

Beyond Balls and Dolls: Unlocking Children's Potential through Gender Atypical Kiswahili Children's Storybooks

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Abstract

This paper explores the exciting possibilities offered by gender-atypical Kiswahili storybooks to dismantle barriers during playtime for children. It examines how these storybooks, featuring characters that challenge traditional gender norms, can inspire a new generation of children to explore a broader scope of play opportunities in their playgrounds, thereby enhancing creativity and assisting self-discovery. The paper adopts participatory visual methodology design (PVMD) with a qualitative research approach. Data was generated using drawings with fifteen grade three children from a school in Trans-Nzoia County-Kenya, that was selected through purposive sampling. Social learning theory was used to frame this paper. Data was analyzed using thematic-qualitative analysis. The findings of this paper revealed that most boys and girls conformed to gender stereotyped plays even after being exposed to gender-atypical Kiswahili children's storybooks. The findings also revealed that even though some participants conformed to gender stereotyped plays, there was change in their perspectives to adopt gender-atypical plays. This paper therefore suggests that exposing children to gender-atypical children's storybooks could challenge gender stereotyped plays during early years of socialization. The paper recommends that the Ministries of Education integrate the use of gender-atypical children's storybooks in Early Childhood Education (ECE) to enable children construct gender plays beyond the borders of gender binaries and promote inclusive play patterns. The paper also recommends the infusion of gender education to the in-service teachers to equip them with skills on gender treatment during reading lessons. Through this, children will be empowered to unleash their potential and engage in a wider range of play activities of their interests, thus transforming playtime from a battlefield of stereotypes to a boundless landscape of imagination.

Keywords: *Children's Literature, Early Childhood Education, Gender-atypical Storybooks, Gender stereotypes, Play Behavior*

1.0 Introduction

Play is a crucial aspect of child development, fostering physical, cognitive, emotional, and social growth (Parker & Thomsen, 2019; Skene et al., 2022; Yang, 2025). However, traditional gender stereotypes can limit children's play experiences (Ellemers, 2018; Lever, 2020). Boys might be discouraged from playing with dolls or engaging in imaginative play, while girls may feel pressured to avoid playing with balls which are perceived as masculine (Lever, 2020). In the world of children's literature, where creativity has no limits, we come to a point of change. While society

still embraces ingrained gender stereotypes, an intriguing adventure takes place in the world of unconventional children's storybooks. This adventure goes beyond typical gender-based stories, where authors use these stories as 'agents of change' by questioning and challenging the gender biased plays among children. In this paper, we explore children's storybooks, where the unusual becomes a powerful tool for nurturing inclusivity, breaking down stereotypes, and fostering a generation unencumbered by the restraints of societal expectations. This paper unravels the potentials of gender-atypical Kiswahili children's storybooks to challenge gender stereotyped plays which limit play patterns among children. By featuring characters who defy traditional gender expectations, the storybooks can empower children to develop an expansive view of themselves and their possibilities (Ekiru, 2019). The papers' objective was to establish how children construct gender plays when exposed to gender atypical Kiswahili storybooks in schools.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Gender-atypical children's storybooks

Gender-atypical storybooks refer to books with narratives that portray characters with unconventional behaviors and personalities usually associated with individuals of their opposite sex (Pruden and Abad, 2013; Almuqbil, 2024). These characters present atypical behaviors by engaging in activities that defy traditional gender expectations. They may be boys who enjoy ballet or girls who build robots. Mirele (2015) refers to these storybooks as narratives that redefine gender roles and plays by challenging gender-stereotyping and promoting individuality. In her article titled '*20 Children's Books That Redefine Gender Roles*', she outlined 20 gender atypical children's books that counter preconceived notions of what it means to be a boy or a girl.

Alderman (2015) suggests that gender-atypical storybooks can be used as a mitigatory strategy, to challenge gender stereotypes among children, in an environment that is predominated by sexism or gender stereotypes. It is due to this notion, that this study explores how gender atypical Kiswahili children's storybooks can be used to challenge gender stereotyped plays among children.

