Examining a Child’s Perception of Mommyhood through Critical Book Conversations

Shonna Crawford

One evening my family was enjoying the board game Life, and my four-and-a-half-year-old daughter, Aubree, agreed to play. As she traveled around the board from college to retirement, I noticed her becoming increasingly distressed, especially when she failed to land on any squares that entitled her to have children. Near the end of the game, Aubree landed on a space that required her to turn in her career as an athlete and become an accountant. She cried at what she felt was an injustice: no children and a career not of her choosing. Meanwhile, the rest of us had vehicles full of children and our first-choice careers. I attempted to cheer her by sharing how the mother of a close friend of hers was an accountant, but she burst into tears, lamenting, “But daddies are supposed to make all the money, not mommies!” Surprised by her statement, I asked her why and tried to think of a way to challenge her line of thinking. As I continued contemplating her statement, I grew even more perplexed about her perspective. As a working mother, I assumed I had been modeling a wide variety of roles, including my relationships with my family and my career as an educator. This experience prompted my desire to explore how and why Aubree held these perceptions of gender roles. I wondered if her outburst represented her own view of mommyhood, or if she merely repeated something she had heard. I decided to use our mother-daughter reading times to better understand Aubree’s views by intentionally building in book conversations to explore her understandings more deeply. Personally, I wanted to know if having critical conversations around picture books could influence Aubree’s view of mommyhood.

Planning for Critical Conversations

My priority was to engage Aubree in critical thinking about gender stereotypes. This would require living a critical literacy stance in my home. Lewison, Flint, and Van Sluys (2002) describe a multiple-viewpoints dimension of critical literacy as “understand[ing] experience and text from our own perspectives and the viewpoints of others and to consider these various perspectives concurrently” (p. 382). I wanted my conversations with Aubree to challenge her to become aware of her thinking and to encourage her to consider multiple perspectives about mommyhood. Luke and Freebody (1997) encourage us to reflect on multiple perspectives by interrogating texts and asking questions that uncover how texts are positioning us. I recognized that by opening up a space for talk, I could provide additional opportunities Aubree might need in order to examine how she is positioning herself in the role of mommyhood and to interrogate gender roles in picture books.

Author Mem Fox (1993) validates the need for examining texts; she says, “Everything we read . . . constructs us, makes us who we are, by presenting our image of ourselves as girls and women, as boys and men” (p. 84). Although Aubree has access to hundreds of books in our home and at preschool, I wondered if these picture books were perpetuating static roles of women instead of the multifaceted
roles available. Cai (2002) cautions, “Stereotypes not only impact how stereotyped groups are treated, but also how they see themselves” (p. 71). As evidenced during the game, Aubree already views herself as a future mom—but not as a professional with a high salary. This surprised me, and I wondered how she developed this perspective, because it does not fully represent the existing dynamics of our family.

Text as a Mirror and a Window
For a reader, a text can function as a mirror and/or a window (Galda, 1998; Glazier & Seo, 2005). Glazier and Seo (2005) provide a lens for interrogating text in this way: The text must instead be interrogated from multiple perspectives and act as a comparison point for students’ own lives in order for it to be transformative, or life—and culture—affirming. As a result, it must act as both mirror—allowing students to reflect on their own experiences—and as window, providing the opportunity to view the experiences of others. (p. 688)

Part of the roadblock I initially identified in our game of Life was Aubree’s frustration that the game was not a mirror showing her what she felt she should be as a mommy, nor was it a window for her. She could not see herself in any role other than mother. The emotion of her outburst demonstrated that she was clearly unwilling to accept alternate perspectives. As I examined Aubree’s talk in our book conversations, the mirror and window metaphor served as a lens for analyzing her perceptions of the role of mommyhood.

Eliciting Critical Conversations around Picture Books
Using the books in her bedroom, I chose to engage in critical conversations with Aubree to help me uncover a clearer picture of her view of mommyhood and disrupt her static notions. First, I asked Aubree to search through her books to look for things that mommies do. Second, we read What Mommies Do Best/What Daddies Do Best (Numeroff, 1998), and I encouraged Aubree to make a list of “Things Mommies Do” and “Things Mommies Do Not Do.” Based on her lists and observations, I chose a second picture book, Mommies at Work (Merriam, 1989), to read and discuss. Finally, Aubree created her own book to show what she will do as a mommy. In each of these scenarios, I facilitated discussion and asked questions to help Aubree explore her thinking.

