards & Morse, 2007) and resulted in the following categories: characters’ gender identity and performance; essentialist representations of gender; emotional experiences; relationships with family, teachers, peers, and others; and assertion of agency. Each category will be discussed in depth below.

Findings

Since the main characters’ expression of gender is an easily identified category in this text set, with each character clearly identifying as female or male, I begin with this distinction before moving onto discussion of the other categories. I close with an examination of additional characteristics of the overall text set, such as character and authorship representation as well as style and design aspects. As each book is introduced in the sections that follow, I provide a brief synopsis to provide context for my analysis and discussion.

Characters’ Gender Identity and Performance

The books fit into subcategories related to the main character’s self-identified gender: seven feature protagonists identifying as female and two feature protagonists identifying as male.

FEMALE IDENTIFICATION. Seven books depict characters who identify as female although their gender assigned at birth was male: *10,000 Dresses* (Ewert, 2008); *Be Who You Are*

(Carr, 2010); *When Kayla Was Kyle* (Fabrikant, 2013); *I Am Jazz* (Herthel & Jennings, 2014); *But, I’m Not a Boy* (Leone, 2015); *My Favorite Color Is Pink* (Benedetto, 2015b); and *Truly Willa* (Naylor, 2016). Each protagonist explicitly states she feels like a girl internally. The characters desire to perform gender as female externally through hairstyle and/or clothing and use gender-neutral names or elect new names during the narrative to further claim and assert female gender.

In four of the books, the protagonists identify as and perform female gender throughout. In *10,000 Dresses*—“one of the first picture books to clearly depict a transgender character” (Naidoo, 2012, p. 105)—Bailey identifies as female and dreams about a staircase of dresses each evening, but she is unable to be fully accepted and perform as female until the end of the narrative. In *When Kayla Was Kyle*, *Be Who You Are*, and *But, I’m Not a Boy*, the protagonists identify as female throughout but reveal and further perform their gender as the narrative unfolds. *But, I’m Not a Boy* tells the story of Sarah (initially known as David) and discusses her coming out and transition at home. *When Kayla Was Kyle* shares Kayla’s school-based harassment when performing as male, familial support when transitioning at home, and acceptance as female at school over time. In *Be Who You Are*, Hope (initially known as Nick) also experiences challenges at school when performing as male but identifying as female, and she begins to perform and be further accepted as female with an evolving network of support.

The protagonists in *My Favorite Color Is Pink*, *I Am Jazz*, and *Truly Willa* identify as and perform female gender from the beginning of the books as well, though they do flash back to instances when they performed or were identified as male. In *My Favorite Color Is Pink*, Patty directly expresses her enjoyment of “playing dress-up, picking flowers, playing baby dolls, having tea parties, and dancing ballet” (Benedetto, 2015b, n.p.); her frustration when people outside her home comment on and question her gender identity; and the mismatch she feels when trying to perform gender as male. *I Am Jazz* and *Truly Willa*, both authored by transgender youth, are autobiographical and the only books within the corpus in which the characters explicitly identify as transgender. Jazz writes: “I have a girl brain but a boy body. This is called transgender. I was born this way!” (Herthel & Jennings, 2014, n.p.). Similarly, Willa notes: “I am transgender, which means the feelings you have about yourself do not always match the body you were born with” (Naylor, 2016, n.p.). Willa was instrumental in the creation of a gender-identity bill that protects the rights of transgender individuals in her home country of Malta (Naylor, 2016, n.p.).

Significantly, the seven books described in this section constitute the bulk of the corpus within this study.

Thus, currently available representations of trans individuals within picturebooks are predominantly female. In turn, this may convey the inaccurate message that trans individuals are primarily those who identify as female, and trans individuals who identify as male may experience difficulty finding reflections of themselves in texts.

MALE IDENTIFICATION. Only two books feature children assigned female at birth who identify as male: *When Kathy Is Keith* (Wong, 2011) and *About Chris* (Benedetto, 2015a). Each protagonist describes feeling like a boy internally and explicitly desires to perform gender as male externally through hairstyle and clothing. The characters also use gender-neutral names or elect a new name during the narrative to further claim and assert male gender.

