



# Gender-inclusive picture books in the classroom: A multimodal analysis of male subjective agencies

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## ARTICLE INFO

### Keywords:

Male protagonists  
Subjective agencies  
Multimodal analysis  
Gender-inclusive picture books  
Critical literacy  
Multimodal literacy

## ABSTRACT

This article examines the representations of agentive identity of non-normative male protagonists in children's picture books in relation to the affordances of this material for classroom activities. The analysis of protagonists' agencies in five picture books revealed varied instantiations of the New Age Boy masculinity schema. A multimodal transitivity analysis of protagonists' agentive roles yielded a profile of individual agentive identity. Protagonists' agentive roles when interacting with conflictive antagonist characters were compared with their agentive roles when not interacting with them. Variations were significantly associated with the social domains where the conflict took place (family, school, or community) as different ways of responding to social rejection. The findings of the study concerning the representation of protagonists' agencies provide young readers with models of action in situations of social rejection that can help make more informed decisions for guiding the selection of gender-diverse reading material and of classroom activities of critical thinking and multimodal literacy.

## 1. Introduction

Gender-inclusive picture books have the potential to contribute to the promotion of social justice and gender equity in the classroom by providing diverse representations of gender and gender roles. They can help to expand children's understanding of gender beyond traditional, binary, and stereotypical views, and promote more flexible and inclusive conceptualizations of gender identity and expression. When teachers choose gender-inclusive picture books for their students, they can create a learning environment that acknowledges and values diverse gender identities and expressions, promotes empathy and respect, and supports children in developing a positive sense of self. By including a range of gender identities and expressions in their reading materials, teachers can also help to create a more welcoming and inclusive classroom culture for students who may not conform to traditional gender norms.

Reading gender-inclusive picture books can also serve as a starting point for important conversations in the classroom about gender, diversity, and social justice. Teachers can use these books as a tool for engaging children in critical conversations about identity, power, and privilege, and to foster a greater understanding of the experiences of individuals from different backgrounds and identities. These books can also help to counteract the negative effects of gender stereotypes and

biases that are often reinforced in mainstream media. By providing children with a broader range of gender representations, teachers can help to challenge the narrow and limiting portrayals of gender roles and identities that are often perpetuated in popular culture.

Stemming from feminist theories of gender as a performative social construct (Butler, 1990), literature about non-conforming male protagonists in picture books has explored male gender identity from critical discourse approaches in which agency has been instrumental for interpreting characters who pull away from hegemonic masculinity within family, school and community (Herzog, 2009; Smulders, 2015). In addition, semiotic approaches have focussed on disclosing the visual and verbal resources employed by writers and illustrators to engage readers empathetically with protagonists by providing sound methodological basis (Martínez-Lirola, 2019; M., 2021; M., 2022; Martínez-Mateo, 2020; Moya-Guijarro, 2021; Moya-Guijarro & Martínez-Mateo, 2022, amongst others). A concern is also found in the literature about the pedagogical affordances of these books for improving social acceptance, such as neutralising bullying at school (Bickford, 2018; DePalma, 2016), which is a pervasive problem nowadays (Wang et al., 2015).

Social pressure and backlash for gender-variant male behaviour, such as playing with dolls, wearing dresses, liking mermaids or dancing

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<sup>#</sup> <https://ror.org/02f40zc51>

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.linged.2023.101242>

Received 4 June 2022; Received in revised form 3 September 2023; Accepted 5 September 2023

Available online 15 September 2023

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(Sciurba, 2017), are amply represented in picture books. Those representations are mainly scrutinised through content analyses in which the identity of the protagonist is interpellated in terms of his agency (or the lack thereof) and the conflictive relation with his peers, family or neighbours. Although attempts have been made to describe the resources employed by writers and illustrators to engage readers with those protagonists, accounts of what exactly protagonists' agencies import are not carried out systematically, which leaves the door open to subjective interpretations of their meaning (including what it means to be agentive) or to lack of agreement when discussing the potential affordances of these books.

In this paper a social semiotic method is presented for the systematic analysis of multimodal character representation. The multimodal resources employed by authors to construct protagonists' agencies are connected with different social contexts in which the representation of gender identity seems to be moulded by different kinds of conflict. The method has been applied to the analysis of the agencies of non-normative male protagonists featured in five gender-inclusive picture books: *William's Doll* (Zolotow & Pène du Bois, 1972), *Oliver Button Is a Sissy* (DePaola, 1979), *Willy the Champ* (Browne, 1985), *Ballerino Nate* (Bradley & Alley, 2006), and *10,000 Dresses* (Ewert & Ray, 2008) (featuring Bailey, a transgender character). The results obtained provide a more thorough description of these multimodal characters' agencies, and the systematicity of the method applied allows to compare their agentive profiles and so support comparisons and discussion on more objective grounds than in previous studies.

## 2. Literature review

This section presents an overview of the research supporting the study, which deals with the role that gender-inclusive picture books have in children's socialization and identity development, especially New Age Boy characters; the role of agency and conflict in the representation of male protagonists in picture books; and the affordances of multimodal gendered characters for fostering children's engagement with social issues.

### 2.1. The role of gender-inclusive picture books in children's socialization and identity development

Children connect with gender representations in literature as a basic component of their socialization and the modelling of their identity, and picture books often constitute their first contact with representations of family, school and other social formations in the aggregate of institutions that constitute a culture (Saltmarsh, 2007). Gender is a crucial dimension of children's socialisation (Kim, 2016; Taylor, 2003), and they recognize it as a fundamental aspect of their surroundings at an early age (Frawley, 2008; Martin & Ruble, 2010; Nielsen & Davies, 1997; Taylor, 2003; Tunks & McGee, 2006), also using it as a yardstick to compare themselves to the social model they have learned.

Gender-inclusive picture books can help children understand and look at the world through someone else's perspective, as if they were windows, in Bishop's (1990) terms, through which to look at a different reality from one's own, and also as mirrors conflating with readers' own lives, thus helping children develop empathy and critical literacy skills. However, whereas children who feel marginalised may experience a sense of belonging, some may also find it challenging to accept gender behaviours in characters that do not match their expectations about gender roles (Frawley, 2008; Kümmerling-Meibauer & Meibauer, 2022: 27). This can create opportunities for teachers to deepen children's comprehension of different perspectives (Sipe & McGuire, 2006), as narratives "model subject positions by depicting characters in relationship with other characters within social structures, and imply particular positions for readers to take up in relation to what is depicted" (McCallum & Stephens, 2011: 366).

However, the real challenge of gender-inclusive picture books is not

their topics, but how the reading is guided. The transferability of the information found in picture books depends on the conversations that adults have with children during reading (Strouse, Nyhout & Ganea, 2018: 11–12), as well as on the development of their critical and multimodal literacy skills. In the case of reading about gender inclusiveness, the specific features of the gendered characters represented will condition not only the selection (or not) of a specific reading material but also the guidance that teachers will prepare. The degree of familiarity with how gender is represented through literary characters is instrumental for reading material selection as well as for reading guidance, and as DePalma (2016: 840) contends, lack of agreement in the potential affordances of specific reading material can be symptomatic of the subjective nature of the book selection process but also reveals a need for improving criteria.

### 2.2. Non-normative gendered characters: under the umbrella of the New Age Boy

Gender-inclusive picture books often feature male characters that are represented in non-normative ways. Although there are various literary models or schemata found in literature to describe such non-conforming characters, in this paper they will be considered under the umbrella concept of the New Age Boy.

The concept of the New Age Boy masculinity schema was proposed by Stephens in 2002, and it represents a third category of masculinity that breaks the dichotomic view between the manly/masculine schema (Old Age Boy) and the unmanly/unmasculine character (Mommy's Boy). The New Age Boy blurs the borders between conventional masculinities and femininities (Bakar, 2013; Kazianka, 2021; Lowe, 2016), and through its literary representation as a character who feels "uncomfortable in his conventional gender role" (Nikolajeva, 2009a: 106), patriarchal ideologies are interrogated by reconstructing masculine subject positions through "the revelation of spiritual sensibilities" (Lowe, 2016: 224). The New Age Boy is characterised by agency, sensitivity, creativity, imagination, and other-regarding behaviour, and is different from the Old Age Boy, who is self-regarding and physically assertive (Stephens, 2002: 44).

