

**A Thematic Content Analysis of Children's Picture Books that Portray Fairness**

Shuo Zhang

Mount Saint Vincent University

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Thesis Supervisor: Dr. Sarah Reddington and Dr. Jamie Leach

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### **Abstract**

Considering the essential role fairness plays in the early years and the powerful impacts of picture books on young children, it is necessary to understand how fairness is portrayed in children's picture books, and how this small sample of picture books might inform children's understanding of fairness and how it relates to children's moral compass in relation to their rights and agency. The thematic content analysis is adopted as the research method. This study is based on three children's picture books that were published over 50-year periods. This research examined the depiction of fairness in those books, addressing questions about how fairness is portrayed, the embedded messages in the depiction of fairness, and whose perspective is represented. This research explored perspectives including Kohlberg's moral development theory and Gilligan's ethic of care. Although Kohlberg's theory explains some aspects of children's moral reasoning, it undermines children's agency and puts them in a morally deficient position. This research advocates for the care perspective and children's agency in their morality development. Recommendations, limitations, and suggestions are included.

*Key words:* Kohlberg's moral development theory, ethic of care, picture books, children's agency, child rights-based approach

### **Acknowledgements**

I have had a strong interest in fairness due to personal experience in childhood. As I stepped onto the university campus, I told myself that I would become a fair and just teacher in the future. As a mother, disputes about fairness between my two children often inspires me to think about this issue. It's just like a part of my life. Exploring how picture books portray such an important topic to young children is very meaningful and interesting.

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## Chapter One: Introduction

### Statement of the Problem

Children explore the world they live in spontaneously from the beginning of their early years. However, children's inner power as an independent human being is often undervalued. Since the 1970s, the concept of children's agency, which views children as social actors rather than passive recipients, highlights a significant theoretical shift in childhood studies (James, 2009). Jans (2004) claims that children's agency is a "complex interaction in which children simultaneously are determined by their environment and help to determine their environments" (p. 39). The picture book, as an appealing and accessible medium provides young children with opportunities and creates imaginary scenes to learn about the world around them, and child's literature can play a part in promoting their understanding of their surroundings. Given this understanding, it is necessary to examine how some important issues, especially those that can impact young children's views about the world, are portrayed in children's picture books. Within this context, my study aims to explore how fairness is framed in children's picture books and what messages about fairness are shared within this small sample of children's literature published across different time periods. I recognize from the outset that this is a small content analysis, however, there is a necessity to explore fairness and how it gets portrayed in children's literature. In this research, the aim is to examine closely if concepts of fairness when portrayed in children's literature can potentially shape children's moral compass and their capacity to have agency in diverse settings.

Fairness plays an integral role in children's active negotiations whether in an early childhood setting or a multi-child family environment. For example, it is common to observe expressions about fairness from children in their play, like "That is not fair". In children's play,

the concept of fairness and injustice to fairness can be observed as young children express their understandings through actions, like taking turns and sharing toys with their friends. Nuba et al. (1999) state that the picture book is a common and powerful tool that can help children express their feelings and expand a child's horizon or alternatively, limit their focus to a single important event or feeling. Additionally, the message and meaning behind the story can be brought back to when children encounter similar situations in real world situations (Nuba et al., 1999). Therefore, it is necessary to learn more about how children's picture books convey messages of fairness and how children's literature can potentially inform children's understanding of fairness.

Fairness is a fundamental concept involving a range of meanings and perspectives in human society. At the most basic level, fairness can be defined as "the quality of treating people equally or in a way that is right or reasonable" (Oxford University Press, n.d.). Before further describing the notion of fairness, it is important to draw out two important dimensions of this definition. The first one is the quality of treating people equally, namely equality (i.e., the value of treating people with equality). The second dimension is treating individuals in a way that is right or reasonable, which can be understood as equity. In my study, I adopted this definition. Later in my study, I will outline the literature related to the concept of fairness as it is important to know how the concept is explored within children's literature.

Children's lives are often analyzed from the perspectives of adults and through dominant developmental discourses that perceive children to be dependent and lacking autonomy. Paulus and Essler (2020) identify that developmental psychology contributes to the early origins and fundamental rules of fairness. However, most studies from the developmental lens assert that children are egocentric and see fairness as an equal distribution of resources (Lee, et al., 2021). Therefore, there is a requirement to disrupt static discourses on child development and



acknowledge that children are active in their interpretation of the world, and this includes how materials, like books, can inform their learning.

### **Purpose of the Study**

Considering the fundamental role fairness plays in the early years and the powerful influence of the picture book on young children, the overall aims of this study are: a) to make a contribution to the understanding of how fairness is portrayed within three children's picture books; b) to find out how this small sample of pictures books might inform children's understandings of the concept of fairness and how it relates to children's moral compass in relation to their rights and agency.

### **Research Questions**

For this study, I examined the texts and images in three children's picture books and used a thematic content analysis to analyze how fairness is portrayed. My specific research questions are: a) How is the concept of fairness conveyed in each children's picture book? b) What messages are embedded in the depiction of fairness in each book? c) Whose perspective of fairness is told in each book?

### **Research Structure**

To answer my research questions, I established the following structure for my thesis: I explored the concept of fairness and current research on this issue, mainly focusing on the use of Kohlberg's moral development theory to support how fairness is portrayed in each of three children's books. It was important to become familiar with the children's literature in advance of this research inquiry and understand central concepts, such as: fairness, morality, children's agency, and the influence that children's literature has on young people's lives. For example, at the outset I tried to explore the power of children's literature from the perspective of the

interaction between socio-cultural environment and individuals. This drew me into how we understand children in contemporary childhood studies. Hence, I tried to learn more about the concepts of children's rights, children's voices, children's agency, and their history and relationships.

My research project adopted thematic content analysis as a research method. Therefore, I tried to find out the differences and similarities related to the concept of fairness among the three picture books presented in the literature review, seeking to reveal how fairness is portrayed and what is the message embedded in them. There are some discussions, implications, and direction of future studies in the last chapter.

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

To understand how the concept of fairness is conveyed in children's picture books in the context of contemporary childhood studies, the literature review consists of the following areas related to this research: a) fairness and moral development, b) introduction to fairness in the early childhood stage, c) children's literature and the picture book, and d) how can we understand children in relation to their agency and rights as young people.

### **Fairness and Moral Development**

Fairness is a key concept and value that has been linked to ethics and political science and discussed since ancient Greek times. As stated in the introduction, *Oxford Learners Dictionaries* (n.d.) defined fairness as "the quality of treating people equally or in a way that is right or reasonable". In this study, I am interested to see how fairness is portrayed in the children's picture books in relation to "a way that is right and reasonable". This aligns with children's agency and their capacity to question their own moral compass when navigating the concept of fairness within an early year setting.

### ***Fairness and Moral Development***

Classic developmental theories in psychology have assured that fairness is related to the moral domain, as fairness is inherently linked to concepts of justice, rights, and well-being (Yucel, 2006). Kohlberg and Hersh (1979) argue that justice is the key principle of moral education and contributes to the development of different stages of moral judgment. They regard justice as the fundamental standard "for the value and equality of all human beings and for reciprocity in human relations" (p. 58). Kohlberg (1984) also believes that the principle of fairness, applied to individuals, is the core characteristic of justice. Hence, the concept of fairness is often related to ensuring equal opportunities, rights, and treatment; in a word, this is equity.

### *Justice Perspective*

Kohlberg is the most influential psychologist in moral development (Duska & Whelan, 1975). His theory of moral development identifies six stages, two stages occurring at three distinct moral reasoning levels: pre-conventional, conventional, and post-conventional (see the Appendix). Among all the levels, the pre-conventional level, which including stage one and stage two, is mostly descriptive of children. In stage one, children's justice reasoning is heteronomous, which means they do not yet develop an internal and autonomous moral sense and obey the rules to avoid punishment from the authority (Kohlberg, 1984). Kohlberg (1984) describes stage two as having three core areas, namely individualism, instrumental purpose, and exchange. He believes that what children consider right in this period is "serving one's own or other's needs and making fair deals in terms of concrete exchange" (Kohlberg, 1984, p. 409). The final stage is understanding universal ethical principles. It "assumes guidance by universal ethical principles that all humanity should follow" (Kohlberg, 1984, p. 412). Duska and Whelan (1975) argue that Kohlberg's theory of moral development reflects the evolution of moral reasoning from a focus on self-interest to universal ethical principles. There is also a body of research related to fair distribution based on Kohlberg's theory of moral development (Paulus & Leitherer, 2017; Thorkildsen, 1989).

