

# Beyond a Single Identity

## Family-Themed Picture Books Depicting Intersecting Identities

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**P**icture books have been described as written artifacts that convey cultural and social messages.<sup>1</sup> The messages shown in picture books can perpetuate societal problems by excluding diverse groups or promoting stereotypes.

On the other hand, inclusive children's literature can combat socialized forms of oppression.<sup>2</sup> Sharing inclusive children's literature from an early age can promote positive identity development. Messages in these texts normalize the diversity of experiences and identities that may be reflected in students' lives or the experiences of their peers. Diverse portrayals, particularly those depicting individuals at intersections of multiple marginalized groups, are underrepresented in children's texts. Diverse students negotiate the complex implications (e.g., cultural, historical, social, and political) of having multiple identity markers.<sup>3</sup>

Therefore, our libraries must be representative of these rich, complex, and layered identities. These books can address intersectional concepts for students of all age levels, introducing these topics in ways that are relatable and appropriate.

Because children's lives revolve around their family unit, picture books often tell stories depicting the centrality of families. These texts can send messages about the way families are and the way they are "supposed to be."<sup>4</sup>

Although few studies focus specifically on family-themed picture books, the available literature reveals a lack of intersectional identities represented.<sup>5</sup> When families with non-dominant identities are focused on, often whiteness and upper-class identities are privileged.<sup>6</sup>

We have seen this theme in our own work with teacher candidates' analysis of family-themed picture books. For about five years, Lisa Czirr, a State University at New York (SUNY) Cortland Memorial Library teaching librarian, along with teaching faculty, joined forces to support our early childhood and elementary teacher candidates' critical analysis of the portrayal of families in picture books. From the beginning, our candidates noted a lack of diverse intersectional themes. Reflecting on this and considering recent social movements (e.g., Me Too movement, Black Lives



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Matter, or the refugee crisis and response) as well as resulting backlash (e.g., anti-trans policies, book banning), we decided to systematically examine more recently published picture books.

Using an intersectionality framework, we used a content analysis method to analyze more than one hundred recent children's books to identify what identities are represented and analyze how those identities are portrayed. In this article, we provide an overview of our methodology, the predominant findings from the analysis, and a bibliography that highlights texts depicting the richness of families embodying diverse and intersecting identities.

## Theoretical Lens

We acknowledge that our positionalities affected the research process. Collectively, we share a lens of critical literacy. We celebrate multiculturalism and advocate for social justice in our communities, libraries, and classrooms. As we examined texts, our own identities, family experiences, and values influenced our interpretation and analysis of each family-themed story. Among the four authors, we differ in our identities related to race, culture, language backgrounds, and family structure.

We used an intersectionality framework to determine what identity markers (e.g., race, class, sexual orientation, language, culture, ability, and gender) are represented and how they are portrayed in the texts. Intersectionality suggests that we should think of each aspect of a person's identity as linked to fully understand a person's lived experiences and shared experiences. Moreover, a paradigm of intersectionality can be used to understand how injustice and inequality occur on a multidimensional basis.<sup>7</sup> This recognizes that issues of oppression that deal with race, class, and gender are all interconnected.

According to Lester, "Intersectionality acknowledges that various systems of oppression are interdependent, and that many people experience multiple forms of oppression simultaneously that cannot be fully understood by examining each form of oppression singularly."<sup>8</sup> Importantly, it is too simplistic to reduce an individual to a single aspect of their identity.

Similar to individuals, families themselves are also reflective of complexities potentially combining multiple intersectional aspects. These complex and dynamic intersectional families can thereby encounter oppression in a multitude of ways. For example, children living in an alternative family arrangement (e.g., single parents, divorced, living with grandparents) will often confront a label of "broken" while children of same-sex parents

are judged for not being from "traditional" families.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, we used intersectionality as the framework to identify and analyze the depictions of diverse identity markers in family-themed books.

## Search Techniques

A specialized collection within Memorial Library, the Teaching Materials Center (TMC) at SUNY Cortland, includes preK-12 books and other classroom materials that preservice teachers can borrow. The collection development goals of the TMC reflect the current curricula and overall needs of the School of Education. Among these priorities is a strong focus on books with themes related to diversity, equity, and inclusion. As a result of this focus, recently published picture books with culturally diverse topics are generally well-represented in the collection. All books were therefore chosen from within the TMC for ease of access, along with the availability of relevant diverse topics.