Characters embodying the New Age Boy schema were first found by Stephens in young adult fiction, which plays a significant role in reflecting and refracting ideologies back into the culture in which they are read, and by doing so invoking models of being, doing and sensing the world which are sanctioned socially (Adam & Harper, 2021). However, while the New Age Boy schema is relevant to both young adult and children's literature, the representations of non-normative male protagonists are different in each case. Due to the crucial use of visual resources, intertwined with the verbal ones to make meaning multimodally in a unified way, as well as to the cognitive development of the target readership, picture books represent a unique way of shaping writers and illustrators' decisions of the resources they will employ in the narrative (Moya-Guijarro, 2014: 2).

Picture books often lack the depth necessary for constructing dynamic characters and developing them along the narration (Nikolajeva & Scott, 2006: 82); they result in a "concise narrative" (Tan, 2010) that relies heavily on visual depictions of the protagonist's facial expressions and actions rather than on elaborate verbal description. Yet, non-normative protagonists are still embodied in children's literature with an agentive identity, often constituted through endurance and resilience and which can change the way the social group rejects or appraises the protagonist (Elorza, 2020). Although the literature on gender-inclusive picture books for children is abundant (e.g. Adam & Harper, 2021; Bickford, 2018; Crisp & Hiller, 2011; Davis, 1984; Earles, 2017; Lee & Chin, 2019; Madalena & Ramos, 2022; Moya-Guijarro, 2019; Moya-Guijarro & Ventola, 2022; Smith, 1995; Sunderland, 2012; Wharton, 2005), specific work on character representation of non-conforming male protagonists is scarce and often approached from critical discourse and semiotic perspectives (Herzog, 2009; M.

Martínez-Lirola, 2021; M., 2022; Smulders, 2015), although pedagogical applicability is also a common focus of interest (e.g. DePalma, 2016; Earles, 2017; Kim, 2016; Scieurba, 2017).

Stemming mainly from Butler's (1990) feminist conceptualisation of gender as a performative social construct (rather than intrinsically linked to biological sex), critical discourse studies highlight the difficulties of characters for "becoming gendered" (Bickford, 2018) out of hegemonic rules of behaviour. Social pressure and backlash for gender non-conformity is exerted on boys from school peers as well as from parents (Herzog, 2009). Thus, the social domains where non-conforming male narratives are developed in picture books correspond to three specific social contexts, namely family, school, or society at large (to a lesser extent) as represented in the character's community.

Herzog (2009) delves into the connection between social gender conformity and deviation, as manifest in 1970s in the US, and how those are portrayed in picture books. His analysis focuses on William and Oliver, protagonists of two popular and widely taught works of early children's literature: *William's Doll* (Zolotow & Pène du Bois, 1972) and *Oliver Button Is a Sissy* (DePaola, 1979), respectively. His aim is to explore how the books "conceptualize and comment on traditional gender roles by creating a space for gender non-normative boys" (61). Although he considers *William's Doll* "an unavoidable, seminal text" in any discussion of gender non-conforming boys (68), his content analysis makes him conclude that William's transgressive behaviour (his yearning desire to have a doll to cradle) is "strategically packaged" in such a "palatable manner" (68) that the narration ultimately fails to portray William's behaviour as really transgressive:

While *William's Doll* does seem to work, at least at some level, as an attempt at feminist deconstruction of gender roles, the book ultimately conforms to a conservative, rigid framework of gender behaviour. (Herzog, 2009: 68)

Herzog supports his conclusion by referring to a mismatch between the transgressive narrative constructed verbally and the conservative style adopted for the visual layout:

This "old-fashioned, charming" [sic] style creates a classic, conservative frame for *William's Doll*. While the text of the book may aim to break new ground in children's literature, the style, very consciously, does not. (Herzog, 2009: 68)

The lack of systematicity in Herzog's methodology is made clear, as his analysis of Oliver Button's behaviour follows a different strategy. This character features a boy who is bullied by his schoolmates. Herzog envisages Oliver's behaviour as fitting into the New Age Boy schema (Stephens, 2002). For Herzog, this schema supposes an alternative means to cater for male gender behaviour which challenges the notion that "lacking masculinity means lacking agency" (70). Herzog interprets that "Oliver derives [his] agency from his creative talents and his ability to perform [as well as for being] both passionate and dedicated to his dancing" (70), and he resorts to the text to support this view: "the phrase 'he practiced and practiced' is repeated over and over again, emphasizing Oliver's commitment and determination" (70).

What Herzog's (2009) analyses illustrate is that, although the narration is used as the basis for the analysis of characters, it seems to be employed as a cherry-picking resource rather than for exploring thoroughly the actual resources that construe the characters' agencies. Butler's (1990) idea that gender is constructed linguistically not as "a thing (a noun), but as a series of repeated actions (verbs) that through their repetition appear 'natural'" (Crisp & Hiller, 2011: 197), can be extrapolated to the narration in order to interrogate it, even though the combination of visual and verbal resources expands the complexity of the analysis. If agency is identified with the protagonists' actions, these are depicted visually, and not just verbally, but different characters such as William and Oliver could be compared with one another on the same ground.

Within the familial domain, protagonists range from boys (and

anthropomorphised animals) behaving in gender-variant ways (Scieurba, 2017), such as playing with dolls, dancing, or liking mermaids or reading or listening to music, to characters with an explicit transgendered self-consciousness which clashes with externally imposed constructions of identity (Smulders, 2015: 419). Transgender boys such as Bailey, the protagonist of Ewert and Ray's (2008) *10,000 Dresses*, are taken in this paper to correspond to non-conforming male protagonists, as the conflict developed in the narration seems to be comparable to other male gender-variant characters. Even so, the difference between their "assigned" gender (male in Bailey's case) and their "affirmed" gender (female in Bailey's case) is acknowledged (Smulders, 2015: 419). However, not all transgender protagonists correspond to this classification (see Bedford et al., 2023, for examples of transgender protagonists in non-clashing contexts). Finally, works focusing on non-conforming male characters who are not protagonists have been left out, typically those dealing with same-sex parenthood (e.g. M. Martínez-Lirola, 2021, M., 2022).

### 2.3. Conflict and agency in gender-inclusive picture books with male protagonists

Mead (1934) contends that our self is essentially a social structure constructed dialogically through our interaction with others. The presence of an opponent social group or character in conflict with the protagonist is one of the characteristic features of gender-inclusive picture books with a male protagonist. The protagonist's opponents are sometimes member(s) of his family, or school peers, or even the community where he lives can act as a unified whole against him. In addition to these narrative antagonists, it is also frequent to find characters who are the protagonist's allies. If opponents are involved in the narrative conflict with the protagonist, ally characters are often crucial for the protagonist's success, also because they convey the supporting message to young readers that the protagonist is not alone in his quest.

Family and school as opponents represent the cultural formations in which the protagonists live their everyday lives, thus constituting "the power structures and peer relationships which shape being-in-the-world and interpellate participants into gendered roles" (Stephens, 2002: 43). Under such circumstances, the protagonists' subjective agencies are crucial in order to succeed in their self-constitution, which they need in order to contest those power pressures when required. After all, as Nikolajeva (2009b) contends, "nowhere else are power structures as visible as in children's literature, the refined instrument used for centuries to educate, socialize and oppress a particular social group" (16). Consequently, in terms of the social relations represented, the story lines often present a narrative of conflict developed as a *tour de force* between the protagonist and an antagonistic social group (or character), with each side embodying a different schema of masculinity.

All in all, it is through all the character's actions along the narration that readers interpret his self. Whereas conflictive interaction will tell how the protagonist is constructed "socially", a look at all his actions as a whole will tell how his self-constituted agency tends to be, providing a more comprehensive characterisation of him as an individual.

Social backlash is often constructed in picture books as homophobic bullying behaviour. Harassment of non-conforming protagonists is very often set within the school context, where characters who embody traditional masculinity values are presented as agentive, and bully the protagonist-cum-victim physically (e.g., by pushing or taking his possessions), verbally (e.g., by namecalling, threatening or ridiculing him) or in relational ways (e.g., by using social power to damage his image) (Moulton et al., 2011). Interestingly in terms of what is considered agentive behaviour, Gini and Pozzoli (2006) contend that bullying is not only proactive (bully's goal-orientated) but also reactive (victim's agentive reaction), so when gender identity is discussed in relation to the characters' agency (or lack of it) only traditional binary views of gender still associate agentive behaviour with masculinity.

