

Transgender Identities in Children's Picture Books: A Critical Multimodal Discourse Analysis

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**Transgender Identities in Children's Picture Books: A Critical
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Master's Thesis

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Abstract

This study examines the representation of transgender characters and their identities in children's picture books by employing critical multimodal discourse analysis. Seven picture books featuring transgender, non-binary and gender non-conforming characters are analyzed, each focusing on the multifaceted experiences of being a transgender child and navigating pivotal moments such as coming out and transitioning. The qualitative analysis reveals two overarching themes central to these narratives: being different and being accepted. Both rely on using visual and verbal cues to compare transgender and cisgender characters. Transgender characters are initially depicted as individuals, deviating from societal norms. They are contrasted with cisgender characters to emphasize their inability to fit within the same group. However, usually later in the narrative, transgender characters experience moments of acceptance. Again compared to their cisgender counterparts, transgender characters no longer stand out but blend in. The analysis shows that these picture books effectively introduce readers to transgender individuals and their experiences while serving as powerful tools for promoting empathy, understanding, and acceptance of diverse gender identities.

Keywords: picture books, transgender, gender identity, gender expression, critical multimodal discourse analysis

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1. INTRODUCTION

Picture books are children's initial experience with literature. While they serve the purpose of integrating children into a culture, the finest picture books also encourage diverse readings and interpretations. (Salisbury and Styles, 2012, p. 75)

Questions about suitable topics for children's picture books is ever-present. However, the notion of suitability is a matter of cultural influence and time. Even though subjects such as death, illness, violence and racism have been explored within the pages of picture books, many parents, teachers and researchers in western countries believe children should not be exposed to these topics and put an emphasis on protecting them from unpleasant aspects of life. However, there are cultures in the West, and globally, that openly discuss troubling aspects of life and death in picture books, while not specifying a precise target age group. This includes Scandinavian countries, France, Belgium, Germany, and the Far East, in particular South Korea. (Salisbury and Styles, 2012, p. 113) In contrast, British and American publishing industry maintains a more conservative stance when it comes to the publication of books for young readers. This restricts the possibility of publishing challenging or controversial picture books, usually affording it only to well-known and established authors and illustrators. (Evans, 2015, p. 10)

Various factors contribute to this difference in attitudes towards unconventional picture books, but one of the most important ones is the perception of childhood. The notion of childhood is a social construct that changes over time and across cultures. Consequently, the reception of challenging and controversial topics in picture books depends on cultural attitudes towards childhood. An illustrative case is the United States where areas such as downtown New York and rural West Virginia have such diverging ideologies that the types of picture books published in those places also differ considerably. Furthermore, this difference is also based on prevailing social norms, so some cultures are more willing to openly discuss uncomfortable subjects, while others do not find that acceptable. (Salisbury and Styles, 2012, p. 113)

Thought-provoking and challenging picture books can be helpful and therapeutic texts. Many young children experience troubling personal difficulties in their daily lives, such as parents' divorce, illness and death of family members. By mirroring real-life circumstances, challenging picture books can help children make sense of and come to terms with disturbing and occasionally controversial issues in life. (Evans, 2015, pp. 5-7)

One of the topics that many deem controversial and unsuitable for children are LGBTQ+ topics, in particular, those dealing with transgender individuals. However, with more children identifying as LGBTQ+ and little to no representation of LGBTQ+ stories in education, these children face difficulties in their daily lives. For example, they are very likely to be bullied and their mental health is at risk. (Sullivan, Urraro, 2017, pp. 3)

Picture books featuring LGBTQ+ characters and stories might help these children deal with these difficulties. These stories may also help them feel a sense of belonging and reassure them that being different should not only be acceptable but celebrated. Furthermore, these picture books can teach children to accept their LGBTQ+ peers and treat them with kindness and respect. Thus, when it comes to picture books focused on transgender themes specifically, the representation of transgender characters and their experiences holds significance for both transgender and cisgender readers.

This paper focuses on picture books featuring transgender, non-binary and gender non-conforming characters with the aim of analyzing the ways in which these characters' identities and experiences are represented.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is a critical linguistic approach that sees language as a social practice and focuses on the larger discursive unit of text as the fundamental unit of communication. It puts emphasis on considering the context in which language is used and takes interest in exploring the relationship between language and power. CDA considers various forms of discourse, like political, gender and media discourses, that reveal different levels of struggles and conflicts. (Wodak, 2001, pp. 1-2) CDA “primarily studies the way social power abuse, dominance and inequality are enacted, reproduced and resisted by text and talk in the social and political contexts.” (van Dijk, 2008, p. 85)

Inherent to CDA is the notion of ‘critical’ which “is to be understood as having distance to the data, embedding the data in the social, taking a political stance explicitly, and a focus on self-reflection as scholars doing research.” (Wodak, 2001, p. 9)

Two other important notions for CDA are those of ‘ideology’ and ‘power’. Ideology can be defined as “particular ways of representing and constructing society which reproduce unequal relations of power, relations of domination and exploitation.” (Fairclough and Wodak, 1997, p. 275) In CDA, ideology is viewed as a crucial element in the creation and preservation of unequal power relations. (Wodak, 2001, p. 10)

Power revolves around differences in relations and the way those differences impact social structures. (Wodak, 2001, p. 10) What CDA is interested in is the abuse of power that can hurt people and lead to social inequality and injustice. (van Dijk, 2008, p. 17) Language is linked with social power; it indexes power, expresses it, and engages in power struggles. It can serve as a means for challenging power, undermining it and altering power dynamics. (Wodak, 2001, pp. 10-11)

Language also communicates meaning. However, meaning can be conveyed through other semiotic modes. For example, an advertisement or a news text accompanied by a photograph can convey meaning through visual features. The way meaning is made through the use of language, images, diagrams, graphics, etc. is evaluated by Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA). (Machin and Mayr, 2012, p. 6)

2.1. Picture Books, Multimodality and Critical Discourse Analysis

Painter, Martin and Unsworth (2012, p. 133) write that picture books need to be understood and approached as bimodal forms of text that create meaning from both the visual and the verbal

modality. Sometimes this is done based on the differences between the ways these two semiotic systems afford meaning. Verbal text is dynamic and sequential with “a rich potential for the construal of temporal deixis, sequencing, location, phasing and aspect.” (Painter, Martin and Unsworth, 2012, p. 133) In contrast, images have an instantaneous nature and a potential to create “non-sequential spatial and comparative relationships.” (Painter, Martin and Unsworth, 2012, p. 133) However, language and image can sometimes create similar meaning, for example in construing human emotion. Either way, meaning in picture books is created by the interplay between the visual and verbal semiotic.