Told from the perspective of the teacher, who serves as confidant and ally, *About Chris* describes the child's interests (e.g., Legos and mud), the child's characteristics (e.g., "leader of the pack" and "king of the hill" [Benedetto, 2015a, n.p.]), and the teacher's efforts to understand and support Chris. Chris performs and is accepted as male throughout the narrative. However, in *When Kathy Is Keith*, the narrative shows the protagonist's efforts and evolution to be identified as male as the story progresses, though little is shared about his interests beyond what readers might interpret based on items illustrated in his bedroom, which are listed in the next section.

Essentialist Representations of Gender

In each of the books, the trans character's gender identity reflects stereotypical gendered interests. For example, for characters who identify as female, these interests include dressing up (*10,000 Dresses*; *Be Who You Are*; *But, I'm Not a Boy*; *I Am Jazz*; *My Favorite Color Is Pink*), playing with dolls (*I Am Jazz*, *My Favorite Color Is Pink*, *Truly Willa*, *When Kayla Was Kyle*), and having pink as a favorite color (*I Am Jazz*, *My Favorite Color Is Pink*, *Truly Willa*). Characters identifying as male play with trucks and mud (*About Chris*) or like robots and airplanes (*When Kathy Is Keith*).

These stereotypical notions of gender are associated with clothing and appearance as well. Characters identifying as female yearn to wear dresses and grow their hair longer and often vehemently reject wearing attire they perceive as boy clothes. For example, in *My Favorite Color Is Pink*, Patty is depicted on four subsequent pages wearing clothes she perceives as markers of maleness, such as a hat turned backward, shorts, and a sleeveless T-shirt. The text on these pages is blue and expresses the character's unease: "Sometimes I try to be a boy. I try 'fitting in.' Then I feel lost. I just want to be myself" (Benedetto, 2015b, n.p.). Similarly, Jazz has a sad affect anytime she wears clothes she associates with maleness throughout *I*

Am Jazz. This is particularly apparent in the fourth page spread, in which Jazz draws a series of pictures. Images of her in blue and wearing shorts depict a sad face and rain clouds, while drawings of her in a dress depict her smiling and in sunshine. This is echoed on the verso of the seventh opening, in which Jazz describes moments in her earlier childhood: "Sometimes my parents let me wear my sister's dresses around the house. But whenever we went out, I had to put on my boy clothes again. This made me mad!" (Herthel & Jennings, 2014, n.p.). There appears to be little recognition by the trans female characters in these and the other books that there are numerous ways to identify, perform identity, and exist as a female.

The protagonists' parents are depicted in stereotypical gender roles across the books as well. In *10,000 Dresses*, Bailey's mother clips coupons, her father works in the yard, and her brother plays soccer. Depictions of mothers in the kitchen and fathers working outside the home are consistent across the other texts. In *But, I'm Not a Boy*, Sarah yearns to make cupcakes with her mother while they both wear pink aprons. Mothers are shown shopping in *When Kayla Was Kyle* and *When Kathy Is Keith*. Fathers are associated with playing sports or building tree houses in *When Kayla Was Kyle* and *But, I'm Not a Boy*, activities the trans female protagonists despise.

Color is used strategically throughout the text set, in design and illustrations, to reinforce essentialist representations of gender. The covers of and illustrations for *I Am Jazz*, *My Favorite Color Is Pink*, and *Truly Willa* are saturated with pink. Pink is also used in *But, I'm Not a Boy* when Sarah dresses as a princess, wears an apron, and makes cupcakes with her mother. However, when performing or being viewed as male, Sarah wears blue. Blue is associated with maleness in other books as well. The cover of *About Chris* is blue, and blue permeates *When Kathy Is Keith* through the protagonist's bedroom wall color, when Keith dresses as a male, and when he envisions himself as male in the mirror. When Jazz plays soccer in *I Am Jazz*, the only time she plays sports in the book, her uniform is blue. Her brothers and father are always depicted wearing blue shirts. Color is also used for text in some books, with words composed of letters in various colors that are often congruent with what is being described. For example, in *My Favorite Color Is Pink*, Patty's first-person narration is written in pink, purple, and yellow until she discusses others' expectations of her to dress or perform as male, at which time the words shift to shades of blue. In *About Chris*, words associated with being female (i.e., "If Maezie played Cinderella" [Benedetto, 2015a, n.p.]) are written in pastel colors, whereas words depicting Chris's views of maleness are written in darker, bolder colors. For example, when Chris is called Christina, his response ("My name is Chris!" [n.p.]) is in deep shades of blue. In these

instances, color not only alludes to gender but fortifies gender dichotomies and stereotypes.