Social behaviours are made of specific actions interpreted with a

social meaning (as positive, negative, (in)appropriate, etc.), so any attempt to identify how they are represented requires identifying the specific actions involved, the *doings* of the characters.

Wharton's (2005) study of gender imbalance in the material chosen in a reading scheme for early childhood education in the UK analysed the participant roles of male and female characters applying Halliday's (2004) categories of *participant* and *process* of the transitivity system as described in systemic functional linguistics (SFL). The advantages of her approach are that it can be applied systematically and that this method can be "reasonably independent of the analyst" (Wharton, 2005: 240). Unfortunately, Wharton only investigated the verbal mode of the texts.

Ignoring the visual representation of characters is a serious shortcoming, like considering only half of the picture of the unique interplay of the visual and verbal resources employed. In picture books, what is told (verbally) is not necessarily coincidental with what is shown (visually), and mismatches between modes is precisely one of the ways to create narrative tensions in picture books (Nikolajeva & Scott, 2006; Painter, Martin & Unsworth, 2013; Unsworth & Wheeler, 2002). In fact, characterisation is not only constructed by both modes simultaneously, but it is indeed the visual mode which draws children's attention in the first place.

#### 2.4. Affordances of multimodal gendered characters

Visual literacy connects with the aesthetic potential of picture books to offer a pleasant reading experience to children (Roche, 2015: 25). In fact, discussing solely gender-thematic aspects may ignore the widely recognised potential and complexity of the semiotic resources and affordances of the visual mode in picture books, as pieces of literary and visual art (Pantaleo, 2018; Sipe, 2008: 143; Stafford, 2011: 26). For example, the richness of colours and compositional variety of visual resources employed in *10,000 Dresses* (Ewert & Ray, 2008) prompts the exploration of how this 'artistic unit' (Sipe, 2001) functions as "a vehicle to explore gender nonconformity" (Smulders, 2015: 418) also *aesthetically*.

As multimodal texts, picture books (gendered-themed or not) share potential affordances for developing emotional literacy and life skills, such as citizenship, sense of belonging or empathy (Törnby, 2020), and also critical literacy skills (Kim, 2016; Leland, Lewison & Harste, 2020; Lundy & Swartz, 2011; Roche, 2015; Véliz, 2022). Critical thinking is considered an essential complement for promoting active citizenry and a well-functioning democracy (Roche, 2015), but the active engagement with ideas that is required for thinking for oneself requires an effort (Roche, 2015: 14) which is even greater in the case of reading multimodal texts (Serafini, 2010). Hence, the selection of appropriate reading materials also requires considering the resources employed for constructing the narratives and gendered characters' representations.

Djonov and Tseng (2021: 352) suggest that educators need to "build awareness of the constructedness of narratives", in addition to motivating learners to positive social change by encouraging them to explore how social issues are presented in narratives in relation to their social contexts. In order to do that, Djonov and Tseng (2021) have presented a social semiotic method to compare how different media versions of the same story construct narrative characters and foster audience engagement with social themes.

Based on systemic functional linguistics (Halliday, 2004) and social semiotic grammar (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006), Djonov and Tseng's analysis has revealed systematic semantic patterns of characters' actions and interactions, which they consider fruitful for extending multi-literacies education to early years of school. However, they place an emphasis on the relevance of the reading guidance and the conversations to be developed by educators, as they have also found how the activities designed for interactive versions may be irrelevant or non-coherent to the character's story world or the narrative, making children's identification with the protagonist and the promotion of the underlying values difficult or unlikely. In the same line, Unsworth and

Macken-Horarik (2015) posit that students need to understand explicitly the meaning-making resources of images "to go beyond simply comprehending what occurs in the story world to interpreting the significance of what happens" (57).

This approach is relevant for exploring the representation of gendered characters and their agency in picture books, and how their representations and interactions can foster engagement with relevant social issues such as bullying or family pressures to shape one's own identity, which are crucial to children. In this paper it is argued that one fruitful way of delving into this question is to explore the specific multimodal resources employed for representing protagonists' agencies. In order to do this, the method of analysis presented seeks to answer these questions:

- (a) How is the agency of each protagonist represented?
- (b) Do the protagonists' agencies change when taking part in conflictive interactions?
- (c) Is conflict represented differently depending on the social structure involved (family, school or community)?

### 3. Theoretical framework

The representation of agency is approached from Halliday's (2004) descriptive model of systemic functional grammar, combined with G. Kress and Van Leeuwen's (2006; 2021) model of visual social grammar. Agency is understood, along Vaughn et al. (2022: 346), as a process construed socially: "one occurring within complex environments, by which individuals are part of a collective and interconnected with social actors", and hence explored through the analysis of the actions and interactions of the characters. The transitivity system in SFL focusses on the action (*a process*), in which one or more *participants* are involved, under some *circumstance(s)*, which constitutes a *figure*, or transitivity configuration (Halliday, 2004: 170). The type of process instantiates a specific domain of experience (the idea is about somebody *doing* something, or somebody *sensing*, or somebody *being* 'x', etc.), so that the participatory roles are different for each domain. For example, in *'the boys pushed Oliver'*, 'the boys' is participating in the material process of pushing with the role of Actor, whereas Oliver is the Goal achieved, affected 'passively' by the pushing; the one to whom the action has been *done-to*. The *core* participants are intrinsically involved in the processes as 'doers' of some kind: Actor (in material processes), Senser (in mental processes), Behaver (in behavioural processes), Sayer (in verbal processes). These (essentially agentive) roles have been analysed systematically in order to obtain a profile of each protagonist's subjective agency.

This categorisation results in profiling characters in this way: when the protagonist's agency is constituted through a majority of figures of *sensing*, for example, his most characteristic agency depicts him with a tendency for mental activity (thinking, feeling emotions, expressing his wishes, or his likes or dislikes). This agency has been linked in the literature to the *New Age Boy* schema, profiling a character whose agency is constituted through the expression of his emotions and/or his thoughts. The character is hence portrayed essentially as a Senser. Similarly, a predominance of figures of *doing*, *saying* or *behaving*, will yield a profile of the character essentially as Actor, Sayer, or Behaver respectively.

Gender identities tend to be associated with specific profiles, taken as characteristic of a certain type of agency:

- 'Material' processes include actions such as *push*, *eat*, or *take*, in which the agentive participant is the *doer* (Actor). These processes are the most prevalent in (English) language and are the ones to which the agency of the *Old Age Boy* is typically connected to, thus interpreting agency essentially in physical terms.
- 'Mental' processes include perceptive, cognitive, desiderative or emotive actions such as *see*, *think*, *wish*, or *like*, in which the agentive

participant is the *doer* (Senser). These processes are associated with the agency of the *New Age Boy* as a sensitive character, relating him with actions involving the expression of emotions and making responsible judgements (McCallum & Stephens, 2011: 365).

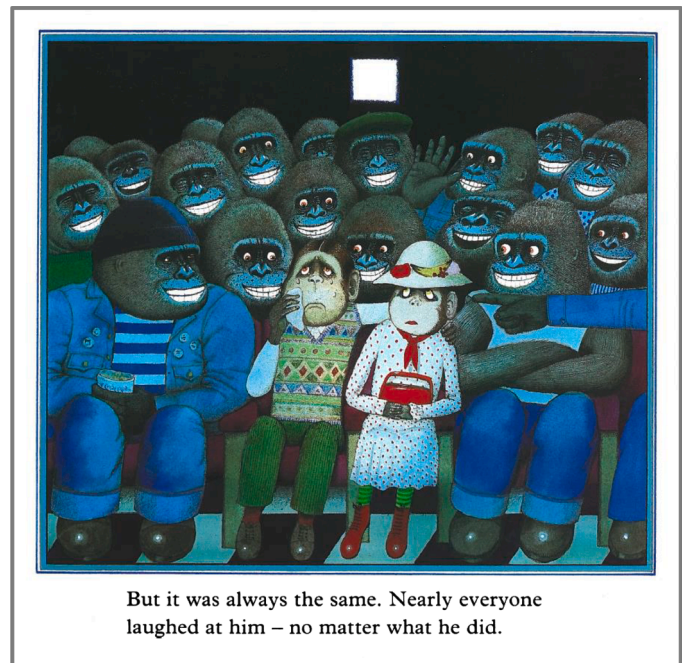
- ‘Verbal’ processes include actions such as *say*, *ask*, *suggest* or *threaten* (verbally), in which the agentive participant is the *doer* as a Sayer. No specific male schema is associated with this role.
- ‘Behavioural’ processes include a varied range of actions such as *sleep*, *cry*, *dance*, *stare*, or *threaten* (gestures), involving physiological actions (sleep) and also actions showing externally the participant’s inner state (cry, dance) or purpose (stare, threaten), and in which the agentive participant is the *doer* as a Behaver. All male gender schemata are, in one way or another, connected to some stereotyped sort of social behaviour, for example when a character is described as a bully, or a dancer, or a whiny (I. Elorza, 2022).