With a research team of teacher candidates, we conducted a critical content analysis for inclusion of intersectional identities in over one hundred family-themed picture books published between 2016 and 2021. Each researcher analyzed fifteen books using a checklist, before we met to debrief on our texts. Books were selected for this project based on specific criteria, including publication date, format, and content.

We conducted searches within the library's discovery service, ONEsearch (Primo), using specific parameters to limit to books meeting these criteria. To ensure that books were current, the publication date was set to 2016 to the present. This data range was chosen specifically to determine whether the availability of intersectional family-themed books had changed relative to our previous work and findings. The format was also limited to picture books within the TMC's Easy collection, to likewise maintain consistency with the previous project.

To ensure that family was the main focus of the books rather than a stray keyword in the record, the search filter of "Subject contains phrase: Families" was selected. An additional search into other TMC areas containing picture books was also conducted, limiting to a subject of "picture books" within the TMC's Nonfiction, New, and Biography collections. The initial result lists that were generated from these searches were downloaded in spreadsheet format. Certain obviously irrelevant titles were eliminated immediately based on not meeting the criteria: publication date out of scope (the "creation date" in the system caused them to appear), other language (Spanish), content (if very obviously

not applicable), and duplicates. The resulting list of 121 books was then divided between researchers for further analysis.

Additional books not on these main lists were occasionally added when applicable, whether from additional searches within classes, or otherwise encountering them outside of the project. For instance, other family-oriented or diversity-related terms were often useful for students working on projects for the family and community course. Occasionally, one of the researchers of this project would serendipitously notice a book that did not appear in the initial search. It is always essential to be aware that search records may be limited. For instance, although a book might not contain the word “families” in its subject, a family might still feature prominently enough within the story to be relevant. Additionally, a book’s record might include terms for more specific details, such as family members (mother, father, sibling, etc.), but the broad word “family” might not appear at all. For this reason, comprehensive searches should be strategically built, to thoroughly explore all possible books that are available on a topic.

## Methodology

Each researcher individually examined the books from their list, further eliminating strongly irrelevant books (animal characters, no family present, etc.). Any relevant books were then more closely examined through a critical content lens to observe specific identity-themed elements. Critical content analysis is a research method for analyzing texts as written artifacts to describe and interpret their messages. To conduct an examination of what Beach et al. say reflects “the critical in *critical* content analysis,”<sup>10</sup> we used an intersectionality framework. This allowed our analysis to uncover biases, consider power dynamics, and examine inequalities within the stories. Both text and illustrations were examined, as often one or both of these elements would provide a clue to the main characters’ identity. Each researcher used a chart to organize their findings, listing examples of direct evidence from the text and illustrations of the books. The different elements examined included race, gender, culture, language, sexual orientation, disability, and class. A section for “other categories” was also included, to capture any further identities not already represented, as well as a “notes” field for additional comments. This chart served as a checklist to help individuals to summarize and organize their findings so that they could be better compiled and articulated to the research team.

Along with what was depicted, evaluators considered *how* these items were represented to determine whether and how themes of intersectionality impacted the characters and plot of the books. A particular identity might be present, but not a main focus of the plot. For instance, although a Black female might experience oppression in different ways due to her gender, race, or both of these aspects, a character’s gender-based experience might not factor into the story being told in the book. However, the reader encountering this story would still visually see both of these aspects of their identity represented on the page. Throughout the analysis, evaluators considered how closely these intersecting identities related to the plot, if at all. Even if it was not central

to the plot, they still made note of the differing identities as they appeared. After the analysis, the evaluators determined whether intersectionality was actually represented in the book, answering the question as *yes*, *no*, or *unsure*.