Essentialist representations of gender that reflect binaries and normative views are reinforced through illustrations and written narratives across the corpus of trans-inclusive picturebooks included in this study. Queer theorists not only question assumptions of normality in regard to gender (Blaise & Taylor, 2012) but also resist gender as a binary (Barnett & Johnson, 2015; Butler, 1990; Meyer, 2007). It is important to note that all trans characters in my text set align their gender performances with traditional social norms and expectations typically associated with the gender they assume regardless of their gender assigned at birth. This could reflect expectations they perceive from peers or messages conveyed by media representations.

Each character experiences change over time, and the texts show how their lives continue to be complicated with both contentment and obstacles.

Emotional Experiences

In six of the books, the characters' emotional trajectory is one of initial sadness, frustration, and isolation followed by a growth of happiness, pride, and self-confidence by the narrative's resolution (*10,000 Dresses*; *Be Who You Are*; *But, I'm Not a Boy*; *Truly Willa*; *When Kathy Is Keith*; and *When Kayla Was Kyle*). These emotions are sometimes stated explicitly but always are conveyed through illustrations. In four of the aforementioned six books (*Be Who You Are*; *But, I'm Not a Boy*; *When Kathy Is Keith*; *When Kayla Was Kyle*) and two others (*I Am Jazz*, *My Favorite Color Is Pink*), illustrations show the transgender characters' sadness even when such emotions are not directly stated in the text. This risks sending the message that a transgender existence must be accompanied by unhappiness.

For example, in *Be Who You Are*, Hope is illustrated with a hesitant and flushed expression on her face, though the text states, "Knowing that her family loved her made Hope feel really happy" (Carr, 2010, p. 31). A few pages earlier, Hope walks sullenly from a classmate, though the text claims she politely had asked the boy to call her Hope when he used the wrong name by mistake. Similarly, Sarah appears melancholy in *But, I'm Not a Boy*, though the text states, "She reached down within her to the place that brought her joy" (Leone, 2015, n.p.). Such misalign-

ment between words and illustrations may affect meanings produced by readers who oscillate between the two modes of communication, interpreting "the text in terms of the pictures and the pictures in terms of the text in a potentially never-ending sequence" (Sipe, 1998, p. 102). It also shows the power of illustrations to convey information beyond that provided by the verbal text (Reynolds, 2011).

In all of the books except *Truly Willa*, the illustrations frequently depict the transgender characters as isolated, reinforcing the idea that transgender individuals are lonely and different. Sometimes this is achieved by the spacing and scale of the trans character compared to other characters. This is particularly apparent in *My Favorite Color Is Pink*; *About Chris*; *But, I'm Not a Boy*; and *When Kayla Was Kyle*. Throughout *My Favorite Color Is Pink* and *About Chris*, the protagonists are nearly always illustrated alone on a page. When they do share a double-page spread with other characters, particularly peers, the protagonists are separated from others by the gutter. The use of scale to denote physical and emotional distance is paramount in *10,000 Dresses*. Until the final page spread, every page on which Bailey appears with others is illustrated with her in the distance and at a fraction of the size of cisgender characters, who loom over her like giants. Thus, these illustrations reinforce the notion that transgender individuals are lonely and outcasts.

Each character experiences change over time, and the texts show how the characters' lives continue to be complicated with both contentment and obstacles. The conclusions of *Be Who You Are*, *I Am Jazz*, and *When Kathy Is Keith* specifically address characters' occasional, ongoing struggles coupled with their sense of positive self-worth. For example, *Be Who You Are* concludes:

Hope's story never ends. Each day brings new joys and new challenges. Each day brings the chance for all of us to be who we are, to accept others for who they are and to make the world a more loving place for everyone. (Carr, 2010, p. 32)

Coupled with these words is an illustration of Hope sitting on a hillside, looking into the distance, relaxed and at ease, as if gazing toward the future, with blue skies surrounding her. *Jazz* expresses such satisfaction through words in *I Am Jazz*: "I don't mind being different. Different is special! I think what matters most is what a person is like inside. And inside, I am happy. I am having fun. I am proud!" (Herthel & Jennings, 2014, n.p.).