In order to explain his mode of judgements in moral dilemmas, Kohlberg's moral development theory adopts Aristotle's idea in *Nicomachean Ethics* and stresses three dimensions of justice problems, namely distributive justice, commutative justice, and corrective justice (Kohlberg, 1984). Hence, Kohlberg's moral development theory mainly focuses on justice-based moral orientations. Accordingly, I adopted and transformed it into the framework of fairness I examined in the children's picture books.

There are also some critics about Kohlberg's moral development theory. Gump et al. (2000) state that Kohlberg's theory is based on one assumption that individuals prioritize abstract justice considerations over interpersonal concerns in moral reasoning as they develop morally. Another critique is that Kohlberg's theory regards justice concerns as developmentally more advance than interpersonal considerations (Gump et al., 2000).

### *Care Perspective*

In contrast to Kohlberg's justice perspective, Gilligan (1982/1993) proposes that morality consists of justice and care. Gilligan (1995) states that the ethic of care shifts the fundamental dimension of relationships from inequality/equality to attachment/detachment, reshaping thoughts, emotions, and language to imbue terms like 'dependence,' 'responsibility,' 'fairness,' and 'care' with different connotations and meanings. According to Sherblom (2015), Gilligan's theory values caring and compassion and prioritizes the understanding of individual contexts and the people involved. Therefore, the care perspective emphasizes affectively acquired knowledge, such as empathic perspective taking, as legitimate sources of moral insight. Despite Kohlberg later redefined his theory as a measure of 'justice reasoning', "this is not recognised in the widespread use of his ideas neither is his belief that there is a care perspective in people's moral thinking" (Adams, 2015, p. 290).

Care perspective should play a part in the early years and education system. Noddings (1984) regards perspective-taking and empathy with students as the fundamental part of caring for the perspective of care giver, which includes educators. Noddings also emphasizes on how concepts of care in relationships within learning settings are closely aligned with Gilligan's ethics of care perspective (McKenzie & Blenkinsop, 2006). That is, a care perspective should be applied to clarify the position of educational care and the concept of care should be prioritized as

a central part of education (Adams, 2015). Sherblom (2015) comments that care perspective shapes contemporary moral psychology and education practices. Caring also plays an important part in early childhood settings. For example, *Ontario's Early Learning for Every Child Today* (ELECT) curriculum framework emphasizes the essential role of a caring environment in supporting children learning. It also supports that the educators should establish a caring relationship with children (BSEPEL, 2007).

### **Introduction to Fairness in Early Childhood Stage**

Early years is critical for children to develop basic perspective towards some values and the perception of fairness is fundamental issue that young children experience in early childhood settings and at home. Early years researchers emphasize the importance of promoting fairness and social justice. For example, Wong (2013) believes that early childhood education possesses the ability to advance social justice by promoting fairness in resource allocation and can foster social justice by challenging oppressive practices. Wong (2013) claims that social justice can be operated in a minimum of four dimensions in early childhood education, which are “by facilitating greater equity in the distribution of resources, challenging oppressive practices, supporting moral development and enacting children’s rights” (p. 313). In this study, I am interested to see how children’s literature can inform children’s understandings of fairness towards new ways of thinking in relation to social justice and agency.

### ***Young Children’s Conceptualizations of Fairness***

Children are aware of moral concerns from an early age. Sloane et al.’s study (2012) indicates that young children already have fairness-related expectations. This research involves infants aged 19 to 21 months and aims to explore their expectations regarding resource distribution and rewards to others. It reveals that infants as young as two years old possess

sophisticated and diverse expectations regarding how people should allocate resources between two individuals and rewards to others. Smith et al.'s study (2013) similarly shows that children generally begin to explicitly understand and value equality typically by the age of 3-4. This is demonstrated by their idea of resource distribution.

Young children's understanding of fairness can be related to equality when exploring the concept of sharing which is often a theme covered in children's literature. However, the nuances of fairness and individual children's understandings are not fully developed until their later years. For example, Wittig et al.'s study (2013) shows that young children seem to understand fairness means equality, but this does not develop until later in life. This is evident in their research where they found that 5-year-old children when playing games struggled at earlier ages to understand the nuances of fairness when games became more challenging and competitive. For instance, they witnessed that young children could express support for fairness norms, but when faced with the practicality of fairness in their engagement they would often counter the concept and choose individual pursuits (Smith et al., 2013; Wittig et al., 2013). Smith et al. (2013) reiterate that children aged 3 to 8 years old acknowledge the importance of equal sharing even though they typically fail to practice it until around ages 7 to 8. These studies identify the significance children assign to fairness principles and how their understanding of the concept grows as they get older. However, the research also demonstrates that children question fairness when it entails a personal sacrifice. Blake et al., (2014) state that the gap between children's fairness knowledge and actual behaviour is influenced by two factors, namely maintenance of relative advantage over peers and the way rewards are obtained.

### ***Fairness Through Developmental Lens***

The exploration of fairness in early years mainly stems from the field of development psychology, especially in the morality field. For example, according to Killen and Smetana (2015), children's understanding of fairness emerges at an early age and is the core moral issue that is explored in early childhood. In part, this is because fact that "most developmental scientists agree that morality refers to individuals' treatment of others, not...the self, and reflects individuals' intentions and motivations for actions" (Killen & Smetana, 2015, p. 702).

Research on the development of fairness in childhood draws upon classical psychological theories concerning the development of moral judgement (Hod-Shemer et al. 2018). Damon (1988) believe that fairness is one of the typical childhood moral problems (Damon, 1988). There is a rich body of research that has concentrated efforts on examining the early origins and development of fairness principles in the past decades (Paulus & Essler, 2020). Damon (1977) proposed a six-level developmental sequence for children's understanding of positive justice. The first three levels offer a nuanced perspective on early childhood perceptions, demonstrating how children at around 4 years old may confuse justice and fairness with their own desires and later use irrelevant characteristics to justify preferences, such as claiming entitlement based on gender.

### ***Challenging the Developmental Lens***

However, those studies only reveal part of the reality through developmental discourse. Children should be understood as active agents who have the capacity to understand concepts, like fairness. According to Hod-Shemer et al. (2018), there are three key components that can affect participants' understanding of fairness and interpretation of social situations, namely providing a rationale, showing empathy, and proposing a resolution. Based on this understanding, Lee et al. (2022), adopting a video-cued ethnographic method across three early



childhood classrooms, criticize developmental approaches and argue that children's enactment on fairness is very nuanced – in real-world situations, children can produce solutions that promote equality. This study shows that young children's understanding of fairness is about equal distribution and allocation of resources using fair practices. Moreover, children can choose to share materials equally and prioritize social justice. Giving this understanding, it is important to disrupt developmental perspectives and view children as active agents.

## **Children's Literature and the Picture Book**

### *Introduction of Children's Literature*

Children's literature, which emerged in the first half of the 18th century, has served a significant role in the lives of children and research highlights its profound influence on various facets of childhood development. Bayraktar (2021) reviews the literature and states that children's literature can enhance imagination, creativity, and language development in children, specifically enriching their vocabulary and fostering awareness of diverse topics. Additionally, children's literature can provide a unique way for children to explore unfamiliar situations, concepts, places, and people, allowing them to experience a broader range of emotions and perspectives beyond their daily lives. Nuba et al. (1999) believe that "children's literature is a powerful form of communication" (p. 6) because it can help children understand the meanings of their lives and increase their comprehension of the world. Furthermore, children's literature can leave a lasting impact throughout children's lives, as the messages resonate with the emotional needs of individuals, providing children valuable insights into addressing challenges (Nuba et al., 1999).

Exposure to children's literature can support increased understanding of the components of childhood and how children perceive the world. Ariès (1996) describes childhood as a

category of existence shaped by social conventions and historical experience. I could argue that reading children's literature is one aspect of childhood that can inform and shape their knowledge and lived experiences. Lerer (2008) states that "the history of children's literature is inseparable from the history of childhood, for the child was made through texts and tales he or she studied, heard, and told back" (p. 1). In this study, I examined how fairness is portrayed in children's literature as children's picture books have the capacity to inform their ideas and promote their development.

