Representations of Families in Children's Literature

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Abstract

This qualitative study examines representations of families in nineteen fictional picture books for young children. The aim of this thesis is to understand how families are constructed and presented in children's literature, in terms of different family structures, functioning systems and interrelationships. Further discussion also considers the use of children's literature in both family and educational environments. Family theories, language learning and children's learning and development around the ages of 3-7 years are considered in relation to the chosen books. Four stages of iterative content analysis are utilised to consider the stories over eight interrelated categories, which are then presented and discussed to address the research questions. Findings included a broad range of family types and relationships within the selected literature. The family were supportive of the child protagonists. Lead caregivers varied in age, gender and familial relationships, and the presence of parents, siblings, pets, and extended family also varied. Considerable context was given though illustration, and roles were defined though both text and illustration. These stories were short, welcoming, and often humorous, but the themes within them and the potential for deep learning and consideration of heavy topics suggests that children's literature is an undervalued medium for learning and development. Adults, both in an educator and a caregiver role, could benefit greatly from exploring children's literature.

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1. INTRODUCTION

This thesis focuses on the representations of families in children's written and illustrated literature, specifically books aimed at preschool children aged between 3-7 years. The first section will define the concept of children's literature and then provide some overview on current literature surrounding the topic. Next, the previously defined concept of literature will be related to children's learning and development over the established age range. The application of children's literature as a tool for learning will then be discussed for both home and educational spaces. The limitations of literature for children's learning development will also be considered.

The second section of the literature review will consider a range of current family theories. The potential lenses with which to consider the construction and presentation of families in the literature will have different outcomes and it is important to identify which theories will best suit the purpose of this thesis.

Finally, this section will outline the research questions which will be used to guide the research.

1.1 Defining children's literature

This thesis considers children's literature and the representation found therein. It utilises childhood studies, which is defined as "the interdisciplinary study of the early period of the human life-course that is legally recognised, socially, and scientifically defined as childhood, as distinct from adulthood" (James & James 2012, p.18). The sociology of childhood is concerned with the placement and the view of children in society. For this study, the chronological age 3-7 years is used. The literature sampled is produced for this specific age group, but arguably could (and will) be utilised by those outside of that limited age bracket.

Children's literature relevant to learning and development at ages 3-7.

Ages 3-7 are part of early childhood, though the definition of childhood is not easily defined. However, I will be using the definition provided by James & James (2012, p.9)

"A child is defined a human being in the early stages of its life-course, biologically, psychologically, and socially; it is a member of a generation referred to collectively by adults as 'children', who together temporarily occupy the social space that is created for them by adults and referred to as 'childhood'."

Earlier studies on children's learning and development focused on the ways in which children might successfully transition to adulthood, Piaget's concern was to "understand how children develop the rationality characteristic of adult thought." He therefore tried to map or construct a "hierarchical, universal path of human development" (Burman, 1994, 153 In Esser et al. p.36) It seemed that the real focus of interest was how to transform children into adults in the best possible way. The current lived experiences of children were irrelevant as they were not (yet) valid. As children's literature focuses on the current lives of the child protagonists, this research will have more of a focus on the current lived experiences of children as they are. However, as literature might be utilised as a tool for development, it is important to consider the range of potential learning outcomes.

Children's literature impacts a child's understanding of the world around them. It can provide 'mirrors and windows' with which to understand the world. (Tschida et al. 2014). Stories can be used both to make sense of one's own experiences and life, and to better understand the lives of others. Choices of literature have the power to transform and personalise learning, as we construct our own reality through narration, (Bruner, 1991).

Areas of children's learning and development in which literature may play a key role are briefly outlined below. These areas can be part of home and family life, experienced in an educational setting, or both. Literature can be utilised in family education; it is a rich source of personal and social development. The stories we explore with children in an

educational setting can also teach children what is and is not valued in society, as well as messages relating to their place within society. (Krashen & Bland, 2014.)

Home and educational settings were prioritised as they are the settings in which young children spend most of their time. Table 1 briefly overviews how the use of literature has related to these settings.

Table 1.

Potential applications of children's literature across settings.

Home Setting	Educational setting	Both
Part of a daily routine for the child and caregiver.(Rönkä and Korvela 2009)	Part of a daily routine in an educational setting, for example circle time, rest time.	A multi-sensory experience as a child interacts with a physical book.
An opportunity to connect and promote a secure attachment. (Bowlby, 1979)	Understanding the process of listening to a story in a group & social expectations.	An opportunity to learn about something the child has not yet experienced.
Moments of physical connection as a book is read.	Language development through scaffolding, including second language learning. (Bland, 2015)	An opportunity to reflect on a similar experience and to compound learning about that experience.
An opportunity to consider the story on a deeper level and find meaning together. (Hunte and Golombieski, 2014)	The beginning of a project or activity based on the themes of the story. Project based learning. (Kokotsaki, et al, 2016)	Learning through play as a child mimics an adult reading (Vygotsky 1978)

Children's literature in a home setting.

'Home settings' refers to a place where a child lives with a caregiver. Sharing stories can also be a multi levelled experience, both for the reader and the child.

An adult reader also stands to gain from the experience of reading. As Hunte and Golombieski (2014 p. 75) state, "Storytelling is central to humanity because it is through narrative that we learn about ourselves and prepare ourselves for the future in an evolutionary sense". It takes time to understand how society works and how complex societal structures impact people in different intersecting ways. All of the societal oppressions, opportunities and social structures experienced by adults are also to some degree experienced by children. However, children have less experience in navigating

these situations. Children need opportunities to learn and to practise using the influence they have. Piaget considered that children engage in activities and changes then occur in their understanding and thought processes, but Vygotsky argued that through social interaction, children learned to internalize the skills and competencies they observed in others. For example Vygotsky (1978). Proposed that 'the child' is "positioned, foremost, as a social actor." Corsaro's (2005) theory of interpretive reproduction suggests that children re-interpret the world around them and create their own peer cultures and ideas, surpassing the ideas of the adults around them.

The relationship between the adult caregiver and the child can grow in the process of sharing a book. Should the book have some element which attracts the interest of the child they may want to know more, and this can set up a very rich and deep experience for both parties. For example, if a child asks for further clarification or some other explanation of what is happening in the story, it is up to the adult to try to relate their understanding of the story in a way they can both relate to it. Some parts may be explained later in the story or be missed entirely.

Children's literature impacts a child's understanding of the world around them. It can provide 'mirrors and windows' with which to understand the world. (Tschida et al., 2014). In some instances, further explanation can open the door to further conversation and speculation. For example, if the story showed a parent looking concerned about spending money on dance lessons, and the parent is shown in the book as having a job which is traditionally very low paid, there is the scope to try to offer an explanation. This could be that different families have different incomes, or that some work is not paid well and therefore parents will have to make difficult choices about what they are and are not able to provide for their children. Depending on the level of interest the child has, a book like this can provide a jumping off point for understanding more about the world.

