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# 'We would just assume the wolf would be a boy ...': critical engagement with children's literature by early years educators

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## ABSTRACT

This paper presents a case study of the impact of an unconscious bias training intervention on early childhood educators' awareness of unconscious bias and their professional practice. We also present the findings of an audit of the picture books read to children and the rationale for the choice of books. Participants in the study were 23 educators based in 13 early childhood education settings in the North East of England. The intervention consisted of two sessions of unconscious bias training two months apart, with a particular focus on gender and children's literature. Participants completed a survey before and after the intervention about the last 10 books they had read to children in their setting. The literature audit shows the corpus of literature used in settings continues to lack gender diversity, and that non-human characters in books are often considered male. A matched sub-sample of 6 participants showed a significant increase in the number of counter-stereotypical books chosen after the intervention. The paper shows that the intervention raised participants' awareness of the impact of stereotypes and brought a medium-term change of practice for individuals, their early childhood settings and ultimately the quality of experience for young children in their care.

## ARTICLE HISTORY



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## KEYWORDS

Unconscious bias; picture books; literature; early childhood education; gender

## Introduction

Picture books play an important role in children's early development by helping to shape their understanding of literature (van der Pol 2012), people and their roles (Kozak and Recchia 2019), and the world around them (Peterson and Lach 1990; Strouse, Nyhout, and Ganea 2018). For many children, the library corner in an early childhood education setting may be the first time that they have been exposed to a wide corpus of literature that they can choose to read (Crisp and Hiller 2011). As such, it is important that they are presented with a variety of literature that represents the society around them

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(Tschida, Ryan, and Ticknor 2014). However, it can be assumed that early children's literature is largely bought and read by adults thereby controlling access to the literature children come into contact with.

### **Problems with children's media**

Patriarchy is the political structure that grants privileges to men at the expense of girls/women and boys (Millett 1977). Media can contribute to sustaining the dominant social order by reproducing existing and dominant constructions of reality (Kim 2008) and presenting stereotypes and belief systems of race, class and gender (Sun 2001). Over time this will shape what children know and understand about the world (Sun 2001).

There has long been concern that the picture books present a stereotypical and limited view of broader society. For example, they give a narrow view of a traditional family with absent fathers and mothers predominantly doing household or care work (Adams, Walker, and O'Connell 2011; Anderson et al. 2023) and show adults and children acting in gender-stereotyped ways (Tsao 2020). The situation is more stark for non-human or animal characters. They are predominantly presented as male (Ferguson 2018; Lee and Chin 2019), with some popular books containing no female characters at all. Where female animals are included, this is often indicated by stereotypical human female characteristics (long eyelashes, wearing bra or skirt) whilst the male animals are represented as 'just animals' (Filipović 2018, 315).

In terms of ethnic diversity, many picture books feature mainly white human characters (Adam and Barratt-Pugh 2020). Where books do include ethnic diversity non-white characters are often incidental characters and are depicted in stereotypical or outdated ways (Adam, Barratt-Pugh, and Haig 2017) and few can be classed as culturally authentic (Adam and Barratt-Pugh 2020).

Children should have access to a variety of models to choose from when constructing their understanding of the world (Tsao 2020). The challenge with stereotypes in literature is that they perpetuate a 'single story' (Adichie 2009). Where people are repeatedly shown only in one light, this trains them to see in a limited way and opportunities to express parts of themselves that differ from stereotypes are lost (Adichie 2009). Children's literature should also serve as a mirror reflecting back and validating elements of children's identities, cultures and experiences, as well as a window for offering views of less familiar worlds (Tschida, Ryan, and Ticknor 2014).

There are ongoing efforts to increase the diversity seen in pictures books (Miller 2020). Whilst gender has long been a focus of research in children's literature (see e.g. Weitzman et al. 1972) and is the particular focus of the current study, organisations have started to monitor, and publicise, the ethnic diversity represented in recently published books both in the UK (Centre for Literacy in Primary Education 2022) and the US (Fernando 2021). While the UK children's book market has shown a sustained improvement in inclusive and representative literature since 2017, there is still a long way to go before new children's literature reflects children's realities (Centre for Literacy in Primary Education 2022).