### ***What is the Picture Book?***

The picture book combines words and pictures together to tell stories. The definition of the picture books varies based on the role the illustrations play. For example, Nodelman (1988) emphasizes that illustrations take a dominant role in narrating the story; while Schwarcz & Schwarcz (1991) prioritize the interaction between illustrations and text to a greater extent. Martinez and Harmon (2012) claim that in the core part of the picture books' definition is acknowledging that stories are told by two sign systems, illustration, and text. Both systems can express meanings and have their own individual strengths. Schwarcz & Schwarcz (1991) also believe that those two languages work together. Furthermore, they argue that the picture represents a space, presenting all its elements and details simultaneously, allowing readers the freedom to interpret content and significance at their own pace. For the purpose of this study, I adopted Martinez and Harmon's idea where images and text collaborate closely to tell a story. I would also like to emphasize the crucial role illustrations play in children's picture books.

### ***The Importance of the Picture Book***

The picture book serves a pivotal role in early childhood development. It can address aesthetically, psychologically, and educationally rich content, embracing both enjoyable and

profound subjects in ways that satisfy children's sensibilities (Schwarcz & Schwarcz, 1991). In a picture book, pictures not only serve to illustrate the narrative but also extend it by introducing additional story elements, such as developing character, establishing mood, and anticipating themes (Landes, 1985). The picture book also plays a key role in shaping children's understanding of morality, aesthetics, and cultural norms (Spitz, 1999). Moreover, Spitz argues that the picture book creates a reservoir of "children's mental museums", which form a foundation for their understanding of the world (p. 14). Similarly, Horst & Houston-Price (2015) argue that books are a powerful tool that could significantly aid children in engaging and comprehending their surroundings. Therefore, the picture book can influence children's development in multiple ways, including inner growth and perception of the world.

There is a body of research supporting the idea that the picture book can influence children's learning and support them to transfer information from books to the real world. Ganea et al.'s study (2008) reveals the crucial role of early exposure to books in shaping and expanding children's understanding of the world. It claims that 15- and 18 months (about 1 and half years) old can transfer newly acquired labels between pictures and objects. Ganea et al. (2011) conducted another research, and it demonstrates that children can acquire new biological knowledge from picture books by the age of 4. This study asserts that it is important to expose young children to books as it can structure and enhance children's knowledge about the world. Akyol's study (2021), aiming to explore the effects of picture books with moral themes among 20 preschoolers and a preschool teacher, highlights the crucial role of picture books with moral themes in influencing social development during early childhood, particularly in enhancing communication skills and peer relationships. This study aims to contribute to the current research by examining three children's picture books and how fairness is portrayed.

### ***The Picture Book Supporting Interaction Between Children and Society***

Considering the vital role imagination plays in children's lives, the picture books act as an important mechanism for children to learn about the world, making it plausible to explore the interaction between children and society. Vygotsky's social-cultural theory is an essential background to explore this issue. According to this theory, children's learning develops in the context of social interaction (Vygotsky, 1978). The picture book, as a medium that is widely favored by young children, can convey important socialized messages. As Stephens (1992) states, "every book has an implicit ideology... usually in the form of assumed social structures and habits of thought" (p. 9). Likewise, McCallum and Stephens (2011) confirm that regardless of apparent simplicity, every book carries ideological implications. Stephens (1992) claims that the most important theme in children's literature is the shift in an individual from "infantile solipsism to maturing social awareness" (p. 3). As Albrecht (1954) states, "literature is interpreted as reflecting norms and values, as revealing the ethos of culture, the processes of class struggle, and certain types of social 'facts'" (p. 425). That means literature reflects society, literature influences society, and literature functions as social control (Albrecht, 1954).

### **How Can We Understand Children?**

Over the past few decades, there has been a shift in the viewpoint of childhood studies. Social studies of childhood began to flourish in the early 1980s due to the impact of *the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* (UNCRC), social movements and women's movement (Qvortrup et al., 2009). The sociology of childhood, as a distinct subdiscipline, emerged in the 1990s. There is a growing common view that childhood should be seen as an integral component of society and children are increasingly recognized as active participants within society (James & Prout, 1997). Qvortrup (2009) argues that it is wise to regard children as

constructive actors and view children in structural terms because this acknowledgment empowers children to have a voice. In other words, addressing childhood and children independently with rights, without always framing them in relation to their future roles as adults.

Therefore, I framed this part into the following sessions: children's rights, children's voices, and children's agency. The following sections align with the relevance of connecting how children's literature can inform children's future agency and actions. In this study, it is the concept of fairness and how it gets portrayed in children's literature and how this messaging on fairness, equality and justice can potentially shape and inform children's positions as active agents in their own worlds.

### ***Children's Rights***

The UNCRC, which was ratified in 1989, influenced the reconceptualization of childhood as it recognizes children as individual rights-holders. Four basic principles are forwarded in the UNCRC that include non-discrimination, the best interests of the child, the right to life and development, and participation (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2021). When following the UNCRC, children are viewed as independent rights-holders who have the same fundamental freedoms and human rights as adults (Liefwaard & Sloth-Nielsen, 2016). Smith (2011) states that it changes the dominant image of childhood and constructs a world-wide accepted standard of basic human rights for children. Hence, the UNCRC can be seen as the cornerstone of understanding children's perspective. One area of research that is not often explored is the messaging in children's books as it relates to children's future actions and agency.

It is also important to acknowledge early childhood practice that children are independent rights-holders who have the same fundamental freedoms and human rights as other human

beings with the implementation of the UNCRC. The original 1989 UNCRC document did not include references to early childhood, but the Committee on the Rights of the Child addressed this gap in 2004 focusing on implementing children's rights in early childhood. This initiative led to the creation of *General Comment No. 7* in 2005, which presents a series of recommendations specifically addressing prevailing assumptions about early childhood (Smith, 2011). It is notable that Wong's Australia-based study (2013), which aims to explore how early childhood education and care is constructed as socially just, claims that the implementation of children's rights is also a characteristic of socially just value in early childhood education. I am curious in terms of what role children's literature plays in how children come to understand their rights. If we explore picture books on concepts, like fairness and morality, with children more intentionally can they support the UNCRC and rights of the child.

### *Children's Voices*

The voices of young children are often not being heard in early childhood practice, and it can be attributed to a lack of opportunities for expression or inadequate methods to elicit young children's thoughts. For instance, children under the age of five engaging in educational decision-making can be difficult due to their limited vocabulary and experiences to articulate their viewpoints and preferences (Mortimer, 2004). However, hearing children's voices is of great significance when following UNCRC. It asserts that children are entitled to express their views on any matter that impacts their lives:

States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child. (UNCRC, 1989, Article 12)

The UNCRC (1989) also reinforces children's freedom of expression as follows:

The child shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of the child's choice. (Article 13)

Those articles specifically support the need to listen to children and the need for children to have a voice. Furthermore, it is "beyond freedom of expression, to place clear obligations on States to create the time, space and opportunity for children to be heard, and to take the necessary action in response to their views" and argues that the UNCRC "embodies the recognition that being heard, and being taken seriously is fundamental to the dignity and humanity of every child" (Lansdown, 2014, p.172-p. 188). In this study, children's voices manifested that the relevance of exposing children to concepts, like fairness, equality and morality that allow them opportunities to explore these concepts within early years settings.

### *Children's Agency*

**Agency.** There are various definitions of agency. The idea of children's agency is grounded in the belief that young people possess the capability to "set a goal, reflect and act responsibly to effect change" (OECD, 2019, p. 2). Hanson (2016) argues that children's skills in participating or making autonomous choices are related to the concept of children's agency. Likewise, Katsiada et al. (2018) define agency as children's ability to independently make decisions and choices based on their own inclinations and preferences. Varpanen (2019) believes that agency is the individual's capacity which emerges in social interactions. For the purpose of my study, I will adopt the definition of agency as "the capacity to choose, act, and influence"

(Mentha, 2015, p. 626). From this definition, children can construct the world through their actions. In other words, they can be regarded as social actors.

**Children as Social Actors.** The shift perception of seeing children as social actors can be traced back to 1970s. Back then, growth and influence of developmental psychology played a dominant role in how to perceive childhood (James, 2009). James and Prout (1997) first defined the term social actor in the first edition of their *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood* which was published in 1990:

Children are and must be seen as active in the construction and determination of their own social lives, the lives of those around them and of the societies in which they live.

Children are not just the passive subjects of social structures and processes. (p. 8)

In this study, I am focused on how children's picture books might be a mechanism for children to explore concepts, like fairness that can support their agency in early years settings.