The critical approach to the analysis of picture books employed in this paper draws from Theo van Leeuwen’s *Discourse and Practice: New Tools for Critical Discourse Analysis*. Due to the scope of the research, the paper will only focus on two chapters from Leeuwen’s (2008) book, chapter 2: *Representing Social Actors* and chapter 8: *The Visual Representation of Social Actors*.

In chapter 2, Leeuwen introduces an approach that answers the question “How can social actors be represented in English?” while taking grammar to be “a ‘meaning potential’ (‘what *can* be said’) rather than a set of rules (‘what *must* be said’)”. (Leeuwen, 2008, p. 23)

In chapter 8, Leeuwen focuses on the visual point of representation. One aspect of the visual representation of social actors is the relation between the depicted people and the viewer, with three important dimensions: social distance, social relation and social interaction. The other aspect of the visual representation of social actors is the ways people are depicted in images. This approach answers the same questions Leeuwen’s chapter 2 answers, but instead of the words, the focus is on the images. (Leeuwen, 2008, pp. 137-142)

3. METHODOLOGY

For this analysis, seven picture books featuring transgender, non-binary and gender non-conforming characters were chosen randomly based on several online lists of LGBTQ+ picture books. The chosen picture books are:

- *I am Jazz* by Jessica Herthel, Jazz Jennings and Shelagh McNicholas
- *Jack (Not Jackie)* by Erica Silverman and Holly Hatam
- *Calvin* by J. R. Ford, Vanessa Ford and Kayla Harren
- *When Aidan Became a Brother* by Kyle Lukoff and Kaylani Juanita

- *The Name I Call Myself* by Hasan Namir and Cathryn John
- *From the Stars in the Sky to the Fish in the Sea* by Kai Cheng Thom, Kai Yun Ching and Wai-Yant Li
- *Neither* by Airlie Anderson

The first four picture books feature transgender characters, meaning that the character identifies with the gender opposite of the one assigned to them at birth. The main characters in *The Name I Call Myself* and *From the Stars in the Sky to the Fish in the Sea* do not identify with either of the two ends of the gender spectrum but rather alternate between them or mix the characteristics of both. Gender is never explicitly referenced in *Neither*, but the author has mentioned she was largely inspired by one of her transgender students to write this story. (LGBTQ Reads, 2018)

The analysis is divided into four sections. First, the analysis looks at the way pivotal moments like coming out and transitioning are represented. Drawing upon Elorza's (2002) insights about the frequent comparison and contrasting between transgender and cisgender characters, and utilizing Painter, Martin and Unsworth's (2012) framework for analyzing social relations in visual narratives, the second section focuses on differentiation and othering of transgender characters from cisgender ones, as well as the impact of this on their relationships and emotional experiences. Employing the same framework, part three analyzes how transgender characters are accepted and embraced by family, friends and society. Lastly, section four applies a critical discourse lens by drawing from Leeuwen's (2008) chapters on verbal and visual representation of social actors.

Screenshots from the analyzed picture books can be found in the Appendix.

4. ANALYSIS

4.1. Being transgender

Picture books are embedded in ideology, aiming "to sustain, and sometimes redefine, social values that are assumed to be shared by text and audience." (Stephens, 2018, p. 137) Picture books that feature transgender, non-binary or gender non-conforming characters introduce young readers to the broader understanding of gender, gender identity and gender expression, as well as the lives and experiences of transgender people. Some picture books discuss gender and identity explicitly, while others focus on the struggles and joys that someone may experience just for being different.

Out of the 7 analyzed picture books, 3 mention the word *transgender*, *I Am Jazz*, *Calvin* and *When Aidan Became a Brother*. In these picture books, the experience of being transgender is

explained as a difference between the body and the mind or heart. In *Calvin*, the main character says he is “a boy in my heart and in my brain”, while Jazz from *I Am Jazz* explains: “I have a girl brain but a boy body.” This way of describing gender puts emphasis on the person’s feelings rather than physical characteristics and points out that gender is something intrinsic and personal.

In line with that, some picture books describe a sense of knowing reflected in Calvin’s words: “For as long as I can remember I knew I was a boy.” Jack from *Jack (Not Jackie)* consistently asserts his identity as a boy and a brother throughout the book in a matter-of-fact way, choosing ‘boy’ clothes and a ‘boy’ name, even though his family refers to him as a girl. Similarly, Jazz shows preference for playing with ‘girl’ toys and wearing ‘girl’ clothes, referring to herself as a girl and a lady. In short, gender is represented as something a person simply knows about themselves.

Calvin offers the definition of *transgender*: “Being transgender means other people think you are one gender, but inside, you know you are a different one.” Albeit a simplified one, the definition reflects the previous two points about the body-mind/heart dichotomy and an innate sense of knowing one’s gender and is in line with a widely accepted definition of the word *transgender*: “An adjective to describe people whose gender identity differs from the sex they were assigned at birth. [...] It is important to note that being transgender is not dependent upon physical appearance or medical procedures.” (GLAAD, 2023)

In *From the Stars in the Sky to the Fish in the Sea* the main character is Miu Lan, a child that is “always changing”, constantly choosing between masculine and feminine characteristics, as well as different animal characteristics, like tails, fur and wings. This positions Miu Lan outside the gender binary, describing it as “being a little like everything.”

In *Neither* the main character is a green half-rabbit and half-bird in a world of blue rabbits and yellow birds. Even though this picture book doesn’t talk about gender identity explicitly, *Neither*’s color and mixing of characteristics of the two groups can be read as the character being outside the gender binary, or being gender non-conforming.

Finally, in *The Name I Call Myself* we follow the main character on their journey of self-discovery. They were assigned male at birth, but certain body changes cause them discomfort. (Pictures 36 and 37) Moreover, their inability to fully conform to male expectations lead them to dealing with unsupportive surroundings. We only find out about their gender identity at the end of the picture book, when the character has fully accepted themselves. However, they do not label

their identity; the character only tells us that their name is Ari and that they are neither a boy nor a girl, or that sometimes they are both.

An important part of being transgender is transition, “the process a person undertakes to bring their gender expression and/or their body into alignment with their gender identity.” (GLAAD, 2023) There are different types of transitions, two most notable ones being medical and social transition. The latter is present in most picture books, and it involves “telling family, friends, and co-workers, using a different name, using different pronouns, dressing differently, starting or stopping wearing make-up and jewelry, etc.” (GLAAD, 2023) Most characters choose new pronouns and new names after coming out (Jazz, Calvin, Jack, Ari), ones that fit them and their gender expressions better. They also start dressing differently. For example, Calvin and Jack choose clothes that are more masculine (Pictures 9 and 27), while Jazz wears feminine clothes. There is also a change in hairstyle; Jazz and Ari grow their hair out, while Calvin, Jack and Aidan cut their hair shorter. (Pictures 10, 21 and 28)

When it comes to coming out, there are characters like Jazz and Jack that knew they were transgender from the beginning and acted like their true gender. This is especially true for Jazz because there is no specific moment when she comes out. Jack, on the other hand, does have a moment when he says: “I am a boy!” For Aidan and Calvin, coming out is an important part of their storyline. There is the fear of not being believed, not being accepted and being judged. For Aidan, “it was hard to tell his parents what he knew about himself.” Calvin did not come out to his family for a long time because he shared similar fears: “I was scared they wouldn’t believe me.” His coming out scene most prominently shows how difficult it is to come out even to people closest to him. (Picture 25) He is shown by himself on a white background. This “removal of the setting draws our attention to the emotion and/or behavior of the character, thereby evoking affect (and sometimes judgement) in us.” (Painter, Martin and Unsworth, 2012, p. 40) In this scene, the reader is fully focused on Calvin’s face, on his body language, the way he is clutching his stuffed lion closely to himself, all of which point to the fear he is feeling when he tells his parents the truth about himself.