A group discussion allowed for the researchers to share findings about books that clearly contained intersectionality, and further consider the books labeled as “unsure.” This meeting was essential to clarify questions, and better determine how to classify the uncertain books. For instance, many researchers noticed that some books included multiple categories of identity, but not within a single character’s experience. Even in this situation, these books still had a variety of identities represented that a reader could easily observe, which is still a positive finding. They would still count as strong examples of diverse literature. However, the group determined that these were not true intersectional books, since the identities were spread out between many individuals and not closely connected. True intersectionality occurs when the overlapping categories of identity impact a specific individual and their family’s lived experience.

## Limitations

This paper has potential limitation with an inability to generalize the findings when addressing the values of intersectionality in children’s picture books. Although a thorough search was conducted to locate a wide variety of books, the study was limited to books that were available within the TMC; the findings do not represent all of the potentially available picture books that have been published. As previously mentioned, catalog records also do not always necessarily supply all of the relevant details about a book, especially when intersectionality is not embedded within the plot. Varying search terms and strategies were used to mitigate this limitation, but it is possible that some titles may have been missed due to this lack in catalog information. This study also focused specifically on picture books and the topic of families, so it does not account for intersectional children’s literature in other formats featuring additional themes. Identifying books as intersectional additionally proved to be occasionally challenging, with ambiguity in some titles leading to uncertainty about whether they could be included. Some of the picture books that were read by the authors were excluded from this paper because they accentuated one or two characteristics in the storyline despite the books portraying socially significant and critical identities.

## Findings

Our results were encouraging, with several titles that included intersectional identities, although the exact representation varied, from intersectional themes that were central to the plot and often depicted character struggles, to themes that were implied within illustrations, but had little bearing on the storyline. Both multiple and single experience books were identified throughout the process; although both have importance, the latter represents a true depiction of an individual’s multifaceted experience. Many