On the other hand, texts such as *But, I'm Not a Boy* and *About Chris* have resolutions that are overly simplistic and thus risk minimizing the experiences or possible complications transgender individuals may encounter in reality. For example, when Chris's teacher

calls him Christina, Chris corrects her. This is followed by the teacher asking Chris if he really feels like a boy. Chris responds, “From my belly button down—I’m a girl. But from my belly button up—I’m a boy!” (Benedetto, 2015a, n.p.). The teacher immediately exclaims that she understands now, and the two embrace in a hug. Though this resolution is idealistic and likely well intended by the author, it trivializes acceptance, which is often much more difficult and complex for trans individuals, especially within their school experiences (Kosciw et al., 2016). In addition, Chris’s emphasis on body parts equates gender identity with sex organs, although, as noted earlier, many transgender individuals transition and/or identify as a gender different from their sex assigned at birth regardless of their anatomy and without surgical interventions.

Relationships With Family, Teachers, Peers, and Others

The above sections detail depictions of the transgender characters’ isolation from as well as their interactions with others. These relationships (or lack thereof) with others—family, peers, and additional supplemental characters—warrant further description and analysis since they are integral to the transgender characters’ experiences.

FAMILY. Except for *About Chris*, all of the books have characters who live in households consisting of two heterosexual, cisgender parents. (In *About Chris*, only the mother is referred to and on a single page.) In all but two of the books (*10,000 Dresses* and *About Chris*), parents are either immediately supportive or grow in their support over time. In *But, I’m Not a Boy* and *When Kayla Was Kyle*, the protagonists experience anxiety as they consider speaking with their parents about being female. However, they show great courage in sharing their needs and receive acceptance from their parents. For example, Sarah, in *But, I’m Not a Boy*, “decided she could hide no longer, that she must tell them the truth” (Leone, 2015, n.p.). When Kayla expresses her identity in *When Kayla Was Kyle*, her “parents scooped [her] up in their arms and hugged [her] for a long time” (Fabrikant, 2013, p. 18), telling her: “We’ll always love you. Nothing could ever change that” (p. 19). In *My Favorite Color Is Pink*, Patty is also supported by her parents throughout the narrative. Her mother claims she is “the bravest kid ever” (Benedetto, 2015b, n.p.), and when others comment that Patty is a pretty girl, her father responds, “The real you is—a pretty girl!” (n.p.).

In the beginning and near the end of *Be Who You Are*, Hope’s parents directly tell her to “be who you are” (Carr, 2010, pp. 3, 17), demonstrating that their love and support are unwavering. Her parents provide further support by speaking to teachers who initially resist Hope’s identity and needs and by seeking additional resources for guidance and

connection (e.g., peer groups for trans-identified and gender-nonconforming children). Thus, unlike the parents in *But, I’m Not a Boy* and *When Kayla Was Kyle*, Hope’s parents not only express love and support for their child but also take a subsequent step to help her gain support and community outside of the home to ease transitioning.

Parental support is manifested in a different way in *Truly Willa*. The narrative describes how Willa’s parents facilitated her activism in order to share stories with and aid others. For example, near the end of the book, Willa states, “Me and my mum and dad are trying to teach people about what it is to be transgender, and how children like me need to be welcomed as who they are inside” (Naylor, 2016, n.p.).

TEACHERS AND OTHER ADULTS. Throughout the books, it is often the mother who takes initiative to seek support, such as talking to teachers, counselors, doctors, or other parents of gender-nonconforming children. Support people are typically female—such as the psychologist, medical doctor, and principal in *When Kathy Is Keith* who provide guidance to the mother and explain that other children like Keith exist and the counselor in *Be Who You Are* who regularly meets with Hope and invites her to discuss her feelings. Thus, in these various examples, both within and outside the home, females are typically depicted as providing support. This results in a dearth of representations of adult males in support roles.

