



Diversity in Aotearoa New Zealand picturebooks published between 2021 and 2022

Nicola Daly¹ · Nicholas Vanderschantz¹ · Stella Mitchell¹ · Crissi Blair²

Received: 10 January 2024 / Accepted: 16 February 2025
© The Author(s) 2025

Abstract

It is widely accepted that diversity in the literature read by and with children is of great importance, both for ensuring all children see themselves in the stories they share and in ensuring children are aware of lives and experiences outside their own. There is a growing body of international literature critically exploring the diversity present in English-language children's literature, but to date very little analysing diversity in Aotearoa New Zealand. This study examines 90 picturebooks published between 2021 and 2022 in terms of representations of ethnicity, skin colour, gender, disability, family structures, and language use. Findings indicate similar representations of gender, disability, and family structure to those found internationally but higher representation in relation to the ethnicity and skin colour of primary and secondary characters. New findings in relation to language use are presented. Future research concerning the details of representation in picturebooks and other formats of children's literature in Aotearoa New Zealand is called for.

Keywords Picturebooks · Diversity · Ethnicity · Gender · Disability · Family · Languages

1 Introduction

Renowned children's literature scholar Rudine Sims Bishop (2012) has famously observed, “[H]istorically, children from parallel cultures [traditionally marginalised communities] had been offered mainly books as windows into lives that were different from their own, and children from the dominant culture had been offered mainly fiction that mirrored their own lives” (p. 9). That is to say, historically, marginalised children have not been considered by publishers as potential implied readers or implied viewers of children's books. This exclusion of marginalised children as potential audiences is especially important with regard to picturebooks as they are introduced at a formative stage in a young person's development of their relationship to reading, and their worldview and self-image (Short & Cueto, 2022). Children who identify with the homogenous body of literature and find themselves overrepresented are also disadvantaged, as they are left ignorant of the lives

✉ Nicola Daly
nicolad@waikato.ac.nz

¹ University of Waikato, Hamilton, Aotearoa, New Zealand

² Te Puna Mātauranga O Aotearoa, National Library of New Zealand, Wellington, New Zealand

of their peers and the true diversity of the world they live in (Bishop, 1990). The negative impact on this group of children and teenagers, however, can be countered. Access to literary representations of traditionally marginalised communities can support the development of empathy for young people different to themselves (Centre for Literacy in Primary Education, 2022; Purcell, 2018).

While there has been some research concerning diversity in children's literature published in the USA (e.g. Hayden & Prince, 2023; Koss, 2015; Lo, 2019), the UK (Centre for Literacy in Primary Education, 2022), and Australia (e.g. Adam & Barratt-Pugh, 2020; Booth & Lim, 2022; Caple & Tian, 2022), there has, until very recently, been very little research concerning the representation of minoritised communities in New Zealand children's literature, with the exception being a survey of sexually diverse families in Aotearoa New Zealand primary school libraries (Hardie, 2014), analysis of family structures in the New Zealand Picturebook Collection (Daly, 2015), and the recent Master's thesis by Taylor (2022) analysing representations of the LGBTQIA+ community in award-winning picturebooks in Aotearoa New Zealand. As researchers in this area, we decided that an analysis of diversity in Aotearoa New Zealand children's literature was required in order to know the current state of play, a benchmark for future work, and some insight into gaps in the representation of diversity to share with the rest of the children's literature community. In this article, we represent the first comprehensive analysis of picturebooks published in Aotearoa between 2021 and 2022, presenting a critical content analysis of the representation of human and non-human characters, ethnic diversity, gender, family composition, languages, and disability in the 90 picturebooks published in Aotearoa New Zealand in that time. Our key research question is "What diversity exists in the image and text of picturebooks published in Aotearoa New Zealand between 2021–2022, and how does this diversity relate to diversity in Aotearoa society?".

2 Literature review

A range of research has examined and analysed diversity in children's literature written in English in a range of settings. All of the literature points to the under-representation of groups with less power. For example, in the most recent 2022 Reflecting Realities review by Children's Literature in Primary Education (CLPE), a British organisation which promotes the use of children's literature showed that 20% of the books submitted to them by British publishers featured characters of colour. Nine percent of books had a main character from an ethnic minority which was an increase from 1% in 2017. CLPE (2022) note that "the casting of characters of colour is more likely to equate to an increase in ethnically ambiguous figures...as opposed to fully actualised characters from specific demographic groups or identifiable cultural backgrounds" (p. 8). Other work from the USA shows that there is a similar under-representation of minoritised groups in terms of authorship. In the USA, the Cooperative Children's Book Center's annual reports show a trend of books that feature diverse characters but not written by authors from that background (Cooperative Children's Book Center [CCBC], 2002). This finding leads to questions about who has the right to tell diverse stories. This lack of representation is important to identify and rectify because of its potential impact on engaging readers from minoritised communities and the unrealistic representation of society it presents to readers from dominant cultures and communities.

Research from Australia also indicates a lack of diversity in books held in early childhood settings and in terms of the ethnic identity of characters in Australian children's

literature. Adam and Barratt-Pugh (2020) found that the majority of books in the four participating long daycare centres in Western Australia did not portray cultural diversity. The representation of non-dominant cultural groups in the few remaining books was largely stereotypical or tokenistic and, in some cases, outdated. In addition, the books overwhelmingly portrayed dominant culture ideologies and viewpoints, as has been found by others. This study raises important concerns regarding expectations and requirements for selecting and using literature in early learning settings. This is particularly the case for literature that is inclusive of the worldviews and perspectives of children from non-dominant cultures. The impact of monocultural and stereotypical books in early childhood settings seeds early impressions about who is important enough to be in books, and this has implications for ongoing engagement for children who do not see themselves or their families represented. Caple and Tian (2022) recently found 88% of the human characters in the 118 books shortlisted for the picturebook category of the prestigious Children's Book Council of Australia (CBCA) Book of the Year awards in the last 20 years "were white; none of the main characters were Asian, Black or Middle Eastern". The importance of diversity in award-winning books lies in the fact that these books are more likely to be purchased for school libraries or as gifts for young children, resulting in more children being overexposed to these stories and continuing the cycle of marginalisation.

Related to representations of diverse ethnicity in children's literature are reflections of linguistic diversity in children's literature, which ensure recognition of home languages and diversity outside a monolingual English bias. There is an increasing number of studies exploring the benefits of picturebooks featuring multilingualism in some way (e.g., Naqvi et al., 2013; Zaidi, 2020). Findings show that the use of such picturebooks leads to increased literacy engagement and increasing language awareness.

Another avenue of research concerning multilingualism in picturebooks focuses on language hierarchies and the design used to communicate the relative importance of languages. Recent work by Vanderschantz and colleagues (Vanderschantz et al., 2022; Vanderschantz & Daly, 2023) examined the ways in which language order and typography can communicate the relative importance of languages. Daly has explored the text layout in dual-language picturebooks featuring anywhere from two languages (Daly, 2016) up to 12 languages (Daly, 2019), suggesting that such design decisions can impact language awareness and language attitudes among young readers. Work by Brouwer and Daly (2022, 2023) showed how dual-language picturebooks featuring te reo Māori could be used with the parents of children in a kindergarten setting to support the use of te reo Māori in the home. Smith and Pryor (2022) analysed how children's literature was being created in support of the revitalisation of Gamilaraay, an Indigenous Australian language. Revitalisation of such languages has not only contributed to language revival but has also fostered positive identity development among children from Indigenous communities.