An adult has considerable mental work to do in the situation described above. They must decide how much to explain, and how to do this in a way that the child will be able to understand. In a sense they are actively translating their understanding of the story into

simple and child-friendly language and content. Stories can be used both to make sense of one's own experiences and life, and to better understand the lives of others. Choices of literature have the power to transform and personalise learning, as we construct our own adult reality through narration (Bruner, 1991). It is possible that in the above situation, an adult also takes some time to reflect on income inequality, and perhaps changes their own mind in the process.

This interaction also gives the child the opportunity to construct their own understanding of the story world, and how it relates to their own. This is seen as an important part of their learning and development: "Children are and must be seen as active in the construction and determination of their own social lives, the lives of those around them and of the societies in which they live. Children are not just the passive subjects of social structures and processes" (Prout & James, 1990, p. 8) (from Esser et al 2016 p.19).

Children's literature in educational settings.
Children's literature can play a key role in language education, especially through the use of illustrations. As Bland highlights: "The pictures can provide a narrative scaffold to help the reader follow the story even when their linguistic competence is still limited. Consequently, pictures often provide a meaning-anchor effect that supports inexperienced L1 readers, young language learners as well as teenage L2 learners." (Bland 2015 p.25) The illustrations can also provide significant additional depth to the experience. "The pictures in children's literature frequently provide easier access to cultural background in the sense that they are physically present and frozen in time, however this does not diminish their educational potential, but rather extends it." (Bland, 2015)

Dolan (2014, p. 92) calls picture books 'windows and mirrors' and "a powerful vehicle in the classroom in terms of intercultural education for all learners, including those working through the medium of a second language". The pictures in children's literature are windows in that the student can see into another world, and mirrors in that the different world reflects back a reality that allows the reader to see their own world in a new light. Bland argues for literature as potentially superior to textbook learning: "Authentic picture

books and graphic novels reflecting cultural diversity thus move readers towards flexibility of perspective – away from rather monolithic, and in L2 textbooks, often stereotyped input on other cultures towards intercultural competence." (Bland 2015 p28) However, it does not necessarily follow that literature will be free of such stereotypes. Diverse representation in children's picture books is key to developing both personal identity and understanding the lives of others (Bland, 2016). Children's literature is used in Heritage language classes, and my own library of children's books are regularly borrowed to compliment lessons.

The limitations of literature.

Stories serve as examples of situations which might be faced in 'real life'. Sometimes they are based on true or real life events and experiences. However, in 'teaching by example' there is a very real risk that the examples used only tell some small part of a story. The representations of a single character in one story will not have the scope to consider that there are infinite other possibilities and experiences that each character might have.

"The Danger of a single story" is expertly summarised by Chimamand Adichie in her 2013 TED talk, in which she explains that knowing only one narrative or aspect of somebody's life or story can lead to over-generalisations about the self and others. One book may describe one family, from one perspective. If this is the only time such a family is represented, it could severely limit future understanding of other people's lives and perspectives. If the story represents a single 'window' into another way of life, we would be wary of making generalisations based only on that one story.

1.2 Family theories

The family is a controversial concept with different definitions. It might be considered as a community where some needs are met - including, but not limited to heritage, living and household, love, power, and authority. There are also many reasons for a family to exist: biogenetic, personal choice, law, economic, cultural, experience or for mutual support.

Families are dynamic and change over time. There are not only the historical changes (Allen & Henderson 2017), they are in constant flux, and each person in a family brings new perspectives. There might be a daily or weekly rhythm, long or short-term change. Families are diverse in structure, systems, and inter-relationships.

As many children move from their home lives to educational environments, their lives alter significantly and they begin to understand the lives and experiences of others, and how their own lives and experiences may be similar or different. Therefore, at this stage they may also consider what 'family' means in their lives. This section comprises an overview of family theories. Children are rarely, if ever, entirely out of the context of their family, therefore if, for example, there is some problem for a child in a school setting, it is important to consider what is going on in the family of this child. Perhaps they don't have a problem in themselves, but their parents or siblings do, and this is affecting them.

Several different theoretical lenses could be used to study family structures, systems and relationships in children's literature. Six of these are summarised in Table 2, to consider which might be applied to this research.

Table 2

Family theories summarised and considered for application to this research.

Family theory	Summary	Potential application
Family systems theory: Cox & Paley (2003, p.193), Piaget, (1970)	Family systems theory presents the family as a unit seeing cohesion and a balance between stability and change.	Some children's literature may narrate perspectives of family members outside of the mother-child relationship, which is an important aspect of family systems theory. (Cox & Paley 2003, p.193)
Life course theory, Elder (1987, 1981) Bengtson & Allen (1993)	Life course approach - e.g., Edler (1981). This approach is concerned with life changing, cultural co construction of reality and big events. Therefore the data is collected at several points in time allowing for the observation of the trajectory of changes and influences, and how people react to these larger changes.	In these 'big theme' stories, life course theory could be applied as a research perspective which involves looking at significant life changes along an extended timeline of events. However, many children's stories offer only a snapshot in time so while this is useful to consider, it is likely to have only limited function in this study.
Daily family approaches Rönkä and Korvela (2009)	Daly (2003) critiques traditional methods of family research as failing to capture 'lives as they are lived'. Therefore, this approach is concerned with what actually happens day-to-day in family life. These pragmatic, process oriented approaches were utilised by Rönkä and Korvela (2009) in considering the impact of daily life in families. The rhythm of family life and 'what happens and when' aspects of life paint a picture of the family.	There might be a daily or weekly rhythms, with the events of daily life describing what it means to be a family, in which case the texts could be analysed from the daily family approach.

Feminist theory: Allen (2016)	This approach considers the social implications of the roles within the family. It considers the impact of gender roles in family life as well as power structures and dynamics at play. Feminist family theory also encompasses the concept of motherhood as an institution and an experience, (Rich, 1977), the idealised 'perfect mother' (Chodorow & Contratto, 1992) and the concept of intensive mothering (Hays 1996)	Using feminist family theory (Allen, 2016) would also give a very valuable perspective and critically examine power relationships and expectations of family members in the stories.
Social constructivism:	In this approach, our reality, and what we understand to be real, is ever changing. 'Meanings' are socially constructed in time and place. Family and parenthood are therefore also ever-changing social constructions. Parenting and family life are dynamic and circumstance dependent.	Each story is its own narrative account and constructs its own world, in which the concept of family life is explored. This approach blends neatly with analysis of children's literature, the constructed worlds within stories reflecting the constructed social realities we live in.
Attachment parenting / family theories: (Bowlby, 1979)	Children form relationships with other children, siblings, family members, teachers, neighbours and wider society. They observe how adults communicate with each other and create their own relationships.	The primary attachments within the family should be evident in the text, and the rupture and repair of relationships strongly relate to the role of the family in the texts.

Families have multiple voices and realities, they are dynamic and change over time (Allen & Henderson, 2017). They are in constant flux, and each person in a family brings new perspectives. The relationships between characters in the stories will be considered both in their descriptions and in terms of ages and genders.