The protagonists’ teachers are often positioned as confused and unsupportive, and their attitudes are reflected in actions such as requiring the transgender character to use restrooms aligned with the gender assigned at birth or using incorrect gender pronouns. For example, in *Be Who You Are*, the male teacher is frustrated by Hope’s female self-portrait, drawn when she expresses how she feels on the inside and wishes to present herself. Teachers are similarly critical or unsupportive in *When Kathy Is Keith* and *I Am Jazz*. For example, Keith’s teacher states he “is being silly” (Wong, 2011, p. 8) when Keith expresses being a boy. Research has shown that characters and readers are often positioned as homophobic (e.g., Blackburn & Clark, 2011)—or in this case, transphobic—and these texts reinforce such constructions. An exception to this is *About Chris*, in which the protagonist’s teacher seeks to acknowledge, understand, and support his gender identity throughout the text. Near the end, when Chris asserts his name is not Christina, the teacher asks, “Do you truly believe you are really a boy?” (Benedetto, 2015a, n.p.). Chris responds in the affirmative. The teacher kneels, extends her arms out to her student, and expresses, “I get it now, Chris. The real you—is a boy! I believe you!” (n.p.). This example shows teachers *do* exist who support their students without hesitation.

PEERS. Peer relationships in the books include aspects of gender policing. This occurs with both male and female peers, but the taunting is more prevalent for characters identifying as female. This is particularly apparent in *When Kayla Was Kyle*. While still performing a male identity, Kayla confides to a cismale friend that she enjoys playing with dolls. Although the friend initially expresses not seeing this interest as problematic, he shares the news at school, to Kayla's dismay:

Kyle felt so happy. He thought maybe he was wrong about the boys in his class. Maybe they could be friends. But at school the next day...the kids teased Kyle....No one talked to Kyle at lunch or played with him on the playground. (Fabrikant, 2013, pp. 12–14)

At this point, the protagonist Kayla is still referenced as “Kyle” and “he” by the narrator, and the male friend is mocking what he sees as a fellow boy's gender-nonconforming activities.

Similar mocking occurs in *I Am Jazz* and *10,000 Dresses*. Jazz shares, “I hardly ever played with trucks or tools or superheroes. Only princesses and mermaid costumes. My brothers told me this was girl stuff” (Herthel & Jennings, 2014, n.p.). Bailey's mother, father, and brother proclaim, “Boys don't wear dresses....Don't mention dresses again!” (Ewert, 2008, n.p.). Such ideas align with a long history of misogyny in which actions and identities associated with maleness are privileged while those associated with femaleness are targeted and ridiculed (Pharr, 1988).

The types of peer relationships sought by the protagonists are also distinctive. Trans female characters repeatedly and primarily seek friendships with other girls, whereas trans male protagonists show an interest in friendships with both male and female peers. For example, in *I Am Jazz*, Jazz is *only* illustrated playing with or longing to do activities with other girls from which she feels excluded, such as ballet rehearsal. In *Truly Willa*, Willa expresses her level of happiness at being able to be her true self outside the home and with friends: “I even met with my friends to play at the park dressed as the girl I am” (Naylor, 2016, n.p.) and “My friends accepted me and I was so happy” (n.p.). In all instances of Willa's stated friendship, only girls are depicted. Similarly, Sarah in *But, I'm Not a Boy* “wished she could play with other girls where they could all play dress up and be taking care of their dolls together” (Leone, 2015, n.p.) rather than play with the boys from her neighborhood. Thus, much like the essentialist representations of gender described earlier, there is also an essentialist notion of who can interact with whom—that perhaps girls should only interact with and be accepted by other girls.

In all of the books, the transgender characters assert agency regarding their feelings and the changes they hope to make, even if doing so requires persistence.

Asserting Agency

In all of the books, the transgender characters assert agency regarding their feelings and the changes they hope to make, even if doing so requires persistence. Typically, the characters advocate for change via their relationships and interactions with others. Therefore, some of the examples and descriptions provided in this section may overlap with information from the earlier “Relationships” section. This also accounts for this section's brevity compared to other sections. However, the explicit emphasis on agency, and the importance of this within some trans individuals' life experiences, warrants this separate category.