**Agency and Participation.** Given the understanding of children's agency's definition, it is notable that participation plays a part in this term. Mentha (2015) argues that agency is "intrinsic to participation" (p. 630). It signifies that when young children actively engage in tasks and express their ideas, they are enacting their agency through practicing. James (2009) states that the achievement of children's agency is related to how children themselves can be seen as active participants in society. Moreover, agency is a crucial concept in examining the practical implementation of children's rights (Mentha, 2015). Di Santo and Kenneally (2014) states that it is necessary to recognize children's rights and responsibilities as citizens and validate children's roles as active agents in societies if we value children's early years in the realization of children's rights.

## **Theoretical Framework**



In order to explore how fairness is portrayed in children's picture books, I adopted a child rights-based approach. In the following, I outlined the key points of this approach and how it can attune us as early childhood educators (ECEs) to thinking about agency and the role materials play in exploring children's rights with young people. In this case, the materials are children's picture books and their role in the lives of children.

### ***Child Rights-based Approach***

The child rights-based approach (CRBA) is a method that "puts the needs and rights of children, their opinions and their participation in the center of all activities" (Kindernothilfe, 2019, p. 22). It acknowledges the UNCRC and act as an overarching framework that governs all actions relating to children (UNICEF ECARO, 2018). The four basic principles in UNCRC, namely non-discrimination, the best interests of the child, the right to life and development, and participation as identified previously, do not only provide the foundations for establishment of meaningful connections with young children and enhancement of effective communication (Winter, 2011), but also serves as guidance for implementing, constructing, and monitoring all children's rights (Kindernothilfe, 2019).

It is also imperative to highlight the importance of embracing the child rights-based approach when working with young children. Di Santo and Kenneally (2014) proposed the importance of child rights-based approaches in early learning spaces through the rights-based lens. They argue that a child rights-based approach to early learning entails recognizing children as individuals who possess rights while ensuring that the UNCRC is applicable to all children including young children. Di Santo and Kenneally (2014) emphasized that it is necessary to change how we perceive children, recognize their rights and responsibilities as citizens, and validate their active agency in the communities they live.

Taken collectively, I adopted a child rights-based approach as it supports the exploration of how fairness is portrayed in children's picture books regarding children as right holders. It acknowledges the value of listening to the children's perspectives and allows to prioritize the children's voices in relation to their understanding and experiences with the concept of fairness. Given this understanding, picture books in my study were examined based on UNCRC's basic principles, namely participation and the best interest of the child. I hope by applying a child rights-based approach to this study, that I will gain further insights into the role children's books have in exploring concepts, like fairness with young children.

To sum up, considering how the concept of fairness is portrayed in children's picture books is often not discussed, it is imperative to examine how fairness in various books is portrayed over time. It is meaningful to explore how this concept informs children. It can be assumed that fairness can potentially impact children's future ways of thinking and interpreting the world because it is also an examination of how fairness is described to reflect the social norms and influence the societal context. Also, there is a requirement to disrupt static discourses on child development and acknowledge that children are active in their interpretation of the world, including how materials, like books, can inform their learning.

### **Chapter Three: Methodology**

This is a qualitative study to reveal how the concept of fairness is informed in picture books. Bryman et al. (2012) explain that qualitative research mainly uses “words and images as data rather than numbers” to explore others’ lived experiences (p. 132). Contrasted with quantitative research, qualitative research is “a way of knowing in which a researcher gathers, organizes, and interprets information obtained from humans using his or her eyes and ears as filters” (Lichtman, 2013, p. 7). Similarly, Merriam (2009) states that qualitative researchers aim to comprehend the subjective interpretations and constructions of meaning that individuals have about their world and their lived experiences within it.

This qualitative research was then focused on addressing the following points, a) How is the concept of fairness conveyed in each of the children’s book? b) What is the message about fairness embedded in each book? and c) Whose perspective of fairness is told in each book? The method used in this research is a thematic content analysis. Texts and illustrations were selected and examined based on three picture books in this study to in order to analyze the existence of fairness. Coping texts and images in children’s picture books could reveal some unique perspectives through commonly seen picture books.

#### **Methodology: Content Analysis**

Content analysis can produce replicable and valid inferences from texts and other forms of text, including images, maps, sounds, signs, symbols, and even numerical records (Krippendorff, 2013). This definition stresses the inferential nature of content analysis: the fact that through an inductive, deductive, or abductive process, conclusions are drawn from certain premises and samples (Gheyle & Jacobs, 2017). Content analysis, which can be applied in both quantitative research and qualitative research, can provide new perspectives, enhance a

researcher's understanding of specific phenomena, or guide practical actions with a systematic reading of texts, images, and symbolic matter (Krippendorff, 2013).

Qualitative content analysis, based on Hsieh and Shannon's (2005) definition, is "a research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns" (p. 1278).

Likewise, Schreier (2012) states that qualitative content analysis is a systematic approach used to describe the meaning of qualitative content by categorizing materials into instances of the classification within a coding framework. According to Short (1995), qualitative content analysis can "provide in-depth contextual analyses and so presents a powerful exploration of content within the framework" (p. 21).

In content analysis, the concept of inference plays a crucial role, as researchers employ analytical constructs or rules of inference to derive answers to research questions from textual data (White & Marsh, 2006). They claim that texts and context are two independent domains and inference allows researchers to draw conclusions from the textual domain to the contextual domain using these inferential rules. Hence, to ensure that inferences are both systematic and informed, I must engage in close reading of textual material and associate it with my framework of fairness.

## **Method: Thematic Content Analysis**

### ***Introduction***

According to Anderson (2007), thematic content analysis (TCA) involves descriptively presenting qualitative data by identifying and portraying common themes or categories through interview transcripts or other analyzed texts, enabling the categorization of diverse information into thematic groups. This process prioritizes minimal interpretation while emphasizing the

organization of data to highlight underlying patterns from extensive entries (Anderson, 2007). Based on Short (1995), thematic content analysis is “the use of a theory or theme to analyze a text or series of texts” (p. 21). Given this understanding, the literary work will be analyzed in the framework of a particular theoretical, political sociological, or psychological framework (Short, 1995). My research adopted a thematic content analysis. In my study, I choose to focus on how fairness is conveyed through three children’s picture books over time as the focus. In this study, I closely examined the data to identify common themes – topics, ideas, and patterns of meaning that come up repeatedly in relation to fairness.

### ***Data***

The thematic content analysis was based on three picture books published over a 50-year period. They are: *The Little Red Hen*, *Click, Clack, Moo: Cows That Type*, and *That’s not Mine*. These books are accessible through the Internet and public libraries. The books were published in different time periods and have distinctive features. It is necessary to clarify that Paul Galdone’s *The Little Red Hen* was originally published in 1979. My study utilized the version republished in 2011. The following is the full information of those three books:

### ***Table 1***

#### ***Books for Thematic Content Analysis***

Book #1	Galdone, P. (2011). <i>The little red hen</i> (P. Galdone). Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. (Original work published 1979)
Book #2	Cronin, D. (2000). <i>Click, clack, moo: Cows that type</i> (J. Lewin, Illus.). Little Simon.
Book #3	Kang, A. (2015). <i>That’s (not) mine</i> (C. Weyant. Illus.). Two Lions.

### ***Analysis Procedure***

Firstly, I read and studied references to source some key points related to the concept of fairness and how this concept is studied in the early years of childhood. This information was used as a reference for the development of further thematic content analysis. Additionally, I examined the views on childhood and key concepts related to contemporary childhood studies to support deeper exploration. Secondly, I read and re-read the picture books, looking for information related to fairness within the texts and images. Also, I tried to connect the information found under the structure of fairness categories to conduct thematic content analysis. Thirdly, I engaged in close reading of the children's picture books by examining similarities and differences in those picture books related to fairness, aiming to discover how fairness is portrayed in those books. In addition, I tried to identify inferences across various contexts, and uncover implied meanings embedded in those texts and images. I then identified common themes – topics, ideas, and patterns of meaning that come up repeatedly in relation to fairness. In addition, I used Kohlberg's theory of moral development and Gilligan's ethics of care to support the inquiry when analyzing how fairness is portrayed in the children's literature. The use of Kohlberg and Gilligan allows opportunity to understand more closely how fairness is depicted across the picture books and how it might inform children's understandings of agency.

## Chapter Four: Findings

The three picture books I proposed to examine in this chapter are: *The Little Red Hen*, *Click, Clack, Moo: Cows That Type*, and *That's (Not) Mine*. In this chapter, I presented my analysis based on the following research questions: a) How is the concept of fairness conveyed in each children's picture book? b) What messages are embedded in the depiction of fairness in each book? c) Whose perspective of fairness is told in each book? I began by reporting the findings based on each book.