Efforts have also been undertaken with trainee and in-service teachers to become more familiar with, and see the power of diverse titles (Tschida, Ryan, and Ticknor 2014). However, in England, early childhood education is underfunded (Lawler 2021) and the worsening financial situation for providers in England (Drayton and Farquharson

2022) means that settings are unlikely to be able to change or regularly supplement the contents of their library with newly published books. This results in authors of diverse races, classes, religions, sexualities, and abilities being routinely left out of classrooms (Tschida, Ryan, and Ticknor 2014). While there is a desire among teachers to reduce stereotypes (Davenport and Padwick 2022), there is also a lack of conceptual tools to help guide teachers in the ongoing questioning of texts in their classrooms (Tschida, Ryan, and Ticknor 2014).

### **Unconscious bias and early years education**

Unconscious bias can be defined as the way in which internalised expectations of a group of people (i.e. stereotypes) can, without conscious thought, cause changes in behaviour towards members of that group leading to a negative effect on them (FitzGerald et al. 2019). These stereotypes may relate to any personal or social characteristic such as gender, race, language, etc. In early years education, unconscious bias may manifest itself through educators expecting particular behaviours from certain children (Wingrave 2018), in other words, expectations are set by stereotypes that educators hold. Gendered interactions, both verbal and non-verbal, transmit to children acceptable behaviour and attitudes, limiting their self-expression and personal development (Callahan and Nicholas 2019). It is important to note that this is not explicit bias (prejudice), and educators may say that they are not biased and treat all of their children as individuals whilst their behaviour and language indicates otherwise (Filipović 2018). For example, Gansen (2019, 400) describes how even when an educator stated that *'boys and girls are similar in their behavior and needs'* their observed disciplinary practices were gendered. Furthermore, the normative practices within the early years education setting around behaviour are often linked to white and middle-class codes of behaviour (Souto-Manning, Ghim, and Madu 2021) and can disadvantage children who do not show 'appropriate' behaviours (Souto-Manning, Dernikos, and Yu 2016). Teachers may attribute the perceived deficit in learning to the child, rather than to the school and societal structures (Valencia 1997). Therefore, without awareness of unconscious bias related to gender, diversity and representation, patriarchy and deficit thinking continue to be perpetuated in classrooms.

Beyond education, as part of diversity initiatives, many organisations have invested in training (Carter, Onyeador, and Lewis 2020) to reduce unconscious biases and remove the negative effects caused by them. Whilst such training alone will not eliminate structural issues (Kalev, Dobbin, and Kelly 2006) it can have value in raising awareness of unconscious bias and reducing it (Atewologun, Cornish, and Tresh 2018). Carter, Onyeador, and Lewis (2020) provide five challenges for designing effective unconscious bias training: being realistic about what training can accomplish on its own; selecting proper goals for the programmes; deciding how to manage attendee discomfort; minimising counterproductive effects of discussing bias; and demonstrating impact.

### **Research design**

Critical analysis aims to uncover the ideologies that are perpetuated in the public imagination shaping peoples understanding of reality, and identify the prevailing structures and practices that maintain inequalities (Prioletta 2020). These theoretical frameworks can

support teachers to make sense of teaching and learning in new ways and help them question their assumptions of cultural norms (Priolella 2020). This paper presents the effects of an unconscious bias intervention on educators in 10 early childhood education settings through a content analysis of adult and child-led picture book choice through the lens of gender stereotypes. It also provides a broader picture of literature in everyday use in a number of early childhood education settings which goes beyond newly published or prize-winning books. By drawing attention to the literature in use in classrooms and the challenges associated with it, the intervention highlights how literature is moulding childrens' understanding of the world. The intervention provides the theoretical frameworks and practical tools to support teachers to critically assess texts in their classrooms, including how to interpret and re-negotiate older books and stories to counter stereotypes.

This study takes a critical realist ontology; such that 'holding a belief that an independent reality exists does not commit one to the view that absolute knowledge of the way it works is possible' (Scott 2005, 664). This is combined with social constructivism which holds that how the world is experienced is constructed through interactions between individuals, groups and society (Creswell and Creswell 2022). Thus, an educator may know that wolves exist, but their expectation of the behaviour shown by a storybook wolf is socially constructed. Using these frameworks we explore the following research questions:

RQ1a: What books are early childhood educators choosing to read with children in their settings?

RQ1b: What rationale do early childhood educators give for the book choice?

RQ2: What is the impact of a short-term unconscious bias training on early childhood educators including on their choice of books read with children in their settings?