The protagonists in *I Am Jazz*; *Be Who You Are*; *But, I'm Not a Boy*; *When Kathy Is Keith*; *10,000 Dresses*; and *When Kayla Was Kyle* all discuss their gender identity with their parents and advocate for change. In some instances, the characters further assert agency when these initial attempts are unsuccessful. For example, when Bailey is repeatedly not supported by her family members in *10,000 Dresses*, she “ran and ran. She ran all the way to the end of the block, until she came to a house with a big blue porch” (Ewert, 2008, n.p.). By escaping the confines of home, Bailey discovers a supportive neighbor who embraces Bailey's female identity and shares a passion for envisioning and creating dresses. When Keith's successive efforts to tell his friends, teacher, and parents are unsuccessful in *When Kathy Is Keith*, he decides to tell the mall Santa Claus about his desire to be a boy in order to ignite change: “I want to be a boy. Santa, can you please make me into a boy!” (Wong, 2011, p. 20). In *My Favorite Color Is Pink*, Patty directly addresses the reader about her gender: “Other people wish that I would dress and act like a boy. But that's not who I am!” (Benedetto, 2015b, n.p.) and “I just want to be myself” (n.p.). The characters in every book assert agency through expressing their gender identity and having others acknowledge and support it.

Through these characters' advocacy for themselves, they disrupt notions that gender and biological sex are synonymous (Blaise & Taylor, 2012; Plummer, 2013). Their advocacy also alludes to political stances within queer theory that demand change and a reconceptualization of what is accepted as normal. Britzman (1995) argued that

queer theory is political in its attempts to “conceptualize strategies that confound” (p. 157) institutional laws and social practices that enforce and sustain normativity, and she claimed this is done “through the very refusal of subjects to properly normalize themselves” (p. 157). Such refusal is evident in the trans protagonists’ assertion of agency throughout these books.

Additional Characteristics of the Overall Text Set

My findings thus far focus specifically on the transgender characters themselves regarding gender performance, experiences, and relationships with others. However, additional aspects of the books further affect the representation of transgender characters and how they might be interpreted by readers.

LACK OF DIVERSITY. Overall in the text set, there is a preponderance of White, middle class characters living in households with two cisgender, heterosexual parents. Such pervasive representations align with findings of other scholars’ analyses of LGBTQ-inclusive children’s literature that dominant cultural groups are typically the ones most represented (Hermann-Wilmarth & Ryan, 2014; Lester, 2014). These representations, along with representations regarding authorship and point of view, which are further discussed below, are listed in Table 1.

AUTHORSHIP. Three of the books were authored by trans individuals (two by trans youth themselves and one by an adult), and five of the others were authored by a mother of a trans child (one), a clinical professional (one), or another cisgender activist (three). The ninth book in my text set, *10,000 Dresses*, was authored by Marcus Ewert. The book’s back cover describes Ewert as a co-creator of an animated series on MTV’s LOGO channel, but no information was provided regarding the author’s gender identity, relationship to trans individuals, or activism. In all but one of the books (*10,000 Dresses*), the back matter or jacket flap notes that the book was published as an advocacy tool and/or in conjunction with support organizations. The authorship frequently reflects the story’s point of view. For example, *I Am Jazz* and *Truly Willa*, coauthored by transgender youth, are written in the first person from the trans child’s perspective. *I Am Jazz* begins with the narrator proclaiming, “I am Jazz!” (Herthel & Jennings, 2014, n.p.). Similarly, *Truly Willa* begins, “Hello, my name is Willa. I am very happy being Willa, and I want to tell you my story” (Naylor, 2016, n.p.). In each, the author’s sense of pride about who she is radiates.

On the other hand, *Be Who You Are*, written by a parent, and *When Kathy Is Keith*, written by a psychologist, are told in the third person from adult perspectives. For example, *When Kathy Is Keith* begins with this author dedication: “[This book] was inspired by many transgen-

TABLE 1
Characteristics of the text set

Title	Gender Identity of Protagonist	Race of Protagonist	Social Class	Parents and Their Gender Performance	Age—Role of Author	Narration
<i>10,000 Dresses</i>	Female	White	Not evident	Mother and father: cisgender	Adult—not specified	Third Person
<i>About Chris</i>	Male	White	Not evident	Mother, no other demographics specified	Adult—activist	First Person (teacher)
<i>Be Who You Are</i>	Female	White	Middle class	Mother and father: cisgender	Adult—mother of trans child	Third Person
<i>But, I’m Not a Boy</i>	Female	White	Middle class	Mother and father: cisgender	Adult—trans female	Third Person
<i>I Am Jazz</i>	Female	White	Middle class	Mother and father: cisgender	Teenager—trans female	First Person (child)
<i>My Favorite Color Is Pink</i>	Female	White	Middle class	Mother and father: cisgender	Adult—activist	First Person (child)
<i>Truly Willa</i>	Female	White	Middle class	Mother and father: cisgender	Child—trans female	First Person (child)
<i>When Kathy Is Keith</i>	Male	White	Middle class	Mother and father: cisgender	Adult—clinical psychologist	Third Person
<i>When Kayla Was Kyle</i>	Female	White	Middle class	Mother and father: cisgender	Adult—activist	Third Person