### The Little Red Hen

#### *Introduction*

*The Little Red Hen* is a classic folk tale that was first collected in 1874. It has had many adaptations over the past hundred years. My study utilized Paul Galdone's work which was originally published in 1979 and has become a staple version. In the story, the little red hen undertook almost all the chores in the house. In contrast, Galdone portrays the cat, the dog, and the mouse as lazy characters through their preference for sleeping at comfortable spots – they did nothing but lounging around in the house until the little red hen found some grains of wheat and asked for help from the other animals to plant, cut, grind the wheat, and bake a cake. However, none of the other animals were willing to contribute their efforts at each stage of the process. In the end, the hen decided to eat all the cake herself. Later the other animals started to be actively involved in household chores.

#### *Analysis*

In the opening part of this picture book, the author introduces the hen, cat, dog, and mouse who “all lived together in a cozy little house” (Galdone, 2011, p. 1). The author conveyed the characters' features through several illustrations – the hen was hardworking, shouldering all

the household chores – “the little red hen had to do all the housework” (Galdone, 2011, p. 5); the other animals prioritized their own comfort and convenience over their responsibilities by not participating in any work. The illustrations present this contrast with expressive and full details. The hen took on all the cooking, dishwashing, bed-making, floor cleaning, sewing, and gardening tasks. From all of these details, it can be inferred that the hen acted as the role of a parent within the household. It sets the stage to reveal the hen's moral lesson.

One day, the hen found grains of wheat in the garden. This time, she decided not to take on the responsibilities alone. Each time the little red hen repeatedly sought other animals' assistance, she consistently received the same response, “Not I”. The repetitive texts of “Not I”, coupled with the illustrations, were presented four times in this book, including the process of planting the wheat, cutting the wheat, grinding the flour, and baking the cake. Each time, the little red hen faced their refusal, her answer was always “Then I will”. Therefore, she completed all the tasks by herself. The recurring texts established a rhythmic pattern in the narrative. Furthermore, it emphasized the depiction of the little red hens' parent-like role and each animal's proportional contributions.

The above lacklustre reactions from the other animals contrasted with their eagerness to eat the cake later. It is at this moment that the little red hen stepped into a role of authority, educating the others about a moral lesson. When delicious smell of the cake filled the house, the cat, dog, and mouse couldn't wait to rush into the kitchen, hoping to share the tasty cake. At this moment, the hen asked them, “who will eat this cake?” (Galdone, 2011, p. 16). The three animals all cried out, “I will” (Galdone, 2011, p. 16). This contrasts strongly with their repeated “Not I” during the work. The little red hen said the following passage:

All by myself



I planted the wheat,  
I tended the wheat,  
I cut the wheat,  
I took the wheat to the mill  
to be ground into flour.

All by myself  
I gathered the sticks,  
I built the fire,  
I mixed the cake.  
And  
all by myself  
I am going to eat it! (Galdone, 2001, p. 17).

The hen's tone indicates that she was an authority figure here because this statement is lengthy compared to previous short question-and-answer dialogues in this story. The little red hen emphasized every step of planting the wheat and baking the cake, reminding other animals that this was done "all by myself" (Galdone, 2011, p. 17); therefore, she deserved to eat the whole cake. Using a serious and unchallengeable tone, the hen occupied a higher moral position than the other animals: I did all the work, so I deserve all the cake; and if you haven't contributed any work, then you have no right to share the cake. It is a widely accepted principle of distributive fairness that no one can rightfully demand to share the fruits of labour without contributing to the work. The hen made it clear to her companions that she had undertaken all the work, so it was only fair for her to eat the cake entirely by herself. The other three animals,

expecting rewards without efforts, learned from this incident and became actively involved in housework.

### ***Depiction of Fairness and Embedded Messages***

From the analysis above, *The Little Red Hen* depicts the principle of distributive fairness as it presents that what you get is equal to the proportion you contribute. In this story, the little red hen alone undertook all the work of planting wheat and baking the cake. Thus, it was fair for her to eat the entire cake because it corresponded to the proportion of her contributions. By contrast, the other three animals made no contribution to the work, so they were not entitled to any portion of the cake. Therefore, *The Little Red Hen* reveals a moral lesson that is straightforward – no contribution, no share; and the ratio of possession should match the ratio of contribution. This principle, to some extent, also aligns with the people's practice of distributing goods in daily life and fits with our common sense of fairness.

The depiction of fairness can be interpreted typically through Kohlberg's moral development theory stage one, namely obedience and punishment orientation. In this stage, children have not yet developed an internal and autonomous moral sense, meaning that they obey the rules to avoid punishment from authority (Kohlberg, 1984). Therefore, the moral reasoning features are considered egocentric and heteronomous and lack equity and prescriptive role-taking (Kohlberg, 1984). The hen, who can be seen as a parent-like authority, has power over the cat, the dog, and the mouse, who symbolize the embodiment of the child. Therefore, the other three animals must accept the punishment that they cannot have the cake made by the hen; they must obey the rule, taking shared responsibilities or they cannot get a proportional share. At the end of the story, it can be inferred that the other animals actively participated in the work in order to avoid further punishment.

Although there is a complete storyline and humorous dialogue in this story, I would argue that it still conveys the principle of fairness to children in an abstract way. As Gilligan pointed out, women and children tend to think about moral problems as “contextual and narrative rather than formal and abstract” (Gilligan, 1982/1993, p. 19). This story appears to deliver a widely accepted moral message to children straightforwardly, namely no contribution, then no share; the ratio of possession should match the ratio of contribution. Therefore, it is evident that this book has a strong moralistic tone which positions children in a morally deficient role and regards children should be under the guidance of adults or authority to develop their morality. In this context, the depiction of fairness in this story appears pale and disconnected from children's lives to some extent. Therefore, *The Little Red Hen* is a high moralistic story told from an adult's or authority's perspective.

Furthermore, from the lens of the ethic of care, the hen, representing a parent-like authority, did not embody what Noddings refers to as “the one-caring” (Noddings, 1984). Noddings gave an example of a dialogue between a teacher and a student who is doing poorly in math. When the student tells his teacher that he hates math, what a caring teacher should do is not manipulate his student or impose the teacher's love for math onto the student. Instead, the teacher should, “as nearly as I can, with the view from his eyes” (Noddings, 1984, p.15), ask questions like: how would it feel to hate mathematics? What reasons could I find for learning it? Noddings (1984) argues that the one-caring must start by putting oneself in the shoes of others to foster a relationship between one and another human being, which opens a chance for further change. Therefore, when examining *The Little Red Hen* from this perspective, it is the hen who quietly took on all the household chores, allowing the cat, dog, and mouse to develop habits of avoiding work. However, when she decided to plant wheat and bake the cake, each time she

faced the refusal of other animals, she did not take any further actions to develop a relationship that could promote mutual understanding. From the above example provided by Noddings, it is obvious that the hen closed off the possibility of dialogue by saying “Then I will” at that moment.

### **Click, Clack, Moo: Cows That Type**

#### ***Introduction***

*Click, Clack, Moo: Cows That Type*, which was published in 2000, is seen as “a new workers-rights classic” (Stippich, 2014, p. 36). This humorous story is written by Doreen Cronin and illustrated by Betsy Lewin. In the story, cows and hens communicated with Farmer Brown through typed notes. In order to improve their working conditions, they asked to be provided electric blankets in the cold barn. When the farmer refused to meet their demands, the cows and hens went on strike and withhold their milk and egg production. The duck acted as a neutral party to make the two parties negotiate. Finally, both Farmer Brown and cows and hens made a concession.

#### ***Analysis***

It is notable that Farmer Brown and the cows are in unequal positions at the beginning of the story. At first, Farmer Brown “couldn’t believe his ears” (Cronin & Lewin, 2000, p. 1) that cows can type; he “couldn’t believe his eyes” (Cronin & Lewin, 2000, p. 2) that cows can post a note to ask for electric blankets. This narrative describes Farmer Brown’s belief in his authority over the cows. In this relationship, Farmer Brown is the master, and the animals have no right to propose improvements in their working conditions. Therefore, Farmer Brown rejected the cows’ request. In contrast, the cows considered themselves as equal workers with the employer Farmer Brown instead of seeing themselves as Farmer Brown’s private property or as slaves. Hence, the

cows posted the notification of the strike – “Sorry. We’re closed. No milk today” (Cronin & Lewin, 2000, p. 4). In this relationship, the cows consider themselves to have the right to make reasonable demands to improve their working environment; they also had the right to take further action, such as going on strike, if their demands were denied. The illustration on this page implicitly conveys Farmer Brown’s rage after seeing the strike note: a dark body shadow with a red backdrop, which is also the colour of the barn. It contrasts with curious cows watching Farmer Brown. The strong emotional contrast between the cows and Farmer Brown could certainly make children laugh when reading this book. Besides, it also reflects the different understanding of both sides’ rights based on their positions.