## **Materials and methods**

The study took a complementarity mixed methods approach (Greene, Caracelli, and Graham 1989). A pre- and post-intervention online survey was used to audit the most recent 10 books chosen by pre-school practitioners within their settings. Content analysis of the books was undertaken to identify the gender balance within the books, and the rationale given for their choice. To allow clarification and exploration of the changes arising from the intervention which might not be captured in the survey, field notes were taken by one of the authors (CD) during the training sessions and qualitative semi-structured interviews were conducted by another of the authors (AP). This research design was chosen because it allowed a broad exploration of book choice in a range of settings as well as an in-depth examination of the outcomes.

## **Participants**

Participants were drawn from a pre-existing early childhood educators' community of practice (COP) facilitated by one of the authors (KH). The COP contains approximately 88 members from a wide variety of different early childhood education settings<sup>1</sup> all of whom are either graduates or en route to graduate status. The COP is based in

Northumberland, a county which has a 98.4% white population with 97.2% being born in the UK (Northumberland County Council [n.d.](#)) and the participants in the COP map similarly to this demographic.

There were 23 participants in total from 13 different settings: 17 participants completed the pre-intervention survey, and 10 participants completed the post-intervention survey; 6 participants from 6 different settings completed both the pre- and post-intervention survey. The participants had a range of experience and responsibility within their setting including child-facing practitioners ( $n = 8$ ) and owners/managers ( $n = 15$ ). The majority of settings were private or charitable provisions (80% in the pre-intervention sample, 78% in the post-intervention sample). Semi-structured interviews were carried out after the intervention with four of the participants. All participants were informed about the purpose of the research and the confidentiality and security of their data. They gave their informed consent to take part in the study electronically before completing the initial and final survey. Participants were able to take part in the training even if they declined to take part in the data collection.

### **Intervention design**

During the design of the intervention, attention was paid to the challenges provided by Carter, Onyeador, and Lewis (2020) to ensure that these were incorporated (Table 1).

The intervention comprised of two twilight sessions with an accompanying ‘gap task’. These sessions took place after the end of the participants work-day, and they were therefore undertaking the training in their own time. The gap task was designed to enable practitioners to engage further with ideas and potential impacts of unconscious bias prior to the second session. Both sessions took place online and used a blend of didactic teaching and participant discussion using pre-defined prompt questions.

Session 1 contained an introduction to unconscious bias; examples from data on the presence of gender stereotypes within children’s literature and in early years settings; and reflections on the effect of unconscious bias within practitioners’ settings. During this session care was taken to ensure that where participants felt uncomfortable they were reassured about the nature of unconscious bias as a consequence of human development and not a failure of their own making. The associated ‘gap task’ was to either to analyse the play spaces in their settings to see if the physical set up and associated activities influenced which children played more in the space; or to use a simple proforma to

**Table 1.** Implementation considerations used in the design of the intervention.

Challenge (after Carter, Onyeador, and Lewis 2020)	Current intervention
Be realistic about what training can accomplish	The aim of intervention was to raise awareness of unconscious bias and encourage participants to reflect on their current practice
Select appropriate goals	The training was tailored to the interest of the community of practice on increasing awareness of bias with a particular focus on children’s literature
Manage attendee discomfort	Participants were able to discuss in small groups and could discuss examples of bias they had seen, not necessarily their own. Facilitator is experienced and providing ‘safe spaces’ for discussion during training
Minimise counterproductive effects of discussing bias	A small number of concrete strategies were suggested for managing bias during the training sessions
Demonstrating impact	Quantitative and qualitative methods were planned to capture impact from training

analyse the stereotypical content in a selection of books in their setting. During the second session practitioners were presented with an overview of the initial content analysis of book choice as a stimulus for discussion. Participants also shared and discussed their findings from the gap tasks, and field notes were made of these reflections. Finally, participants were asked to plan and record how the training would change their own practice (behaviour) and the practice of others in their setting.

The research obtained ethical approval from Northumbria University (29102).

### **Research tools**

An online questionnaire was used to gather data about the choice of literature in the early years settings ten days before the intervention and then again one month after the intervention. The participants were asked to name the 'last ten books that you read to a child or a group of children', along with the rationale for the choice of book. The survey also included demographic questions relating to the nature and location of the settings, and the role the participant held. Individual responses were anonymised using a code. Field notes during the training and semi-structured interviews after the training were used to explore other changes that had taken place during, or as a consequence of, the training. Interview participants chose their own pseudonyms for reporting purposes.