G. Kress and Van Leeuwen’s (2006; 2021) visual grammar caters for the analysis of transitivity choices made from the visual resources available. The character must be recognisable along the narration in each depiction as being the same and no other character (e.g., Harry Potter’s scar fulfils this function). But those representative features are often combined with symbolic attributes present consistently along the different depictions of the character in the narration. In gender-inclusive picture books, symbolic attributes include gendered accessories and colours (Elorza, 2020). Visual characterisation is also represented through comparison and contrast between the protagonist and other characters when interacting in the same figure (Painter, Martin & Unsworth, 2013: 66–68). In those cases, size, relative position and clustering of the characters on the page are the means employed for meaning making, and agency can be construed also in this way (e.g., the protagonist appears reading a book while his opponents play football in the background).

As in verbal constructions, the visual resources employed in the depiction of the protagonist can be analysed to identify his participating role in the *figure of doing*, of *sensing*, of *saying*, or of *behaving*, represented. However, in contrast to the linearity of the verbal narration, in which the writer selects the perspective they want the readers to follow, the simultaneous display of the visual material allows readers to map several ‘readings’ of what the figure represents. In narrative images, we can see all the intervening participants ‘doing something’, and indeed often doing more than one thing at the same time. Let’s consider one illustrative example.

Fig. 1 can be described representationally in different ways. Visually, Willy is represented as a target of the gorillas’ gazes and their pointing fingers. Gazes and the imaginary vectors traced by body limbs are the devices for signalling the participants’ roles and relations in a visual grammar (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006; G., 2021). So, following the visual focus of attention, we can interpret that the gorillas’ role is agentive, whereas Willy’s role (as the target of the gorillas’ gazes) is not. But if we place our attention on Willy, we can see him crying. From this perspective, Willy’s agentive role is Behaver (he is the *doer* of the behavioural process of crying) in Fig. 1. What is more, in the interplay between visual and verbal modes, only the visual mode is employed for representing Willy as a Behaver.

Although the specific contribution of each mode to make meaning in the figure is exploited by authors of picture books to create narrative tension or irony (Nikolajeva & Scott, 2006), the mismatches between what is shown and what is told do not involve a fragmented construction of the protagonist’s agency. All the information we get about the protagonist’s actions, irrespective of the mode used, contribute cumulatively to his consistent characterisation (Nikolajeva & Scott, 2006: 81). The systematic model of multimodal characterisation analysis presented has been applied recently to study protagonists’ agencies in gender-inclusive picture books (Elorza, 2020; I., 2022), as part of a more comprehensive study of gender-inclusive picture books (M. Martínez-Liro, 2021; M., 2022; Moya-Guijarro, 2021; A.J., 2022;



But it was always the same. Nearly everyone laughed at him – no matter what he did.

Fig. 1. Protagonist Willy surrounded by antagonistic opponent group. Eleventh figure from *Willy the Champ* (Browne, 1985) © Walker Books.

Moya-Guijarro & Martínez-Mateo, 2022, amongst others).

#### 4. Methodology

The sample of five picture books was compiled in this way. The first criterion was to get a varied sample of *New Age Boy* protagonists. *William’s Doll* (Zolotow & Pène du Bois, 1972) and *Oliver Button Is a Sissy* (DePaola, 1979) were chosen for being influential in paving the way for future developments of non-conforming male characters (Herzog, 2009; Sanderock, 2023), and they are still recommended in order to bring discussions about gender diversity to the classroom (e.g., Lundy & Swartz, 2011).

Three picture books of later production were chosen in order to represent variety of realizations of the *New Age Boy* schema. The search was also done for books that had been used in the classroom for critical and/or multimodal literacy and that featured different types of protagonists (not just, for example, ‘dancing boys’). *Willy the Champ* (Browne, 1985) fulfilled this criterion (Martens et al., 2012) and provides an excellent example of an independent protagonist who lives on his own and whose social context of interaction is the community where he lives. It was also chosen because Browne skilfully approaches the narration of conflict through humour, which for Colomer (2010: 44, 49) is one of the major tools for helping protagonists underplay conflict and dramatize their problems, and hence showing readers how to do that too.

*Ballerino Nate* (Bradley & Alley, 2006) was a choice based on a ‘modern’ representation of a ‘dancing boy’, produced almost thirty years later than Oliver’s book, which involved presumably a different representation of the *New Age Boy* schema, also because this time the conflict scenario was the family, represented as a conflict amongst siblings. Even if the protagonist is not vindictive nor “defiant of conventional gender assumptions” (Nodelman, 2022: 95), Nate still represents a *New Age Boy* schema as a non-conforming character with gender roles and attributes.

*10,000 Dresses* (Ewert & Ray, 2008) was chosen because, although its transgender protagonist represents a more challenging character than the others to discuss gender diversity in the classroom, it has already been used by teachers. In this book we find a protagonist whose conflict is developed, again, within the familial context. For Colomer (2010), the

values represented in picture books of the 21st century are characterised by access to quality leisure time (for example, attending a ballet performance, like Nate), but also by a reduction of space to the private sphere, typically represented by the family. However, in the case of Bailey it is precisely her family who suppresses her space, only kept in her dream world until she escapes and finds a friend in the vicinity. In this sense, Bailey's story is transgressive, as it contradicts the trend of the period representing the family as the secure context against the perils and uncertainties of a world in turmoil (Colomer, 2010: 49). For Sanderson (2023), Bailey's new friend Laurel represents, precisely, "found family".

In this way, the five titles cover the three social conflict scenarios relevant for the research questions (family, school and community) as well as social changes starting in the 1970s, as shown in Table 1.

The *New Age Boy's* subjective agency was studied through the participation of the protagonist as the *doer* of actions with agentive roles. The method of analysis developed for multimodal character representation was applied systematically to the study of the five protagonists in the book sample, categorising each participation (visual and/or verbal) as Actor, Senser, Sayer, or Behaver. In this way, their profiles were obtained from the overall multimodal depictions of each protagonist in the stories. After that, a comparison was made of each protagonist's roles when they were interacting in the same figures with their opponents (conflictive situations), versus their most frequent participating roles when they were interacting with other friendly characters or on their own (non-conflictive situations). This procedure aimed at exploring whether the protagonists' agencies changed in conflictive situations, interpreting that changes in agency could respond to pressures, actions and reactions from opponents, and also if changes could be interpreted in relation to the social structure involved (family, school or community).

The operationalisation of agency through multimodal transitivity analysis requires a few methodological decisions. Picture books often present mismatches between the visual and the verbal messages in order to produce tensions in the narration, rather than repeating the same meanings in both modes (Nikolajeva & Scott, 2006); consequently, visual participant roles and verbal ones have been identified separately.

Also, some categories are realised differently in each mode. The available resources in the visual mode cannot make a clear distinction between many behavioural processes and mental ones, like *stare vs see*. Mental processes involving thinking are often construed visually by means of thought bubbles. Mental activity of other kinds is interpreted through the direction of gazes and face gestures and bodily positions as a reaction to a phenomenon (the case of Willy's friend Milly in Fig. 1).

The depiction of the character reacting to a phenomenon made Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006; G., 2021), and Painter, Martin and Unsworth (2013) prefer to label this agentive role Reacter, rather than Senser, for describing visually depicted mental roles. The systematic method presented merges both labels into one: Senser/Reacter so that all the agentive participant roles related to mental processes can be categorised in a unified way.