Sorting Picture Books
I began my inquiry by sitting with Aubree as she sorted books according to my prompt, “Let’s look through your books and see which ones tell us about things that mommies do.” She quickly picked up one of her favorite books, Seven Silly Eaters (2000) by Mary Ann Hoberman and Marla Frazee.

Aubree: This one is like, she has, um, I think, twelve kids and she has to get food for them and they are silly eaters.

Me: They are silly eaters. Let’s start a pile right here of books that show things that mommies do. So, this is a book that shows a mommy trying to feed her silly eaters, right?

Aubree: Right!

In her comment, Aubree appeared to accept Seven Silly Eaters as a window into the kinds of things mommies do. She chose to emphasize the mom’s role of feeding her children and consequently justified her placement of the book into the “Books that show things mommies do” (“Moms Do”) pile. As Aubree continued reading through books another pile emerged, “Books that do not show things that mommies do” (“Do Not Show”).

Throughout this activity I noticed several ways that Aubree read the books: sitting and reading the entire book, flipping quickly through it, looking carefully at the illustrations on each page, telling the story from memory, or just looking at the front cover before placing it in one of the piles. Each time she carefully talked through her decisions.

For example, Aubree picked up The Busy Body Book: A Kid’s Guide to Fitness (2004) by Lizzy Rockwell. She talked with me about her opinions of the book, and it seemed to serve as a mirror of our family’s life.

Aubree: This is just, like, about exercising.

Me: Does it show anything that moms do?

Aubree: No.

Me: Ok, well, if you already know the book you can put it right in the pile.

[Aubree ignores my invitation and continues looking at the book and talking.]
I was relieved that Aubree ignored my invitations to put the book into the pile I suggested. By doing so, she opened up a space to think and talk about the book from a new perspective. Aubree created a new way of thinking by shifting her ideas of mommyhood to include what she thought moms could do even when the author or illustrator chose not to portray a mom in the text. Consequently, Aubree now had three sorted piles: (1) “Moms Do,” (2) “Do Not Show,” and (3) Books that show things mommies COULD do (see Figure 1).

Aubree worked for nearly an hour looking through books and sorting them. Table 1 shows the outcome of her book sort, including her reasons for choosing the category for each book.

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Reflecting on the data in Table 1, I noticed Aubree’s reasons for placing texts in the “Moms Do” pile and the “COULD Do” pile were clearly articulated through her talk while sorting. In contrast, she did not elaborate on why she placed books in the “Do Not Show” pile. When prompted, she replied, “They [the books] just don’t [show things moms do].” Even though she did not explain further, her brief response confirmed that she did not label anything in those books as something that contributed to or confirmed her perception of mommyhood. This sophisticated book-sorting process highlights Aubree’s agency or ability to choose ideas from the books that count as knowledge then determine if these ideas meet the criteria of the categories she invented.

During the text sorting, I also noticed that Aubree’s decisions were not affected by the illustrators’ representations of a mom as a person or an animal. In Five Green and Speckled Frogs (Basaluzzo, 2008) Aubree counts the action of the mother frog jumping in the water as something mommies do. Throughout her book sorting, Aubree read-
ily accepted both animal and human representations of moms and seemed to focus her sorting decisions mainly on the action of the mom in the text. For example, with the book *Pete's a Pizza* (Steig, 1998), she noticed a mom in the illustrations, but because the mom was depicted as just standing there, not doing anything, she decided the book didn’t show things mommies do and put the book into the “Do Not Show” pile.


Me: Does this [book] show things moms COULD do or things that moms do?

Aubree: Things moms could do because they say goodnight to their kids, they put them to bed, they clean dishes, some kids scream for water and kids have to wait, and she has to answer the phone, then run around and do everything. . . .

Me: Mmmm-hmmm.

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Table 1. First book-sorting chart

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Aubree's Reason</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

[Aubree continues to retell the story.]

Me: So this shows things mommies do, right? Not just things mommies COULD do?

Aubree: Well, dads could do it too, so I think this one.

Aubree points to the “COULD Do” pile.

Me: Oh, ok, 'cause dads could do it too.

The *Llama* book conversation seemed to mark a critical shift in Aubree’s understandings of gender roles. Even though the book showed a mother llama caring for her child, Aubree chose the “COULD Do” pile because she recognized that daddies could also care for children in those ways. I noticed her definition of “things mommies COULD Do” was evolving as she realized mommies and daddies could engage in the same type of activities and share similar roles.

After completing the book sort, I asked Aubree to pull out books that showed what she personally wanted to
do as a mommy. Table 2 shows the fifteen titles she chose and includes her own words explaining why she chose each picture book.