4.2. Being Different

These picture books put an emphasis on being different. Izaskun Elorza (2022, p. 49) writes that “gender-inclusive picture books tend to prime the construal of gender relationships as contrast” between the transgender protagonist and other cisgender characters. This is often

achieved through reinforcing gender stereotypes and having transgender children fail to conform to them, as well as making them stand out in their surroundings, as will be shown in the following analysis. Verbally, this difference between the transgender character and the group representing the stereotyped behavior, as well as the comparison of the transgender character to groups representing deviant behavior is “construed ideationally as (affirmative or negative) declarative clauses or combinations of them.” (Elorza, 2022, p. 50) Visually, transgender characters are contrasted with cisgender characters through compositional asymmetry and differences in size, attributes and actions.

Failing to conform to gender stereotypes and being compared to cisgender children can cause an internal conflict within the transgender character, often accompanied by various complex emotions, including feelings of sadness, discomfort and worry. Furthermore, rejecting the established gender stereotypes and not acting according to other people’s expectations can lead to a sense of confusion and a lack of understanding from the character’s family and friends, but it can also cause external conflict and alienation.

In *Neither*, the birds and the rabbits are grouped as members of the same class based on co-classificational relations that consist of “symmetrical display of equal size participants with same spatial orientation.” (Painter, Martin and Unsworth, 2012, p. 68) While the birds and the rabbits all stand on one side, Neither stands opposite of them, therefore not being a part of that group. (Picture 2) Moreover, Neither is compared to other inhabitants of This and That through their color, they are green in a world that is blue and yellow, as well as through their shape, they have a mix of bird and rabbit characteristics. Verbally, this contrast is expressed through a combination of affirmative and negative declarative clauses spoken by the birds and the rabbits: “You’re not one of us. You’re Neither!” Neither does not fit into the predetermined categories of the binary world of This and That and because of that, at the beginning of the story, they are alienated, and eventually, are driven out of the land.

In *From the Stars in the Sky to the Fish in the Sea*, Miu Lan is compared to other children in their school. Using co-classification (Painter, Martin and Unsworth, 2012, p. 68), the students are construed as members of the same class as they all stand together with the same spatial orientation and similar physical appearance, while Miu Lan is separated from them by standing on the other side. Apart from compositional asymmetry and differences in spatial orientation, Miu Lan is contrasted with the other children based on physical attributes, shapes and contours. All

students are either boys or girls, regular humans: “they had no feathers, no scales, no fur, no fins—not even sparkles!” Miu Lan stands out with their animal characteristics that other children do not possess, for example their tiger fur and peacock tail on the first day of school. (Picture 4) There is a lack of understanding and confusion from children because Miu Lan is always changing: “what are YOU supposed to BE?” This causes negative emotions for Miu Lan, so when they come home after their first day at school there is a dark cloud looming over them, their tail is on the ground and their shoulders sloped. (Picture 5) When children point at them and whisper, Miu Lan is worried that they won’t accept them for who they are: “no one invited Miu Lan to play.” Miu Lan tries blending in by not wearing anything non-human and they are invited to play, but only with boys because the children perceive them as one. (Picture 6) They do not like it when Miu Lan starts playing hopscotch because they think it is a girls’ game.

In *Jack (Not Jackie)*, the main character is primarily compared to and contrasted with his sister. In the first few pictures (8) both Jack and his sister wear dresses and tie ribbons in their hair. Even their body movements are similar. This co-classifies them as members of the same class. However, further along, as Jack starts discovering more about his gender identity and gender expression, the contrast between him and his sister grows. First, he stops wearing ribbons in his hair. Then, while his sister keeps wearing dresses and skirts throughout the story, Jack starts wearing pants and T-shirts. Lastly, Jack cuts his hair short (Picture 10), which stands in contrast with his sister’s long hair. This is also the moment in which Jack’s sister verbally expresses his deviation from the expected, stereotypical girl behavior: “Now, Jackie looks like a boy.” Jack’s sister doesn’t like the changes Jack is going through and that is what causes the main conflict in this picture book. When Jack wants to wear ‘boy’ clothes, she is against it, claiming that it is wrong. When Jack cuts his hair short, she protests. When Jack confirms that he is a boy and her brother, she has a hard time accepting that.

In *I am Jazz*, the main character is compared to her friends who are cisgender girls. This is expressed verbally by Jazz: “I am not exactly like Samantha and Casey.” Visually, Jazz is separated from them, she is standing farther away from them, closer to the reader, while her friends stand together in the background. (Picture 14) Several illustrations compare and contrast Jazz to her brothers and sister. In one picture, her brothers are in the background, co-classified as members of the same class based on their same spatial orientation, their similar ‘boy’ clothes and engaging in a stereotypically masculine activity of playing basketball. In contrast, Jazz stands closer to the

reader with her back towards her brothers, wearing a skirt and a tiara. (Picture 16) This deviation from expected 'boy' behavior is overtly articulated by Jazz's brothers: "My brothers told me this was girl stuff." Another illustration depicts Jazz alongside her sister who has long hair and wears a T-shirt and a skirt. (Picture 17) Jazz's hair is shorter and she is wearing a princess dress. While certain similarities between the two girls are evident, they cannot be co-classified. Even though they both wear stereotypically feminine clothes, Jazz's dress is puffier compared to her sister's denim skirt. Moreover, Jazz's dynamic body language, characterized by outspread arms and standing on one foot is contrasted with her sister's more static demeanor. This difference reflects the fact that at that point Jazz's family have not yet accepted that she is a girl and think of her as a boy that doesn't like stereotypically 'boy' things. Her sister expresses this verbally: "You're a funny kid." Finally, Jazz is compared to other cisgender girls doing ballet. (Picture 18) Distinctions are visually manifest as she stands at a distance, sporting shorts, a T-shirt, and short hair, while her peers wear pink ballet attire and gracefully dance. Her body language, characterized by inward-turned feet, bent head, and fidgeting with her clothes, conveys her discomfort and frustration. Jazz is angry and sad when she is compelled to wear 'boy' clothes; they are a source of distress evident in her posture and gestures. This sense of sadness and discomfort permeates Jazz's older drawings in which she depicted herself with shorter hair and masculine clothing, a dark rain cloud looming above her while the sun is shining for her friends. (Picture 15) Moreover, the inability to express her true gender identity feels like "telling a lie." As mentioned before, Jazz's gender non-conformity initially causes confusion for her family: "At first my family was confused. They'd always thought of me as a boy." Finally, Jazz sometimes comes into conflict with the society that does not understand or accept her gender identity: "... there are kids who tease me, or call me a boy name, or ignore me all together." The picture accompanying this text shows Jazz and a group of boys behind her who are looking at her and exchanging hushed comments.