There have not been many studies of the family structures represented in picturebooks, but some exceptions are a recent study by Adam et al. (2024) which examined 90 award-winning Australian books from 2019 and 2020 Children's Book Council of Australia awards, showing "positive inclusions" (e.g. sole parented and intergenerational families) and "glaring omissions" (e.g. step and blended families and same-sex or other LGBTIQ+ families) in terms of representations of family structures. Hedberg et al. (2022) explored representations of rainbow¹ families in 60 English-language picturebooks

¹ Hedberg, Venzo, and Young define "rainbow families" as "families with parents, guardians, caregivers, extended family members and sometimes even offspring who identify as LGBTIQ+" (2022, p. 199).

available in Victorian (Australia) public libraries. Their work showed the presence of stereotypes and limited representations of such families. Analysing 116 English-language picturebooks from 38 awards and 2 honour lists for children's literature, Lo (2019) and her graduate assistant coded family and relationship structures, showing a skew toward white families with two heterosexual parents. She concludes that it is important to know these biases as "[n]aming norms helps to make them visible and reveals the narrowness of these picture storybooks as hermeneutical resources" (p. 27). When the literature children share with their caregivers does not reflect the family structures in which they belong, we can only imagine that engagement is perhaps less easy.

Another set of studies explore the effects that picturebooks featuring diverse family structures can have on adults involved in choosing and/or reading them. Cloughessy and Waniganayake (2019) have explored the reactions of lesbian parents to picturebooks featuring rainbow families. Their findings showed that the picturebooks, while limited in some cases, were perceived as powerful tools in fighting heteronormativity within ECE settings at a time when children were receptive to learning about such diversity. Kelly (2012) documented how New Zealand kindergarten teachers interpreted children's responses to a set of ten picturebooks featuring same-gender parented families, her results showing that while the children appeared open to the diversity in family structures, the teachers themselves were reluctant to fully engage with children in discussions relating to these books.

Representations of gender have been researched in many ways over the years since the rise of feminism in the 1960s (Kalogirou et al., 2020). As with the other research reviewed so far, the marginalised group, in this case women, is often stereotyped and/or under-represented, which has an impact on young readers' understanding of gender identity and power in society. In her review of diversity in a database of 455 children's trade picturebooks published in 2012 in the USA, Koss (2015) explored the gender of main characters using normative gender characteristics in illustrations, gender pronouns, and gender-specific language. Characters were coded for the occupation they were involved in, whether they were indoors or outdoors and if they were being passive or active. Her findings indicate that of the 455 titles analysed, only 48 did not have a male or female character present. In books where a gendered character was featured, the distribution was fairly even, with 84% of titles featuring a male character and 80% of titles featuring a female character. When, however, main characters were considered, 60% were male compared with 36% female. Gender stereotypes were clearly evident in occupations characters were involved in. Sixty-two percent of female characters were engaged in jobs associated with women such as stay-at-home mothers, teachers, and ballet dancers, whereas the male characters had a greater range of occupations and were involved in traditionally male occupations such as business owner, sports star, and explorer (92%). Female characters often had passive roles (cf. Males in active roles 88%) and were depicted working indoors more frequently than men who were shown outdoors. Using Gender Schema Theory (GST), Koss notes that "a lack of representation of females in non-traditional gender roles perpetuates stereotypes and learned gender behaviour" (p. 37).

While there has been no specific research concerning gender representations in picturebooks published in Aotearoa New Zealand, Jackson and Gee (2005) used a feminist post-structural analysis to analyse 100 randomly selected early school readers used over the last 50 years in Aotearoa New Zealand educational contexts. In their analysis of illustration and text, they examined comparative postures of male and female characters, representations of clothing and hair, and the activities of adults and children. Their findings showed little variation across time: Women were mostly depicted as caregivers and domestic workers; fathers were paid workers and involved with children outside.

Another aspect of under-representation of minoritised groups in children's literature relates to disability. Like the previous categories, this can be assigned to two categories: those concerned with content analysis of how and who are present in stories featuring disabled characters; the second category explores how such literature can be used (Ellis, 2019; Pennell et al., 2018; Kleekamp & Zapata, 2019; Tondreau & Rabinowitz, 2021). The former of these categories is most relevant to the present research and important because of the messages being communicated to child readers about the place of disability within society.

A range of recent research has explored representations of disability in picturebooks. The research is always based on the importance of inclusion and for all readers to be able to see themselves and understand others in the literature they read. Motivated by the power of picturebooks to "convey cultural messages and values about society" (p. 32), Koss' (2015) content analysis of 455 picturebooks published in the USA in 2012 showed that while disabilities were represented in 44% of the books, this was reduced to 9% when characters wearing glasses were not included. Indeed, the least-common disabilities such as visual and hearing disabilities were more frequently represented than the much more prevalent cognitive disabilities. Koss concluded that "the lack of diversity in children's literature indicates that educators will need to make special efforts to seek out and use quality books that include diverse characters" (p. 39). Hayden and Prince (2023) complete qualitative content analysis on 34 exemplar picturebooks from the Innovative Resources for Instructional Success Center at the Vanderbilt Peabody College (USA) which sets a "rigorous standard" in their selection of children's books which represent children with disabilities. The books selected featured strength-based representations of main characters with a disability. Similar to Koss (2015), their findings show that low occurrence disabilities (e.g. visual and hearing disabilities) are represented more frequently than high-occurrence disabilities (such as Specific Learning Disability). They argue that "while increasing numbers of students with disabilities are being educated in general education settings, teachers cannot assume these students are represented in the picturebooks they read" (p. 257).

And lastly, research showing that non-human characters are very visible in children's literature shows us one of the techniques used by picturebook creators ostensibly to avoid criticism relating to lack of diversity. There is considerable literature concerning representations of non-human characters in children's literature (e.g. Burke & Copenhaver, 2004; Sharama, 2017; You, 2021). Specific analyses of proportions of non-human characters are less numerous. In their analysis of diverse characters in Australian picturebooks published in 2018, Booth and Lim (2022) showed that non-human protagonists made up over half of the Australian picturebook protagonists in the 2018 sample year (53%). Non-marginalised protagonists, whether human, animal, or non-human, clearly emerged as the "normal" characters for Australian picturebook publishing in 2018, while non-marginalised characters were revealed to be the singular group of prioritised voices. They concluded that by featuring animal or inhuman protagonists, creators are "exempted" from providing representations of marginalised characters.

Booth and Lim (2022) suggest that the output of Australian picturebooks in 2018 suggests local publishers do not perceive picturebooks starring marginalised protagonists as worthy of their resources or appealing to the Australian readership. More importantly, these findings raise questions about why privileged protagonists (30%) are so significantly preferred by publishers in comparison and why animals (40%) are perceived by publishers as more than twice as worthwhile or valuable as a protagonist than a person from a marginalised community.

All of the research reviewed thus far indicates the variable representations of diversity in children's literature, with the overarching theme of lack of representation of minoritised,

marginalised, and non-dominant² communities. As discussed earlier, very little research has been done in the New Zealand context, and it is the aim of this article to present research which fills this gap by presenting critical content analysis of picturebooks published in Aotearoa New Zealand between 2021 and 2022.

3 Method

There were two aspects to our methodology. Firstly, choosing the picturebooks for analysis, and secondly, analysing the picturebooks.