Finally, where simultaneity of processes is found within a single image (e.g., a character holding a cup and talking), one process is identified as the main one according to its relevance in that point of the

**Table 1**  
Book sample distribution (periods and social scenarios).

	1970 - 2000	2001 - ...
Conflict at home	<i>William's Doll</i> (Zolotow & Pène du Bois, 1972)	<i>Ballerino Nate</i> (Bradley & Alley, 2006) <i>10,000 Dresses</i> (Ewert & Ray, 2008)
Conflict at school	<i>Oliver Button Is a Sissy</i> (DePaola, 1979)	
Conflict within the community	<i>Willy the Champ</i> (Browne, 1985)	

narration and its relation to the other visual and verbal resources employed (for example, if it is highlighted compositionally). The method of analysis employed harnesses the multimodal potential of the transitivity system, allowing to gather a systematic bimodal representation of characters' agencies and compare them.

## 5. Findings

The findings of the analysis are discussed in relation to the three research questions used to shape this study: how the agency of the protagonists is represented, whether it changes when interacting with opponents, and whether conflict is represented differently depending on the social structure involved (family, school or community).

### 5.1. Representations of protagonists' agencies

The tendency towards one or more agentive roles of Actor, Behaver, Sayer, and Senser/Reacter discloses a unique profile of the representation of the character's agency. Table 2 shows the range of frequency and distribution of agentive roles of each protagonist in the narrative.

#### 5.1.1. Agencies which range between actor and Senser/Reacter roles

The role of Actor, often associated with traditional male gender roles, is prominent for most protagonists, irrespective of the time period when the books were published. It is the most frequent role for Bailey (2008) and for William (1972), and hence the dominant tendency in their agencies. For Oliver (1979) and Willy (1985) it is the second most frequent, whereas for Nate (2006) it is marginal (only 17.24% of his participating roles).

The role of Senser/Reacter, associated typically with non-normative male characters, also appears as a definitory feature of most protagonists' agencies. It is the most frequent role for Nate, Oliver and Willy, and the second most frequent for William; only for Bailey it is more marginal in comparison with Actor and Sayer roles. The prominence of the Senser/Reacter role corroborates expectations about the realization of the *New Age Boy* schema as featuring sensitive boys whose ideas, emotions, and desires are a dominant constitution of their agencies, qualifying them as "peaceful and sensitive" (Moya-Guijarro & Martínez-Mateo, 2022: 173). Table 2 shows that Actor and Senser/Reacter roles cover most of the protagonists' participation in the narratives, but often in combination with roles involving other types of behaviour, all of which model the agency of each participant in a unique way.

**Table 2**  
Protagonists' agency profiles.

Bailey (2008)	1 Actor	40%
	2 Sayer	34%
	3 Senser/Reacter	26%
	4 Behaver	0%
Nate (2006)	1 Senser/Reacter	42.53%
	2 Sayer	26.43%
	3 Actor	17.24%
	4 Behaver	13.80%
Oliver (1979)	1 Senser/Reacter	50%
	2 Actor	41.93%
	3 Behaver	6.45%
	4 Sayer	1.62%
William (1972)	1 Actor	40.90%
	2 Behaver	27.30%
	2 Senser/Reacter	27.30%
	3 Sayer	4.50%
Willy (1985)	1 Senser/Reacter	44.82%
	2 Actor	31.03%
	3 Behaver	20.70%
	4 Sayer	3.45%

5.1.2. Agencies as constellations of participant roles

Table 2 suggests that agencies are not constituted just by one form of behaviour (e.g., Actor), but rather through a complex representation of protagonists' agencies. Agency is represented through a constellation of roles, distributed along a cline where one type of role stands out as dominant. We interpret the character as disclosing a certain type of agency, i.e. being +/- agentive of the Actor type, +/- agentive of the Senser/Reacter type, +/- agentive of the Sayer type, or +/- agentive of the Behaver type. In this way, the frequency of his participant roles will tell not only how often he behaves in a certain way but also the tendency he has to a particular type of role in the narrative.

The frequencies of participant roles form distribution patterns, sometimes found in more than one character. This is the case of Oliver and Willy, whose agencies range from Senser/Reacter, to Actor, Behaver, and finally to Sayer (the least frequent), as Fig. 2 shows. Their agency pattern corresponds to the Senser-Reacter type, portraying an essentially 'emotive' New Age Boy which depicts Oliver and Willy as two quiet boys who enjoy their hobbies (reading, going to the cinema, dancing, listening to music), and practise them actively. The predominance of their participation in mental processes (wanting, wishing, imagining, etc.) also points to their portrayal as lonely characters (I. Elorza, 2022: 49; Moya-Guijarro & Martínez-Mateo, 2022: 173).

For Oliver and Willy, Senser/Reacter and Actor roles represent together most of their activity (91.93% and 75.85% respectively) in their narrations, but William presents a different profile, as Fig. 3 illustrates. Although Actor is clearly the dominant role in his case (40.90%), two roles, Behaver (e.g., hugging a doll) and Senser/Reacter (e.g., wanting to have a doll), cover his second more important agentive tendencies (27.30% each) in the narration, which together (54.60%) outnumber the role of Actor. Hence, William's agency ranges between two poles: his activity as Actor on one end of his agency, and his activity as Senser/Reacter and as Behaver on the other. This polarisation between his doing what his father instructs him to do (e.g. practising basketball or setting up an electric train) and his desires to have a doll to hug and look after is kept along all the narration.

Interestingly, the disclosure of agencies in Figs. 2 and 3 also highlights the fact that the role of Sayer does not constitute a dominant tendency in Oliver's, Willy's or William's agencies. Their voices are barely heard in their stories, and this stands in clear contrast with the protagonists from the 2000 period.

Fig. 4 shows that Nate and Bailey have different agency types (Senser/Reacter and Actor, respectively). However, unlike the protagonists sampled from the 1970s on, Sayer is the second most dominant role for both. In both narrations, speech constitutes a characteristic feature of Bailey's and Nate's agencies. Nate and Bailey do not hide their desires, and it is precisely their verbalising them which triggers their opponents' rejection. So whereas protagonists from the 1970s are attacked because of what they do or how they behave, these protagonists of the 2000 are attacked because they express verbally and openly what

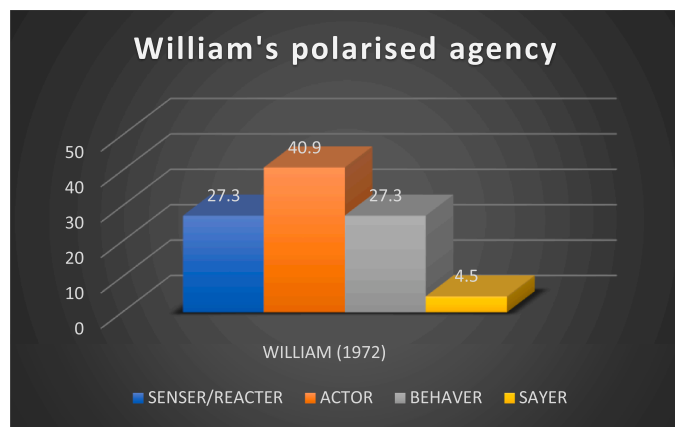


Fig. 3. Distribution of participant roles in William's agency.

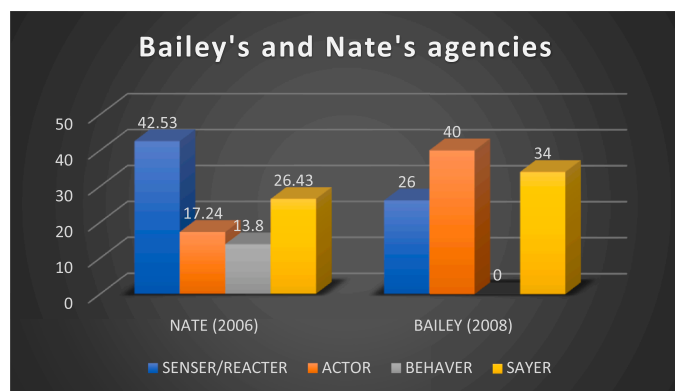


Fig. 4. Sayer saliency in Bailey's and Nate's agencies.

they want.