The unity of animals plays a role in changing Farmer Brown’s stubborn idea because it is evident that the strike could have huge impact on the running of the farm. As the strike went on, the hens joined the strike by asking Farmer Brown to provide electric blankets, or else they would not provide him with eggs anymore. It represents the unity of the workers. On the one hand, this makes Farmer Brown realize that the cows’ demands at the beginning were not isolated. In fact, it shows that many animals in the barn needed help since they were also suffering poor working conditions. On the other hand, after the hens joined the strike, it also indicates the increasing strength of the workers’ strike movement, which would put more pressure on Farmer Brown. Despite his anger, Farmer Brown started to realize that the impact of the strike on him was unbearable: “How can I run a farm with no milk and no eggs!” (Cronin & Lewin, 2000, p. 8).

The increasing pressure caused by the strike forces Farmer Brown to start communication with cows and hens. The letter that Farmer Brown typed symbolizes that he began to negotiate using an equal form of communication. The illustration here adopts a soft, light-yellow

backdrop, showing a more relaxed atmosphere compared to the preceding tension. However, Farmer Brown still put farm animals in a lower position and took their work for granted – “You are cows and hens. I demand milk and eggs” (Cronin & Lewin, 2000, p. 9). In this situation, the negotiation was challenging, and Farmer Brown still refused to provide electric blankets. This led the strike to a deadlock.

In this situation, the cows held an emergency meeting to discuss further bargaining chips and made concessions at last. The illustration adopts a darker tone to emphasize the tense atmosphere of this meeting. It is also notable that the other animals' reaction during the cows' emergency meeting. They were watching the meeting through a crack of the barn door, “but none of them could understand Moo” (Cronin & Lewin, 2000, p. 11). In my view, this scenario metaphorically implies that the labor rights awareness of the other animals has not yet awakened. Eventually, the cows decided to adjust the bargaining chips, offering the typewriter in exchange for electric blankets. Farmer Brown thought this was a good deal and accepted the cows' offer. This could be seen as the second phase of the strike, where both sides needed to make compromises and concessions. On the side of the workers, the cows and hens conceded by giving up their typewriters. On Farmer Brown's side, he changed his previous uncompromising attitude and accepted the new negotiation conditions. At this point, he was no longer the authoritarian master but transformed into an equal employer who could engage in dialogues and make concessions.

It is noteworthy that the transition of the duck's role in the story. The duck initially played the role of mediator, passing messages between the cows, hens, and Farmer Brown. However, instead of returning the typewriter as the neutral party, the duck also used it to make their own demands: “The pond is quite boring. We'd like a diving board” (Cronin & Lewin,

2000, p. 14). There is only one illustration without text on the final page showing a duck leaping from a diving board. This provides a humorous and unexpected ending to the story and inspires children to imagine more about the further story that might be caused by this strike.

As we can see from the story, the awareness of workers' equal rights among the animals on the farm began with the cows, followed by the hens, and then the ducks. It could be assumed that the other animals, who were concerned about the emergency meeting, might also use typewriters to make their own reasonable demands to Farmer Brown. Besides, the diving board for the ducks on the last page also reveals that Farmer Brown might finally recognize the rights of all the animals on the farm.

### ***Depiction of Fairness and Embedded Messages***

The depiction of fairness in this story largely falls into Kohlberg's theory of moral development stage two as the characters advocate for their own needs and interests. Stage two is also called individualism, instrumental purpose, and exchange orientation. Kohlberg (1984) pointed out that at this stage, children's moral cognition is characterized by a concrete individualistic perspective. In this story, the cows and hens could not tolerate the cold barn and had a strong need for warmth. Based on this individual necessity, they requested electric blankets from Farmer Brown. This kind of moral reasoning and behaviour that is driven by individual needs should be classified as the preconventional level stage two. Compared with stage one, children can recognize the legitimate needs of others in stage two, however, their moral reasoning still stems from their own needs and interests (Kohlberg, 1984). Specifically, regarding children's understanding of negotiation, compromise, and reciprocity at this stage, Kohlberg believed that children at this stage have "a notion of concrete exchange of equal value or goods in serving the needs of self and other" (Kohlberg, 1984, p. 629).

Someone might argue that the way this story portrays fairness should be categorized as stage five in Kohlberg's moral development theory because the cows and hens appear to advocate for better working conditions and are fighting for human rights and social welfare. However, the key distinction between stage two and stage five lies in where moral reasoning originates, whether from individual needs or from social interests. The cows and hens did not request electric blankets for other animals who were enduring the cold in the barn together with them, nor did they invite the others to join the strike to fight for universal equal workers' rights. Therefore, in my view, the depiction of fairness still aligns with Kohlberg's stage two of moral development.

Furthermore, the negotiation process for fair treatment between two sides in this book also reflects to some extent the characteristics of children's moral reasoning in Kohlberg's theory stage two. Firstly, all parties involved, including the cows, hens, and Farmer Brown, realized that refusing to negotiate and letting the strike continue would certainly harm their individual interests. Therefore, Farmer Brown would say that he cannot run the farm without milk and eggs. Secondly, all parties in the story continuously assessed whether the negotiation terms have equal value that could lead to an agreement. The most important principle in negotiation is the principle of fair exchange, which means that the conditions used for bargaining need to be equated and accepted by both parties. In the first round of negotiation, Farmer Brown did not accept the conditions proposed by the cows and hens to exchange electric blankets for milk and eggs, as he considered it an unfair exchange. After an emergency meeting, the cows decided to exchange typewriters instead, which Farmer Brown then accepted. As shown in the story, in the negotiation process, both sides tried to evaluate the negotiation conditions and ultimately found mutually acceptable terms for exchange on the basis of their own interests and needs.



More importantly, *Click, Clack, Moo: Cows That Type* vividly conveys the concept of fairness in a way that reveals farm animals, who represent children, have freedom and right to seek fair treatment. In this story, the cows and hens as the disadvantaged on the farm, had to bear the cold barn at first, however, they considered themselves equal workers to have the right to make reasonable demands. Therefore, they asked for electric blankets to keep them warm so that they could have better working conditions.

*Click, Clack, Moo: Cows That Type* demonstrates a strong awareness of social reform and activism for young children. Certainly, as mentioned before, the cow's and the hens' demands for improving working conditions reflect children's moral reasoning features in Kohlberg's moral development theory pre-conventional level, which views children as egocentric who can only think and act from their individual needs and interests. However, this story eventually conveys the concept of fairness to young children in a way of shows the characters' agency. It reflects the transformation of the conceptualization of childhood in recent decades that children are active social actors rather than insignificant, passive members of society. Just like James (2009) describes, "Children are and must be seen as active in the construction of their own lives, the lives of those around them and of the societies in which they live" (p. 8). Kohlberg's moral development theory largely underestimates children's moral reasoning and actions as it views children as egocentric and can only think and act on their individual needs and interests. The traditional approach of developmental psychology represented by Kohlberg's theory has been challenged by new paradigms in the study of childhood.

*Click, Clack, Moo: Cows That Type* is a story which can be understood as an allegory of workers' rights created for children. Therefore, it implies that children could be active social actors in order to make a fair world. The embedded message in the depiction of fairness is that

children have abilities to be social agents instead of passive recipients. Specifically, the cows and hens are described as the charters who they have many freedoms, such as freedom of expression, freedom of association, and freedom of peaceful assembly, which are children's basic rights at UNCRC. Additionally, this story also portrays that when farm animals can stand up and speak out their reasonable demands when encounter unfair treatment. As we can see, children often say "This is not fair" in their daily life. However, by presenting farm animals as active social actors in the process of strike that happened on a farm, it reveals to children that they are capable to seek for fair treatment.

By highlighting the agency of the farm animals to question and act in improving their working conditions, *Click, Clack, Moo: Cows That Type* encourages children to recognize their own capacity to navigate their own moral compass. It empowers children by demonstrating that even the smallest voices can spark changes. Through the act of typing notes on an old typewriter, the cows communicated their rightful demands for better working conditions to Farmer Brown. This act of communication serves as a metaphor for the importance of freedom of expression. As the story unfolds, children witness the animals negotiating with the farmer, illustrating the value of negotiation in achieving fairness. Furthermore, the book also encouraged children to question authority and challenge injustice in a peaceful manner. Therefore, this picture book can be understood as a story that empowers children and encourages children to advocate for what is right in the world.