der children and youth I have worked with” and carries the hope that readers “see [the book] from the view points of a transgender child or youth” (Wong, 2011, p. 3). The narrative begins, “Kathy looks at the mirror every day. She sees a girl in the mirror, but she knows the mirror has made a mistake, because the person in the mirror is not a boy” (p. 4). Here, the adult author inserts his beliefs about trans youth and their feelings onto his protagonist based on his observations as a clinical psychologist. Nodelman (2008) discussed the importance of authorship in regard to how protagonists are constructed, especially related to the potential disconnect of how childhood is envisioned and created through an adult’s projection. Thus, in texts authored by trans youth themselves, readers are afforded perhaps a more authentic, accurate view.

PUBLISHING. Except for *I Am Jazz*, the trans-inclusive texts are published independently or by small publishing houses. These aspects of authorship, illustration, and publication are important to consider because, as a result, availability of the books may be more limited. In addition, the quality of the finished product may be compromised in regard to illustrations and/or writing, further making these books less accessible to readers and less lucrative for publishers. While *10,000 Dresses* uses narrative devices such as recurring phrases, varied sentence length and structure, and lilting lines like “With all her heart, Bailey loved the dress made of lilies and roses, with honeysuckle sleeves” (Ewert, 2008, n.p.), the other texts frequently do not employ such stylistic features and often come across as didactic. For example, though the protagonist in *When Kathy Is Keith* yearns much like Bailey, the writing style pales in comparison:

Kathy looks at Santa’s eyes and says, “I want to be a boy. Santa, can you please make me into a boy!” Santa is surprised by Kathy’s request, and does not know what to say to her. Kathy’s mother feels embarrassed but also feels that Kathy meant it when she asked Santa that question. When they get home, Kathy’s mother asks Kathy, “Do you really see yourself as a boy?” Kathy nods without any hesitation. (Wong, 2011, pp. 20–22)

When Kayla Was Kyle demonstrates a similarly clunky writing style in describing reactions to the protagonist’s transitioning: “Lots of kids and teachers at school didn’t understand. Some kids and parents in the community didn’t accept Kayla and were mean” (Fabrikant, 2013, p. 24). In both examples, there is a simplicity in language use and in how the trans protagonists and supplemental characters feel and respond. The less expressive writing style not only minimizes the

characters’ experiences but also runs the risk of being less inviting and engaging to readers.

With regard to design, the text within *But, I’m Not a Boy* is written in various fonts and sizes, appears arbitrary, and affects cohesiveness. On the 10th opening, the bottom line of text is spliced due to printing. The illustrations in *Truly Willa*, *About Chris*, *My Favorite Color Is Pink*, and *When Kayla Was Kyle* are particularly rudimentary. Although the intent may have been to include illustrations that looked, or were, child-created, the result is a product that does not reflect the importance of the story and would likely inhibit a child’s engagement. Except for *10,000 Dresses* and *I Am Jazz*, all of the picturebooks are only available in paperback, which may inhibit the physical sustainability of the books in classroom libraries.

Though the above statements critique the writing and artistic quality of predominantly those books from small or independent publishers, it must be noted that *10,000 Dresses*, an exemplar text for writing quality, is from a small publisher. Thus, books from publishers of all sizes have the potential for incorporating writing and illustrations honoring protagonists’ experiences and are capable of resonating with the intended young audiences.

Conclusions and Implications

Through this study, I explored the representations of transgender children as characters in realistic picturebooks and considered the significance of those representations. My investigation revealed that diverse representations of transgender characters are limited with regard to race, social class, gender identity, and gender performance and that the majority of picturebooks perpetuate single-story representations (Adichie, 2009) and binary performances of gender (Jaggar, 2014). In closing, I discuss implications of my findings for the current state of the literature and describe what is needed for all children to have access to a more engaging and inclusive set of texts.