In *When Aidan Became a Brother* the contrast between Aidan and other children is mainly conveyed through verbal expressions. When Aidan starts deviating from what is expected behavior for a girl, everyone assumes "he was just a different kind of girl." However, Aidan realizes he is a boy, but even then he is differentiated from other, cisgender boys: "But Aidan didn't feel like any kind of girl. He was really another kind of boy." Similar to other transgender protagonists, the imposition of stereotypical gender norms makes Aidan sad and uncomfortable. At the beginning of the story, depicted in a stereotypically feminine bedroom, wearing a pink dress and having long

hair, Aidan appears visibly unhappy and out of place. (Picture 20) His demeanor is in stark contrast with his parents' excitement. His personal experience of feeling different, uncomfortable and misunderstood drives his determination to create a welcoming and accepting environment for his future sibling, as well as his fear of making mistakes. For example, Aidan takes issue with the societal division of gender into binaries so he modifies a book title "50,000+ Names for Boys and Girls" to say "babies" instead of "boys" and "girls". He also does not like it when the store attendant asks him about being excited about having a brother or sister and instead expresses excitement about assuming the role of a big brother. Furthermore, Aidan makes sure to select a gender-neutral name, clothing and room decor, reflecting his commitment to fostering an inclusive and understanding environment for his sibling. Despite that, he worries that the baby might not like what he has chosen for them and still feel uncomfortable and alienated. He is also afraid of getting things wrong: "What if I don't know how to be a good big brother?"

In *Calvin*, the main character immediately asserts that he has always known he was a boy and expresses his rejection of stereotypical 'girl' activities and attributes through his drawings: "I'd draw myself with short hair and a shirt like Papa's. I'd dream about swim trunks like my dad and brother wore." Visually, there is a comparison between Calvin in those drawings and Calvin in photographs. (Picture 24) In the photos, Calvin has long hair and wears dresses, while in his drawings he is depicted with short hair and wearing swim trunks. Calvin is also compared to his brother. In the photographs, the difference between them is clear, but in Calvin's drawings they look very similar in terms of physical attributes. This suggests that Calvin has co-classified himself and his brother as members of the same class. The main concern for Calvin is whether he will be accepted by both his family and his friends at school. He is worried the children will refuse to address him using the pronoun 'he' and that he will be alienated. In his imagination, Calvin envisions a scenario in which all the children are playing and he is hiding behind a tree. (Picture 29) On the first day of school, other students are rendered in faded colors while Calvin stands out in vibrant colors, drawing the reader's attention to the fear etched across his face. (Picture 30)

In *The Name I Call Myself*, the main character verbally expresses the ways in which they deviate from stereotypical 'boy' behavior by telling the reader they like to play with dolls, desire long wavy hair, want to wear dresses and shave their body hair. They also admit they sometimes wish they were a girl. Ari compares themselves to other girls, their mom and stars they see on TV. Physical changes associated with their gender assigned at birth, like body hair and changes in their

voice, cause them discomfort which is aggravated by peer ridicule. (Pictures 34, 36 and 37) The central conflict in the picture book involves Ari and their dad, who imposes strict gender norms and forces Ari to conform to masculine appearance and behavior. He cuts Ari's hair short because that is "what a boy looks like." The act of having their hair cut is visually compared to trees being cut down by enormous scissors, representing Ari's sadness and discomfort. (Picture 32) Moreover, another picture (33) portrays Ari and their mother trapped in a tower and their father is shown as the jailor, standing tall over the valley and looking down on them. Another illustration (35) also shows Ari's father bigger than he actually is, towering over Ari as he yells at them for kissing the poster of Nick Jonas. These visual metaphors, with the differences in size and positioning of the characters as discussed in Painter, Martin and Unsworth (2012, p. 17) underscore the power imbalance between Ari and their father. As far as Ari's mother is concerned, she understand and listens to Ari, she lets them borrow her foundation and wear her dresses, but ultimately she cannot help them break free from their father's grip as she too is powerless against him. Finally, Ari's sense of confinement is visually represented by them being locked in a cage for others to view, like and exhibit or an animal in a zoo. (Picture 38)

4.3. Acceptance

The analyzed picture books emphasize embracing diversity and the value of being different. That is why all of them feature moments of acceptance, usually from the transgender character's family and friends that, to an extent, resolve some of the aforementioned conflicts and evoke positive emotional responses from the transgender character. Approaches used to represent differences are also used to represent acceptance: visual comparison of transgender characters to themselves or cisgender characters, reinforced by declarative clauses and positive messages expressed by transgender characters or their families and friends. Transgender characters are again compared to their cisgender peers but, instead of pointing out the differences, the two groups are co-classified. Additionally, transgender characters are also compared to themselves, either through their drawings and photographs, or retrospectively to their earlier selves featured in the picture book. These kind of comparisons are used to show the sense of happiness and positivity the characters experience after coming out and being accepted.

After coming out, and despite pointing out that she is "not exactly like Samantha and Casey", Jazz is shown playing with other girls, therefore being co-classified with them as members of the same class. (Picture 13) Additionally, Jazz is also compared to herself in her drawings.

(Picture 15) Her older drawings, where Jazz is presented in stereotypically masculine clothing and hairstyle, are characterized by sadness, visually represented by a rain cloud. In more recent drawings Jazz depicts herself wearing dresses and having longer hair, and she is noticeably happy and comfortable what is represented by the presence of sunshine. Being accepted by her family and friends has a profound impact on Jazz's emotional well-being as it makes her happier and more comfortable being her authentic self: "Being JAZZ felt much more like being ME!"

In *From the Stars in the Sky to the Fish in the Sea*, Miu Lan's mother has always been accepting and supportive, telling her child: "whatever you dream of, i believe you can be". This makes Miu Lan feel loved from the moment they are born. Towards the end of the story, Miu Lan also experiences acceptance from the students in their school as all of them embrace a freer and more diverse expression of gender and exhibit various non-human characteristics, such as wings and tails. (Picture 7) As a result, Miu Lan doesn't stand out anymore and instead they are co-classified with the other students. Apart from sharing similar physical attributes, the children are shown engaging in play, fostering happiness and contentment, especially for Miu Lan now that they've been accepted for who they are.