Considering the aim of this thesis is also to enable the application of children's picture books to educational settings, further analysis should also consider why these family representations are constructed in this way, and what the impact of this might be. It is because of the inherent power of literature, that its use should be carefully considered. Therefore, considering the systems, structures and relationships presented in the texts is not enough, and a deeper understanding of the purpose of these stories, as well as their potential to shape the worldview of children and adults alike. A combined approach, considering all the above theories will allow a more holistic approach to analysis.

1.3 Research Questions

The research questions that are guiding this study are:

- How are different kinds of family structures, systems and relationships constructed and presented in children's literature?
- What role does the family play in each of these examples?

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Research data

Nineteen published children's books for ages 3-7 years old, illustrating various family relationships were selected. The age group considered in this study may be learning to read for themselves or listening to the stories read to them by a family member / adult carer. They may also be listening to these stories in a day-care or school environment. For most of the children, the focus will be on the pictures and the sound of the adult reading the book, as well as the space in which the literature is presented. The context has an impact on the experience and the same text may present differently depending on multiple external factors.

2.2 Data collection / selection

The following criteria were established for the selection of books:

> 1. Target reader age group: 3-7 years old.

> 2. The book must contain at least one significant family relationship or representation of a family.

> 3. 'Family' is a key element of the story.

The first criteria were selected primarily for consistency of data. There should be considerable similarities between books aimed at children of this age in terms of language used, length of each text and the 'level' of understanding which might be developmentally appropriate. The second criteria were essential for analysing the construction, presentation, and role of families in the texts. There are many children's books which fall outside of this specification, and these would not suit the purpose of this study. The third criteria further refine this. Family might be present in a text without playing a significant role. As these stories are short, without the family being a central or at least key element in the story, it would be difficult to fully understand their role unless they were also a key factor determining the events of the story.

Stage 1: Selection and organisation of the books

1. The books list was constructed, comprising the book title, author, illustrator, year of publication and an image.
2. Each book was given a number and shorthand title for use in tables.
3. A brief plot summary and description of the family structures shown in each book was added to the books table.
4. A separate document was created for each book which included all of the above information.

At this stage several books were removed from the list as they failed to meet criteria 3. Several other books were added. One book which was considered and swapped out was 'Call me Max' which centred on a boy called Max. The story told of his feelings of gender

dysphoria and being trans. His family (and pets) were described in the story, but the story focused on Max's own energy and understanding of himself as he navigated his life. His parents are 'along for the ride' as opposed to key influences in his life, and in fact Max changes his name at school some time before his parents become aware. One author (Cerrie Burnell) is featured twice in the books list, but several other books by the same author might have been included. Several other authors had multiple works which could have been considered but I chose to focus on the books which had the strongest representations of family life and relationships.

This process resulted in the following list of books:

Table 3

A numbered list of books: Titles, authors, and illustrators.

	Title	Author	Illustrator
1	The Boy who Loved Everyone	Jane Porter	Maisie Paradise Shearring
2	Morris Micklewhite and the Tangerine Dress	Christine Baldacchino	Isabelle Malefant
3	King Baby	Kate Beaton	Kate Beaton
4	The Proudest Blue	Ibtihaj Muhammed, S. K. Ali,	Hatem Ali
5	Snowflakes	Cerrie Burnell	Laura Ellen Anderson
6	From Far Away	Robert Munch & Saossan Askar	Rebecca Green
7	Uncle Bobby's Wedding	Sarah S. Brannen	Lucia Soto
8	Julian is a Mermaid	Jessica Love	Jessica Love
9	If All the World Were…	Joseph Coelho	Allison Colpoys
10	Fairy Magic	Cerrie Burnell	Laura Ellen Anderson
11	Just Because	Rebecca Elliot	Rebecca Elliot
12	Ravi's Roar	Tom Percival	Tom Percival
13	My Monster and Me	Nadiya Hussain	Ella Bailey
14	If I Were You…	Richard Hamilton	Babette Cole
15	I Will Never Not Ever Eat a Tomoto	Lauren Child	Lauren Child

16	The Star Makers Apprentice	Sam Hay	Xin Li
17	Wild	Emily Hughes	Emily Hughes
18	Ish	Peter H Reynolds	Peter H Reynolds
19	I Want a Sister	Tony Ross	Tony Ross

2.3 Data Analysis

Stage 2: Analysis of the books, a list of analytical steps.

Primary cycle: Following the basic steps of iterative analysis as outlined in Tracy (2020), the process was as follows:

1. Data immersion: each book was studied / read several times each.
2. The family structures shown in each text were summarised / mapped in a separate document. The key relationships were then highlighted.
3. Extensive notes were gathered on people, language, action, narration, themes, and settings.
4. These areas were also grouped together and added to tables / tallies.

Stage 3: Further consideration of the data.

The picture books, the subset of 'illustrations', were added to each analysis. Illustrations were also analysed for themes and motifs. the ways in which these recurring patterns were presented and their implications in presenting families.

The mood/tone of each story was also important. They ranged between very light-hearted humour and celebration to considerably darker themes and moods. This served as an extension to the 'themes' category.

Further tables were constructed to consider the patterns in family structure, significant relationships, and other key features in the texts, including the social issues impacting the protagonist and their family.

Therefore, the categories of analysis ended up being: People, Language, Illustrations, Action, Narration, Themes, Tone, Settings. These headings go on to form the subheadings of the findings section. Table 4 summarises the analysis performed relating to the updated headings:

Table 4

Categories of analysis and the sources of data collected relating to each category.

Category:			Analysis includes:	
1.	People	a.	Family type / structure table. Most significant relationships.	
		b.	Tally - relatives and pets.	
		c.	Features of each protagonist / representation.	
2.	Language	a.	Individual summary of linguistic features in each text.	
3.	Illustrations	a.	Individual summary of illustrated features in the text.	
		b.	Additional commentary on themes, motifs and the clothing of the characters.	
4.	Action	a.	Individual summary of the plot and main action in the text.	
		b.	'Impacted by' table considering.	
5.	Narration	a.	Individual summary of narration	
		b.	Narration table.	
6.	Themes	a.	Individual summary of themes.	
		b.	Themes table.	
7.	Tone	a.	Individual summary of tone.	
8.	Settings	a.	Individual lists of settings shown in each book.	
		b.	Settings table.	

2.3 Stage 4: Combining of the data according to the research questions

The data then needed to be arranged in a format that best suits the research questions, and at this stage five simple sub questions were introduced. As some categories provided answers for both research questions, they are used in both questions.

Table 5

Research questions, sub questions and sources.