## **That's (Not) Mine**

### ***Introduction***

*That's (Not) Mine* was created by Kang and Weyant in 2015. It presents a different style compared with the other two picture books. It features limited texts using young children's daily

languages and simplistic backgrounds, characterized by ample white space in its illustrations. With simple text and expressive illustrations, a real children's world is revealed. In the story, a tall, orange, bear-like creature, and a short, purple, bear-like creature both want to sit in a comfy yellow chair that neither of them wants to give up, leading to a tense fight over ownership and then a humorous ending. Eventually, a third bear-like creature appears and claims that he has the right to have the chair.

### *Analysis*

This book contextualizes the story in an authentic environment that every child could encounter, which makes it different from the other two books. Furthermore, unlike the other two picture books, this book features with simple and short dialogues. For the purpose of research, I divided this story into three parts and analyzed text and illustrations from those parts.

**Justify “Mine” and Fairness.** Children's perception of “mine” is intricately tied to their emerging sense of ownership and autonomy. At the beginning of the story, the orange creature and the purple creature argued about who should preserve the rights of the yellow chair. The orange creature claimed that “I'm sitting in it now” and “I have it now” (Kang and Weyant, 2015, pp. 2-3); the purple creature claimed that “I was sitting in it before” and “I had it first” (Kang and Weyant, 2015, pp. 2-3). In the process of arguing, the purple bear-like creature tried to solve the problem and brought out a new swivel chair. The purple bear-like creature then claimed “Well, this is mine” (Kang and Weyant, 2015, p. 4). It attracts the orange creature's attention and asks, “Can I try it?... Just once” (Kang and Weyant, 2015, p. 6). Interestingly, after offering the orange creature the opportunity to play with the new swivel chair, the purple creature sits on the yellow chair. When the orange creature comes back to preserve the rights over the yellow chair, the purple creature uses a perception of fairness that originally from the

orange creature to reject the orange creature's claim by saying "No, it's mine" (Kang and Weyant, 2015, p. 6).

There are numbers of mimetic words accompany the characters' actions with various variations offering vivid depictions of movement. For example, when the brown bear leaps onto the black chair and dashes away, the word "zoom" is paired with elongated lines to convey a sense of rapid motion. Near the end of the dispute, the illustrator employs large, bold, uppercase lettering to emphasize the declaration "IT'S MINE" (Kang and Weyant, 2015, p. 12). This amplifying texts effectively emphasize the characters' frustration and tension between the two bears for who should preserve the rights over the yellow chair.

**Care Perspective and Fairness.** There is a plot worthy exploring when looking back at the two bear-like creatures' conflict through the care perspective. Following the heated argument, they both fell over. It is the turning point of the story. Since this moment they realized they can still play together and be friends. It is the beginning of empathy – they begin to care for each other. The illustration shows that they hold hands and say sorry to each other. From here, they are both no longer insisting on having the yellow chair or claiming ownership of it. Instead, they revert back to friendship situation, as the purple creature invites the brown creature to play: "Want to go play?" (Kang and Weyant, 2015, p. 14). it is commonly observed in young children and reflects children's perspective which is often neglected by adults. Therefore, it is a plot vividly depicts and reveals children's enactment and understanding of fairness in an authentic world.

**Sharing and Taking Turns: Children as Agents.** Beyond this, it is notable that the author presents another depiction of fairness among young children. According to the previous literature review, young children's understanding of fairness can be related to equality by

sharing. In practice, taking turns is a common way to achieve this status. In order to achieve fairness and settle disputes, early childhood educators and caregivers often adopt the way that encourages children to share or take turns in early childhood settings or multi-child families. In the first part of the story, it is obviously that the two bear-like creatures did not choose to share the yellow chair. It is notable that a blue creature observed the previously mentioned two bear-like creatures from behind the yellow comfy chair. It is reasonable to assume that the blue bear had been observing the other two creatures and was waiting for its turn to sit on the chair. The last page shows that after waiting, the blue bear can finally claim the rights of the yellow chair as "Mine". This unexpected twist sophisticatedly portrays children's authentic enactment of fairness in their lives. This scenario, without any authority appearing in the environment, is also commonly seen in young children's lives, which is captured and presented by the author.

### ***Depiction of Fairness and Embedded Messages***

The concept of fairness in *That's (Not) Mine* is conveyed both from Kohlberg's theory and care perspective. The story is triggered by the rights of having the yellow comfy chair in the beginning, which is partially related to the distribution of resources and can be explained with Kohlberg's moral development theory pre-conventional level. Kohlberg (1984) argue that the pre-conventional level is often seen among children, especially most children under nine years old. The dispute between the two bear-like creatures over the yellow chair can be closed connected with children's moral development characteristics as Kohlberg described in his theory.

In the argument, the purple bear-like creature and orange bear-like creature both claimed they have the yellow chair. At this point, children's perception of "mine" is intricately tied to their strong egocentric nature, reflecting "naive moral realism" at stage one of the moral development theory (Kohlberg, 1984, p. 624). When the orange bear-like creature played with

the swivel chair and came back for the yellow one it was sitting before, it is notable that those two bear-like creatures used a perception of fairness that was originally held by the other. It explicitly reflects children's egocentric nature based on Kohlberg's theory of moral development, which is stage two – "a concrete individualistic perspective" (Kohlberg, 1984, p. 625). From this point of view, their claims can be understood as the following: "I should have the yellow chair because I was sitting in it before/I should have the yellow chair because I am sitting in it now"; "I should have the yellow chair because I had it first/ I should have the yellow chair because I have it now". It means both bear-like creatures want to have the yellow chair when they want it and they justify their choice based on their own interests.

The depiction of fairness in this story can also be explored through the care perspective. As Gilligan (1982/1993) describes, there is "potential in crisis for developmental transition and [this] demonstrates how the recognition of defeat can signal the discovery of a new way" (p. 123). The purple bear-like creature and orange bear-like creature's dispute can be regarded as a test of their relationship, and they finally got tired of arguing. Eventually, both of them fell over and got hurt. As Gilligan (1982/1993) describes, "an ethic of care rests on the premise of nonviolence – that no one should be hurt" (p. 174). Additionally, it aligns with Gilligan's view that the recognition of defeat can signal the discovery of a new solution. This moment is the beginning of their empathy and connection. They said sorry to each other and started to care for each other. Here, this turning point seems unexpected. Nevertheless, it is commonly observed in young children and reflects children's perspective which is often neglected by adults. The return of their friendship implies that relationships and connection are more valued in young children's lives than adults may think.

The depiction of fairness in this book informs that children have abilities to develop their morality when facing tough situations. This book presents children's conceptualization of fairness. Reading this book is like watching two young children's natural interaction in real-life scenarios. In this context, it reveals children's own voices and enactments of fairness which are often neglected by adults. That is, relationships are important compared with Kohlberg's views on children's fixed and absolute manner of fairness. Although sharing is often encouraged by educators and caregivers, children have rights to refrain from sharing, and they can practice agency when faced with conflicts in order to enact fairness. Therefore, the embedded messages in the depiction of fairness are following: children have the ability to produce fair solutions with care and empathy; friendship is more important than fixed principle of fairness. More importantly, this depiction reveals that children as agents have abilities to solve the fairness issues.

Unlike the other two picture books which convey explicit messages and principles, the narrative of this book is simple while focused on children's experiences. The book does not prioritize conveying profound meanings or implications. Rather, through its simplicity, it affirms children's abilities to express themselves authentically and embraces the authenticity inherent in their experiences. Given the depiction of fairness and embedded messages, it can be concluded that it is a story that encourages children to solve fairness problems in their own creative ways and at their own pace, like by sharing and taking turns. By respecting their agency, it shows that children should be regarded as active agents in moral reasoning.

### Chapter Five: Conclusion

This is a qualitative thematic content analysis research conducted by examining the text and images in three picture books in order to answer three questions: a) How is the concept of fairness conveyed in each children's picture book? b) What messages are embedded in the depiction of fairness in each book? c) Whose perspective of fairness is told in each book? My research attempted to analyze how picture books interpreted fairness for children from several different perspectives. These perspectives included Kohlberg's theory of moral development, which is considered representative of traditional developmental psychology, Gilligan's ethic of care, and children's agency and rights.