The transitivity analysis carried out has allowed us to learn how each protagonist embodies a unique multimodal realization of the *New Age Boy* schema, as a constellation of participating roles, as well as to compare amongst their respective agency tendencies.

5.2. Protagonists' agencies in conflictive interactions

We have seen (cf. 2.1) that our agency is crucially constituted through social interaction, and in the case of gender-inclusive picture books featuring male protagonists this interaction is problematized as conflictive. So, in addition to how protagonists' agencies are represented multimodally, another pertinent question for discussing the educational potential of gender-inclusive picture books is how they portray gender problematization in their narratives, and hence how protagonists' agencies are represented specifically during conflictive interaction. Before exploring this, an overview of the load of conflictive interaction in the protagonists' narratives is presented in Fig. 5, where a pattern can be observed that about half of the protagonists' participation in the narrations takes place during interactions with opponents. It can also be observed how Oliver's scarce interaction (16,12%) stands out.

In contrast with the others, in Oliver's narrative conflict is not constructed through frequent interaction with opponents but through a clever distribution of very few but significant interactions along the narration instead. The reader is quickly orientated to the conflict from the title *Oliver Button is a Sissy* on the book cover, with his opponents' voice resonating from the very beginning. This strategy anticipates the climax of the narration, in the middle of the story, when 'the boys' expose Oliver to public scorn by writing the same humiliating statement on the wall of the school. Oliver observes this from the distance without

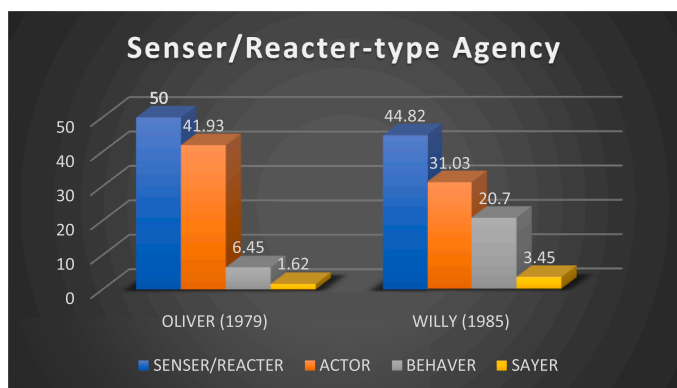


Fig. 2. Agency pattern of the Senser/Reacter type: Oliver and Willy.

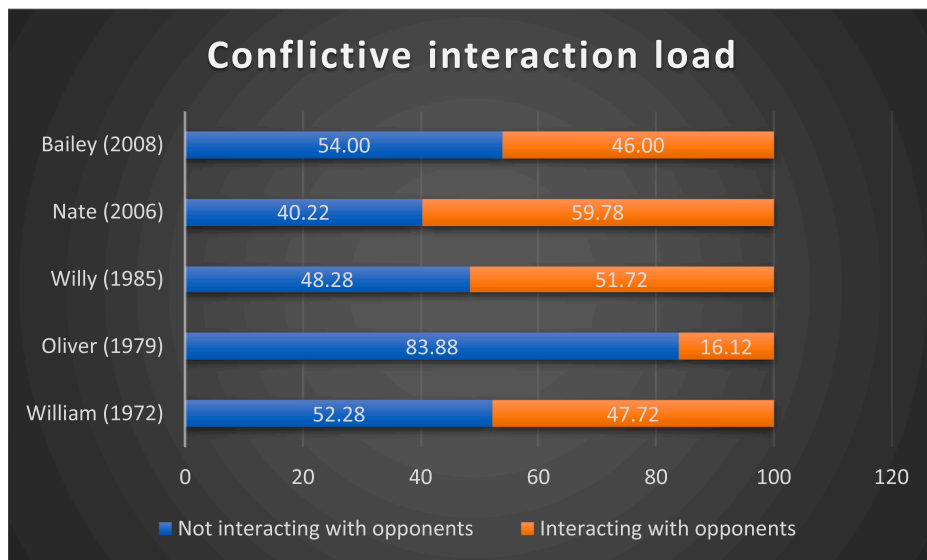


Fig. 5. Conflictive interaction loads per narrative.

responding to the aggression, as a mute witness whose gesture of despair expresses the emotional impact this has on him. So whereas Oliver’s characterisation is achieved in terms of conflict since the very beginning of the narration, readers are orientated in the other stories to the protagonists’ agentive features (their likes and desires especially), and only later is conflict introduced in the story as a situation they become involved in.

In order to see to what extent and how conflictive interaction affects agencies, the protagonists’ dominant tendencies have been explored when interacting with opponents, and compared with their overall agency. In this way, an insight was obtained of their agency when they faced conflictive interactions, which helped us identify two different strategies that the characters employed to respond to conflict, either by changing their behaviour in some way (indicated by a different frequency and distribution of the dominant roles in his agency profile), or by not reacting to conflict (not presenting salient changes in his profile), as Fig. 6 shows.

A comparison of the dominant roles in and out of conflictive interactions reveals how agency tendencies do not seem to be affected in

the case of William, Oliver, and Nate. Nevertheless, it is noticeable that other participant roles are suppressed, Sayer in the case of William, and Sayer and Behavior in the case of Oliver. Considering how we communicate socially, it is revealing that, even though they are called sissy or creepy, neither of the two respond verbally to opponents’ attacks. In this, Nate’s resilience is realized differently. Nate’s agency represents him as a talkative character (Sayer is his second dominant role), so conflict in his case is also constructed verbally.

When the conflict is developed within the familial context, the main way pressure is exerted is through verbal exchanges between antagonist and protagonist. In such cases, the role of Sayer gains relevance for the protagonist’s subjective agency. Nate, as well as Bailey, are clear examples of this. The following exchange between Nate and his brother Ben takes place when Nate learns that he has been accepted in the ballet school, and provides a glimpse of conflict constructed through psychological pressure amongst siblings:

*“Yeah!” Nate cheered. “I get to be a ballerina!”*  
*Ben laughed. “Boys can’t be ballerinas!”*  
*“Yes, they can,” said Nate.*

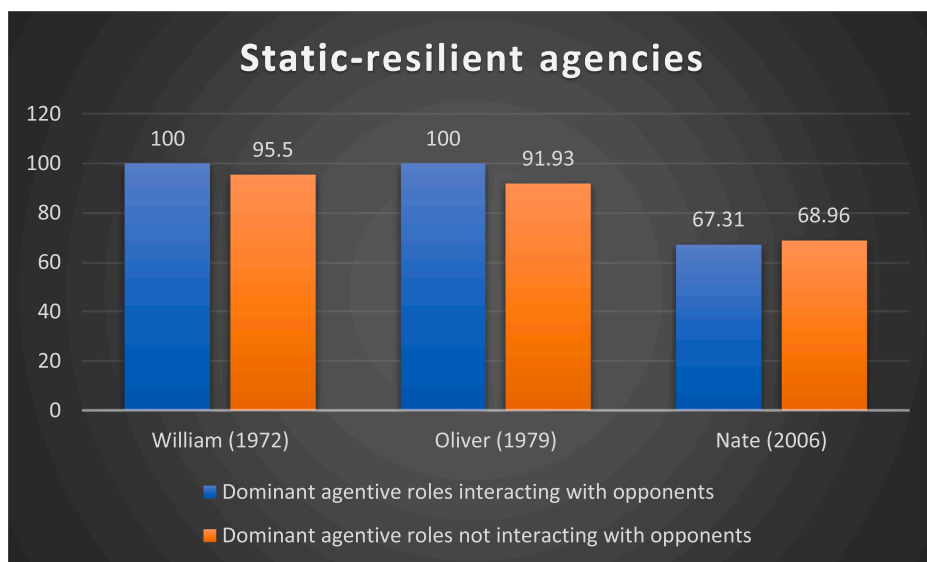


Fig. 6. Static-resilient characters.



“No, they can’t,” said Ben.

He said it again at night when they were supposed to be asleep. “Boys can’t be ballerinas. They never, ever, ever can.”

The resilience of William, Oliver, and Nate relies on holding firm to their goals, in spite of their feelings when opponents try to destroy them emotionally, so their agencies represent a static form of resilience by keeping the same agentive tendencies also during conflict. Conversely, Bailey’s and Willy’s resilience involves a dynamic form of agency instead, as Table 3 illustrates.