## Example Books: Varying Identities and Levels of Intersectionality Depictions

Title and Author	Intersectionality
Arnold, Elana K. <i>What Riley Wore.</i>	Identities: gender and race Level of Depiction: Race is in the illustrations only, gender identity is central to the plot Riley is shy at school and decides to wear a bunny suit. Each day Riley wears something different to school, to the dentist, to the hardware store, etc. Riley is accepted by friends, family, teachers, and members of the community no matter the outfit being worn.
Avingaq, Susan, and Maren Vsetula. <i>The Pencil.</i>	Identities: culture/language, race, and gender Level of Depiction: Culture and gender roles are central to the plot The author, Avingaq, shares childhood memories of growing up in an iglu. A large wooden box kept things safe, such as tools for cleaning skins, needles and snaw for sewing and even a pencil! One day Anaana, Inuktitut word for 'mother,' temporarily leaves to help another family. Ataata, Inuktitut for 'father,' stays home with the children. Does Anaana let the children use the pencil?
de Anda, Diane. <i>Mango Moon: When Deportation Divides a Family.</i>	Identities: race, culture, socioeconomic status, and mental health status Level of Depiction: Multiple aspects all factor into the plot. Maricela and her family live together in the United States. Maricela and her brother attend school while her Mama and Papi work. When Maricela's Papi is taken away, Mama works two jobs but cannot support Maricela and her brother, so they must move in with their relatives. At first Maricela is happy to live with them, but when she faces bullying at school, she becomes anxious.
Ehrenberg, Pamela. <i>Queen of the Hanukkah Dosas.</i>	Identities: culture, race, and religion Level of Depiction: Culture and religion factor into the plot, race is depicted in the illustrations Explains traditions in celebration of Hanukkah and making of dosas as well as singing the Dreidel song and attending Hebrew school. The main character buys food from a Little Indian Market but it is an unlikely visit for other Hebrew families: "I am very sure I have never seen anyone from the Hebrew school at the Indian shop." The parents are a mixed-race couple from different cultural backgrounds.
Gale, Heather. <i>Ho'onani: Hula Warrior.</i>	Identities: culture and gender Level of Depiction: Culture and gender are both central to the plot At school, Ho'onani Kamai takes on a role that is normally for males. Her sister, Kani, does not want Ho'onani Kamai to break the culture's tradition. Her parents are very accepting and proud of her. Will Kani accept her sister for who she is? (Note: the story uses female pronouns for Ho'onani).
Javaherbin, Mina. <i>My Grandma and Me.</i>	Identities: culture, religion, gender, and multiple generations Level of Depiction: Multiple aspects all factor into the plot. Gender in relation to religion/culture is mainly in the illustrations. Grandmother and granddaughter share their daily activities in Iran. Morning prayers were said, a basket filled with bread sent up to their window with ropes, visiting their next-door neighbor, a grandmother and granddaughter too. A lovely story of different faiths (Muslims and Christians), friendship, and love.
Kirst, Seamus. <i>Papa, Daddy, and Riley.</i>	Identities: race and sexual orientation Level of Depiction: Sexual orientation factors into the plot, while race is only shown in illustrations. A classmate questions Riley's family structure by asking her which of her fathers is her "real" dad. Riley, a Black girl, ponders her similarities to both of her fathers, who are shown in the illustrations to be an interracial gay couple.
Maillard, Kevin Noble. <i>Fry Bread: A Native American Family Story.</i>	Identities: race, gender, socioeconomic status, and multiple generations Level of Depiction: Multiple aspects all factor into the plot. Features a mixed race, extended family of all different ages and skin tones. The author's notes provide a strong context for intersectional themes (poverty, race, gender, etc.). It's a thoroughly researched book, with many sources cited. The author is a cultural insider and discusses his own experiences.
Narh, Samuel. <i>Maisie's Scrapbook.</i>	Identities: culture and race Level of Depiction: Race and culture both factor into the plot. Mama is White and Dada is Non-white, different cultures are shared in the story. Mama plays violin, dada plays marimba, mama wears linen, dada wears Kente clothes, includes two different cultures to relate to.
Neal, DeShanna and Trinity Neal. <i>My Rainbow.</i>	Identities: gender, race, and disability Level of Depiction: Multiple aspects all factor into the plot. The main character Trinity is transgender, autistic, and Black. She worries that she must grow her hair long in order to look more feminine. Her mother is very accepting of her identity, and comes up with a creative solution to her problem.
Phi, Bao. <i>My Footprints.</i>	Identities: sexual orientation, race, gender, and culture Level of Depiction: Multiple aspects all factor into the plot. The main character is Vietnamese American and has two moms of different races. Her identity (race, gender, and her moms' orientation) is central to the storyline, and they use cultural stories to empower her.
Smith, Heather. <i>A Plan for Pops.</i>	Identities: sexual orientation, disability, and race Level of Depiction: Multiple aspects all factor into the plot. This story follows Lou and her gay grandparents, Pops and Grandad. Throughout the book they talk about what the three of them do every Saturday during the day when they get to see each other. In the middle of the story, Pops falls and has to be put in a wheelchair. Pops becomes very sad and does not leave his bed. To cheer him up Lou comes up with a contraption to try and get Pops out of bed. It works and Pops goes outside to see that they built him a ramp.
Wang, Andrea. <i>Watercress.</i>	Identities: culture, race, and multiple generations Level of Depiction: Multiple aspects all factor into the plot. Explains the traditions of eating together and using chopsticks in Chinese culture. There is cultural conflict over the type of food prepared and the shame of picking it at the roadside.

of the single-experience books portrayed the lives of characters who might belong to multiple marginalized identities, but grappled with only certain aspects within the book's narrative.

From our original list of 121 texts, we narrowed it down to 34 books that had intersectional identities or were marked unclear. After discussions, we ended with twenty-two titles for our bibliography of picture books depicting intersecting identities.

## Diverse, Not Intersecting, Identities Depicted Across Characters

Some books depict various aspects of identity that are dispersed among several characters who are not always necessarily family members. While these titles might still include excellent portrayals of marginalized people, they do not involve intersectional themes in their plotlines. For example, the book *Magnificent Homespun Brown* by Samara Cole Doyon is a poetic celebration of brown skin and African American culture.<sup>11</sup> Traditional cultural details appear in the illustrations in the form of activities, objects, and patterns.