After being cast out of This and That, Neither comes across the Land of All where they encounter many creatures characterized by unique and varied physical attributes. (Picture 3) Neither is surprised to find "so many different kinds" in one place. Among the creatures of this land, Neither no longer stands out visually. True to its name, the Land of All welcomes Neither, as well as all other creatures that feel like they don't belong elsewhere.

After Calvin comes out, he is once again compared to his brother, as well as his new friend, but this time the three boys are co-classified based on their similar spatial orientation and identical clothing. (Picture 26) Calvin's family embraces his identity immediately and are actively involved with his transition, as they help him select new clothes and cut his hair short. (Pictures 27 and 28) Performing a fashion show for his family shows how comfortable Calvin is with sharing his identity with them. Calvin's friends and teachers play an important role in fostering a supportive atmosphere within the school environment. Seeing his name displayed throughout the classroom fills Calvin with joy and excitement, and because of this effort to make him comfortable he is no longer afraid that he is going to be alienated because of his identity. In fact, he feels so comfortable that he decides to share the story of his transition with the class.

Similar to Miu Lan, Jack has the support of his parents from the beginning, when he first starts rejecting traditional feminine stereotypes. In particular, Jack's mother has a prominent role in creating a supportive environment as she unquestioningly adapts to Jack's new clothing choices, new name and new haircut. When Jack's sister states that him wearing 'boy' clothes is wrong, their mother corrects her: "Not wrong, Susu. Just different." Towards the end of the story Jack's sister creates two drawings, depicting Jack presenting as a girl and Jack presenting as a boy. (Picture 11) This visual comparison makes her realize that even though the two versions have different physical attributes, they are fundamentally the same person: "Jackie. Jack. The same big round eyes. My sister. My brother. It's okay, either way."

In *When Aidan Became a Brother*, comparison is drawn between present and past versions of the main character. One instance contrasts Aidan's experience in his old, stereotypically feminine room with his new, gender-neutral room. In the old room, Aidan is depicted with long hair, wearing a dress and exuding discomfort. In his new room, Aidan is evidently happier and more comfortable. Aidan also compares his present self to himself as a baby when examining some old photographs (Picture 23): "He looked so different back then! It hadn't been easy, but he liked the boy he was growing into." An important aspect of Aidan's journey were his parents who accepted his gender identity and made sure to create a supportive environment by spending time with and learning from other families with transgender kids. (Picture 22)

At the end of *The Name I Call Myself*, Ari comes out to their parents as a person outside the gender binary. There are no comparisons drawn between Ari and other characters, nor do we witness them being accepted by their surroundings. The narrative focuses on Ari's self-acceptance and finding joy and comfort in their gender identity regardless of the opinions of others. Visually, this is represented by Ari liberating themselves from the cage and holding the key in their own hand. (Picture 39)

Finally, most picture books include explicit messages about tolerance and acceptance of diversity among individuals. Jazz points out that "being different is okay" and that she doesn't mind it because "different is special." Surrounded by peers embracing non-human physical characteristics, Miu Lan expresses a similar sentiment: "it was fun to be many different things." When Aidan voices his concerns about making mistakes with his younger sibling, his mother reassures him: "When you were born, we didn't know you were going to be our son. We made some mistakes, but you helped us fix them. And you taught us how important it is to love someone

for exactly who they are. This baby is lucky to have you, and so are we.” In the Land of All, Neither comes across many different creatures with varying colors and physical attributes that coexist harmoniously and no one is ostracized because “everyone fits in here.”

4.4. Critical Approach to Analyzing Picture Books

Considering the relation of people depicted in images to viewers, Leeuwen (2008, p. 138) proposes three dimensions: social distance, social relation and social interaction. When it comes to social distance in picture books, all of them use a combination of different “shots”, meaning the characters are sometimes shown from far away, and other times they are shown in a “close-up”. Social relation refers to “the angle from which we see the person.” (Leeuwen, 2008, p. 139) In the analyzed picture books, the viewer is almost always following the story at eye-level with the main character, which signals equality. The exception is *The Name I Call Myself* in which the reader is looking down on the main character Ari in a scene where their father is yelling at them and the one where Ari is in a cage. (Pictures) Leeuwen (2008, p. 139) points out that “to look down on someone is to exert imaginary symbolic power over that person.” However, in this picture book, looking down on Ari is not about the power imbalance between the reader and Ari, but rather it shows Ari’s powerlessness in their own life and against their father. Finally, social interaction refers to whether depicted people are looking at the viewer or not. In picture books most characters are not looking at the reader, except for Calvin and Jazz. Both of them are looking at the reader when they are introducing themselves, and while Calvin only does it at the end of the picture book, Jazz addresses the reader at the beginning and in the end. (Pictures 12, 19 and 31)

According to Leeuwen (2008, p. 33), “representations can endow social actors with either active or passive roles.” In the analyzed picture books, main characters are represented as agents when expressing their gender identities. Verbally, this is represented by active verbs: “Aidan explored different ways of being a boy.”, “Jackie picks out shorts and a shirt.”, as well as statements spoken by the characters: “I am a boy!”, “For as long as I could remember, I knew I was a boy.” Visually, the characters are shown taking part in activities such as picking out new clothes and getting haircuts, Miu Lan changes their appearance every day, Calvin draws himself as a boy, Ari shaves their legs.

Some characters also have an active role trying to fit in with others. Before being cast out, Neither “tried playing a this game” and they “tried playing a that game.” Miu Lan tried to fit in with other students at school by giving up their unusual physical characteristics.

Parents and family members are activated in the role of supporters. Verbally, this is represented by active verbs (Calvin: “He introduced me.”, “Gigi bought me and my brother matching swim trunks.”; Jazz: Mom and Dad told me I could start wearing girl clothes to school, and growing my hair long.”; Miu Lan: “no matter how many things Miu Lan became, their mother always brought them back into the little blue house, gave them a bath, and tucked them into bed at the day’s end.”). Visually, parents and family members are shown involved in actions like helping characters choose new clothing and cutting their hair. They are also activated in instances involving physical touch, usually when the character comes out or is upset, so they touch the character’s shoulder or face, hug them or kiss them.

The exception is *The Name I Call Myself* where the father is activated as the abuser and in relation to him Ari is represented as the patient. Verbally, active verbs are again put to use: “My dad cuts my hair short.”, “...he yells at me anyway.” The father is also activated through his direct quotes: “This is what a boy looks like.”, “You’re a boy so you have to act like one.” Visually, the father is the one that has locked Ari and their mother in the tower, he is the one that yells at them and keeps them in the cage. Towards the end, Ari becomes the agent in freeing themselves from their father by telling their parents who they are and leaving the cage.