Changes in agency during conflictive interactions are realized in different fashions. For Willy, his agency when facing opponents involves a much higher frequency of behavioural actions (such as crying or worrying), denoting visible manifestations of his inner feelings, also including the emotional impact that bullies’ aggressions have on him. Although his agency is of the Senser/Reacter type, the same as Oliver’s, Willy tends to express his emotions much more overtly and frequently than Oliver (20.70% vs 6.45% respectively, as shown in Fig. 2) all along the narration. For example, as Fig. 1 illustrates (cf. Section 3), he reacts spontaneously by crying when watching the film *Lassie gets lost* (announced as “the classical weepie”), even though he is surrounded by bullies who laugh at him. His-participant role as Behaver is the dominant one in conflict, over Senser/Reacter and Actor, which share their frequency as second dominant roles, in a similar fashion to William’s polarised agency. Willy is harassed much more often and by many more opponents than Oliver but deploys a much more pro-active attitude towards bullies. This is realized by Willy’s always making visual contact with bullies, or just ignoring them (as in the episode at the cinema). In contrast, Oliver never makes visual contact with his opponents, and when harassed he typically reacts by looking down in despair.

Bailey’s pro-active agency is conditioned by the fact that in her case conflict is developed as verbal clash. Bailey only finds open rejection from her family when she explicitly verbalises her strong desires of wearing dresses, which collaterally involves that her transgender identity be accepted. When Bailey’s mother rejects her request, she tries again with her father and later with her brother unsuccessfully. Conflict is constructed as a verbal negotiation between Bailey’s expression of her desires and each family member’s outright rejection. When her brother threatens her physically, she runs away from home and seeks help somewhere else.

As the protagonists’ narratives show, each agency is shaped by the conflict which arises in the protagonist’s environment, but in order to discuss them appropriately it is also necessary to consider the type of social structure involved in each case.

### 5.3. Protagonists’ agencies and the social structures they live in

Three social conflict scenarios appear in the sample analysed, namely home, school, and the city, with three different social groups involved in them: family, school peers, and community members.

At home, Nate’s conflict corresponds to what psychologists term ‘sibling’ bullying (e.g., Wolke & Skew, 2012), but William and Bailey suffer from a different kind of pressure. In the case of William, we find a combination of sibling bullying, embodied by his brother and his brother’s friend (and neighbour), in parallel to paternal suppressive directives. Bailey just finds the same non-negotiable suppressive response of rejection. Bailey is, for each member of her family, ‘the odd one’. In the case of Nate and William, the family is where they also find members who listen to them and are supportive, either convincing opponents (as William’s grandmother), or delegitimizing them (as Nate’s

parents contradicting his brother). When there is no support from family members, it is necessary to seek a suitable listener, and this is exactly what Bailey finds in her new friend Laurel. These three protagonists exemplify agentive ways of facing conflict at home.

When the conflict takes place at school or in the community, it takes the form of some sort of public bullying. Direct physical and verbal aggressions are the two most frequent ways of confrontation amongst youngsters in bullying behaviour (Rivers & Smith, 1994), and gender-inclusive picture books acknowledge this. As the figure presented at the end of this section shows, two types of bullying are found in the sample analysed, private and public, which are connected with the social structures involved, and their relevant social groups. Groups of opponents include brothers, neighbours, school peers, or even unidentified people. But more importantly, social structures also contain allies, which in the sample cover a range from friends and family members to teachers and classmates, whose role is of paramount importance to help the protagonist who is enduring harassment.

If William and Nate find personal support within the family, Bailey’s agency reveals how the family, a supposedly “secure” social structure, can also be put into question, in which case support must be found elsewhere. So when bullying is private or conflict takes place at home, the protagonists seek personal support (whether within the family or not), and these three picture books are motivating because their protagonists are successful in finding it.

In contrast, public bullying is counteracted in a different way. Oliver’s narrative focuses on harassment at school and his supporters are found amongst family (his father only later), teachers, and a school girl, but he has no close friends who can provide personal support. Oliver participates in a contest show with the tap dance he had practised relentlessly and, although he expected public scorn at school the day after because he had not won the contest, he is surprised to find that he has gained social esteem: the graffiti on the wall saying, ‘*Oliver Button is a sissy*’, now says ‘*Oliver Button is a star*’.

The denouement in Willy’s story follows a similar pattern. When Willy manages to dodge the physical attack from frightening bully Buster Nose, and unintentionally makes him get hurt instead, the boys in the vicinity acclaim Willy as a hero. So gaining social esteem is how public bullying is offset for Oliver and Willy. In both cases, social esteem indicates the recognition from peers who could have been in a similar position (but did not help the protagonist, who had to endure it alone).

A summary of the intervening features found in conflictive scenarios is presented in Fig. 7, showing how conflict is developed in each case.

## 6. Discussion

In spite of the abundant research on the representation of gender in children’s literature, the characterisation of non-conforming gender-variant boys still lacks an appropriate description. In particular, studies of protagonists’ agencies are scarce and provide little details as to how agency is constituted in the narratives as a definitory feature of the boys’ selves and behaviours.

The New Age Boy schema has been useful for identifying different constitutive agencies of masculinity of characters from a broad perspective, and for highlighting how the visibility and presence of such characters has been on the rise since 1970s in children’s literature. The schema has also been instrumental in providing critical characters’ descriptions which connect a character’s *doings* in the narrative with social meaning in relation to a historical and cultural context. But, in doing so, a fully acknowledgement of the protagonists’ characterisations has

**Table 3**  
Dynamic-resilient characters.

	Dominant agentive roles interacting with opponents	Frequency	Dominant agentive roles not interacting with opponents	Frequency
Willy (1985)	Behaver + Senser/Reacter + Actor	93.32%	Senser/Reacter + Actor	75.85%
Bailey (2008)	Sayer + Actor	91.30%	Actor + Sayer	74%

SOCIAL STRUCTURES	FAMILY			SCHOOL	COMMUNITY
PROTAGONISTS	Bailey	William	Nate	Oliver	Willy
MAIN AGENTIVE PROFILES WHEN INTERACTING	Sayer + Actor (91.30 %)	Actor + Behavior // Senser/Reacter (100 %)	Senser/Reacter + Sayer (67.31 %)	Senser/Reacter + Actor (100 %)	Behavior // Senser/Reacter + Actor (93.32 %)
OPPONENTS	all family members (mother, father, brother) (radical rejection; suppression of self)	father (directives); brother and neighbour (bullies)	brother ( <i>Ben</i> ) (bully)	father (at first, directives); schoolmates ( <i>'the boys'</i> ) (bullies)	'almost everyone' (unspecified bullies in different contexts; also a specified bully ( <i>Buster Nose</i> ))
TYPE OF PRESSURE	non-negotiable rejection and physical threatening	direct verbal aggression (private bullying)	psychological aggression (private bullying)	direct verbal and psychological aggression (public bullying)	direct physical and psychological aggression (public bullying)
ALLIES	(new) friend Laurel	grandmother	father; mother; ballet teacher; professional dancer	father (later); mother; dance teacher; school	(old) friend Millie
				teacher; girl classmate	
REJECTED FEATURES	wanting to wear awesome dresses (imagined in dreams)	wanting to have a doll to hug and cradle	wanting to become a ballerino	wanting to win a talent show with his tap dancing	wanting to practise hobbies such as reading, listening to music or going to the cinema

Fig. 7. Features of conflictive interactions according to social structure.

somehow been neglected.

The study presented here has sought to demonstrate that, when the emphasis is placed on a full description of characters' agencies from a narratological and an SFL perspective, the New Age Boy schema reveals as a composite of *doings* that is instantiated in each character in a unique fashion. Although gaining a more delicate description of individual agencies might seem to blur the definitory features of the New Age Boy schema, the analysis has shown how dominant patterns of behaviour can be found in each protagonist that make characters comparable even in a small sample as the one analysed. The dominant tendencies of agency found in the study not only corroborate previous studies, but at the same time also provide a more comprehensive insight of the unique way how writers and illustrators have employed multimodal resources in their narratives for protagonists' characterisations.