As Aubree discussed her reasons for selecting these books, I noticed she used them as mirrors and windows in novel ways. For example, she originally explained that *Who Took the Cookie from the Cookie Jar?* (Garofoli, 2006) showed something mommies COULD do because mommies could find out who stole cookies. Interestingly, the author does not include a mother in the story. Aubree assigned this possible role for a mom to the text, therefore making the text mirror her possibilities. In contrast, when revisiting the book, Aubree demonstrated flexibility in the way she approached texts by seeing something new in the book, “Moms can make their kids go to school and music.” Aubree is now assigning a new role for a mom based on what she sees in the text, signifying how she used the text as a window.

Another example of using text as mirror and window happened with the book, *Arthur Meets the President* (Brown, 1991). Aubree first used this book as a mirror of her own pretend play by identifying a familiar image of a mom holding a baby. However, when giving her reason for choosing the book this second time she said, “I want to let my kids meet the president.” While this is something she has not experienced, the book provided a window for her to consider new possibilities for her future children. Through revisiting texts, Aubree demonstrated how these books operated as both mirrors and windows.

Throughout both sorting activities, I noticed that each book Aubree chose focused on an aspect of motherhood involving caring for children. She made no mention of other roles for mothers such as work outside the home. I wanted to find out if any texts in her bedroom showed alternative roles of mommies and what her views of these roles might be.

### Reading and Talking about Books Together

I continued focusing on Aubree’s perceptions of motherhood by reading picture books that targeted female roles. Two lengthier conversations occurred around *What Mommies Do Best/What Daddies Do Best* (Numeroff, 1998) and *Mommies at Work* (Merriam, 1989). As we read together, I asked Aubree various questions to help her reflect on her views of the role of motherhood.

Numeroff’s (1998) text shows various ways in which parents teach, care for, and spend time with their children. This book does not showcase roles and actions beyond childcare (i.e., jobs outside of the home). I chose

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Picture Book</th>
<th>Aubree’s Reason</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>A Bad Case of Stripes</em></td>
<td>“Take care of your kids when they are sick.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The Seven Silly Eaters</em></td>
<td>“Feed my kids.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Five Green and Speckled Frogs</em></td>
<td>“If I have froggies give my froggies water. Or a mouse or a parrot or a frog.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Arthur Meets the President</em></td>
<td>“I want to let my kids meet the president.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Arthur’s Valentine</em></td>
<td>“Make my kids Valentine’s stuff.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Llama, Llama Red Pajama</em></td>
<td>“Talk on the phone, clean dishes, and going to get drinks” (for kids at bedtime).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Class Picture Day</em></td>
<td>“Get my kids’ pictures taken.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Tea for Ruby</em></td>
<td>“Get my kids tea.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The Busy Body Book</em></td>
<td>“Exercise. Get my kids to exercise and get me to exercise.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The Big Big Wind</em></td>
<td>“Give my kids balloons.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>If You Take a Mouse to School</em></td>
<td>“Pack something. Take care of a mouse. Pack things in a lunchbox for my kids.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Fancy Nancy: Pajama Day</em></td>
<td>“Let my kids have sleepovers.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Apple-Picking Day</em></td>
<td>“Go to the apple orchard with my little puppy and my kids.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Who Took the Cookie from the Cookie Jar?</em></td>
<td>“Make my kids go to music and go to school.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Old Mother Hubbard</em></td>
<td>“Have a big dog. Go to the bread store and get bread.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Books mirroring what Aubree wants to do as a mom
to read this book with Aubree to see if it might help her further consider how some parental roles could be the same regardless of gender.

Before reading this book I wanted to capture Aubree’s current views of mommies, so I asked her to help me make a list of things mommies “COULD Do” and “Could Not Do.” As I wrote down her ideas, I noticed the “COULD Do” list included ways a mom cares for her spouse, children, and herself. Aubree mentioned, “hug kids” and “feed kids” which were also featured in Numeroff’s book. Throughout our discussion and reading, I noticed that both the list and the book served as mirrors for Aubree, confirming what she knew about moms within the mommy/child relationship. At this point I decided to find a text that might extend Aubree’s ideas beyond the home context. It was more difficult than I imagined, given that few picture books depict employed males or females, as Oskamp, Kaufman, and Wolterbeek (1996) found.