Research question	Sub-questions	Source(s)
RQ1. How are different kinds of families presented & constructed in these examples of children's literature?	a. Who is present? b. Who is speaking? c. What can be seen?	a. People - Features of the protagonist and their family structures primarily showed how each family was constructed and presented in the texts. b. Language & Narration - These categories impacted each other considerably and were therefore grouped together. c. Illustration, settings & tone
RQ2. What role does the family play in these examples?	a. What is happening? b. What does this mean?	a. People, Themes & Action - The action of the text followed the Aristotelian pattern of exposition, climax, resolution. These were mapped onto a table and similarities and themes quickly began to emerge. Themes eventually formed five subcategories. b. Illustrations, settings, and tone - These factors further described the role of the family in the texts.

Further observations emerged at every stage of the analysis, for example the coding / grouping of characters through costuming, the lack of names for caregivers, the presence and significance of food, bedding, and pets. The meaning in the data became increasingly apparent as the process continued.

2.4 Ethical considerations

The data used in this study comes from published children's picture books, referenced in the bibliography below. My reading and analysis of these books is likely to deviate from the author's intention due to my own biases. On first reading, in one book I assumed that there were parents present / pictured in the story, but on second reading I found that there were only siblings and pets shown.

Another consideration was the limitations of the sample size. Nineteen books is a small sample size for drawing larger conclusions about the representation of families across all children's literature. There was also the issue of the boundaries of the data. For example, further research about the authors and illustrators, or further information in the books themselves. Reviews and interviews with authors were also considered at the end of the process. This forms part of the later discussion on author authenticity and social positioning, as this is not a direct finding from the data itself.

Familiarity bias: as anyone who writes about families will have a strong own researcher bias, mine may be evident in looking for family setups which reflect my own experiences. In considering childhood studies, each researcher has their own memory of having experienced a childhood, and for my own part, I have the experience of raising children and stepchildren of my own. There is the added context of working in education and my current work as an early childhood teacher. All these factors will influence this research and potentially cause me to notice different patterns within the data, and to interpret it in different ways to another researcher working with the same dataset.

Spyrou (2016) discusses the impact of children's voices being heard in research, although they are 'multi layered and messy' narratives, they are important for understanding the inner worlds of children. Methods for researching children must be accessible to children and cannot cause harm to the children being researched. Böök, M. L., & Mykkänen, J. (2014) conducted a study which gave children the opportunity to construct photo diaries detailing their daily lives. While hearing children's voices thought their own creations and narration would be an ideal way to work in documenting the voices of young children, consent must be sought and obtained from the child themselves and from the caregivers

advocating on their behalf. This study does not directly address the voices of children but instead considers the educational implications of literature produced for children.

FINDINGS

3. Results / Findings

The selected books were chosen due to their representation of a family. However, there was considerable variety in family structures and relationships. Table 4 in section 2.3 (Stage 3) indicates the source of the findings and Table 5 in section 2.3 (Stage 4) provides an overview of the structure of this section and the questions and sub questions.

3.1 Presentation and construction of families in the literature

Who is present?

Family types / structure table: (1a.) Family structure was summarised by the characters shown in pictures or mentioned in the texts. It is possible that other family members do exist in the story world, but my findings are taken from what appears (or does not appear) in each book. Over nineteen books, there were seven examples of families with a single adult caregiver. Of these, there were three mothers, two fathers and two grandmothers. There were seven families with two parents, all of which were male/female partnerships. Four books showed no adult caregivers at all and centred the story around a child and their siblings. Although many of the books showed a child living with two parents, who appeared to be in a relationship with each other, explicit hints of the parents' marital status were not obvious. Therefore, these examples showed some variety of family structures, though with the notable exception of explicitly stated blended and stepfamilies.

Relatives and pets. (1c). Extended family: Book three (King Baby) shows a large extended family, bringing gifts to the new baby. Book seven, (Uncle Bobby's Wedding) shows two family gatherings, where a larger family or social network is implied. Book nineteen (I Want a Sister) shows a cousin and a network of royal staff (Doctor, Cook, Maid (F), General, Admiral, Prime Minister (M)) who serve almost as an extended family to the Little Princess. Pets were featured in many of the stories and were more likely to be given

names than adult caregivers. The variety of different families in these books can show young and older readers alike that there is significant diversity in families.

What is being said?

Protagonist: (1d). The protagonist is indicated to be male ten times and female eight times. Two children expressed themselves in a way which could be seen as not conforming to gendered expectations, and in both stories, this was central to the narrative,Rather than incidental. In ten out of nineteen books the protagonist appears to be a child of colour. In two stories the protagonist openly speaks a different language to other characters, however there are hints in several other stories that the child is multilingual, and some use sign language. In one book the protagonist has a mentioned disability (Isabelle in Fairy Magic is deaf) although 'Just Because' has a child with a disability as a central character. This is significant because it shows that many different children can be the 'main character' and have their stories showcased in literature.

Language and Narration (2 and 5). Twelve texts are told from a third person perspective, often with insight into the feelings & inner world of the child. Seven are first person narrated, three by female narrators and four by males. In three of the first person narrated books, the narrator focuses the story on their relationship with their sister. The identity of the narrator is a key influencer of the language used in each story. For example, in 'I Will Never Not Ever Eat a Tomato' older brother Charlie serves as narrator. Where he is quoting his sister Lola, there is a clear use of words and phrases which are a little more complex than might be expected of younger children, but these are not always grammatically correct. Charlie's narration in the introduction 'I have this little sister, Lola, she is small, and very funny' sets up the family dynamic between the two characters. Charlie then describes his current situation, 'Sometimes Mum and Dad ask me to give her her dinner. This is a hard job because she is a very fussy eater.' From this brief introduction not only do we understand how the family is constructed, but that the parents ask Charlie to act in a pseudo-parental role with his younger sister, despite understanding that the task they have assigned him is not easy.

In almost all cases, those acting in parental roles are known only by role / title e.g. Mum, Dad, Gran. The exceptions are Grandma Mitzi (book five, Snowflakes) who is 'new' to central character Mia, and Uncles Bobby and Jamie (book seven, Uncle Bobby's wedding). Uncle Bobby is Chloe's favourite Uncle, which suggests that she already has more than one Uncle. None of the books implied step-families, or step siblings, however it might not have been possible to tell. It is possible that Mia has more than one Grandma, and therefore Grandma Mitzi is given the extra identifier of 'Mitzi'. This ambiguity may allow the reader to 'fill in' these characters with ideas from their own lives. Educationally, it allows children to consider their own family relationships though the characters presented in the stories.

Some books have pages with no text at all, leaving the illustrations to tell the story without the need for written words. Language in each story varies, though is often used sparingly. Some are poetic in nature, Some stories rhyme. Repetition and alliteration are used. 'Just because' is repeated on every page of the book in 'Just because.' In illustrated children's literature, reading the text alone will rarely give a full sense of the story being told. Without the illustrations alongside the text, the story is incomplete or perhaps doesn't even make sense. Educationally, telling the stories through the combined medium of words and illustrations can be useful for language learners, as the illustrations essentially provide visual scaffolding.

What can be seen?