2.2 Impact of storybooks in shaping children's play

Several classical studies (e.g. Downs, 1983; O'Brien, Huston, & Risley, 1983; Smetana & Letourneau, 1984; O'Brien & Huston, 1985; Martin & Ruble, 2004; DeRoser & Marcus, 2005; Cherney & Dempsey, 2010) have revealed that, children as early as 2- 3 years of age prefer to play with toys stereotypically linked to their own sex. However, other studies (e.g., Ashton, 1983; Green, Bigler, & Catherwood, 2004), have revealed that, children's exposure to gender-atypical storybooks have increased their preference to play with gender-atypical toys.

Ashton (1983) conducted a study to investigate the impact of storybooks in shaping children's play activities. The study involved 2-5 years old children (32 children, 16 boys and 16 girls), who were read picture storybooks of characters playing with either a sex-role stereotypic or non-stereotyped toy. The picture storybooks had either male or female main characters playing with a non-stereotypic or stereotyped toy. After exposure to these storybooks, those children were given the chance to play with the same toys and their behavior was recorded. The findings of the study

revealed that, boys and girls exposed to a stereotypic picture book, significantly selected a stereotypic toy with which to play. On the other hand, boys and girls exposed to a non-stereotypic book, significantly selected a non-stereotypic toy with which to play. The study also revealed that girls seemed to be more strongly affected by the picture books than boys. More interesting in the study was that the findings of the two groups (group exposed to non-stereotypic picture book and that exposed to stereotypic picture book), showed that male and female children were more affected by the non-stereotypic picture book than the male and female groups exposed to the stereotypic picture book.

Green, Bigler and Catherwood (2004) conducted a similar study to that of Ashton (ibid) to examine the influence of non-stereotypic stories on children's gender-typed toy play behavior. The study aimed to find out, whether children who are highly gender typed would prefer to play with gender atypical play toys when they are read a story of a character of their same sex, that plays with gender atypical toys. The study involved 8 preschool children, who were exposed to 2 gender atypical storybooks in which characters displayed gender atypical toy play behaviors. The findings revealed that, these gender atypical storybooks influenced a significant change of play behavior in some of the children. These children, all being female, showed increased play with gender atypical toys and decreased play with gender stereotypical toys.

From the above studies, it is revealed that girls are flexible to change from gender stereotyped play behavior to gender atypical play behavior when exposed to gender atypical stories. This is different from boys who tend to be rigid and still conform to their gender stereotyped play behavior, even after exposure to gender atypical stories with male characters depicted playing with gender atypical toys. However, the studies equally suggest that children's exposure to gender atypical storybooks may influence children's immediate and future play behavior. The previous studies are significant to the current study on which this paper is underpinned because they demonstrate the power of gender-atypical storybooks in deconstructing gender play among children.

However, the previous studies are different from the current study because they used experimental design while the current study used participatory visual methodology design. Secondly, the previous studies were quantitative while the current study adopted qualitative research approach. Lastly, the previous studies exposed children to English gender-atypical children's storybooks while the current study exposed children to Kiswahili gender-atypical children's storybooks.

2.3 Theoretical framework

This study was framed on the social learning theory that was developed by Albert Bandura. This theory explains that human behaviors are learnt from the environment through observational learning (Bandura, 1986). Children observe and learn their behaviors from the individuals around them. These individuals are referred to as models. Models could be teachers, parents, celebrities, characters in the televisions and storybooks, their siblings, peer groups, friends etc. (Nhundu, 2007). The models display feminine and masculine traits for children to observe and imitate. Children pay close attention to these models and learn behavior from them. Later on, they may copy or imitate the behavior they have observed (Bandura, 1986). McLeod (2011) points out that

social learning theory is built on three major tenets which were significant in conceptualization, interpretation and data analysis. These tenets comprise of:

- i. Sexual similarities between the child and model
- ii. The responses of the people around the child toward an imitated
- iii. Social identification

In this paper, the three tenets were suitable because they provided a rationale to explain why children identified themselves with characters of their sexual similarity and copied gender plays exhibited in the findings of this study.