The roles of Actor and Sender/Reacter are amongst the most frequent dominant roles found in the sample analysed and correspond with material and mental actions associated with the New Age Boy features, as portraying active and sensitive boys who are also creative and imaginative. The role of Actor, traditionally identified in binary terms as characteristic of a stereotypical model of masculinity, is a dominant agentive tendency for most protagonists irrespective of the time period when they were created. This tendency demonstrates that these gender-variant male characters have a self-constituted agency, even according to traditional standards of agency as active (vs passive), pro-active (vs reactive) and physically assertive behaviour. The prominence of the Sender/Reacter role, often associated with non-normative male characters, also appears as a definitory feature for most protagonists' agencies, and thus corroborates expectations and previous findings about the depiction of sensitive boys whose ideas, emotions, and desires are a dominant constitutive feature of their agencies.

Gender-inclusive picture books tend to portray male protagonists' agencies as narratives of resilience. From a social semiotic perspective, Mead's (1934) interpretation of self as a social structure constructed dialogically in interaction with others helps understand that conflict, narrated mainly through interactions in harassing and bullying situations, has a sound presence. This is not surprising, as picture books are often "plot-orientated" (Nikolajeva & Scott, 2006: 82). In most cases (four stories out of five) the conflictive interaction covers about half of the protagonist's participation in the narratives analysed. In fact, each agency seems to be shaped by the conflict which arises in the protagonist's environment.

Exploring protagonists' agencies in conflictive interaction and comparing them with those their overall agentive tendencies has allowed us to get a deeper insight into the endurance and resilience that previous studies have identified as characteristic of non-conforming male protagonists. The analysis has revealed two different types of resilient agency: static and dynamic. These are interpreted as representing two opposing ways of reacting to harassment and bullying, either by holding firm to the same dominant tendencies of behaviour as in non-conflictive situations (the static-resilient agency identified in William, Oliver, and Nate), or by showing a different dominant pattern of behaviour (the dynamic-resilient agency found in Willy's and Bailey's actions).

Harassment and bullying have also been considered in relation to the socially conflictive scenarios (family, school or community) in each story, which resonate with the social tensions of their time for achieving agency in diverse ways. Changes in social organization and structures of power seem to have led to changes in the literary representation of social values, in parallel to the diversity of interpretations of gender in today's society and the expansion of family structure possibilities. Children's picture books of the 1970s reflected a demand to make gender-non-conforming characters and behaviours visible, and to celebrate them, thus promoting independence by way of self-constituted subjective agencies. Far from being 'passive' characters, early protagonists such as William and Oliver embody different ways of achieving agency, and their conflictive interactions also reveal the kind of tensions prevalent in

their time of production and reception by readers.

One of the most striking changes brought about by 21st century in western societies is the diversity of interpretations of gender and the expansion of family structure possibilities. Although fluidity is probably not easily represented in children's picture books, gender diversity is not only reflected in the variety of protagonists found, but also in the progressive assertiveness and confidence that later protagonists like Bailey and Nate deploy. Both characters voice their wishes and desires irrespective of the emotional burden imposed to them by opponent characters. With them, the New Age Boy schema is instantiated as an up-to-date version of male protagonists in gender-inclusive picture books, albeit each of them embodying a different type of resilient agency, dynamic for Bailey but static for Nate.

The complex picture of the characters' agencies that has emerged from the analysis derives from the methodological approach adopted in the study. The method proposed and applied builds on the narratological centrality of characters' actions (e.g., Nikolajeva & Scott, 2006) and their comprehensive characterisation through their participation along the whole narration. The operationalisation of characters' agency has been achieved through SFL affordances for describing participation roles in detail.

By carrying out a systematic transitivity analysis of the visual and verbal resources employed to represent protagonists' participation in the narratives, the method has proven useful in three ways. A more comprehensive picture has been obtained of the multimodal features constituting each character's agency. A finer-grained awareness of the diversity of instantiations of the New Age Boy schema has also been acknowledged. More importantly, the systematicity of the method has shown its capacity for comparing amongst different characters from the same perspective.

In this respect, this method of exploring characters' actions seems to afford a more comprehensive understanding of the multimodal representations of characters than those found in previous studies, particularly those which were either based on *ad-hoc* categorizations of behaviour, or that were partial by excluding the visual contribution to character representations. The transitivity analysis in which this method is based has been applied comprehensively and systematically by other scholars (e.g., Djonov & Tseng, 2021; Wharton, 2005) to harness the potential of different types of multimodal narratives for education, particularly for critical literacy and multiliteracies, also in line with pedagogical approaches such as the ones proposed by the New London Group (1996) or by Unsworth and Macken-Horarik's (2015) appeal for a "visual grammatics".

A comprehensive profile of the characters can provide a better detailed description of how their agencies are represented, thus helping teachers foster the connection between how characters act and react, and children's own experiences when (inter)acting socially. A crucial aspect of reading guidance is not only the consideration of how authors present conflict, but the variety of ways how their characters respond to it. Through the identification of the visual and verbal resources constructing the characters' narratives, teachers may be better prepared to guide the reading towards the specific actions which construct bullying in Oliver's story, psychological pressure in Nate's case, how Bailey's or William's families respond to their demands, or how the social environment in which Willy lives constructs threats and provokes fear.

More importantly, teachers may focus on guiding the readings and conversations towards how characters respond to the conflicts they are involved in, pointing to their specific actions and interactions, and discuss both static and dynamic resilience as available choices of behaviour. Victims of bullying who show a confident attitude are considered to be at lower risk of future victimisation than sad or angry victims (Sokol, Bussey & Rapee, 2016). A connection can be made through discussions about the portrayal of agencies such as those of Bailey and Nate. Their conflictive discussions in pursuing their desires and the different courses of action taken by them could set a useful basis for classroom discussions about responding to bullying and suppressive

directives within the family domain in particular, and how different they are from portrayals of public bullying, constructed in terms of social rejection and social esteem.

Teaching children how to disclose the resources through which subjective agencies are constituted in multimodal texts may expand considerably their possibilities to understand how conflict is constructed and how it may be responded in other kinds of fictional and non-fictional narratives too, either in media or in real life. To this end, multimodal transitivity analysis may represent a useful tool for teachers and students, as it provides a metalanguage to help interpret people's social behaviours and multimodal representations of them in a finer-grained fashion in critical literacy and multimodal literacy activities in the classroom.

Although this study has focussed on gender-inclusive picture books, the method affords the analysis of any thematic sample of picture books. This flexibility can be an asset for teachers who aim to develop awareness in multimodal resources, but not necessarily in connection to representations of gendered characters in particular. By studying characters' representations systematically, the method allows to obtain characters' profiles which are comprehensive, rather than partial or sketchy, so that characters can be studied and interpreted holistically, rather than partially or by exacerbating certain features while ignoring others.

Critical content analyses, such as the ones carried out by Herzog (2009), Sciarba (2017), Smulders (2015), and many other scholars, are essential for connecting gendered narratives with socio-historical contexts and examine them from a critical theoretical lens (intersectional, queer, etc.). And yet, placing an initial emphasis on the 'content' analysis over the 'critical' is crucial for gaining a much deeper insight into the "constructedness" of the narrative (Djonov & Tseng, 2021; Unsworth & Macken-Horarik, 2015) and of the multimodal resources employed in them for shaping the uniqueness of each text, rather than on its "deconstruction" (Birner, 2016). In the case of character representation, a systematic approach to the analysis can provide, as this study has shown, a much more comprehensive account of the complexities involved in the multimodal construal of characters' agencies even in a "concise narrative" (Tan, 2010). This comprehensiveness is not only necessary for thinking critically about those characters and their behaviours when in conflict, but very much so for gaining the necessary awareness about the affordances of their stories for selecting useful reading material and preparing fruitful classroom discussions on topics germane to gender inclusion, empathy, diversity or social justice.

### Declaration of Competing Interest

The author declares the following financial interests/personal relationships which may be considered as potential competing interests: Izaskun Elorza reports financial support was provided by Spanish Ministry of Economy, Industry and Competitiveness.

### Acknowledgments

This study was carried out as part of the research project FFI2017-85306-P (The Construction of Discourse in Children's Picture Books, AMULIT), funded by the Spanish Ministry of Economy, Industry and Competitiveness.

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