The use of illustration to present and construct family relationships was a strong feature of many of the stories. Each illustration conveyed significant meaning beyond that of the written text and in some cases told parallel stories or even very different stories to the text itself. For example, in 'I want a Sister' the family pet cats are shown packing to leave, on the misunderstanding that they will soon be getting a dog. Illustrations provided humour, in this example from 'King Baby', the parents are shown looking exhausted while King Baby sits proudly in his highchair.

Image 1

King Baby - Kate Beaton. King baby is sitting proudly in his high chair looking content. The text reads 'It is good to be the king.' The parents are shown on a nearby sofa, looking exhausted while baby toys cover the floor. A cat plays in a basket of laundry.

It is good to be the king.

This provides an interesting difference between the spoken and illustrated story. It allows the reader to share in the joke, perhaps this will be something that a child would spot first, as an adult focuses on reading the text. Educationally it also sets up the idea that perhaps not all people might think alike in the same situation.

Use of colour and costuming in showing relationships.
The use of colour and costuming to 'tie together' characters was a common theme in these stories. There are examples of it in almost every book, and some of the more obvious examples are outlined below.

Illustrations in 'Morris Micklewhite and the tangerine dress' emphasise the use of the tangerine orange colour, which is found on every page. Tying the colour of the dress to Morris' mothers' hair symbolises the strength of the family bond between the two of them. Morris' mother has very little dialogue in the book, but the dress comes to symbolise his mother and the comfort Morris feels in her presence. The dress is blurred, giving it a somewhat unreal and dreamy feeling, that it is somehow more than a dress, but instead the love and care Morris feels from his mother.

In this image of Mia and Grandma Mitzi, in 'Snowflakes' there is a recurring star / snowflake pattern, both in the home and on the clothing of the two characters. They are also shown in combinations of blue and red clothing throughout the book, which serves to link the two of them together. Mia's red coat is a gift from her grandma, which 'felt ever so heavy' to Mia at first. Her red coat with blue collar reflects Grandma Mitzi's blue coat and red scarf.

Image 2

*From 'Snowflakes' by Cerrie Burnell, Mia is held by Grandma Mitzi*

The same colour combination (red and blue) also ties the grandfather and granddaughter together in 'If all the world were…' while creating some distance from the parents, who are shown in olive and yellow combination tones.

In 'The proudest blue' colour and clothing take centre stage, as Asiya's blue hijab is used to symbolise her strength and resilience. Her younger sister reimagines the hijab as the ocean and the sky, and dreams of one day wearing it too, in the same colour. Again the colour emphasises the bond between two characters. In 'Julian is a mermaid', Julian's imagined transformation to a mermaid is complete when a big blue fish presents him with a necklace. Later in the story, his grandmother presents him with a similar necklace, while wearing blue trousers which are the exact colour and pattern on the blue fish. In giving Julian the necklace she gives her approval and support of Julian's new look, just as he imagined.

Image 3

Uncle Bobby's wedding - Uncle Bobby, Chloe, and Uncle Jamie all wear yellow in the cover image. This is not the only instance in the book where their clothing matches. Chloe is usually shown in blue, yellow, orange, and white, as is Uncle Bobby. Her mother consistently wears green.
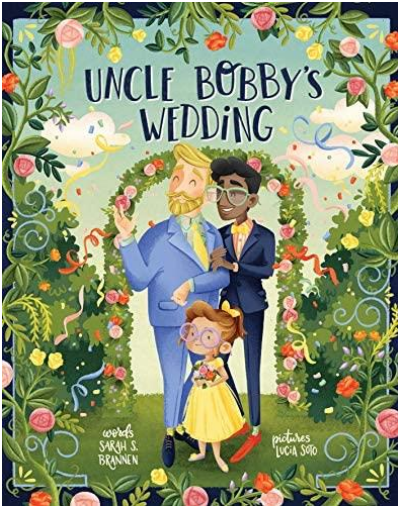
In 'The star makers Apprentice' Finn is presented with his own set of dark blue starry overalls, matching those worn by his father. However, even at the beginning of the story, the two are linked by their matching hats and their similar striped jumpers.

Image 4

The cover of 'The Star Makers Apprentice' By Sam Hay and Xin Li. The image show's Finn with his dad sitting on the moon, looking at the stars together. They are dressed in matching dark blue overalls, hats and black boots. Their tops both show a striped pattern, Finn's in orange and his dad wears green.
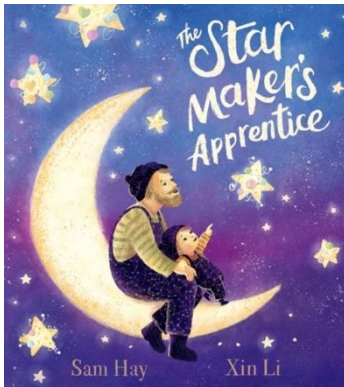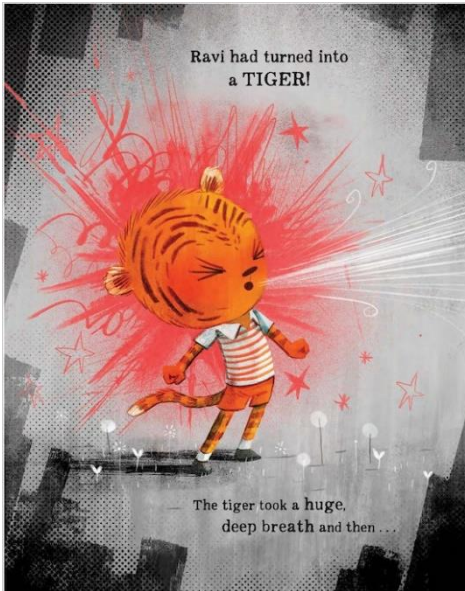

Colour and Illustration themes.

Many of the stories had recurring colour and illustration themes. The ways in which illustrations were used and impacted the stories for example, 'Ravi's roar' uses an absence of colour elsewhere to emphasise Ravi's feelings and the intensity of them. All else fades in the background as the bright orange 'tiger' colours emphasise the depictions of his anger.

Image 5

Ravi's Roar, Tom Percival. Ravi is shown turning into a tiger, orange and red are shown against a greyscale background, emphasising Ravi by contrast.

The simplicity and 'primary colours' themes in 'The boy who loved everyone' give a sweet, childlike feeling to a book with intense layered complexity and meaning. The illustrated settings also build the representation of the family in showing art on the walls, toys, and belongings around the home. This is explored further below. The depictions of classrooms and other educational environments also vary, with some appearing fairly empty and neat, and others a chaotic but joyful environment, for example, the image below:

Image 6

'The Boy who loved Everyone' Maisy Paradise Schering. The classroom is shown as bright and welcoming. Children's art and educational posters are on the walls. Leaves, presumably from outside, and autumn themed decorations suggest a recent autumn project. The children are shown in physical contact with the teacher, who reads them a story, showing the children the pictures as they listen and watch.