3.0 Research Design and Methodology

This paper was underpinned on the interpretivist's paradigm with qualitative research approach. It adopted the participatory visual methodologies design (PVM). Data generation techniques were the drawings and discussions with grade three children from a purposively selected primary school. Drawing method was used to generate data because it is the suitable method of data generation in social science research which involves children and other individuals in the society who might have difficulties in expressing themselves due to language difficulties or other constraints that encompasses the topic of discussion (Mitchell, Theron, Stuart, Smith, & Campbell, 2011; Mitchell, De Lange, & Moletsane, 2017).

The school was purposively selected because it had functioning reading classes from grade one to grade three which were properly monitored and supervised by the teachers. The participants of the study were fifteen grade three children (ten girls and five boys) of the selected primary school. The study incorporated all the fifteen children because they willingly expressed interest in participating in the study. The study also engaged children at this grade basing on their age which ranges from 8 to 10 years. This choice was influenced by Kohlberg (1966) ideas of cognitive development; that at this age, those children would have formed a stable gender identity and sexuality and start adopting gender-stereotyped behaviors, activities, preferences, etc., exhibited to them by either the environment or social models (Gooden & Gooden, 2001; Clarke & Stermac, 2011). Their development of gender identities occurs alongside with the desire and passion to read and re-read their favorite storybooks (Bender and Leone, 1989).

The paper sought to answer the question: How do children construct gender plays when exposed to gender atypical Kiswahili storybooks? Ten gender atypical Kiswahili children's storybooks that were purposively selected were used in the study. The selected Kiswahili children's storybooks had characters who engaged in gender atypical plays. The storybooks were: *Sungura Mjanja* (Islam, 2003), *Siku za Juma 1a* (Nyakeri, 2006), *Atoke Asitoke?* (Mwangi, 2009), *Mama Mwizi* (Mutuku, 2014), *Kombo Arudi Shule* (Lewela, 2008), *Zawadi ya Rangi* (Karan, 2005), *Vitendo vya Jamila* (Mogambi, 2006), *Tuzo ya Baba* (Zawadi, 2013), and *Furaha ya Arope* (Walibora, 2013). The participants were given drawing prompts during the pre-exposure evaluation to make drawings of themselves playing at home and school. After the drawings, each participant gave an oral explanation for each drawing he/she had made. Thereafter, the participants were exposed to read gender atypical Kiswahili children's storybooks for a period of 4 weeks. After the exposure to

gender atypical Kiswahili children's storybooks, a post-exposure drawing prompt was administered to the participants. The study was conducted with the ethical standards outlined by the American Psychological Association (APA). Informed consent was obtained from parents or legal guardians, and assent was obtained from all child participants prior to the study. All procedures in the data generation prioritized the safety, privacy, and the well-being of the children involved. The participants were advised to use the pseudonyms in their drawings to conceal their true names of identities. Data review and analysis were done thematically and was concurrent with data generation.

4.0 Findings and Discussion

After doing a thematic analysis of the pre-exposure and post-exposure drawings and their explanations, the study revealed that children through their drawings constructed gender plays in two ways: conforming to gender stereotyped plays and adopting gender-atypical plays. The summary of the drawings is tabulated in table 1 after which the analysis is done. Thereafter, this section presents study findings and discussion under two sub-themes: Conforming to gender stereotyped and adoption of gender-atypical plays.

Table 1: Participants' pre- and post-exposure drawings on gender play

Participant	Age (Years)	Gender	Pre-Exposure Drawing on Gender Play	Post-Exposure Drawing on Gender Play
Jack	9	Male	Playing football	Playing football
Moreen	10	Female	Rope skipping	Rope skipping
Pogba	10	Male	Playing football	Playing football
Shantel	11	Female	Rope skipping	Rope skipping
Brown	8	Male	Playing football	Playing football
Annete	11	Female	Rope skipping / Playing "Kati"	Rope skipping / Playing "Kati"
Fatuma	11	Female	Rope skipping	Rope skipping / Playing football
Specks	10	Male	Playing football	Playing football
Evelyne	10	Female	Playing "Kati" / Rope skipping	Playing "Kati" / Rope skipping
Maria	10	Female	Rope skipping	Rope skipping / Playing football
Princess	10	Female	Rope skipping	Rope skipping / Playing handball
Pinky	10	Female	Playing "Kati"	Playing "Kati"
Rehema	8	Female	Rope skipping	Rope skipping / Playing football
Mos	10	Male	Playing football	Playing football
Precious	10	Female	Rope skipping / Playing "Kati"	Rope skipping / Playing "Kati"