This study found that different perspectives can explain and portray the moral value of fairness in picture books to some extent. When examined through Kohlberg's theory of moral development, the characters which represented children's moral reasoning capacities in all three books are at the preconventional level. Kohlberg argued that children at this level are egocentric, individualistic, or instrumental (Kohlberg, 1984). In other words, children at this level need external authority to restrict them, and they obey the demands of authority because they want to avoid punishment. In Kohlberg's view, children at this level cannot comprehend social norms. They can only understand moral principles based on their own needs and interests.

My study advocates for the care perspective and children's agency. In these two perspectives, we can better understand the subjectivity of children and the unique characteristics of their moral reasoning. Additionally, children are seen as social actors who can change their environment and society through action. Overall, this study suggests that although Kohlberg's theory could explain some of the children's moral reasoning patterns, it undermines children's agency and puts them in a morally deficient position. Therefore, from this perspective, this study



challenges the approach of developmental psychology represented by Kohlberg's moral development theory.

### **Implications**

Based on the findings of this study, there are some implications for caregivers and early childhood educators.

It is crucial for us to acknowledge children's agency when we select picture books and use them as teaching resources related to moral values such as fairness. Firstly, when selecting children's books or other materials, it is a priority to examine how much they can promote children's agency while respecting children's voices. Unlike picture books about nature and the physical environment around us, which primarily aim to provide factual knowledge, books addressing social and moral issues are about looking at matters of values. Secondly, educators and caregivers must recognize that children have agency in their moral development. Therefore, it is necessary to examine a book carefully to see whether the characters who represent children are respected for who they are and the capacities they have or if their abilities in moral reasoning are undermined. Additionally, caregivers and educators also need to consider whether the picture book provides enough space and opportunity for children to participate in discussions about moral issues when we use them.

Although selecting books carefully is necessary, how educators and caregivers use these books to initiate dialogues with children is more important because it can promote children's participation and navigate their own moral compass. According to Noddings (1984), dialogue is one of the great means of moral education and can be considered as the stepping stone for moral education as a whole. "Of first importance to the one-caring is relatedness" (p.182). It is through dialogue that parents and educators can establish a relationship with children, share their

emotions, and view issues from their perspective. Therefore, a real caring adult should strive to invite children into dialogue when using books as educational materials. For books that undermine children's agency, caregivers and educators need to be aware, keep a critical view, and initiate a dialogue. They can creatively guide children to ask questions while reading or challenge them to have an intellectual adventure together.

We can take *The Little Red Hen* as an example. As I discussed above, this book contains a moralizing tone and overlooks children's agency. However, caring parents and educators can pause appropriately during reading and raise questions. For instance, when the cat, dog, and mouse refuse the hen's request to participate in household chores, we can ask children these questions: Why do you think they don't want to join in the work? Is there a special reason? Is it reasonable? We can even present some hypothetical questions to children; for instance, if a starving and seriously ill friend came to the house when the cake was ready, should the hen share the cake with him or her? If the answer is yes, then under what circumstances do you think the hen should share the cake with other characters who haven't participated in the work? If the answer is no, what do you think the consequence would be, and what are your thoughts about this consequence? Therefore, the picture book is not just meant to be read by adults to children, but it provides an opportunity for both adults and children to have equal dialogues.

### **Limitations**

This study has the following limitations.

Firstly, the three picture books selected as samples for this research do not address the aspect of equity in the fairness theory. The concept of fairness includes two dimensions: equality and equity. Equality refers to the equal distribution of social goods, while equity requires the differentiated distribution of resources based on specific circumstances and people's need to

compensate for those in disadvantaged positions. Nowadays, issues related to equity or social justice are quite controversial and widely discussed. Therefore, picture books as a medium which can promote children's interaction between themselves, and the world play a pivotal role and it should not be neglected. Kohlberg regards equity as a more advanced aspect of fairness than equality in his theory of moral development. He argues that equity is "absent at Stage 1 because of the egocentric, heteronomous nature of this stage of reasoning" (Kohlberg, 1984, p. 625). Despite this, childhood researchers studying from other approaches such as the ethic of care and children's agency and rights disagree with this viewpoint. They believe that children are capable of recognizing equity but may demonstrate it in unique ways. Nevertheless, for young children, equity reasoning is obviously a topic worth further investigation. However, due to a shortage of samples on equity issues, this study did not explore how picture books portray equity to children, which is certainly a limitation.

Secondly, this study employed qualitative content analysis for research methodology, which lacks empirical evidence in both data collection and analysis. One of the research questions in this study investigated how picture books portray the concept of fairness. Children are the most important readers of these picture books. Therefore, it is important to investigate to what extent and in what unique ways children comprehend the concepts of fairness conveyed in the books. Additionally, this study advocates for respecting children's agency and rights and listening to children's voices. Thus, from the standpoint of this research, it is also essential to consider children's understanding of how the principles of fairness were expressed in these books.

### **Further Studies**

Further study is needed to explore how children's picture books inform their understanding of fairness. It is possible to design experimental research which can investigate how preschool children understand and inform a specific aspect of fairness in picture books. As mentioned above, this not only supplements the empirical data of this study but also further validates whether the findings of this study align with the comprehension of children in the real world. To be specific, further research could select two groups of children with the same age and gender ratio from several preschools as the experimental groups and control groups. In the authentic classroom setting, the researcher can read the picture books depicting fairness to the children. Then, children will be invited to choose an art-based approach they prefer, including storytelling, drawing, etc., to explain their conception of fairness to the researcher. Finally, the collected materials would be coded and analyzed. In summary, further experimental research may greatly supplement and advance the existing findings of this study.

### **Personal Reflections**

The exploration of this study is just like a journey to rediscover the children and children's picture books.

Firstly, I explored further how we should understand children and connect it with my previous educational beliefs. Based on my previous experiences, principles like "seeing children", "listening to children", and "following children" emerged as important guidelines to lead me to design educational activities and reflect my educational practice. For example, in a Montessori classroom, it is important to allow the children to explore the environment and materials at their own pace. Similarly, as a teacher of drama in education, creating a safe space for expression and stimulating, sometimes challenging children's ideas are important because engagement in drama course can contribute children's independent thinking. However, I

understood it from the perspective that children should be positioned at the center of education and have never thought deeply about why was imperative to respect and enact those beliefs. This research helps me strengthen my educational philosophies by grounding them in children's rights. Consequently, I now have a clearer understanding of adults' role when working with children, moving beyond mere tell myself, I am the leader, I am the follower.

Secondly, the analysis of picture books made me realize that even seemingly simple texts can convey some complex ideas. Take the picture book *That's (Not) Mine* as an example. It is a picture book which likely to be neglected due to its simple language derived from children's everyday conversations. It took me time to immerse myself in the world of young children's world and uncover its nuanced messages in the depiction of fairness. During this exploration, the ethic of care also provided a new lens through which to analyze how fairness is portrayed. Furthermore, this little book is full of thought-provoking details. Notably, the absence of authority figures in the bear-like creatures' enactment of fairness raises questions. As it features ample white space in its illustrations, it seems like there is no adult or authority engage in the children's activities. However, it is unrealistic in real early childhood settings. This prompts inquiries into how these creatures exercise agency in their moral development, why the blue bear-like creature chooses to wait and take turns, or how the purple bear-like creature initiates play invitations. These questions not only stimulate critical thinking but also may serve as prompts for caregivers and early childhood educators to engage children in meaningful discussions. Hence, it underscores the importance for caregivers and educators to carefully select picture books and be aware of every detail in the children's picture books.

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**Appendix: Laurence Kohlberg's Six Stages of Moral Development**

<b>Preconventional Level</b>	
Stage 1. The stage of punishment and obedience	Right is literal obedience to rules and authority, avoiding punishment, and not doing physical harm.
Stage 2. The stage of individual instrumental purpose and exchange	Right is serving one's own or other's needs and making fair deals in terms of concrete exchange.
<b>Conventional Level</b>	
Stage 3. The stage of mutual interpersonal expectations, relationships, and conformity	The right is playing a good (nice) role, being concerned about the other people and their feelings, keeping loyalty and trust with partners, and being motivated to follow rules and expectations.
Stage 4. The stage of social system and conscience maintenance	The right is doing one's duty in society, upholding the social order, and maintaining the welfare of society or the group.
<b>Postconventional and Principled Level</b>	
Stage 5. The stage of prior rights and social contract or utility	The right is upholding the basic rights, values, and legal contracts of a society, even when they conflict with the concrete rules and laws of the group.
Stage 6. The stage of universal ethical principles	This stage assumes guidance by universal ethical principles that all humanity should follow.