3.1 Selecting the picturebooks

We aimed to collect all the picturebooks released in Aotearoa New Zealand with at least one of the creators residing in Aotearoa New Zealand, published between 1 August 2021 and 31 July 2022. Rather than asking for publishers to submit their books to us, as was done by the CLPE and the CCBC surveys, we used picturebooks submitted for Storylines Notable Book Awards, information supplied by New Zealand Book Awards for Children and Young Adults (NZCYA), other titles supplied for review to *Magpies. Talking about Books for Children*, and some new titles acquired by National Library of New Zealand's Schools Lending Collection. While this means there may be some books not included in this survey, the large majority have been included using this approach. This contrasts with CLPE and CBCC who ask publishers to submit/self-select books, which has the disadvantage of possible publisher bias, but is pragmatic given the number of the books published in the UK and the USA. An initial survey of the 90 Aotearoa New Zealand picturebooks analysed for the present study indicated that two-thirds of the picturebooks were written by women and 40% included rhyming text, while 60% were prose. There were no wordless picturebooks. The books included non-fiction picturebooks as well as works of fiction. Publishers ranged from mainstream publishers with multiple titles, to relatively new, small publishers with their first books, and several individuals self-publishing. Perhaps the most common element in the books from this year-long publishing period is the presence of animals, both real and imagined, native, exotic, and domestic; they are everywhere. There are many stories based on true events and well-being is also a common theme, along with a number of books focused on Te Ao Māori.

3.2 Analysing the picturebooks

Each book's contents were analysed using critical content analysis (Johnson et al., 2017) according to several factors (see below). Underpinning our analysis was Rosenblatt's Reader Response Theory (1982). This theory explains that the reader brings their own experience and identities to the text of children's literature to make meaning; and because each reader brings a different worldview and experiences with them, they will each make and take different meaning from each story. Thus, having a range of identities present in the cast of children's literature is extremely important for ensuring that all children can connect and respond to the literature they are being exposed to.

² While these terms do not all denote exactly the same communities, there is considerable overlap in that all refer to communities with less power in society.

In addition, we brought a critical lens to our work through a Critical Multicultural Analysis approach (Botelho & Rudman, 2009). This approach contends that all literature, including children's literature, are representations of power structures in the societies from which they are created, and so we explored who were represented as characters in the picturebooks analysed, and how this linked to the presence and power of these groups in Aotearoa New Zealand society.

Two of the authors categorised all 90 picturebooks and had discussions where there was any difference found. A third author analysed 20 of the 90 picturebooks as a sample to assess the veracity of the analysis. Raters were in agreement on all books in the sample.

The key variables analysed were:

- Primary character/s gender, skin colour, and ethnicity (where clearly indicated).
- Secondary character/s gender, skin colour, and ethnicity (where clearly indicated).
- Family type including the following categories: Single mum, single dad, nuclear, same-sex parents, extended (including grandparents and aunts and uncles), and childless.
- Disability was coded whenever it was indicated in illustrations or text. We acknowledge that this will not capture all disabilities.
- Language use was coded using an established categorisation: translingual, bi/multilingual, dual/multi version.

As we analysed the picturebooks in terms of these variables, some details in our analysis developed.

3.3 Primary and secondary characters' ethnicity, skin colour, and gender

When gathering statistics for primary and secondary characters (both for gender and ethnicity), if there were multiple primary or secondary characters, all were counted.

If there was illustrative or textual context indicating specific ethnicity (e.g. Māori or Samoan) this was categorised accordingly. However, in many instances, there was no indication of specific ethnicity, and in these cases, the researchers categorised characters as having white skin or brown skin. When the analysis was complete, the researchers noted that in many instances, they had indicated that skin colour was neither brown nor white, but somewhere in between, and so a third category was introduced called "mid-tone". When a character was not identified as Māori or Pacific or any other ethnicity, we could only indicate the colour of the skin.

After sharing an early stage of the research findings with colleagues, we received feedback about problems seen with the conflation of ethnicity and skin colour within one category. Following this, these were separated into two categories—skin colour, and ethnicity. Books where characters had been found to be of a specific ethnicity were re-examined and data regarding skin colour was gathered.

3.4 Family type

When analysing family type, there was a wide assortment, but it was not always clear exactly what the relationships within a family were. For example, *A Stick and a Stone* by Sarina Dickson and Hilary Jean Tapper features five adults and six children. There are visual similarities between some adults and children, but it is not possible to fully define what all the relationships are. Another book featured horses which were noted to have "family type relationships"; however, this was categorised to "not known" as again it was impossible to know the exact relationships.

3.5 Language

The categorisation system used was based on one established in earlier research of multilingual picturebooks (Daly et al., 2022). Translingual picturebooks used English with Māori words woven into the text; bilingual picturebooks had the text fully in both languages; dual-version picturebooks were physically separate books featuring the same illustrations and design, each in a different language. In our analysis, dual versions were recorded as one entry with both titles because the illustrations and design are the same. If they were to be analysed separately, this would skew the data by double-counting elements of diversity in the same story. Only books that were released within the 2021–2022 period have been counted. For example, *My Bum is So Cheeky* (McMillan & Kinnaird, 2022) has a te reo Māori version which came out after 2022, but the English version was published in 2022; so only, the English version was analysed. In total, there were five dual-version picturebooks in the books analysed. We noted that in the English version of the five dual-version picturebooks, Māori was woven into the text, making them translingual. Thus, we added a category for dual-language/translingual to record this.

4 Findings

In this section, we present our findings which are also presented visually in Figs. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, and 7. Percentages have been rounded which sometimes leads to totals of more than 100%.

4.1 Human/non-human

Non-human characters in the survey included animals, monsters, machines, mermaids, and toys. The use of non-human characters exceeds that of human characters (see Fig. 1). The proportions in primary characters were closest to an even split with 55% human to 45% non-human, with more difference in secondary characters (63%/37%), with the total comparison being 59% human and 41% non-human. One example of a picturebook in our corpus featuring non-human characters was *Celia Seagull and the Plastic Sea* by Nicole Miller, illustrated by Lily Uivel (Little Love, 2021).

4.2 Ethnicity

Primary and secondary character ethnicities were categorised where the story had significant supporting information to determine ethnicity. It was not gauged simply by physical appearance. For example, in *Ngā Mihi* by Georgia and Anna Latu, illustrated by Hector Borrero, Maui Studios (2022) the reader knows the main character is Māori because the author makes it clear with a family photograph at the back of the book and accompanying notes explain their Māori heritage, and the inclusion of their younger brother as a character in the book. This approach indicated that 20% of primary and 19% of secondary characters were of a specified ethnicity; the remainder were of unknown ethnicity (see Fig. 2). Our analysis showed that 19% of primary characters and 17% of secondary were Māori, with 1% primary Samoan characters and 1% each Samoan and European in secondary characters.