In perhaps the clearest way possible, the author and illustrator of this book show and tell us about the role of children's literature in education. The book is shared with the class and read by a teacher in what appears to be a circle time activity. The families which are constructed and presented in children's literature are there to be discussed and enjoyed by children and adults. They present as miniature worlds within story books, which offer children the opportunity to imagine something they might not have themselves, or that they might come to understand as the varied and important parts of other people's lives.

3.2 The role of the family

The role of the family in these examples is varied. The themes in each story were collected both in individual summaries and in a table of recurring themes. Additionally, recording the 'action' in each book gave a strong indication of the roles of the family.

What is happening?

Individual action summaries (4a) were also broken down into even smaller summaries in a table. The stories show an incredibly similar journey, despite distinctly different themes and situations. In most of the stories, the child experiences changes or challenges. They then seek to manage the situation, either through their own actions, through seeking support of a relative, or a combination of the two. The child gains the comfort they were looking for and by the end of the story, continues in life with confidence.

The use of body language and positioning is a strong indication of relationships. Close physical contact between family members is common and shown in many of the illustrations.

Throughout the stories children are often seen in close physical proximity to family members. Either holding hands, cuddling, or as above, where Finn's father has his hands on Finn's shoulders. Sharing beds, bathing, and care tasks are shown as being done together. The actions of the family, often shown in the background, illustrate the role of the adults in providing care in the form of the family home and the child's belongings. The majority of the texts show families sharing meals together, further illustrating the caregiving roles of guardians.

Individual summaries of themes & the role the family plays.

Key events or themes included, but are not limited to death, life stages & transitions, parenthood, marriage, births, racism, structural oppression, family planning. (6a) Considering the age group these stories reach, some of these themes may seem incredibly heavy. Five key themes came up throughout the texts, and all of these themes centralised the protagonist and their families. These themes are important to be aware of from an educator's perspective, they may help to introduce difficult topics to class discussion. If educators are aware of these themes they can be prepared for questions and deeper exploration and learning.

Family change, (including grief & loss, adoption, migration)

Nine books covered the theme of a changing family dynamic. All of them ended with a generally hopeful feeling, that even though there was change, the child would be okay. In each story the child learns that their family will be a source of love and support regardless of the changing circumstances and construction. The role of the family was to soften the impact of the loss and provide comfort and support to the child.

'If all the world were…' explores grief and loss from the perspective of a child.

Image 7

This powerfully sad illustration from 'If all the world were…' shows the loss of a beloved grandparent as an empty chair. As mentioned earlier, the granddaughter is dressed in her orange and blue theme, which stands out against the muted background and the olive green & dark blue her mother wears.

But some tales are silent.

Mia (Snowflakes) experiences grief and uncertainty though her adoption process. In each of these examples, the child finds comfort from their family and responsible adults such as a teacher.

Some stories covered the rupture of family relationships in a way that leads the protagonist to feel insecure. In 'Uncle Bobby's wedding' Uncles Bobby and Jamie go to some lengths to reassure Chloe that their relationship is not under threat. In 'Wild' the

child is removed from her forest 'family' and placed with a human family, which is not something that she takes lightly, and she eventually leaves to return to the woodlands.

Life changes, (including new environment, home, school)

Three children encountered a new school and ten books explicitly dealt with a new social experience. Adoption featured in two stories and migration in three. (Only one of those experiences was international migration). In these examples, the family was a key factor in the perception of the new environment or experience.

Family relationships (Including sibling relationships)

Siblings featured in ten of the nineteen stories. In five stories there were siblings present but not a focus. (My monster and me, King baby, I want a sister, Ravi's Roar, If I were you). In three of these stories, the sibling is a baby whose presence is notable only in that they impact the relationship between the protagonist and their parents. Ravi's siblings are a contributing factor in his emotional outburst, who do not seem to deliberately provoke him, but nonetheless impact his experiences. In 'My monster and me' the older brother is unable to provide the help and support that the protagonist needs, and so the role of providing understanding and support falls to Gran.

In five stories, siblings play a key role, and present the closest family relationship. Four out of five focus on a sister and one a twin brother. In 'I Will Never Not Ever Eat a Tomato' Charlie plays a parentified role in supporting Lola to eat her dinner. Their relationship is playful, supportive and imaginative.

In 'Just Because' Toby describes his relationship with his nonverbal older sister Clemmie with great affection. Similarly, in 'Fairy Magic' Isabella's relationship with her twin brother Idris is so strong that they seem to understand each other on a level which does not need spoken words. The two disabled characters in the selection of stories are shown to have incredibly strong bonds with their siblings. Interestingly, neither of these two stories show or mention any adult caregivers.

In 'Ish', Ramon's older brother mocks his art, but his younger sister Marisol idolises him and gives him the confidence to be creative in his own way. In 'The Proudest Blue' Faizah idolises her older sister Asiya. In both stories, the support between siblings is a huge source of strength.

Society, conflict, marginalisation.

Religion and religious cultural practice were a key theme in one book (The Proudest Blue). This story also deals with racism,culture-based oppression and bullying. Two other stories touch on these themes, from (Snowflakes) Mia feeling like an outsider living in a place where children and families look 'different' to her own, and (From Far Away) Saoussan adjusting to life in Canada and wanting to change her name to better 'fit' her new environment.

Protagonist is worried about something.

The most common theme amongst the stories was a feeling of being misunderstood. This was strongly present in fourteen of the nineteen stories. In all the stories in which a child feels misunderstood, it is a family member who seeks to understand them and provide help.

In every story, family members are shown to have insights into the ways in which the protagonist understands the world around them and interacts with their surroundings. They seem to be able to read and understand the feelings of the protagonist, often before they are expressed.

Mental health, though not always explicitly stated, was a key feature of three texts. Saoussan (From Far Away) experiences flashbacks and fears from her experiences leaving her home country and interprets her trip to a zoo ("no one shot at us the whole time") through the eyes of a child who expects violence to be a part of daily life. In 'My Monster and Me' the young protagonist (unnamed) describes his feelings of anxiety through the metaphor of a monster, which is always with him. The monster grows and shrinks relative to his anxious feelings. His grandmother can listen to his problems with quiet compassion. This support allows the protagonist to understand that he can act in a way which helps

him to make the monster go away. Gran did not fix the problem but enabled her grandson to enact his own agency around his worries.

Image 8

From 'My Monster and Me' - Gran is shown comforting her anxious grandson. Her body is shown as angled towards him and her hand is on his shoulder. The text reads 'Gran listened quietly…'

Gran listened quietly . . .

In the stories, the most common role of the family was that of a support system for the child.

What does it mean?

Throughout most of the stories, very little information is given to the thoughts of the adults. In 'The Proudest Blue', we are told that "Mama loves pink" as she suggests a pink hijab for her eldest daughter. However, this was the sole example of a parent expressing their opinion. But do any other parents or caregivers have any kind of preference or personality features besides that? Do mums have personalities? Or are they physical extensions of the child? Morris Micklewhite's mother is almost mute but still a physical entity symbolising comfort. Had this work focused on the closest adult caregivers, it may have been challenging to really profile who these characters are. With limited text space it is probably not easy to fully develop multiple characters.