### **Data analysis**

For RQ1: *What books are early childhood educators choosing to read with children in their settings?* All named books were combined into a single data set and publication dates were obtained using bookselling websites. For each book the gender of the main protagonist was categorised: male, female, mixed (when there was more than one main protagonist e.g. Child 2003), unknown, none. Overlapping subsets of books were analysed by four researchers and differences in coding were discussed until a consensus was reached. The species of each protagonist was also identified using visual and textual clues and categorised as human, animal, fantastical (e.g. teddy bear, mermaid, talking helicopter), mixed (where there was more than one main protagonist), and non-fiction. Finally, two researchers categorised the behaviour of the characters in the story as stereotypical, counter-stereotypical or unclassifiable/not applicable. Again differences in the coding were discussed until a consensus was reached. Excel and SPSS26 were used to produce descriptive statistics.

The rationale given for the book choices pre- and post-intervention was initially coded as to who made the choice of book (child choice, staff choice, or unclear who chose) and then the reasons given for the choice were categorised in more detail. Thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006) was undertaken for the post-intervention semi-structured interviews.

## **Findings**

### **Descriptive analysis of combined corpus**

We first present an overview of the corpus used in the settings considering all of the books identified by participants – both before and after the intervention. We do this to provide an insight into books which are in everyday use within settings. A total of

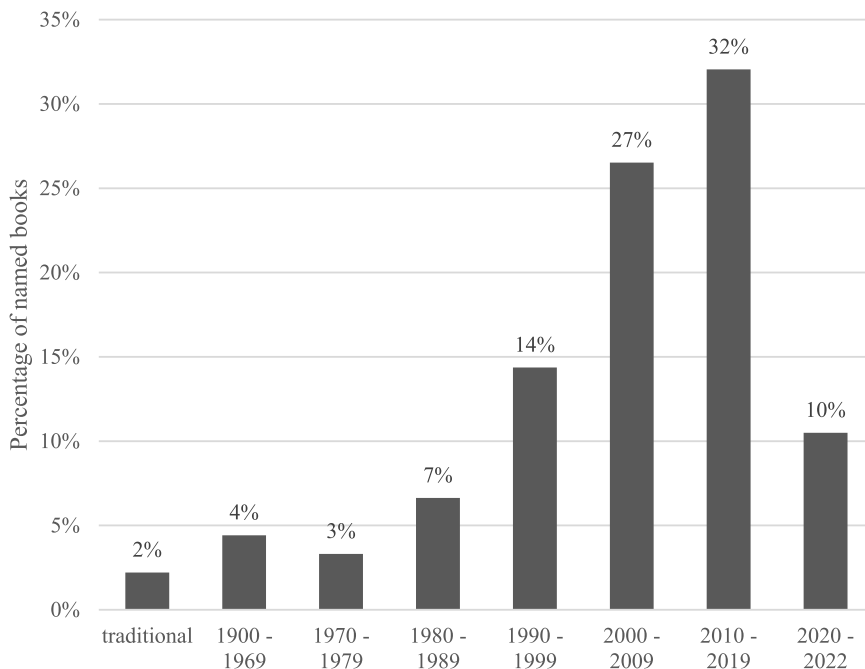


182 unique books were named (85 pre-intervention, 82 post-intervention and 15 named in both data sets), and 69% of the books were published after the year 2000 (Figure 1).

There were 164 unique authors, or author/illustrator combinations, with only 14 authors having more than 1 title in the corpus. The three most popular authors were Julia Donaldson (10%), Sue Hendra (4%) and Kim Lewis (3%). Looking at how often stories from these authors were chosen, Julia Donaldson accounts for 13.2% of all book choices, in part due to her extensive back catalogue, and Michael Rosen accounts for 5% of the books chosen due to the longevity and popularity of 'We're all going on a bear hunt' (Rosen and Oxenbury 1989).