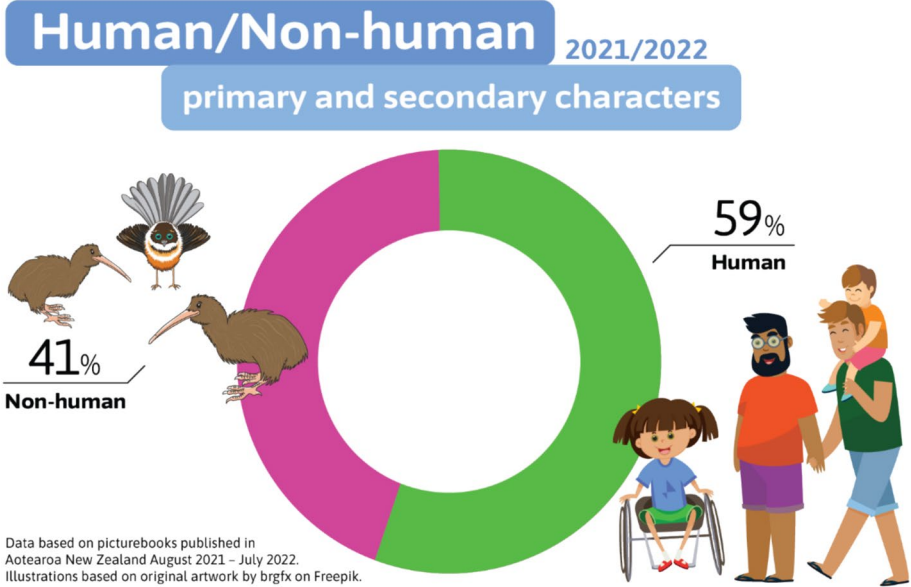


Fig. 1 Human/non-human primary and secondary characters

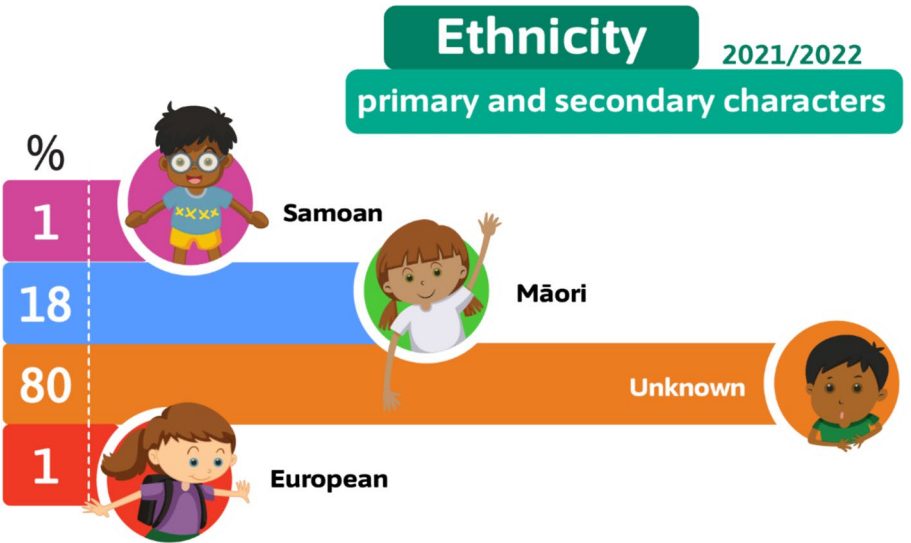


Fig. 2 Ethnicity of primary and secondary characters

4.3 Skin colour

In the picturebooks we examined for this research, we observed a wide range of skin colours which we have designated as white, mid-tone, or brown (see earlier explanation), using inter-rater checking to confirm these designations. The majority of characters have white skin (40% primary, 38% secondary), followed by characters with mid-tone skin colour (30% primary, 38% secondary), then characters with brown skin (30% primary, 25% secondary) (see Fig. 3). In *Messy-o-saurus* by Rachel Weston (Weston Books, 2022), for example, the raters agreed that the character's skin was mid-tone, and in *Crane Guy* by Sally Sutton, illustrated by Sarah Wilkins (Penguin Random House: Puffin, 2022) they agreed that the characters had brown skin. If we combine the statistics for characters of colour, they exceed those with white skin (primary 60% cf. 40%; secondary 63% cf. 38%).

4.4 Gender

Males were narrowly in the majority as characters in our picturebooks with 42% of primary and 40% of secondary characters being male. Females made up 38% of primary and 38% of secondary characters. Four percent and 2% of characters were genderless, leaving 16% of primary and 20% of secondary where gender was unknown (see Fig. 4).

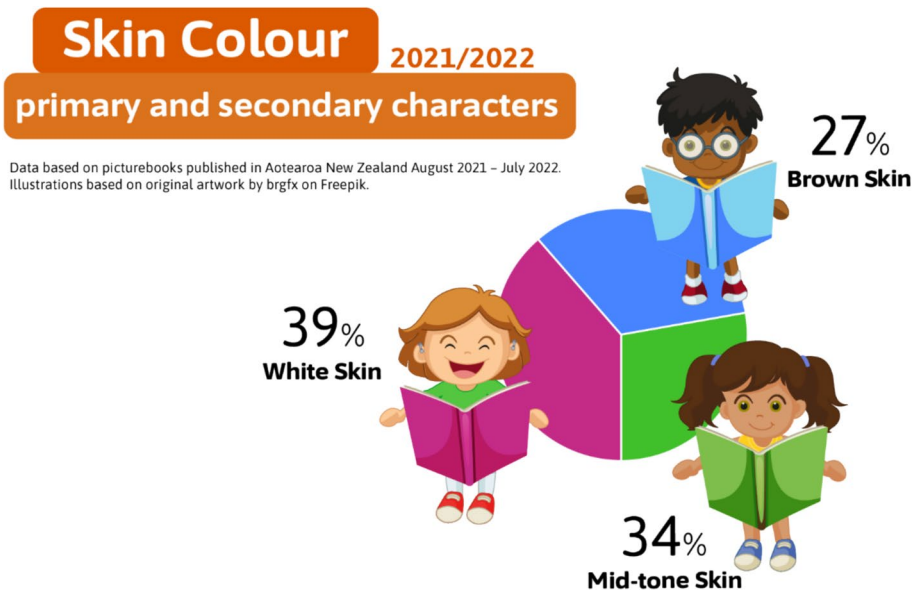


Fig. 3 Skin colour of primary and secondary characters

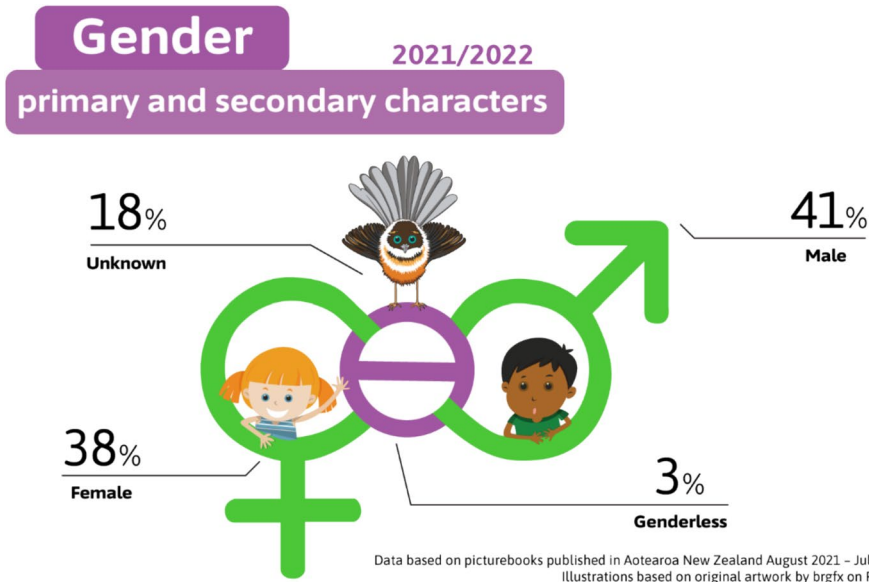


Fig. 4 Gender of primary and secondary characters

4.5 Family composition

Family composition could be identified in 75% of all books in this study (see Fig. 5). Percentages below relate to the total number of books:

- 20% were a nuclear family with mother and father (e.g. *Marvin Makes a Friend* by Nadia Lim, illustrated by Fifi Colston, Scholastic New Zealand, 2021).
- 11% had a single parent included (at least, no other parent was present or referred to in the story). It was more common to see a single mother (9%) than a single father (2%) (e.g. *Thank You* by Dana Winter, Beatnik, 2021).
- 1% featured two dads, and 0% two mums (e.g. *The Cats of Pāia Street/Ngā Ngeru* by Amiria Stirling, illustrated by Sarah Illingworth, Huia Publishers 2022).
- 13% had an extended family (e.g. *Grandpa's Siapo* by Dahlia Malaaleulu, illustrated by Darcy Solia. Mila's Books, 2022)
- 3% featured a grandparent (without other caregiver figures) (e.g. *Koro/Pops* by Gavin Bishop, Gecko Press, 2021).
- 15% featured a single individual, with 7% being female, 7% male, and 1% of unknown gender (e.g. *Good for You, Helen Dew!* By Ali Foster & Catherine Cooper, illustrated by Nikki Slade-Robinson. Duck Creek Press, 2021).
- 2% centred on children alone with no caregiver (e.g. *Muki & Pickles* by Ross Murray. Beatnik, 2021).

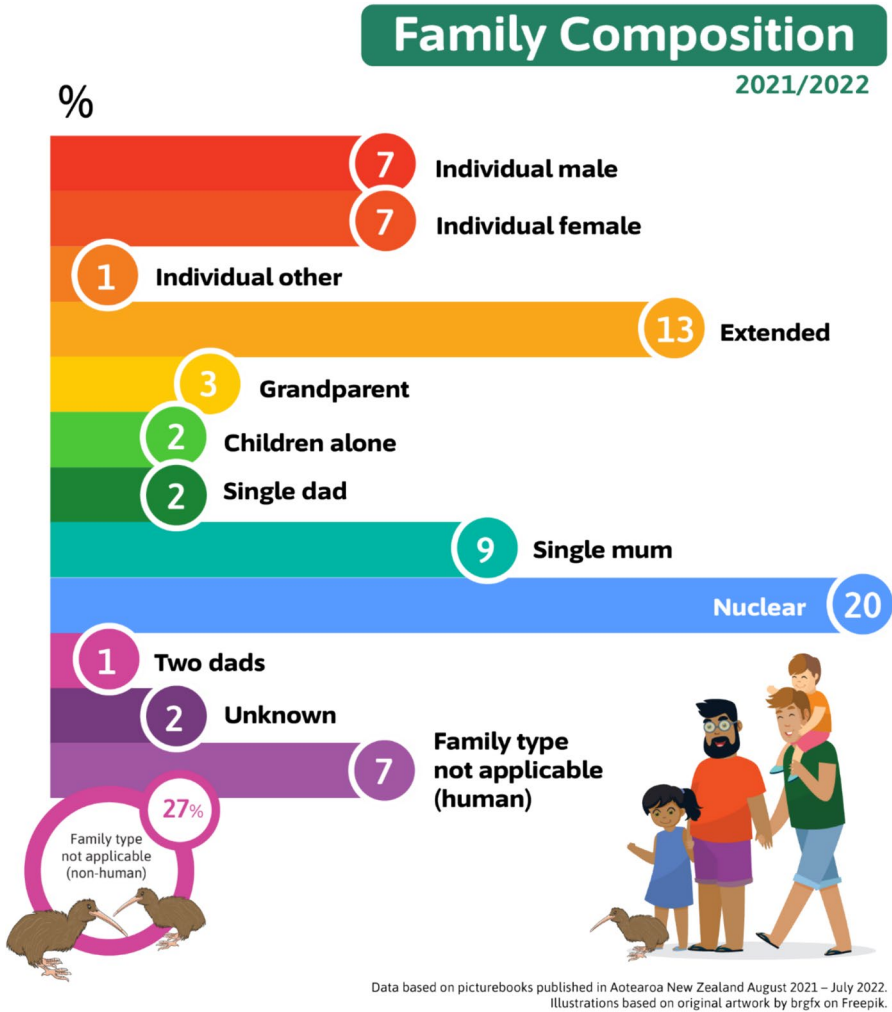


Fig. 5 Family composition

4.6 Disability

Disability was identified in 19% of all books analysed (see Fig. 6). The most common was visual disability with 9% of books including someone wearing glasses, for example in *Daniel's Matariki Feast* by Rebecca Beyer, illustrated by Christine Ross (Duck Creek Press, 2022). Four percent of the books had characters in wheelchairs; another 4% had characters with injuries involving bandages, and a further 4% of the books included people with a missing limb, for example the main character in *The Rhyming Pirate* by Glenn Jones (Little Love, 2021). One percent of the picturebooks included characters with a leg brace; 1% with a walking stick; 1% with hearing aids; 1% with crutches and 1% featured a character with dementia.

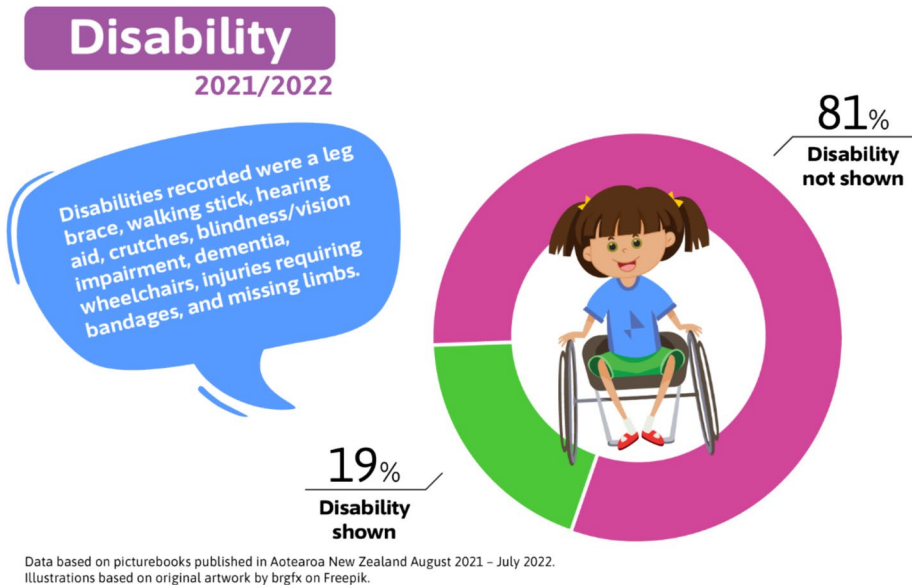


Fig. 6 Visibility of disability in text and illustrations

4.7 Languages

Sixty-two percent of our picturebooks were in a single language: the majority in English and just one book exclusively in te reo Māori (see Fig. 7). There were a range of other picturebooks featuring more than one language within the same book:

- 7% were bilingual, with their text fully in te reo Māori and English throughout the book (e.g. *Nanny Mihi's Medicine / Ngā Rongoā a Nanny Mihi* by Melanie Drewery, illustrated by Suzanne Simpson, te reo Māori by Kanapu Rangitauira. Oratia Books, 2022).
- 19% of books were translingual, with another language interspersed with English text.
 - 13% in English and te reo Māori
 - 1% in English and Samoan (e.g. *Grandpa's Siapo* by Dahlia Malaelulu, illustrated by Darcy Solia. Mila's Books, 2022);
 - 1% in English, te reo Māori, and New Zealand Sign Language (e.g. *Breathe with Me: Using Breath to Look After my Tinana, Hinengaro & Wairua* by Abel Junior Tagalevao, illustrated by Rebecca Gibbs, te reo Māori by Renee Mariner-Solomon. Cultural Hubb, 2022);
 - 1% in English, te reo Māori, Cook Islands Māori, and Mandarin (e.g. *Lost in the Museum* by Victoria Cleal, illustrated by Isobel Joy Te Aho-White, Te Papa Press, 2022); and
 - 1% included words in English, te reo Māori, Cook Islands Māori, Tahitian, Hawai'ian, Wurundjeri, Cherokee, Nahuatl, and Quechua (e.g. *Matariki Around the World: A Cluster of Stars, a Cluster of Stories* by Dr Rangī Matamua & Miriama Kamo, illustrated by Isobel Joy Te Aho-White. Scholastic New Zealand, 2022).

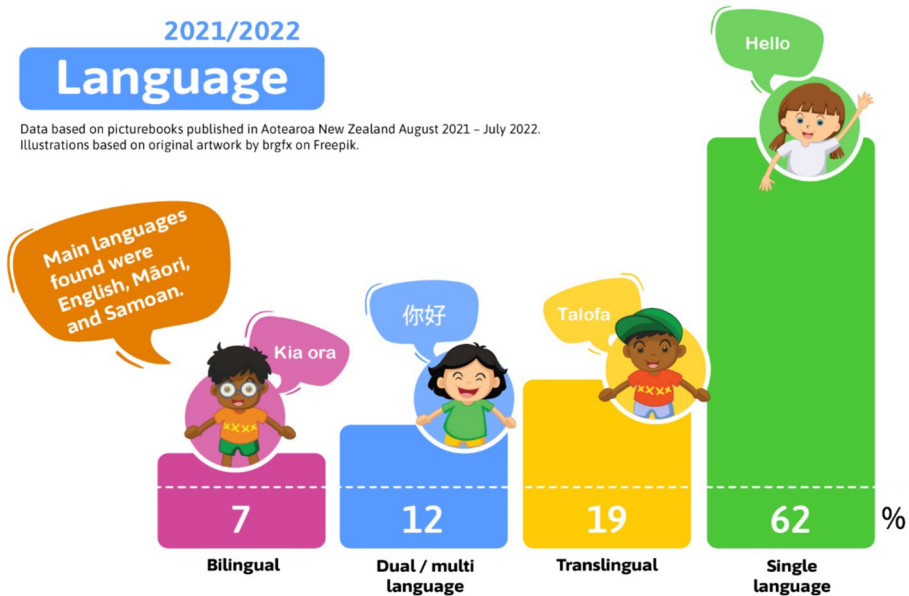


Fig. 7 Language use

5 Discussion

Given the importance of children's responses to literature in meaning-making (Rosenblatt, 1982), our knowledge of who is represented visually and textually in New Zealand picturebooks has important implications for readers' engagement with text, and thus literacy outcomes. Additionally, Critical Multicultural Analysis (Botelho & Rudman, 2009) supports our analysis of how power structures are being represented in Aotearoa New Zealand children's picturebooks. There are several key themes which emerge from this analysis of diversity in picturebooks published in Aotearoa in 2021–2022 in answer to our key research question of "what diversity exists in the image and text of picturebooks published in Aotearoa New Zealand between 2021–2022, and how does this diversity relate to diversity in Aotearoa society?" Some of our findings concur with research concerning diversity in children's literature internationally, and others show distinct differences.

Firstly, the high proportion of non-human characters (44%), which we know, avoids identifying the characters' ethnicity and enables enough distance to discuss sometimes difficult subjects (Burke & Copenhaver, 2004). This approach is a popular one in children's literature and avoids the potential problem of some ethnicities not being represented visually and others being disproportionately visible; this may have a positive effect on literacy engagement with children in non-dominant communities. It does not, however, avoid representations of gender, due to the English convention (currently in change) of assigning a gender-specific pronoun, and our results for gender representation show male characters were more numerous than female, albeit only by a small margin (41% cf. 38%). There is also extensive discussion of the presence of race in children's books, even when characters are anthropomorphised (Nel, 2017).

In further reference to ethnic identity, our findings showed that about a fifth (17% of secondary and 19% of primary) of characters were identified as Māori, but a high percentage

of characters' ethnicity was unknown (80% for primary characters and 81% for secondary). The proportion of Māori characters is, in fact, very close to actual estimates of the number of the Aotearoa New Zealand population who identify as Māori which is 17.3% (Stats NZ, 2023). So, unlike much of the previous research showing an under-representation of people of colour (e.g. Adam & Barratt-Pugh, 2020; Caple & Tian, 2022; Booth & Lim, 2022), in fact picturebooks published in Aotearoa between 2021 and 2022 include a realistic proportion of characters who can be definitively identified as Māori due to context, both textual and illustrative.

While the proportion of Māori characters is in proportion to the numbers of people who identify as Māori in contemporary Aotearoa New Zealand society, findings from the present study show that there is a higher proportion of characters of colour than characters with white skin both for primary and secondary characters. This finding is in contrast to international work showing the under-representation of characters of colour (Cooperative Children's Book Center, 2023). We also note that, in contrast to findings from CLPE (2022) in Britain who found much more diversity among secondary characters than in primary characters, there were remarkably similar proportions of skin colour in primary and secondary characters. Thus, it appears that, in regard to picturebooks at least, Aotearoa New Zealand publishers are creating books which reflect more diversity in skin colour than in many other English-speaking contexts where such research has been conducted.

Turning from diversity of ethnicity and skin colour to gender, in line with the work of Koss (2015) in the USA, our findings show a somewhat equal representation of male and female characters in primary (males 42% females 38%) and secondary (males 52%, female 38%) character roles in Aotearoa New Zealand picturebooks published in 2021–2022, albeit with more male characters in both cases. The fact that neither set of statistics adds to 100% indicates that there are a small proportion of characters whose gender is not identified by illustration, context, or pronoun use.

Earlier work on family diversity in children's literature in several settings, including Aotearoa New Zealand, has shown some diversity of family types (Daly, 2015), but a distinct lack of representation of families with same-sex parents (Hardie, 2014; Lo, 2019; Taylor, 2022). Findings in the present study largely replicate these studies. The most frequent family group represented in the picturebooks is the nuclear family (20%), but single-parent families (11%) and extended families (13%) are also represented. Having said that, a quarter of the families are not identified as being in a particular category (single parent, two parent, same-sex, extended). Overall, our findings from the analysis of picturebooks published in Aotearoa New Zealand show a variety of family types, with the exception of same-sex parented families. Given the power picturebooks featuring same-sex families can have in ensuring all children see their families represented in the picturebooks shared with them (Cloughessy & Waniganayake, 2019; Kelly, 2012), this lack of representation is of concern for children whose families are under-represented, perhaps negatively affecting their motivation to engage with this highly influential format of children's literature, the picturebook.