We read Mommies at Work (Merriam, 1989), a revised version of a 1955 picture book. The updated illustrations depict mommies in a wide variety of job possibilities (e.g., teachers, dancers, assembly line workers, air traffic controllers). While the book aligns with Aubree’s expectations that mommies first love and care for their children, it also explores possibilities beyond the mother-child relationship. While reading this book, Aubree stopped to make a connection with the text:

**Me:** [Reading the text] “Assembly line mommies building cars.”

**Aubree:** Ok, I know one of those mommies. Someone in Arthur [the television program on PBS], but it’s hard to remember…it’s Brain’s mom.

Here Aubree demonstrated her ability to make a connection to help verify information she encounters in text. She used the text as a window into a possible career choice for a mom and extended her thinking by connecting to another context. Significantly, four-year-old Aubree utilized complex comprehension strategies to explore text as a window shaping her view of mommyhood.

**Composing Text Independently**

After we had read and discussed many books, I wanted to see how Aubree would explore her perceptions of mommyhood through composition. I wanted to make space for her to write multiple ideas across several pages as well as to include “both written text and illustrations to make meaning” (Ray, 2004, p. 9). I invited Aubree to make a book to show what she wants to be like as a mommy. Aubree enthusiastically began composing her book. To my surprise, when she was finished, I noticed her book contained examples of activities she would do outside of the home, while highlighting her relationship with her children as well. She chose the title, “Aubree the Mom” for her seven-page book (see Figure 2).

I noticed that Aubree had written about working in various ways as a caregiver and as an employee. She devoted a portion of her book to caregiving, depicting herself not only holding and feeding children, but also covering a turtle with a blanket and caring for a ladybug. Surprisingly, Aubree also included two jobs that go beyond the mother-child relationship: flying an airplane and working at a donut counter. Aubree does not know any women personally who work in aviation, but she read about this profession in Mommies at Work. Working at a donut counter, however, is something Aubree sees on a regular basis as she enjoys trips with Grandma to the donut shop. Aubree captured ideas that mirrored her own thinking prior to this inquiry and ideas that came from windows into new possibilities as she expressed her perceptions of mommyhood in her book.

**Reflections**

This inquiry with my daughter proved to be an incredibly informative and enjoyable experience for me as I used talk to better understand Aubree’s views of mommyhood. Much as they would in a classroom, critical conversations around picture books allowed me to gain insights into how Aubree approached texts as windows and mirrors to form her perceptions of being a mother. I also recognized my role in this process.

First, I questioned Aubree’s declaration during family game night. I reflected on why she might say daddies should make all the money, which could have easily been dismissed or simply laughed about by our family. However, as Kuby (2011) describes her experiences in the early-childhood classroom, “In the moments that I followed a child’s fissure, our conversations were fruitful in collaboratively trying to process the topic . . .” (p. 26). Aubree’s comment during our game was a fissure—an unexpected moment in interaction—and by following it, Aubree and I were able to use books and talk to collaboratively process her views of mommyhood.

Second, I encouraged Aubree to explore her book
collection, knowing that texts can influence ways of thinking. While Aubree read and sorted the books, she was acting on the texts and the texts were also influencing her, offering possibilities (Kress, 1997). I noticed Aubree’s interactions with texts changed over the short timeline of this inquiry. When I decided to immerse Aubree in multiple texts to explore her thinking and draw her attention to her view of mommyhood, she demonstrated how she could use the texts as mirrors, reflecting back on her own experiences, and windows, showing her many possibilities. Also, by revisiting books during the second sorting activity, she learned she did not always have to attend to the books’ details in the same ways. Rosenblatt (1978) suggested that meanings can change based on what the reader brings to the text, and Aubree did, in fact, evoke new meanings from the texts each time she revisited them. Drawing Aubree’s attention to ways she can navigate textual influences will encourage her to read texts from multiple viewpoints and empower her to position herself as a reader.

Finally, I opened up spaces in which to listen, question, reflect, and talk with Aubree as she examined her own perspectives about her desired role of mommyhood. Sahni (2001) draws attention to how “empowerment takes the form of imaginative self-transformation and creative symbolic actions in [children’s] own lives” (p. 33). By engaging in critical conversations around books, Aubree and I experienced this type of “transformation.” Aubree’s book served as a creative symbolic action; she learned to express her perceptions, while I learned to encourage her to do so instead of assuming she would emulate the roles I have
chosen. My goal is to continue helping Aubree and all young children I work with to use texts and book conversations as mirrors and windows to help them develop an awareness of how they can see themselves differently and, in turn, see the world differently.

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References


Children’s Books


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