Source: Primary Data (2018)

4.1 Children's construction of gender plays

The findings depict how children construct gender plays. The construction of gender play involves games and activities they like playing at home and school. The above table (see, Table 1) presents a summary of gender plays constructed by the participants during the pre- and post-exposure

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evaluation. The participants both boys and girls constructed their gender plays by drawing what they like playing at home and in school. The play activity that was most preferred by boys, in the pre- and post-exposure evaluation, as shown in the above table (table 1) was football. All the boys reported that they like football. On the other hand, the most preferred play activities for girls were rope skipping, playing *kati* and handball during the pre- and post-exposure evaluation. In their drawings, it was also revealed that majority of boys and girls presented drawings that showed them playing only with individuals of their gender and not the opposite gender. For example, boys were playing with boys while girls played with girls.

However, few girls in their post-exposure evaluation (Fatuma, Maria and Rehema) reported that they also like playing football. From the analysis derived in the above table (1) all the boys who participated in the study conformed to gender stereotyped play activities even after the exposure to stories of characters engaging in gender-atypical plays. The situation was similar to girls as they also showed preference to gender stereotyped plays during the post-exposure evaluation. Even though some girls (Fatuma, Maria and Rehema), showed that like play football, they still indicated in their drawing that they like rope skipping. In fact, from their drawing, it is clearly revealed that of the two games mentioned, football was the least of their preferred. Football came second in all their drawings after rope skipping. Furthermore, Maria in her drawing presented many boys and few girls playing football. This means that even though she believes she can play football, she still acknowledges the fact that football is a boys' game and not girls' game. Therefore, the analysis above indicates that all boys and majority of girls conformed to gender stereotyped plays. However, some girls expressed their interest in gender-atypical plays after the exposure to gender-atypical Kiswahili children's stories. The paper therefore presents a discussion of the above under the sub-themes of conforming to gender stereotypes plays and the adoption of gender-atypical plays.

4.1.1 Conforming to gender stereotypes plays

The results from the table 1 above indicate that all the boys and majority of girls conformed to plays activities predominantly perceived to be appropriate to their gender even after being exposed to gender-atypical stories. This finding contradicts the findings of prior research (e.g., Ashton, 1983; Green, Bigler, & Catherwood, 2004) which showed that when gender typed children are exposed to gender-atypical play activities, they change to gender-atypical play activities. However, data generated by our participants seems to agree with some of the views presented by the studies. Firstly, the studies argue that when boys and girls are exposed to gender-atypical stories then after afterwards presented with gender-atypical play toys, boys are usually reluctant to plays with the perceived feminine toys as compared to girls who are likely to show little or even greater interest, in playing with the perceived masculine toys. This is evident from our boy participants' drawings which never showed any desire in feminine plays even after being exposed to gender atypical stories of boys playing games such as rope skipping with girls. From the explanation of their drawings, some of them indicated that even though they knew how to play *kati*, rope skipping and *pata*, they cannot play them because they are 'girls' game'

Researcher: Can you play rope skipping?

Specks: Yes

Researcher: Why didn't you draw it?

Specks: It is a game for girls.

Researcher: What about Pata?

Specks: Yes. I know how to play it.

Researcher: Why didn't you draw it?

Specks: it is also normally played by girls.

(Oral explanation, Specks, post-exposure, p.1, {18/7/2018})

Researcher: Do you know how to play 'pata'?

Jack: I know.

Researcher: How come you like football only and not 'kati'?

Jack: (keeping quiet)

Researcher: If we give you 'Kati' and football to play, can you play them both?

Jack: No. (Laughing) I will play football.