Most main characters are visually represented to be actively involved in playing with other children. This serves to show that even though they are transgender, these characters are not actually different from other children and they do what most children do.

Some supporting characters are activated in the role of bullies. In *Neither*, the birds and the rabbits are the bullies as they are shown standing opposite Neither, pointing at them, frowning, yelling and telling them: “You’re not one of us. You’re neither!” Neither is in the passive role of the bullied. Similarly, in *From the Stars in the Sky to the Fish in the Sea*, the students in school are activated in the role of bullies. They are pointing at Miu Lan, laughing, pulling their feathers, yelling at them, and here Miu Lan is also in the passive role of the bullied. Children in Ari’s school in *The Name I Call Myself* are also in the active role of bullies, shown standing opposite Ari, pointing and laughing at them.

Next, “people may be depicted as individuals or groups.” (Leeuwen, 2008, p. 144) Visually, transgender characters are often depicted as individuals, especially in instances in which they are compared to cisgender characters. This, in turn, means that cisgender characters are also often grouped together. In *I am Jazz*, the main character is individualized while her friends

Samantha and Casey are grouped, not just visually but verbally, too, as they are always referred to as “Samantha and Casey”, never separately. This is what Leeuwen (2008, p. 37) calls association. When Jazz is with her family, she is also individualized as she is shown in the foreground while her brothers and sister are usually in the background. When Jazz is looking at a group of girls in ballet class, she is individualized by standing farther away and by her clothes. The girls in ballet class are grouped because they are standing together, wearing the same ballet attire. Verbally, assimilation (Leeuwen, 2008, p. 37) occurs in several instances, usually realized by plurality: “the teachers at school”, “the kids who tease me”, “other kids at school”.

In *From the Stars in the Sky to the Fish in the Sea*, the students in school are grouped together because they look similar and they do not have unusual physical characteristics. They are also assimilated verbally by being referred to as “the other students”, “the other children”, “the other kids”. Miu Lan is individualized because of their appearance. However, when Liu Lan tries to blend in, they are grouped with the boys because they resemble a boy, and in that scene Miu Lan and the boys look so similar it is impossible to tell them apart. (Picture 6)

In *Nether*, the birds and the rabbits are grouped together. Not only that, but all the birds and all the rabbits look exactly the same, so they are homogenized. (Picture 1) This might serve the purpose of making Neither stand out as much as possible. However, more mature readers might see this as critique of a society that divides people into two groups and the people that do not that division but conform to it to the point where everyone looks the same. In *This and That*, Neither is individualized based on their unique physical characteristics. In the *Land of All*, everyone is depicted as an individual based on their appearance but at the same time the inhabitants of this land are represented as a group.

In *The Name I Call Myself*, the children in school that bully Ari are grouped together based on their position opposite Ari, as well as the fact that all of them are depicted without eyes.

Finally, transgender characters are also sometimes grouped with cisgender characters, usually in scenes where they engage in play with their peers. As mentioned before, the point here is to show them as regular children and not single them out just because they are transgender.

Characters can be categorized based on their identities and functions. One type of categorization is identification that “occurs when social actors are defined [...] in terms of what they, more or less permanently, are.” (Leeuwen, 2008, p. 42) Classification (Leeuwen, 2008, p. 42) is a type of identification that categorizes social actors based on existing categories within a

society or an institution, and this can include age, gender, race, class, etc. In the analyzed picture books, the main characters are classified based on their gender identity. Some characters are boys, some are girls, some are both and some are neither, but this is always expressed verbally in the picture books. *I am Jazz*, *Calvin and When Aidan Became a Brother* also classify their main characters as transgender individuals. Another type of identification is relational identification that “represents social actors in terms of their personal, kinship, or work relations.” (Leeuwen, 2008, p. 43) In the analyzed picture books, family relations are very important (with the exception of *Neither*). There is always a mother and a father, or at least one of the parents, and sometimes there are grandparents (Gigi and Papa in *Calvin*). Some characters are also identified as siblings, for example Aidan as a big brother and Jack first as sister and then as brother.

Overdetermination happens when “social actors are represented as participating, at the same time, in more than one social practice.” (Leeuwen, 2008, p. 47) *Neither* is a half-bird half-rabbit that is trying to find a place where they belong but at the same time they stand for a transgender (or gender non-conforming) person trying to fit into a world built on binaries. Furthermore, since gender is not explicitly mentioned in the picture book, *Neither* can also stand for anyone that feels different and is looking for somewhere to belong. This is what Leeuwen (2008, p. 48) calls symbolization. Another category of overdetermination is inversion, with its two most common forms: anachronism and deviation. (Leeuwen, 2008, p. 50) An example of anachronism, which is “often used to say things that cannot be said straightforwardly [...] or to naturalize ideological discourses” (Leeuwen, 2008, p. 50) is also *Neither*. Deviation is a process in which “social actors involved in certain activities are represented by means of reference to social actors who would not normally be eligible to engage in these activities.” (Leeuwen, 2008, pp. 50-51) In the case of analyzed picture books, transgender characters are the ones that deviate from the norm by failing to act as their assigned gender and fit into the predetermined categories. According to Leeuwen (2008, p. 51), “deviation almost always serves the purpose of legitimization: the failure of the deviant social actor confirms the norms”, so these picture books, in a way, legitimize the binary gender structure and reinforce gender stereotypes.

5. CONCLUSION

This paper analyzed the representation of transgender, non-binary and gender non-conforming individuals and their experiences in children's picture books.

The analyzed picture books portray multifaceted aspects of being a transgender child, highlighting important, sometimes pivotal moments universal to transgender individuals, such as coming out and transitioning. The picture books specifically focus on the intrinsic and deeply personal nature of gender, putting an emphasis on feelings over physical appearance. Most of them show the process of social transition in which transgender characters choose new names, hairstyles and clothes.

When it comes to the portrayal of transgender characters themselves, initially they are differentiated from cisgender characters, verbally through declarative sentences and visually through differences in appearance, actions and spatial orientation. Moreover, transgender characters are portrayed as not fitting into stereotypes of their assigned gender. However, some picture books inadvertently perpetuate gender stereotypes by having transgender characters fit into stereotypes of the gender they identify as.

A theme of acceptance is prevalent in all picture books, even though it comes from different places. Sometimes it comes only from the transgender character themselves, sometimes from finding a different, more diverse place, but in most stories it comes from friends and family. Parental support in particular is highlighted, as parents (and other family members) are important for fostering supporting and safe environments for their children's growth and self-discovery.

The analyzed picture books also depict adversities, negative feelings and emotional challenges that transgender characters experiences, such as conflicts with society and feelings of worry, fear and sadness.