The main character is a young African American girl, and throughout, she is shown engaged in various activities with her family. There are a few other underrepresented identities which appear briefly in illustrations, such as disability (a character identified as a brother is in a wheelchair), or religion (an unidentified character in a hijab). The young girl wearing the hijab additionally appears to have a skin condition, which may also be a factor in how she is treated by others. These various aspects of identity are only shown on the surface within illustrations, however, and are not part of the story's main focus on celebrating race. They are, however, still distinct depictions that serve as a reminder of the diversity that exists within the African American race that is the central focus of the book. There are many examples of books like this, which serve to broadly illustrate diversity: for instance, the book *Love Is Love* by Michael Genhart involves a similar portrayal of numerous families of differing racial appearances within the book's main LGBTQ+ focus.

## Intersectionality Depicted, But Only One Identity Central to Plot

In many other books, different facets of a characters' unique identity are present in a way that demonstrates intersecting identities, but that do not necessarily factor into the story. In these cases, these additional identities are often only depicted in the illustrations. For instance, in *Papa, Daddy, and Riley* by Seamus Kirst,<sup>12</sup> the main character Riley is a Black girl whose fathers are an interracial gay couple. The fathers' orientation plays a role within the story, as Riley experiences uncertainty about her family structure, when compared to that of her peers. She is unsure whether one or the other is her "real" father, and considers her similarities to each of her dads, finally concluding that both of them deserve the role. The fathers' identity as a gay couple particularly factors into the story, and, although race is evident in the characters'

appearances, in this case, it is not central to the overall story's message. The fathers are not treated any differently by other characters because of their race, but by their family structure. When Riley's friend comments on her family, she is entirely focused on the gender of her parents ("But which one is your *dad* dad? And where is your mom?"<sup>13</sup>)

Riley later notices that she resembles both of her fathers to some extent, and has similar traits to both that are independent of race. Riley's identity as female is likewise not a factor in this story, but could still make her character relatable to a child who is Black or female, in a family with mixed race or same gender parents, or some combination of any of these intersecting identities. The appearance of additional identities outside of the main theme of the book normalizes them by smoothly integrating them.

## Intersectionality Central to Plot and Characters

The strongest intersectionality examples portray main characters and their families in a multifaceted way. Along with showcasing more than one aspect of their identity, the characters themselves appear throughout their narrative as authentic individuals, with their own unique personalities and backgrounds. Two especially illustrative examples will be described in detail, but further examples are additionally listed in the bibliography.

One exceptional title is the book *My Rainbow*, by DeShanna Neal,<sup>14</sup> which features a main character, Trinity, a young transgender girl who is additionally Black and autistic. In this case, Trinity's varying identities each have an influence on the story overall. Trinity's main struggle is the length of her hair. She is concerned that as a transgender girl, she must grow it out to be better perceived outwardly as female. Her disability additionally makes her especially sensitive to textures ("She loved soft things, just like many kids with autism"<sup>15</sup>). In the illustrations, she has curly hair that is common to individuals of African descent. Both her disability and race play a role in her dilemma to look more feminine: "Trinity struggled to grow her hair long. She hated how it made her itchy when it was growing out."<sup>16</sup> The texture of her hair, as well as her unique reactions as a person with autism both impact her self-expression. Since she cannot grow her hair out, she worries that she is less "female" in her outward appearance and feels a pressure to conform that differs from cisgender girls. Her specific identities as Black and autistic tie into the story again later, as her brother and mother shop for wigs that do not touch Trinity's neck, and are authentic to her race ("She's a beautiful Black girl and her curly hair is *already* perfect"<sup>17</sup>). Ultimately, her mother creates a wig that perfectly captures Trinity's identities, without overwhelming her sense of touch (autism), and combines rainbow colors (broadly representing LGBTQ+) with a curly texture (Black).

Another outstanding example of intersectional themes including race, sexual orientation, and gender occurs in the book *My Footprints* by Bao Phi.<sup>18</sup> The main character, Thuy, is a girl of Asian descent, and is raised by her two mothers who are of different racial backgrounds. Although all three differing aspects are not



technically represented in one character, it is still tied closely to the family overall, and Thuy is consequently treated unfairly by her peers because of these multiple aspects.