(Oral explanation, Jack, post-exposure, p.1, {18/7/2018})

Secondly, the two studies(i.e., Ashton, 1983; Green, Bigler, & Catherwood, 2004) indicated that girls easily play with gender-atypical play toys after reading a story showing a girl character playing with an atypical play toy. This was also seen in our data as some of the participants (girls) showed some interest in playing football after reading stories such as *Tuzo ya Baba*, *Kombo Arudi Shule* and *Siku za Juma* in which the girl characters (Zawadi, Fena, Nanjala and Maria) played football. In general, the above data showed that boys are more discriminative towards the so called 'girls' game' than the way girls are towards the 'boys' game'.

Gender scholars (e.g. Thorne, 1993; DeRoser & Marcus, 2005) argue that boys and girls show rigidity towards their gender appropriate play toys. However, boys show more rigidity than girls to interact with gender inappropriate toys. Thorne (1993) as discussed in Evans and David (2000) for instance has tried to give an explanation on why boys tend to more rigid than girls in adopting gender-atypical behaviors. Thorne (cited) argues that girls and boys are socialized to know acceptable behaviors for their gender at early stages of their development. After, this socialization, they develop their gender schema on how they are supposed to behave as boys and girls. It is at this stage that society through its socializing agents infuse gender stereotypes in their gender schema. The socializing agents in this context are usually teachers, parents, school staff, peers and other individuals within their environment. These socializing agents develops strategies to ensure that these children subscribe to behaviors and activities perceived suitable for their gender. Evans and David (2000) refer to them as the 'gender police'. The gender police closely monitor the child's behaviors and ensure they comply with the gender stereotypes. If a child behaves or engages in an activity which is inconsistent with the gender stereotypes, they are punished by the 'gender police. Those who refuse to comply with 'gender appropriate' behaviors are usually taunted, isolated, ridiculed or even labeled as the other opposite gender. A boy for example is branded with names such as 'sissy' and a girl labeled as 'tomboy'. The names are aimed to make the child feel that he/she is different from the other members of his/her gender hence compelling him/her to conform to 'gender appropriate' behaviors and activities so that he/she can be accepted as equal by the individuals of their gender.

Unfortunately, boys usually receive harsh treatments from 'The gender police' as compared to the girls when they engage in 'gender inappropriate' behaviors and activities. A study conducted by

Kowalski and Kanitka (2003) showed that even at the age of kindergarten, boys were seen segregating from their fellow boys who were found playing with girl toys. They even reported a scenario where a small boy was heard telling another boy who was playing with a puppet “*You need to have a boy puppet and give this puppet to a girl.*” In other situations, ‘gender police’ use coercive techniques of intimidating their peers into performing ‘gender appropriate’ activities. An experimental study done by Langois and Down (1980) showed when some boys tried to play with girls’ toys, other boys interrupted them by hitting and ridiculing. Perhaps it is due to this fear of being subjected to the harsh treatment by the so called ‘gender police’ that made our boy participants to conform to ‘gender appropriate’ play activities. This is clearly revealed from the drawing explanations provided by participants Jack and Specks who expressed that they cannot play *pata* and skip-a-rope because they are girls’ games. During our interaction with the participants in the field, we saw a scenario where a small boy who was playing with girls’ *kati* was called by the other boys to play football with them. The small boy had no choice but to comply with the order from his peers.

From the analysis of the boys’ drawings, majority of them drew boys playing with other boys. When they were interrogated during the oral explanations of those drawings, most of them mentioned the names of their friends (all being boys). This indicates that even in their socialization processes, the ‘gender police’ require them to engage and interact in play activities with individuals of their gender and they have subscribed ideologically to that demand. Just like boys, some of girl participants also made drawings showing girls playing with girls only.

Researcher: Whom do you play with at school?

Jack: I play with my friends.

Researcher: Are they boys or girls?

Jack: Boys.

(Oral explanation, Jack, post-exposure, p.1, {18/7/2018})

Researcher: Whom do you play football with at school?

Pogba: I normally play with Sikosi, Kaka, Kotome, Lucas, Brian and Shaddy.

Researcher: I have not heard you mentioning Marion’s name in your list!

Pogba: Eeeh! (Surprised)

Researcher: Why?