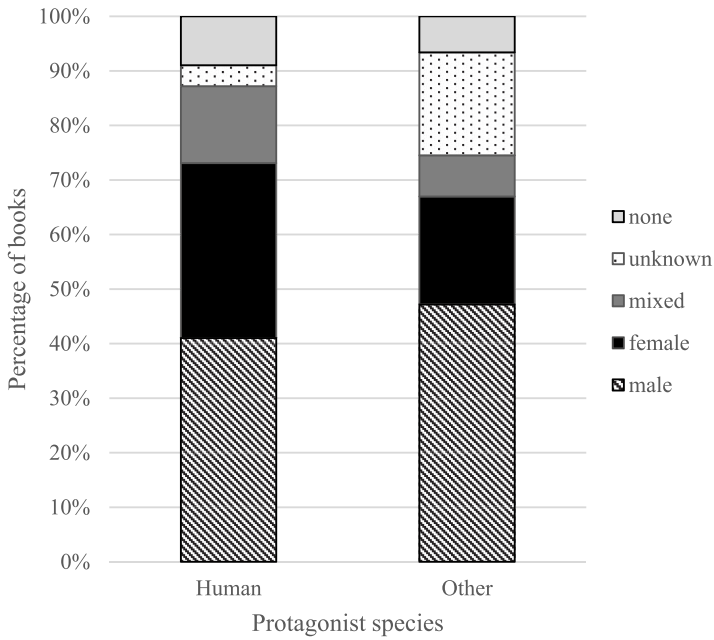
Examining the perceived gender of the protagonists, there were more male characters than female and non-gendered characters combined (F: 25%; M: 44%; NG: 13%; mixed 10%, none 8%). One example of a main characters that couldn't be characterised by gender (NG) is Egg Drop (Grey 2003). When looking at human and non-human protagonists the difference between genders is greater (Figure 2) with non-human characters more likely to be coded as male (F: 20%; M: 47%; NG:19%; mixed: 8%; none: 7%) than human characters (F: 32%; M:41%; NG:4%; mixed: 14%; none: 9%). This finding is statistically significant  $\chi^2(4, N = 184) = 13.387, p = .010$ .

The data indicate that, over time, the percentage of books published with a female protagonist is increasing (Figure 3), as is the percentage of books in which protagonists show counter-stereotypical behaviour, however, these results are not statistically significant due to the small number of books in the categories before 1990 (Figure 4).



**Figure 1.** The percentage of named books published in each different time period ( $n = 181$ ). Percentages do not sum to 100 due to rounding.