Across the nine texts, all trans characters are depicted as White and seven identify as female. (Interestingly, one protagonist, Jazz Jennings, is illustrated with lighter hair and a paler skin tone in her book than images of her in real life convey. Such depiction further perpetuates and privileges particular types of representation.) Eight of the nine protagonists live in supportive homes, and seven live in middle class settings. All of the characters align their gender performances with essentialist and stereotypical notions of gender. The implications for such limited representations, both in the number of books available as well as the representations within those books, are plentiful. Many readers may not be able to physically access a book with a transgender character, especially since the majority of books are published by small publish-

ing companies or are self-published. In addition, if the books readers do read only show certain identities and ways of being—to the exclusion of other cultural groups and of the myriad ways in which people identify and perform gender—their interest, motivation for engagement, and opportunities for transactions (Rosenblatt, 1978/1994) will be limited.

These texts serve a vital role in increasing the visibility of transgender individuals and creating opportunities for youth to read about and discuss such identities with peers and adults, which can in turn foster a more supportive, knowledgeable, and just society.

Gender-nonconforming children, children who may be questioning their gender identity, and children who have transgender friends and/or family members must have access to diverse representations of such individuals. All readers—regardless of their gender identity—need opportunities to engage with a range of trans characters, with the potential benefit of decreasing limited conceptualizations. Specifically, my findings support the argument that greater diversity in race, social class, and gender identity is needed. In addition, there needs to be wider representation of fluidity in gender performance to avoid stereotypes and gender binaries. Fluidity and resistance to gender binaries “obscures essentialist identities” (Barnett & Johnson, 2015, p. 581), and queer theory has long critiqued the preponderance of Whiteness within studies and political movements involving LGBTQ people (Halperin, 2003; Smith, 2010).

Educators and librarians might provide opportunities for children to read books from the text set described here and prompt them to read critically with questions such as these: Which races and genders are represented, and which are absent? What are the characters’ hobbies or interests, and are these framed as gendered choices? How are characters relying on and/or reinforcing gender stereotypes, and how might that be problematic? What are other ways individuals might perform male or female gender, and what are gender possibilities for identity and performance beyond the male/female binary? These and other such questions can help to further “queer” what may already be considered queer texts—challenging normative, dominant, and/or stereotypical representa-

tions in order to consider how other identities and ways of being may be absent but nonetheless existing and possible (Hermann-Wilmarth & Ryan, 2014). Educators, teachers, and parents have the responsibility, as queer theorists argue, to question “what (and why) we know and do not know about things both normal and queer” (Tierney & Dilley, 1998, p. 60) and to “disrupt ‘normalizing’ discourses” (p. 61). Probing textual representations, especially when such representations are homogenous and perpetuate particular ways of being, facilitates challenging concepts of normalcy.

Despite these critiques, I would be remiss not to emphasize the value of the books currently available as well as the importance of the increasing amount of trans-inclusive children’s literature being published. These texts serve a vital role in increasing the visibility of transgender individuals and creating opportunities for youth to read about and discuss such identities with peers and adults, which can in turn foster a more supportive, knowledgeable, and just society. Now that such books exist, it is time for increasingly diverse stories to be published in order to disrupt and complicate the essentialist gendered representations and racially homogenized narratives currently available. A plethora of diverse stories adds to a more nuanced, complete understanding of a group of people (Adichie, 2009; Haraway, 2014). Additional texts provide a multitude of windows and mirrors (Bishop, 1990) so children can see myriad possible reflections of themselves and learn about others, a metaphor beautifully conceptualized by Bailey and her neighbor in *10,000 Dresses* as they dream about and design dresses that showcase other worlds as well as “show us ourselves” (Ewert, 2008, n.p.).

In several books represented within this study, the trans characters are told by their parents that they are loved and are encouraged to “be who they are.” Willa elaborates on this message at the conclusion of *Truly Willa*, along with making a plea to adult readers:

I want to share my story to help others like me, to give hope to children who feel the way I do. I want to tell them to be brave, even when it feels hard, because it is worth it, to fight to be you, because like me you can be happy being your true self....I hope that this book helps the grown ups as well, to listen and support any children they know that are going through this, because we need your support! (Naylor, 2016, n.p.)

Willa’s statements reinforce the need for books like hers and others inclusive of trans characters in the publishing world and within our collections. She is right. Children do need our support, and having such books

available and sharing them with youth can thus encourage *all* children, regardless of their gender identity, to be who they are. ■

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