Overall, as educational resources, the analyzed picture books effectively introduce children to the concept of gender identity and show what it means to be transgender, as well as encourage empathy and acceptance. However, there are certain shortcomings in addressing the connection between gender identity and gender expression, evident in the reinforcement of traditional gender stereotypes. While it is important to note that playing into those stereotypes might be gender affirming and provide a sense of security for transgender individuals, there is also a need for stories that transcend those stereotypes, where transgender individuals are acknowledged for their identity regardless of their clothing or hairstyle choices. As society moves toward a more fluid

understanding of gender identity and gender expression, it becomes clear that the two are connected but are not dependent on each other. *From the Stars in the Sky to the Fish in the Sea* and *The Name I Call Myself* serve as examples of a step in the right direction as they portray more fluid gender expressions. *When Aidan Became a Brother* also acknowledges that girls and boys can express themselves differently.

Moving forward, it is important to advocate for stories that recognize the varied expressions within the gender spectrum and explore diverse ways in which both transgender and cisgender individuals can express their gender.

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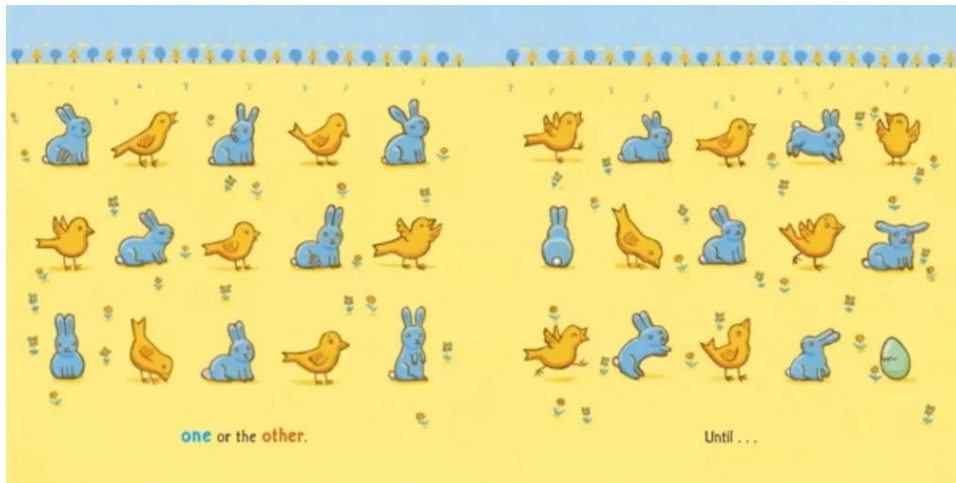
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APPENDIX

Neither, Airlie Anderson



Picture 1

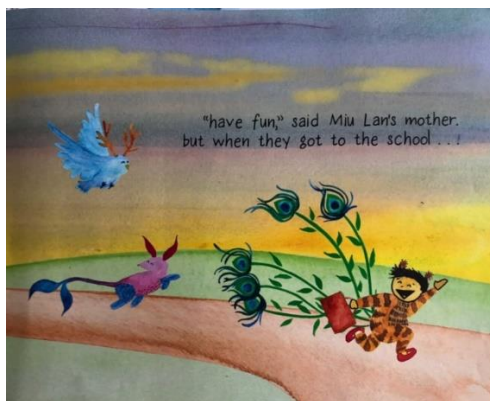


Picture 2

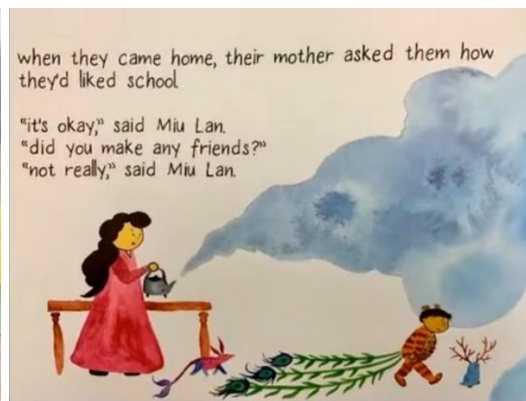


Picture 3

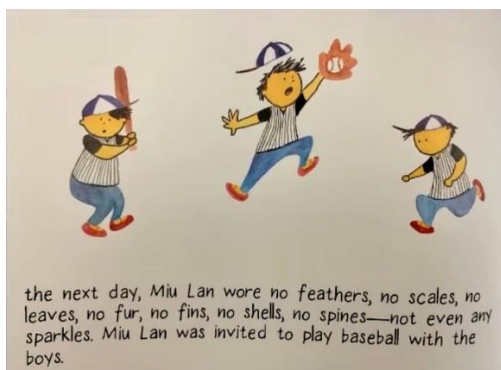
From the Stars in the Sky to the Fish in the Sea, Kai Cheng Thom, Kai Yun Ching and Wai-Yant Li



Picture 4



Picture 5

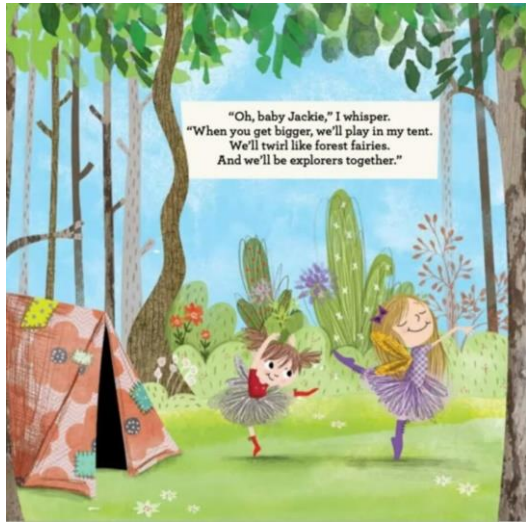


Picture 6



Picture 7

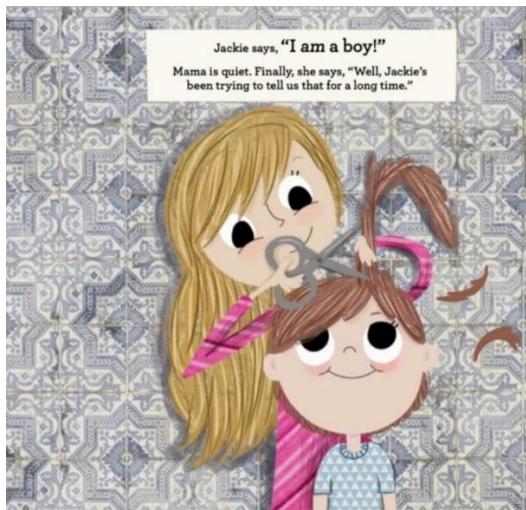
Jack (Not Jackie), Erica Silverman and Holly Hatam