Pogba: I don’t play with her.

Researcher: What makes you not to play with her?

Pogba: (Keeping quiet)

(Oral explanation, Pogba, post-exposure, p.1, {18/7/2018})

Researcher: If we give Jack ‘Kati’, football and rope for skipping, which one among these do you think he will choose?

Maureen: He will choose football.

Researcher: why do think so?

Maureen: Because boys like playing football. I usually see him with his friends playing football.

Researcher: Who are his friends that he normally plays with?

Maureen: Shadrack, Lucas and Gilbert.

Researcher: Are they boys or girls?

Maureen: They are boys.

(Oral explanation, Maureen, pre-exposure, p.2, {16/6/2018})

The punishments and intimidations by the ‘gender police’ discussed above contribute to boys’ reluctance in learning and engaging in play activities deemed feminine. According to social learning theory (McLeod, 2011), reinforcement by people around the child contributes significantly towards its imitation of the model’s behavior. If a child imitates a model’s behavior and the consequences are discouraging or punishing, the child stops performing that behavior. This could be the reason why boys and girls in this study preferred to conform to gender stereotyped play activities even after being exposed to gender-atypical play activities.

4.1.2 Adoption of gender-atypical plays

Analysis of the results from the table 1 above indicates that few girl participants expressed in their drawings their interest towards playing football. These participants were: Maria, Rehema and Fatuma. Football within the context of this study is a male play. Thus, the act of some girls showing preference to playing football would be understood as their quest to challenge gender stereotypes and adopt gender-atypical play. This findings concur with the findings of prior studies (e.g., Ashton, 1983; Green, Bigler, & Catherwood, 2004) which showed that when girls are exposed to gender-atypical stories there is likelihood of them changing their preference from gender stereotyped play toys to gender-atypical play toys. Even though not all our participants adopted the gender-atypical play activities as we had anticipated in our conceptual framework, after reviewing the above-mentioned literature, the results exhibited by some participants is an indication that indeed, reading gender-atypical stories can make a girl to challenge gender stereotyped play activities. The results also suggest that girls unlike boys, as seen in our prior discussions, are flexible and appear to show more variability in masculine toys and other play activities.

There are two possible reasons that can account for the above. The first reason emanates from the previous discussion provided in this study on differential consequences for counter-stereotyping play activities among boys and girls. Prior studies (Fagot, 1977; Langlois & Down, 1980) revealed that boys receive harsh punishment from ‘the acting gender police’ as compared to girls. However, the society seems to be lenient to girls who display gender-atypical behaviors. Thorne (1993) states that in many cases, girls and women who exhibit male traits are usually complimented as being aggressive. This therefore motivates many girls and women to reflect positively on the label of ‘tomboy’. Hence it is because of this that girls find it easier to adopt gender atypical play activities and it was the case to our participants in the present study. This argument is in line with the social learning theory which provides a theoretical framework to the present study.

The social learning theory asserts that reinforcement is a key element in a child’s socialization process. Reinforcement occurs in two ways (McLeod, 2016). First, it occurs externally then afterwards internally. Reinforcement can be either negative or positive. External reinforcement occurs when a child receives approval from peers or parents after imitating a particular behavior from a model. If the approval is positive, the child feels happy and continues to exhibit or display

that behavior. The act of the child feeling happy for being approved is what is referred to as the internal reinforcement. In relation to our data, the context under which my study was conducted seems to be reinforcing the act of girls to play football. In some scenarios, during the data generation, a female teacher could be seen playing football with the girls. The teacher, in some instances created a football match that entailed big girls who played against small boys. Whenever a girl scored a goal against the boys' team, she was much celebrated by the teachers and her peers as compared to the boy who scored against the girl team. Therefore, this study suggests that the internal reinforcement that influenced those girls to show preference in playing football could have been due to external reinforcement present in their learning environment.

The second possible reason to this is the argument by child development psychologists such as Bussey and Bandura. In their study (Bussey & Bandura, 1992) found out that girls have more motivation to adopt cross gender-typed behaviors than boys. This is because most societies tend to socialize girls to associate masculine traits and activities to high status and values as opposed to boys who are socialized to associate feminine traits and activities to low status and value. Football being perceived as a masculine game in this context was embraced by our girl participants due to high status and value that were attributed to it.