Turning from diversity in representations of family types to representations of disability, our analysis of the picturebooks published between 2021 and 2022 in Aotearoa New Zealand, reveals that the picturebooks nearly all represent disabilities which feature aids (e.g. glasses, bandages, wheelchairs). This is very similar to existing research concerning representations of disability in children's literature (Hayden & Prince, 2023; Koss, 2015). Nearly one-fifth (19%) of the picturebooks analysed featured characters with disabilities, but only 1% of the 19% was a disability (dementia) which does not involve an aid such as

glasses, a wheelchair, or a hearing aid. We suggest that this probably reflects the ease of including a support device in illustrations.

And lastly, our analysis of the linguistic diversity of picturebooks published in Aotearoa between 2021 and 2022 revealed findings not previously examined in other contexts. Most of the picturebooks were monolingual English only, but 26% involved more than one language. This is a new finding with little to make a direct comparison with internationally. We suggest that the power of the linguistic diversity present in the 90 picturebooks analysed is that it introduces readers of English to other languages and allows readers whose home language is not English to see their languages represented in picturebooks (Daly & Limbrick, 2020). Such representation must both support literacy engagement and raise awareness of linguistic diversity among emergent readers who enjoy picturebooks alongside their caregivers. Picturebooks have also been shown to be powerful in supporting the revitalisation of Indigenous languages such as te reo Māori (Brouwer & Daly, 2022, 2023; Hadaway & Young, 2013).

Thus, in response to our research question, “what diversity exists in the image and text of picturebooks published in Aotearoa New Zealand between 2021–2022, and how does this diversity relate to diversity in Aotearoa society?”, our findings show that a great deal of diversity is present in the text and images of the 90 picturebooks published in Aotearoa between 2021 and 2022, and it is somewhat proportionate to the diversity present in the population. While our findings show strong diversity in terms of skin colour and ethnicity, less diversity is evident in family structures and disability. This has the potential to negatively impact engagement in literature by children and families from minoritised groups in terms of family structures and disability within our community.

6 Conclusion

As indicated in the literature review, there is a growing body of international research exploring diverse representations in children’s literature, but there is a paucity of such research in Aotearoa. Our study provides a platform for future work investigating representation in Aotearoa and other countries with Indigenous communities.

In conclusion, our research is the first analysis of representations of diversity in picturebooks (or any other formats of children’s literature) published in Aotearoa New Zealand. Many of the findings concerning gender and family structure sit alongside international research (Adam & Barratt-Pugh, 2020; Booth & Lim, 2022; Caple & Tian, 2022; Koss, 2015; CLPE, 2022; CCBC, 2022). The unique contribution of the present study is the extent to which Indigenous Māori characters are present in the picturebooks (in similar proportions to population statistics), the representation of characters of colour, and the linguistic diversity present in picturebooks published between 2021 and 2022 in Aotearoa New Zealand. The positives of these findings are somewhat diminished by the lack of representations of disability and same-sex parented families.

There is a great need for future research in many aspects of diversity in children’s literature in Aotearoa. Examination of how Indigeneity is indicated in the text and image of picturebooks could be further explored; further analysis of how gender and disability is reflected in image and text is also needed. Our survey has been a birds-eye view of diversity in the 90 picturebooks published between 2021 and 2022. Future work is needed to examine the minutiae of representation, and also to see if there are changes in representation in future publications.

Why does diversity in children's literature matter? It all comes back to the windows and mirrors of Bishop's (1990) metaphor. It matters because when children see themselves reflected in the literature they are reading, it provides a strong motivation for engagement, and a validation of identity and language; it matters because it provides a window view into the lives of others, promoting an understanding of one another, with all our similarities and differences.

Acknowledgements The authors would like to acknowledge the University of Waikato Summer Scholarship programme for their support of this research.

Funding Open Access funding enabled and organized by CAUL and its Member Institutions. This research was partially funded by the University of Waikato Summer Scholarship programme.

Declarations

Competing interests The authors declare no competing interests.

Open Access This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if changes were made. The images or other third party material in this article are included in the article's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the article's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this licence, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

References

- Adam, H., & Barratt-Pugh, C. (2020). The challenge of monoculturalism: What books are educators sharing with children and what messages do they send? *The Australian Educational Researcher*, 47(5), 815–836.
- Adam, H., Murphy, S., Urquhart, Y., & Ahmed, K. (2024). Where are the diverse families in Australian children's literature? Impacts and consideration for language and literacy in the early years. *Education Sciences*, 14(9), 1006.
- Bishop, R. S. (1990). Windows and mirrors: Children's books and parallel cultures. In *California State University reading conference: 14th annual conference proceedings* (pp. 3–12).
- Bishop, R. S. (2012). Reflections on the development of African American children's literature. *Journal of Children's Literature*, 38(2), 5.
- Booth, E., & Lim, R. (2022). The picture of privilege: Examining the lack of diverse characters in 2018 Australian children's picture books. *Jeunesse: Young People, Texts, Cultures*, 14(1), 65–83.
- Botelho, M. J., & Rudman, M. K. (2009). *Critical multicultural analysis*. Routledge.
- Brouwer, J., & Daly, N. (2022). Te Puna Pukapuka Pikitia: Picturebooks as a medium for supporting development of Te Reo Rangatira with kindergarten whānau. *Early Childhood Folio*, 26(1), 10–15.
- Brouwer, J., & Daly, N. (2023). Reo Rua Pukapuka Pikitia: Whānau drawing on their community cultural wealth to create strategies for developing Te Reo Rangatira. *Early Education*, 68, 4–11.
- Burke, C. L., & Copenhaver, J. G. (2004). Animals as people in children's literature. *Language Arts*, 81(3), 205–213.
- Caple, H., & Tian, P. (2022). I see you. Do you see me? Investigating the representation of diversity in prize winning Australian early childhood picture books. *The Australian Educational Researcher*, 49(1), 175–191.
- Cloughessy, K., & Waniganayake, M. (2019). Lesbian parents' perceptions of children's picture books featuring same-sex parented families. *Early Years*, 39(2), 118–131. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09575146.2017.1342225>
- Centre for Literacy in Primary Education (2022). CLPE reflecting realities: Survey of ethnic representation within UK children's literature 2017–2022. <https://clpe.org.uk/research/clpe-survey-ethnic-representation-within-uk-childrens-literature-2017-2022-november-2022>