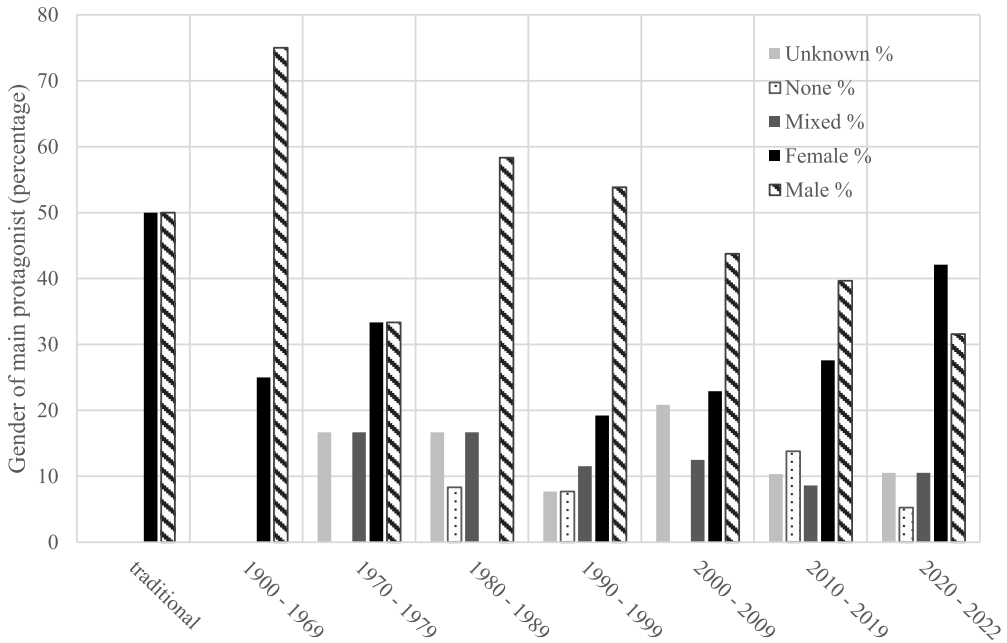




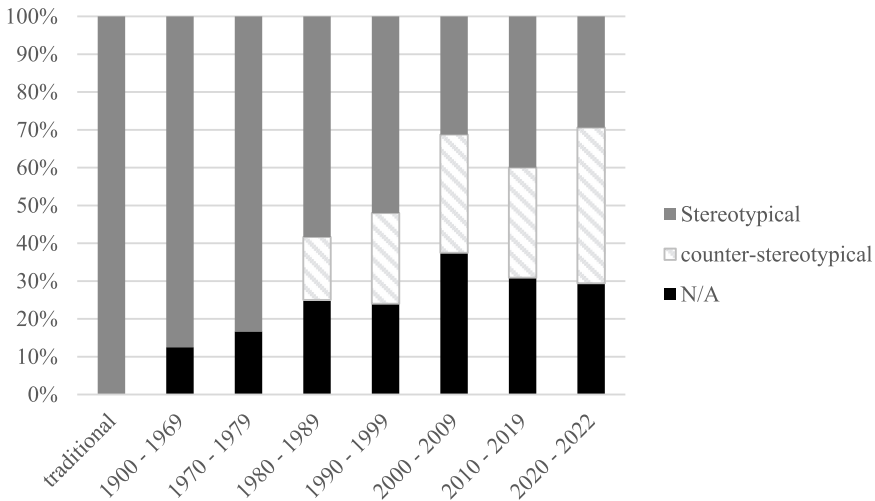
**Figure 2.** The gender of the main character(s) in the combined data set as a function of species.

**Rationale for book choice**

Where a reason was given for the choice of book, adults chose the book more often (34%) than children (23%), although in some cases (14%) whilst a rationale for using the book



**Figure 3.** Gender of protagonists over time as a percentage of books published in that 'decade'.



**Figure 4.** Proportion of books with protagonists showing stereotypical or counter-stereotypical behaviour and attitudes against publication 'decade'.

was given, it wasn't clear from the response who had made the choice. It was apparent that, when adults were choosing the books, they were often tailoring their choice to the interests of the children as can be seen from the examples given below:

following the children's interests, they love learning about other countries. This introduces new animals and counting as well as a new country to find on the map and globe. (about 'We all went on Safari' Krebs and Cairns 2003)

We had been discussing patterns on our socks during the day and read this book as an extension of that with the children discussing the different size, colours and shapes of the pants. (about 'Dinosaurs love underpants' Freedman and Cort 2008)

The reasons given by the participants for the choice of the book were categorised as shown in Table 2.

There was a direct effect of participation in the intervention given in the reasons for choosing a book (2%) and participants had purchased and used books which were recommended in the training session as being counter-stereotypical.

### **Matched sample of participants**

To explore possible changes in book choice following the intervention, data from the subset of 6 participants who completed the pre- and post-intervention survey were analysed. The breadth of books was similar for the matched participants when compared with the whole corpus. There were 110 unique titles provided by participants overall, written by 100 authors. Only 13 authors appeared more than once in the list with Julia Donaldson (10 titles, 9.1% of the total) and Kim Lewis (5 titles, 4.5% of the total) being the only two authors with more than 3 titles on the list.

Comparing the books chosen there was a significant difference before and after the intervention in the choice of books with stereotypical or counter-stereotypical protagonist behaviour by matched participants (Table 3),  $\chi^2(2, N = 106) = 15.645, p = .000$ . More

**Table 2.** Categorisation of the reasons given by participants for the choice of books.

Category	Example comments	%
Child's choice	Child brought book from home; child brought book to staff independently	23
Unclear: children's interest or favourite	Children showed an interest in the female pilot when discussing transport; the children have been interested in recycling all year	7
Unclear: link to events in everyday life	We have a child who spends lots of time in hospital. Gave [them] an opportunity to talk about [their] experiences	7
Staff choice: educational purposes / nursery theme	Covers all areas of the EYFS, good for counting and discussion; a few of our younger children had speech and language delay and we chose this book because of the repetition	45
Staff choice: link to events in everyday life	At the start of covid to aid talking around germs and going on; Chosen because it is such a lovely story about a child who lives with his dad and has no mum ... I was trying to make the children aware that families can look very different from a mum and a dad.	6
Staff choice as a result of intervention	New purchase after reviewing books available	2
No reason given		10

**Table 3.** Percentage of books in which protagonists exhibited stereotypical, counter-stereotypical behaviour.

Time point	% stereotypical	% counter-stereotypical	% not applicable
Pre-intervention	46	11	43
Post-intervention	43	26	31

books with counter-stereotypical protagonists were chosen, with a concomitant decrease the choice of books without any obvious stereotypical or counter stereotypical behaviour (coded as 'not applicable').