Notable exceptions were 'If All the World Were…' and 'If I Were You'. Both stories are centred on a young girl's relationship with a male relative. It could also be argued that Uncles Bobby and Jamie (Uncle Bobby's Wedding) also have some agency and preferences, as they take Chloe on multiple outings to do things that all three of them enjoy. Otherwise, the interests of the adult characters are shown only if they are relevant to the child.

Settings and the role of the family home

Most stories prominently feature a family home. Home is shown or mentioned in all of them. Most end with the child returning to their home, giving a sense that the story is now complete, and the child will rest after their adventure. More specifically, beds are featured in ten of the nineteen texts. They are usually shown as sources of comfort, where the child feels safe, and returns to in times of emotional distress. In most instances, family members are shown comforting the distressed child.

Image 9

Dimitri is tucked into bed by his mother in 'The Boy who Loved Everyone'. This image of a worried child being reassured as they are tucked into bed shows the role of both the caregiver and the home as a safe space for the child.
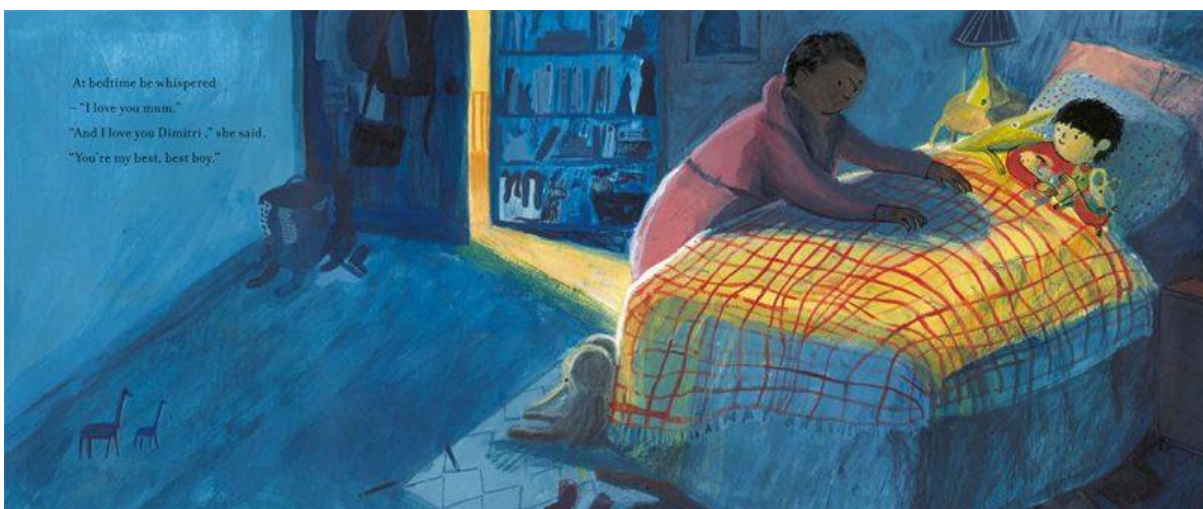
The journey between home and somewhere else features in nine texts and is often shown as an opportunity for connection between the child and a family member. Public transport

is shown in four of the texts, but mostly children are shown walking from one place to another.

Characters visit parks, swimming pools, fairgrounds, zoos, beaches, and shops. In six stories, children go to schools or day-care settings. Three of the books depict family gatherings & events. Children are accompanied by adult caregivers or older siblings in most of the 'real life' instances, or it is at least implied that there is an adult caregiver nearby.

In ten of the stories, they go to imagined settings, most commonly to space / the stars. In these instances, it is less likely that an adult caregiver is also present, this setting exists in the imagination of the child (children) and therefore a protective guardian is not necessary.

Image 10

Toby and Clemmie fly to the moon in 'Just Because…' This book does not feature any parents or caregivers, the narration remains in Toby and Clemmie's own shared world.
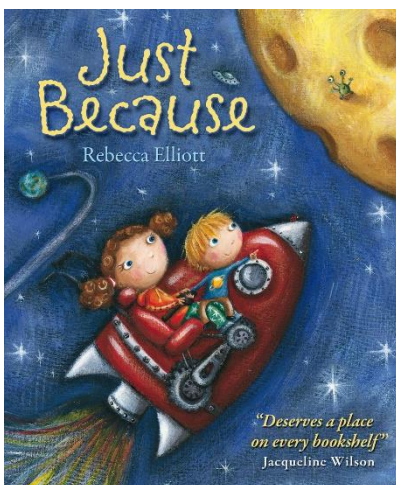
These settings come to represent the growing independence of the child and their ability to imagine and create a life for themselves outside of their circumstances. It is one way that the protagonists enact agency in the stories. Sometimes they share their imagined experiences with their family through words or pictures. (e.g. Morris Micklewhite and the Tangerine Dress, The Proudest Blue)

Image 11

Morris Micklewhite shares his inner world with his mother through his painting of himself riding an elephant in his tangerine dress. The art style changes for this page, showing the art as 'made by' Morris himself.

Tone and mood

Four of the books are primarily humorous. (7a) The illustrations add to the humour and in one book, they tell a second story which runs concurrently with the first:In'I Want a Sister', the pet cats, fearing there will be a dog arriving soon, pack up their things and prepare to leave the castle. Humour intended for parents is also present. King Baby tells us "It is good to be the king" while his parents look exhausted on the sofa. Many of the stories were unapologetically sentimental. Characters express their love for each other through their actions and words.

The significant findings from this analysis are that the families presented in these examples of literature are consistently kind, caring and supportive. There are sometimes changes, misunderstandings and disagreements, but ultimately the resolution is unity. The shape and style of families differ in the amount of people and the significance of each relationship. For educators, this is important for creating an inclusive and caring

classroom, where everyone can feel comfortable and 'seen'. These child-centred narratives support child-centred pedagogy.

4.DISCUSSION

The aim of this thesis was to explore the ways in which families were constructed and presented in children's literature. It also sought to explore the role of families within the literature and consider the significance of these relationships.

Connections to family theories

Most family theories were useful in interpreting and understanding the data. Stories with a focus on mothering did appear in the data. Hays (1996) argued that mothers embrace what she calls the 'ideology of intensive mothering'. "Intensive mothering includes three beliefs: childrearing should be child-centred, it should be done by mothers, and it should be done by mobilizing countless resources of time, money, and energy." We can see the impact of this in Kate Beaton's 'King Baby' although the father also appears to be intensely fathering. Mothers are shown to be putting their children first in their lives. The variety of family types constructed in these examples of children's literature subverted the concept of families consisting solely of a saintly mother and child(ren). Children also had strong bonds with siblings, uncles, grandparents, and pets.