- Cooperative Children's Book Center. (2002). *CCBC diversity statistics*. <https://ccbc.education.wisc.edu/literature-resources/ccbc-diversity-statistics/>
- Cooperative Children's Book Center (CCBC) (2023). Books by and/or about black, indigenous and people of color 2018. <https://ccbc.education.wisc.edu/literature-resources/ccbc-diversity-statistics/books-by-and-or-about-poc-2018/>. Accessed Jul 2023.
- Daly, N. (2015). Family composition as depicted in the New Zealand Picture Book Collection. *Early Childhood Folio*, 19(2), 1–13.
- Daly, N. (2016). Dual language picturebooks in Māori and English. *Bookbird. A Journal of International Children's Literature*, 54(3), 10–17
- Daly, N. (2019). The linguistic landscape of multilingual picturebooks. *Linguistic Landscape. an International Journal*, 5(3), 281–301.
- Daly, N., Kleker, D., & Short, K. (2022). Children as language inquirers: Developing working theories through acts of inquiry. *Language and Education*. <https://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/QMIA3XBKMN5KBRMMQK2G/full?target=10.1080/09500782.2021.2020810>
- Daly, N., & Limbrick, L. (2020). The joy of having a book in your own language: Home language books in a refugee education centre. *Education Sciences*, 10, 250. <https://www.mdpi.com/2227-7102/10/9/250>
- Ellis, G. (2019). Social model thinking about disability through picturebooks in Primary English. *CLELE Journal*, 7(2), 61–78.
- Hadaway, N. L., & Young, T. A. (2013). Celebrating and revitalizing language: Indigenous bilingual children's books. *Bookbird: A Journal of International Children's Literature*, 51(3), 56–68.
- Hardie, A. (2014). Picture books with same-sex parented families: Unintentional censorship. *The International Journal of Learner Diversities and Identities*, 20(1), 45–52.
- Hayden, H. E., & Prince, A. M. (2023). Disrupting ableism: Strengths-based representations of disability in children's picture books. *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy*, 23(2), 236–261.
- Hedberg, L., Venzo, P., & Young, H. (2022). Mums, dads and the kids: Representations of rainbow families in children's picture books. *Journal of LGBT Youth*, 19(2), 198–216.
- Jackson, S., & Gee, S. (2005). 'Look Janet', 'No you look John': Constructions of gender in early school reader illustrations across 50 years. *Gender and Education*, 17(2), 115–128. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0954025042000301410>
- Johnson, H., Mathis, J., & Short, K. G. (2017). *Critical content analysis of children's and young adult literature* (p. 28). Routledge.
- Kalogirou, T., López, X. M., & Millán-Scheiding, C. (2020). Feminism and gender in literary education. *Journal of Literary Education*, (3), 1–9.
- Kelly, J. (2012). Two daddy tigers and a baby tiger: Promoting understandings about same gender parented families using picture books. *Early Years*, 32(3), 288–300.
- Kleekamp, M. C., & Zapata, A. (2019). Interrogating depictions of disability in children's picturebooks. *The Reading Teacher*, 72(5), 589–597.
- Koss, M. D. (2015). Diversity in contemporary picturebooks: A content analysis. *Journal of Children's Literature*, 41(1), 32–42.
- Lo, R. S. (2019). Resisting gentle bias: A critical content analysis of family diversity in picturebooks. *Journal of Children's Literature*, 45(2), 16–30.
- Naqvi, R., McKeough, A., Thorne, K., & Pfitscher, C. (2013). Dual-language books as an emergent-literacy resource: Culturally and linguistically responsive teaching and learning. *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy*, 13(4), 501–528. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468798412442886>
- Nel, P. (2017). *Was the cat in the hat black?: The hidden racism of children's literature, and the need for diverse books*. Oxford University Press.
- Pennell, A. E., Wollak, B., & Koppenhaver, D. A. (2018). Respectful representations of disability in picture books. *The Reading Teacher*, 71(4), 411–419.
- Purcell, J. M. (2018). 'I know that you think that I feel...': Theory of mind, empathy and picture books. In N. Daly and L. Limbrick (eds). *Children's Literature in a Multiliterate World* (pp. 76–94). Trentham Books.
- Rosenblatt, L. M. (1982). The literary transaction: Evocation and response. *Theory into Practice*, 21(4), 268–277.
- Sharama, M. A. D. H. U. (2017). Animals as humans: Psychological reasons of using animal characters in children's books. *Research Journal of English Language and Literature*, 5(4), 215–220.
- Short, K. G. & Cueto, D. (2022). *Essentials of children's literature*. Pearson Education.
- Smith, H., & Pryor, L. (2022). Addressing the hegemony of English through picture books in Gamilaraay. *Waikato Journal of Education*, 27(1), 5–20.
- Stats NZ (2023). Māori population estimates: 30 June 2023. <https://www.stats.govt.nz/information-releases/maori-population-estimates-at-30-june-2023/#:~:text=New%20Zealand's%20estimated%20M%C4>

- [81ori%20ethnic,453%2C900%20females%20identifying%20as%20M%C4%81ori](#). Accessed 20 Nov 2023.
- Taylor, C. (2022). Representations of the LGBTQIA+ community in New Zealand award-winning and finalist children's literature published between 1997–2021. Masters dissertation University of Waikato.
- Tondreau, A., & Rabinowitz, L. (2021). Analyzing representations of individuals with disabilities in picture books. *The Reading Teacher*, 75(1), 61–71.
- Vanderschantz, N., & Daly, N. (2023). The implications of typographic design in bilingual picturebooks for hierarchies. *Journal of Visual Literacy*, 42(1), 48–66.
- Vanderschantz, N., Daly, N., & San, V. (2022). Typographic design in Māori-English bilingual picture-books: Some educational implications. *Children's Literature in English language Education* (pp. 14–40).
- You, C. (2021). The necessity of an anthropomorphic approach to children's literature. *Children's Literature in Education*, 52(2), 183–199.
- Zaidi, R. (2020). Dual-language books: Enhancing engagement and language awareness. *Journal of Literacy Research*, 52(3), 269–292.

Children's books cited

- Beyer, R., & Ross, C. (2022). *Daniel's Matariki Feast*. Duck Creek Press.
- Bishop, G. (2021). *Koro/Pops*. Gecko Press.
- Cleal, V., & Te Aho-White, I. (2022). *Lost in the Museum*. Te Papa Press.
- Drewery, M., Simpson, S., & Rangitauria, K. (2022). *Nanny Mihi's Medicine/ Ngā Rongoā a Nanny Mihi*. Oratia Books.
- Foster, A., Cooper, C., & Slade-Robinson, N. (2021). *Good for You, Helen Dew!*. Duck Creek Press.
- Jones, G. (2021). *The Rhyming Pirate*. Little Love.
- Latu, G., & Latu, A. (2022). *Ngā Mihi*. Maui Studios.
- Lim, N., & Colston, F. (2021). *Marvin Makes a Friend*. Scholastic New Zealand.
- Malaeulu, D., & Solia, D. (2022). *Grandpa's Siapo*. Mila's Books.
- Matamua, Dr R., Kamo, M. & Te Aho-White, I. (2022). *Matariki Around the World: A Cluster of Stars, a Cluster of Stories*. Scholastic New Zealand.
- McMillan, D., & Kinnaird, R. (2022). *My Bum is So Cheeky*. Oratia Books.
- Miller, M., & Uivel, L. (2021). *Celia Seagull and the Plastic Sea*. Little Love.
- Murray, R. (2021). *Muki & Pickles*. Beatnik.
- Stirling, A., & Illingworth, S. (2022). *The Cats of Pāia Street / Ngā Ngeru*. Huia Publishers.
- Sutton, S., & Wilkins, S. (2022). *Crane Guy*. Puffin: Penguin Random House.
- Tutagalevao, A.J., Gibbs, R., & Mariner-Solomon, R. (2022). *Breathe with Me: Using Breath to Look After my Tinana, Hinengaro & Wairua*. Cultural Hubb.
- Weston, R., & Tulloch, S. (2022). *Messy-o-saurus*. (Weston Books)
- Winter, D. (2021). *Thank You*. Beatnik.

Publisher's Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.