There were no significant differences for matched participants before and after the intervention when looking at the gender or type of protagonists or the publication date of books.

The categorised reasons for choosing different books for the matched participants were also examined (Table 4). The training accounted for 8% of the reasons given by matched participants. There was also a small increase (8%) in the 'Child's choice' reason. These changes fell just short of statistical significance ( $\chi^2(6, N = 120) = 12.166, p = .058$ ) due to the small sample size in some categories.

### Qualitative analysis

Analysis of the semi-structured interviews identified four themes: awareness raising of unconscious bias; gender stereotyping in current practice; influence of training on practice and pedagogy; and future needs.

All interviewees reported that they benefited from the training and offered examples of **awareness raising about unconscious bias**, and reflection on their practice. These reflections include the language used when talking with children:

It made you have a look and kind of reflect upon your own practice and what you do and what you say. And I think it's obviously just my kind of era, when I was a child and you were always spoke to about being a policeman or a fireman, and it's been really hard to kind of get out of that because I didn't realise that is how I spoke about those kinds of occupations. (Priscilla)

**Table 4.** Comparison of reason categories for matched participants before and after the intervention.

Reason category	Before intervention (%)	After intervention (%)
Child's choice	20	28
Unclear: children's interest or favourite story	17	12
Unclear: link to events in everyday life	8	10
Staff: Educational purposes / link to nursery theme	43	38
Staff: link to events in everyday life	12	2
Staff: as a result of training	0	8
No reason given	0	2

I hadn't really given it much thought before and some staff would say to a girl aww don't you look beautiful, but they might say handsome to a boy ... I guess it was reflecting on that and being aware of it. (Sparkle)

As well as thinking about language, participants also thought about how the play space was ordered:

It just made me think actually about how we set up our provision. (Helen)

Closely linked to this theme of awareness raising was a second theme of reflection on **previous and current practice in settings**.

We would just assume that the wolf would be a boy and they were bad and evil. I don't know why, and when they're a bad character I do just tend to presume that it's a naughty boy. A naughty bad character, and females are never bad characters. (Priscilla)

We can see that participants were coming to a realisation that the unspoken and unconscious assumptions they had made were leading them to treat children differently.

We talked about being careful how we say things to children, now I know on entry into nursery some of the children can appear upset and I have automatically just assumed that the boys may wish to go and play with the cars and the dinosaurs and directed the girls towards things like the dolls, the dolls house and so on ... I suppose you do things without actually realising that you're doing that. (Priscilla)

There were many **examples of influence on practice** as a result of the training and awareness raising both for participants but also across the whole school, or local authority. All participants mentioned that one change they had made was in the selection and use of new books in the setting, but wider influences were also mentioned. This includes some which support children to transcend limitations imposed on them due to patriarchal structures.

I try and use more open-ended toys now as well ... we used to have a lot of plastic small worlds where the girls were dressed in pinks and purples and pastel shades and the men would be in blue and brown and so I use a lot more of the wood and just the plain wooden peg dolls. (Priscilla)

we had a full evaluation of our setting in regard to unconscious bias ... and we did staff training on terminology, so for example it's firefighter not fireman and then as well within the role play area ensuring that it wasn't gender specific'. (Sparkle)

When I'm going out and observing settings [in the local authority] and explaining things like around home corners and sort of book corners ... I do very much talk about our training ... you know, just to make them [practitioners] think. (Helen)

The final theme to emerge from the interviews was of **future needs and planning for change**. The need for whole setting training was identified, rather than just the one or two people who attended the intervention.

I think that's something [offering training similar to the intervention] that we are potentially thinking about doing as a local authority. (Helen)

There was also recognition that sustaining changes could be challenging.

cause it's just difficult, you flip back in your ways even if you know the research ... and I think it's difficult because this came from us rather than them (staff) going into training. Yeah, they haven't been passionate about it the way we have cause we attended the training then they haven't. So I think that makes a big difference. (Sparkle)

## Discussion

The first research question explored the books used within early childhood settings and the rationale for those choices. The books chosen were written by a broad range of authors with the majority only appearing once or twice in the corpus. However, in both the overall corpus, and the sub-sample from matched participants, these was a subset of authors whose titles were regularly chosen by participants.

The study has highlighted that, despite the recent drive by publishers to bring inclusivity and gender balance into young children's literature, male protagonists still prevail within books used in the settings involved in the intervention. Crucially, this is even more apparent where animals are lead characters as male animals dominate the lead roles, which supports earlier findings (Filipović 2018). Indeed, one of the most popular of these authors, Julia Donaldson, has suggested that in her earlier writing she did not always consider the gender of characters (Miller 2020), although this has changed in more recent stories.