Picture 8



Picture 9



Picture 10



Picture 11

I am Jazz, Jessica Herthel, Jazz Jennings and Shelagh McNicholas



Picture 12



Picture 13



Picture 14



Picture 15



Picture 16

Picture 17



Picture 18

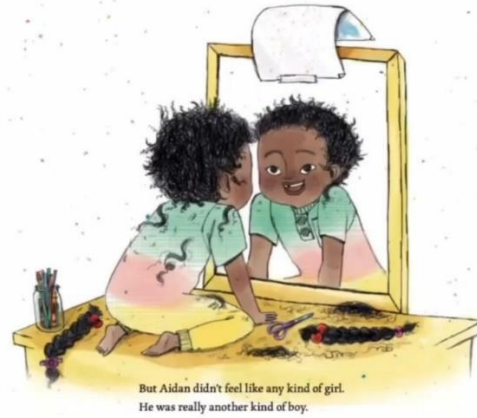


Picture 19

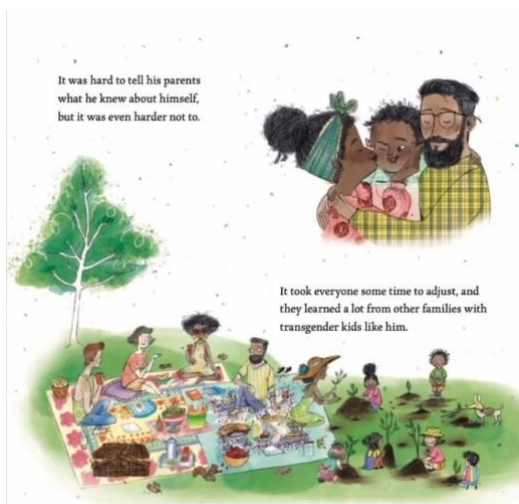
When Aidan Became a Brother, Kyle Lukoff and Kaylani Juanita



Picture 20



Picture 21



Picture 22

Maybe everything wouldn't be perfect for this baby. Maybe he would have to fix mistakes he didn't even know he was making. And maybe that was okay.



Picture 23

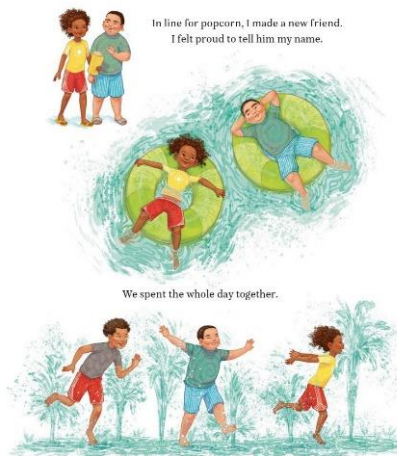
Calvin, J. R. Ford, Vanessa Ford and Kayla Harren



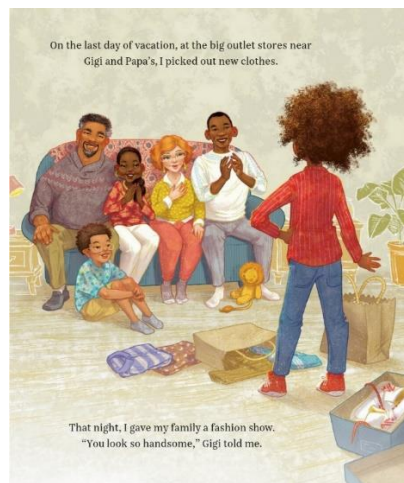
Picture 24



Picture 25



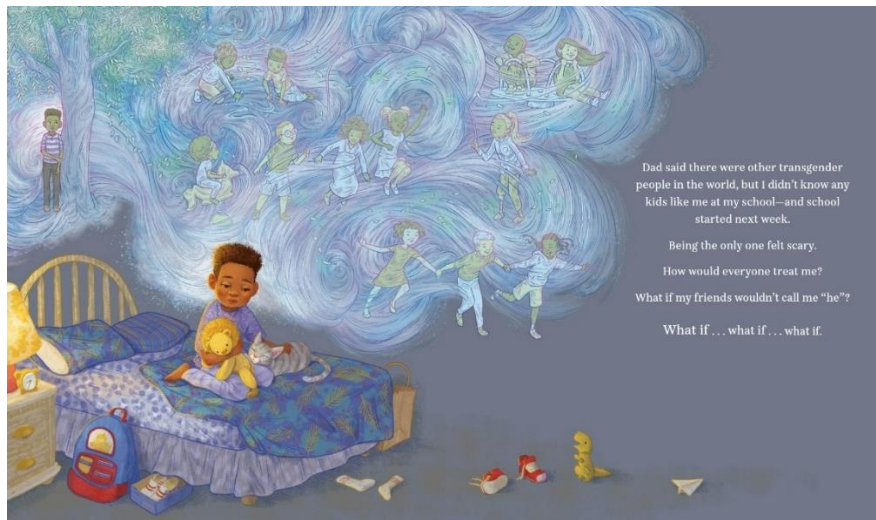
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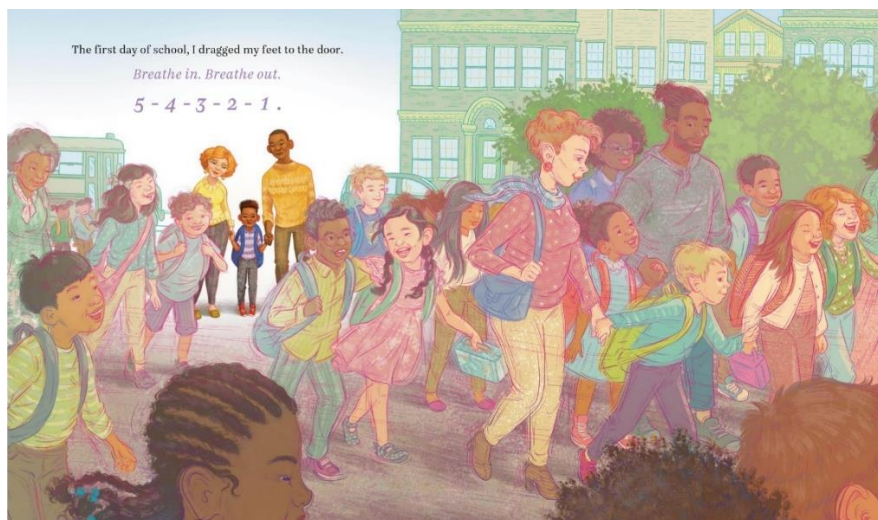
Picture 27



Picture 28



Picture 29



Picture 30

I stood up proudly to share my summer story.
 But first, I introduced myself.
 "Hi," I said. "My name is Calvin. C-A-L-V-I-N."
 And I felt my what-ifs melt away...



Picture 31



Picture 32



Picture 33



Picture 34



Picture 35



Picture 36



Picture 37



Picture 38



Picture 39