Even though all the boys seemed to conform to gender stereotyped play activities, data generated in their oral explanations show that some boys during the post-exposure evaluation believed that girls could also play football with them. This was clearly seen in the drawing made by Specks. In his drawing he had a girl who was playing with boys. The girl was a goalkeeper in that football match.



Source: Primary Data, Year: 2018

Researcher: Is this goalkeeper a girl? (Referring to the drawing)

Specks: Yes (smiling)

Researcher: can she really catch this ball?

Specks: Yes, she can. She is a good goalkeeper.

Researcher: do you think girls also play football?

Specks: Yes. Girls too can play football.

(Oral explanation, Specks, post-exposure, p.1, {18/7/2018})

The above finding could be attributed to the stories read in class about girls such as Nanjala, Fena, Zawadi, and Maria among others who played football with boys, during and after school hours.

After reading the stories, the class teacher and the research assistant that were part of the research team organized discussion with readers concerning the stories. The purpose of those discussions was to reinforce and legitimize the gender-atypical play activities displayed in the storybooks, to enable learners gain more understanding as well as to remember and recall the stories. Before we commenced reading a new story, the teacher and the researcher would always ask the participants recap questions about the previous stories. The questions were always centered on gender-atypical issues presented in those stories. The questions triggered our participants to think, reflect, internalize and appreciate gender issues emanating from those stories.

Perhaps, through these discussions, my participant (Specks) received positive external and internal reinforcement to develop liberal views towards gender-atypical play activities. Even though he did not draw himself engaging in a gender-atypical play activity, presenting a girl playing football with boys in his drawing was a clear indication that the reading sessions and discussions regarding gender-atypical play activities changed his view. Perhaps longer exposure to gender-atypical stories and discussions to accompany them could have changed more his views and completely challenge gender stereotypes. Green, Bigler & Catherwood (2004) recommends long period for intervention strategies to challenge gender stereotypes. This is because; it enhances children's ability to recall accurately the gender-atypical information embedded in the stories.

5.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusion

This paper explored the potential of gender-atypical Kiswahili children's storybooks to deconstruct gender stereotyped plays among children. The results indicate that children's exposure to storybooks with non-traditional gender plays can positively impact their views on gender and their willingness to engage in a variety of play activities. By introducing children to characters that go against traditional gender norms, these storybooks present an alternative story to the typical gender stereotypes. This exposure can help children develop diverse and inclusive understanding of gender and its possibilities. However, it is important to note that the impact of exposing children to gender-atypical Kiswahili storybooks may be curtailed by gender policing often reinforced in other media and broader societal and cultural contexts. This paper also suggests the need for further research to understand the long-term effect of gender-atypical storybooks on children's gender development and their ability to deconstruct gender stereotyped plays.

In conclusion, this paper presents evidence that gender-atypical Kiswahili children's storybooks can be a valuable tool for breaking down playtime barriers among children and promote gender equality in their playgrounds. By integrating these storybooks into their language education settings and encouraging them to use them at school and in homes, we can create a more diverse, inclusive and equitable society for all children.

5.2 Recommendations

Based on the above findings, this paper suggests that the KICD (Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development) includes gender education in the new CBC (Competence Based Curriculum) to empower children with a deeper understanding of gender identities and sexuality. This can be

achieved by intentionally including gender-neutral content in children's books. These books are suitable for use in schools and other educational settings as instructional aids for teaching and learning. Additionally, KICD can work with the MoE (Ministry of Education) and book publishers to create policies on gender mainstreaming to guarantee that all children's books are free from sexist ideas. Finally, it is suggested in the paper that MoE should incorporate gender non-conforming children's books in ECDE (Early Childhood Development Education) reading initiatives. This will enable the young readers to challenge societal norms and accept a wide range of possibilities, thereby strengthening their minds and unlocking their potentials.

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Conflict of interest

There was no conflict-of-interest attendant to the conduct of this study.

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