The rationale given for the choice of books give clear indication that educators are carefully planning and responding to the needs of the children they work with, both educationally and emotionally. Books were thoughtfully chosen to respond to outdoor adventures, family circumstances, and educational development (Table 2). It is thus not surprising that the participants were therefore also willing to consider how their unconscious bias might affect their professional practice. One limitation to the current study is the lack of detailed demographic data for the settings and the participants. These characteristics will likely affect their book choices and future research could explore how the identities of the participants influence the thinking behind their book choices.

### **Book availability**

It is important to note that children and practitioners can only choose books from the selection available to them. If the selection is limited, or if few authors are represented, then their choice is likewise limited. In times of austerity it is not always possible to completely change a setting's resources so choice may be further constrained. Books may have been donated or may be purchased locally on special offers and not reflect the variety of literature available.

In addition, when early years teams in local authorities recommend books, who makes those choices and what criteria are those recommendations based upon? The values, choices and beliefs of individual teachers or advisors can influence (Wood 2014) and where recommendations were made to the settings, it is not clear if this was always research-informed.

The second research question addressed the impact of the intervention on participants' awareness of unconscious bias and their choice of books. The researchers were realistic about the extent to which the intervention could cause changes in behaviour and chose appropriate goals for the intervention (Carter, Onyeador, and Lewis 2020).

There is clear evidence in the qualitative data to show that the intervention increased participants' awareness of unconscious bias and prompted reflection on their current practice. Previous research has shown that even when educators think that they are treating all children the same, their behaviour may indicate otherwise (Stephenson et al. 2022), and this was supported by the current study where participants said that prior to the training they had not thought deeply about the language they used to speak to boys and girls and the effect it might have. The training also prompted them to make changes in their thinking and in their practice including the terminology they used with children, and the resources they provided for children to play with. This impact also went beyond the direct participants who went on to share their learning with other colleagues in their own settings, and other settings (depending on the participants' role). There was also a clear appetite for further unconscious bias training in their settings amongst participants.

The quantitative data from the matched participants also showed a significant difference in the books chosen with counter-stereotypical protagonists after the intervention indicating that, in the medium term, participating in an unconscious bias training intervention can lead to behaviour change.

Participants also identified that ongoing change would be challenging, but achievable. A number of participants also requested further training and support after the end of the intervention period. The challenge of embedding change is supported by Carter, Onyeador, and Lewis (2020), who indicated that structural change is required to sustain the ongoing impact of unconscious bias training.

In the current research, one potential structural change would ideally be for an audit of the current stock of reading materials available in each setting to take place, followed by a winnowing of the most stereotyped books and the purchasing of new materials. However, given the financial constraints on many settings, it is likely that this would need to encompass a longer-term plan for purchasing new materials. Another possibility would be to draw on local authority school library services and local libraries (Department for Culture, Media and Sport 2017).

There is also a need for practitioners to interpret and re-negotiate older books and stories to counter stereotypes (Malilang and Walldén 2024). Initiatives such as this one can provide teachers with the frameworks and tools to critically examine existing texts together with children in their classroom (Tschida, Ryan, and Ticknor 2014). During the reflection times in the intervention, participants talked about how their role as educators was to challenge the stereotypes in the books with children and discuss them at great length, which included challenging patriarchal structures. For example, one participant highlighted questions they might ask children about a book

which portrays a more traditional family dynamic: ‘does that happen in your house?’, ‘lots of mums go out to work now’, ‘some families aren’t a mummy and a daddy.’ However, other participants recognised that not all of the adults in a setting might be comfortable or skilled at such questioning.

## Conclusions

This regional study has shown that a short unconscious bias training intervention can raise awareness of unconscious bias and bring a change of practice for individual practitioners, their early childhood settings, and ultimately impact upon the experiences of young children. The data show an appetite for such training amongst practitioners and those that work with and advise them. Early Years practitioners can enact change by understanding the stereotypes and beliefs that can shape children’s view of the world and then mitigating these by making changes within the environment and resources used in their settings.

## Note

1. Childcare from the ages of 0–5 in England is provided by a broad range of organisations including private (paid for) nurseries, childminders, playgroups, and state funded nurseries attached to schools.

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