At school, Thuy experiences bullying related to the various identities of her family. “I want to be the biggest and strongest and scariest monster . . . so that if kids at school make fun of me for having two moms, or tell me to go back to where I come from, or call me names, or bother me because I’m a girl, I can make them stop!”<sup>19</sup> Thuy’s mothers are very supportive of her, allowing her to express her feelings openly and in her own time. They also encourage her by sharing parts of their respective cultures, joining in her quest to determine which animal can best withstand her classmates’ behavior.

By the end, Thuy invents a new creature that “has black hair and black eyes, it’s both a boy and a girl, and its skin keeps changing color from black to light brown . . . not to hide, but because it always wants to be different shades of pretty.”<sup>20</sup> This uniquely imagined beast combines the names of all three family members, and also depicts both a fluidity and acceptance of their various identities, ultimately celebrating them. Instead of bowing to the social oppression that she encounters, Thuy finds a way to not only overcome it, but transform the situation into something affirming and positive.

## Discussion

Crucially, our findings show that intersectional identities are more apparent and prevalent in recent picture books than in those examined previously (see Lester’s 2014 study). For instance, *My Rainbow* depicts a combination of identities (a transgender person of color) that have historically not been well represented within children’s literature.<sup>21</sup> Although marginalized groups are still less frequently represented in picture books than the predominant white middle class demographic, intentional searching can lead to many excellent results. It is especially promising that the recently-published books we located tended to be culturally accurate and avoidant of stereotypes, regardless of whether they incorporated an intersectional portrayal. While it may initially seem like a high expectation to fit such complex identities within the short span of a picture book, our findings actually indicate that intersectional themes can be effectively incorporated into this format, and may appear to varying extents.

Some picture books (*My Rainbow*, *My Footprints*) may include intersectional themes as an essential part of the plot, while others might only depict some aspects within the illustrations (*Papa, Daddy, and Riley*). The former category of books, in which more than one aspect of identity is explored in a single individual or family are the most influential examples, because these portrayals are a more authentic reflection of real-world diversity.

Reaching beyond a single identity can result in more nuanced character depictions that avoid stereotypes, giving a voice to groups that are often silenced.<sup>22</sup> The inclusion of these multidimensional books in library and classroom collections sends a

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welcoming message to children, acknowledging that all family situations and structures are valid.

## Recommendations

Libraries should have a wide variety of picture books that represent diversity to support different identities. Based on our findings, we offer the following recommendations when selecting children’s literature that portrays intersectionality:

- **Choose picture books that reflect a diverse range of identities.** This has a noticeable impact on readers in establishing their own self-identities. A study carried out between 2003 and 2008 showed that limited representation of identities in picture books may lead to children having a negative perception of their own identities, competence, and self-worth.<sup>23</sup>
- **Identify editors and publishers who write picture books from an anti-bias stance.** Children’s book editor Laura Atkins argued that books are shaped by editors’ preferences, the culture of publishers, and targeted readers.<sup>24</sup> From a broader standpoint, publishers should try to hire diverse editors for increased representation of identities in the picture books.

- **Purchase and encourage selection of picture books that represent intersectionality.** The library should buy current books that embody intersectionality, which reflects human characteristics that are evolving. Additionally, librarians should promote and provide accessibility of the newly acquired book collection to everyone and especially to the instructors who train teacher candidates to use as educational tools.

## Conclusion

Picture books are an excellent vehicle for discussing complex topics with children in relatable and approachable ways. These stories can provide both mirrors and windows to topics related to identity and family and incorporate a nuanced view of intersectionality within a seemingly limited space.

While our analysis shows the prevalence of intersectional themes in children's books, intersectional titles can still be challenging

for teachers and librarians to locate and share. Even when librarians and teachers have access to these texts, some may not share them with children and families for fear of repercussions.

There can be challenges in locating these stories. For instance, many picture books may focus on only one particular aspect of character identities, and publisher summaries or catalog records may leave out details not relevant to the main plot. As a result, it is especially essential for teachers and librarians to seek out a wide range of diverse literature related to families and familiarize themselves with it. Educators should ultimately "consider what literature is available, which identities are being portrayed or excluded, and what explicit and implicit messages are conveyed."<sup>25</sup>

It is not enough to simply locate diverse books; their quality should also be considered, so that children receive a message that is both accurate and respectful of the complex and diverse identities in today's families. &

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