Daly (2003) critiques traditional methods of family research as failing to capture "lives as they are lived". Therefore, this Daily Family Theory is concerned with what actually happens day-to-day in family life. In the miniature worlds created in the narration, a focus on the smaller elements of daily life was distinctive.

Rönkä & Korvela (2009) reviewed 53 studies on everyday family life and suggested that "everyday family life comprises three dimensions: emotions, actions, and temporality." These are reflected in many of the stories. Emotions are a key aspect of family life, with close and deep interrelationships which are ideal places for emotions to be expressed. Ideally, they are 'safe' places to have complicated and sometimes uncomfortable emotions. The actions of being within a family relate to different roles, or jobs, timetables, and things to do. Temporality, in this context, is about how things will evolve and change over time. This particular state will be for a short period of time and then the whole family will grow and adapt to ever changing circumstances, both internal and external. In a sense, each day

is a small story and the connections between the three dimensions and the literature seem very strong. The understanding of daily or everyday family life is "a process that family members are constantly creating with their individual and collaborative actions and emotions in time and space." (Rönkä & Korvela 2009, P98) and so this was strongly reflected in these examples of children's literature. Attachment between children and caregivers was a recurring theme, as outlined above. The rupture and repair of relationships formed a significant part of the 'action' in the literature.

Children's literature, learning and development

These stories have the potential to develop children's learning over some heavy themes. They are powerful in their simplicity, leaving room for imagination and creativity. Children and adults will have the opportunity to co-create a miniature reality in which difficult questions can be asked and difficult answers can be given. (Bruner, 1991) They can serve as an extension of a child's world, one in which different risks can be taken and different outcomes can be considered. Learning can truly be personalised, as each child may have their own interpretation of the stories and can explore possibilities in ways which might seem impossible in their daily lives.

Children's literature and language learning

Bland highlights the value of children's literature because it can provide a 'shortcut' to "deep and pleasurable reading" (Bland 2015, p27). For educators to select appropriate books for their students, Bland (2016, p45) outlines seven questions to be addressed. This provides an immensely valuable framework which can be utilised in teachers planning sessions. The questions are as follows:

> "1. Is the language and content accessible for the target group?
>
> 2. Do the pictures add meaning to the story?
>
> 3. Does the characterisation in words and illustrations encourage empathy?
>
> 4. Is the story compelling, e.g. exciting, humorous, surprising, or moving?
>
> 5. Can the children relate to the narrative – is the import of the story significant for them as individuals so that they will wish to revisit it?
>
> 6. Is the representation of the world and of people accurate and respectful?

7. Does the story encourage a questioning stance and genuine communication?"
(Bland, 2016 p45)

These questions were considered as a potential framework for this research; however, the focus was the construction and presentation of families in the literature, rather than the potential use of these books in an English language classroom. However, it would be interesting to consider as further research.

As an adult reader, I found myself struck by some of the small details, the significance of pets as part of the family, the one-dimensional caregivers known only by title, the details of tidy or untidy homes, of meals, and of the significance of the journeys between one place and another, which often seem to be skipped over but are apparently a perfect backdrop for important conversations.

Considering these findings, I believe that children's literature is an undervalued medium. It's potential in children's learning and development, education, and language development for bring learning to life though miniature story worlds is incredibly strong. Children and adults may be able to find better understanding of themselves and others, to see their own families and lives reflected in the narration. They may develop empathy towards their own families, or better understand each other though characters in children's books. Literature may help children to express themselves in ways they previously could not. They might find themselves able to think or say, 'I'm like Morris!' or 'I feel like Mia!'

Children's literature provides learning opportunities for adults and children alike, it is not fair to claim that the themes and issues covered by children's literature are superficial or light. On the contrary, there is considerable skill in taking a topic that many adults may find complicated, difficult to discuss or uncomfortable to think about, and transform it into a meaningful and engaging story. With challenges such as limitations of language and understanding, attention and life experience, as well as the short length of each book, it is a miracle that children's authors and illustrators cover the ground that they do.

Author identity and authenticity issues

Some writers covered themes and issues outside of their own life experiences. 'Just Because' tells the story of Toby and Clemmie, who are based on the author's own children. It is a beautiful story celebrating Clemmie's life and her relationship with her brother. 'Julian is a Mermaid' has been praised as a positive story about a child of colour who challenges gender norms. However, there have been some comments regarding authenticity, notably whether the story feels realistic to people who would personally identify with Julian. 'From Far Away' is co-authored by Robert Munsch and Saoussan Askar. As an established children's book author, Munsch was able to give Askar the benefit of his experience and status. The resulting narrative reads with great authenticity: the voice of a young girl who has migrated to Canada.

There are several other cases of (for example) white authors writing protagonists of colour. There have been calls for children's story books to be more reflective of those who read them, and this call has partly been answered by white authors adding more characters of colour. The narrative therefore remains in the hands of those with the privilege and means to create and publish children's stories. However, perhaps if authors and illustrators of colour could be allowed to tell their own stories, we might see a different narrative form.

The history and context of the author has a significant impact on the story being told. Nadiya Hussain writes about her own struggles with anxiety in 'My Monster and Me' while Ibithaj Muhammed draws on her own experiences wearing hijab in 'The Proudest Blue'. Rebecca Clements draws from her experiences raising a daughter with multiple disabilities in 'Just Because'. Each author's background can also shape the story. Joseph Coelho is a poet, which feels evident in 'If All the World 46ere..' which essentially reads as an illustrated poem. Kate Beaton is a comic artist, and 'King Baby' the book originated in comic sketches which far predate the book itself.

Image 12

Early 'King Baby' comics – Kate Beaton.

4.2 Limitations and Reliability

Quantity and quality of data

There were limits on the number of books which could be used. Nineteen books covers less than a month of daily reading in a day-care or school. This study was also limited by the availability of books. There were other books which would have made very interesting additions to the list but were difficult to obtain. The families represented in these books did not include any clear representations of stepfamilies or parents in LGBTQ partnerships. However, there were relatives shown in same sex partnerships. There were no clear examples of trans or non-binary parents / caregivers.

Researcher capability. This study was also limited by my own capabilities as a researcher. Finding an appropriate method for analysing the books was difficult and eventually became an amalgamation of several different strategies.

Changes in methodology. Use of PLANTS needed to be adapted to better suit the purpose. Were this research conducted a second time the approach would have been different. However, the adaptations provided a framework which was suitable for addressing the research questions.

Areas of further research. This study could be extended by the addition of more books and media. For example, children's TV shows can be incredibly effective in family education, (for example Bing, Bluey, Peppa Pig and Pablo) as well as films aimed at children. Further research topics could include children's stories centred on emotional regulation and mental health such as The 'Big Bold Feelings' series by Tom Percival, as well as emotional literacy books such as 'The Colour Monster' and 'In My Heart'. Representation of LGBT characters in children's literature was another topic considered for this thesis, which would also be fascinating to study, especially moving into literature for older children, young adult novels and graphic novels.

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