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## **Beyond Gender: Insights from Grade 2 Chinese Learners About Bravery and Strength Through Drawings<sup>1</sup>**

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### **Abstract**

By employing participatory visual methodologies in the form of drawings, this study sought to explore Grade 2 Chinese learners' insights into the notions of strength and bravery as represented in traditional and diverse children's literature. The study demonstrated the premise that notions related to bravery and strength are socially constructed, and that traditional literature has firm gendered connotations related to these notions, often favouring male characters. For 16 weeks, learners at a bilingual school in Beijing, China gathered for a reading club where they engaged with traditional and diverse children's literature. In response, participants were invited to create drawings, accompanied by written and verbal feedback of book characters they thought were brave and strong. The results showed that after engagement with more diverse literature, the participants had more flexible and nuanced conceptualisations of bravery and strength that extended beyond gender and that were not confined to physical attributes. Rather, participants associated these attributes with resilience, perseverance, helpfulness, and moral courage. The study highlighted both the importance of diverse literature as a way of promoting social change and disrupting rigid gender norms, as well as the usefulness of drawings as a way of capturing nuanced insights, especially in a foreign language context.

**Keywords:** bravery, strength, gender representations, diverse literature, drawings, meaning-making

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## Introduction

The contexts in which we live and learn are inherently shaped by, and mediated through, socially constructed, dominant, and contested notions related to gender (Adhikari & Sigdel, 2024; Enloe, 2016). This encompasses, though it is not limited to the way that we drive, the way that we speak, what we wear, and sometimes quite dangerously, even infiltrates workplace dynamics in relation to hiring practices and promotions (Atwood et al., 2024; Butler, 2025; Thelma & Ngulube, 2024). Quite often also, the terms “gender” and “sex” are used interchangeably to mean the same thing. For this study, sex was understood as a category grounded in biological and physiological traits that determine whether one is a human male or human female at birth (Mafumbate et al., 2024). Like Lorber (2018) and Butler (2025), this study considers gender to be a social construct, a social institution that is used to regulate which behaviours and ways of being and doing are “appropriate and acceptable” for males and females, with the former always being favoured and the latter, less so. Simone de Beauvoir as cited in (Bart, 2000) asserted that the representation of the world is often the work of men, described from their viewpoint, and often presented as absolute truths. This is supported by Prasad and Lautoka (2015) who contended that gender is so systematically implanted in our institutions, our thinking, and our desires that it appears to be undeniably innate. Examples of this can be seen in the toys that are given to young children to play with; girls are often presented with gifts such as tea sets, kitchen sets, and dolls whereas boys are given toy guns and toy cars. This can imply that girls belong in the house, while boys should be active. These expectations may also be extreme, positioning females in subordinate roles and expecting them to be “well behaved,” while males are encouraged to display aggression as a way of demonstrating manliness (Heywood, 2022).

Butler (2016) challenged these essentialist understandings of gender, which assume that masculinity should be performed by male bodies and femininity by female bodies. Instead, she advocated for gender fluidity where people can express and perform gender beyond traditional categories, which are limiting. Whilst traditional gender categories may be helpful for young children who are learning about the world and themselves, they can also be problematic. They risk limiting their agency, creating unequal expectations, and reinforcing inequality because they are oversimplified and overgeneralised ideas presented as truths about how people should be (Ellemers, 2018; Myers et al., 2010). So, whilst gender is seen as performative and open to everyone, it comes with conditions as to who can perform it with impunity (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2013). This study confirms the view that the categories of gender and sex are not mutually exclusive and often intersect, for example, in relation to people who may identify as LGBTQIA+. However, in adherence to conditions for the study—as laid down by the Education Bureau in Beijing, China, and the principal of the school where the study was conducted—the intersection of gender and sex was not explored within the study.

Books play an important role in helping young children learn how people beyond their immediate environment behave and experience the world (Casey et al., 2021; Lindsay, 2024). Thus, in a world so deeply influenced by prevailing notions of gender, it comes as no surprise that these ideas are also reflected in children’s literature (Koss, 2015). Traditional children’s books often perpetuate gender dogmas in the way that they portray male and female characters. Similarly, the notions of strength and bravery explored in this study are frequently linked to the notion of masculinity. In traditional children’s books, strength and bravery are often enacted by male characters through heroic action and overcoming adversity; this may include slaying monsters, confronting danger, or embarking on quests (Kinsella et al., 2017). For female characters this is usually more subtle like showing compassion or exercising moral integrity (Lee & Chin, 2019). In this way, bravery and strength are enacted through binary gendered lenses: males as protectors and adventurers, and females as nurturers and moral exemplars. While these stories are probably well intended, they can also socialise young readers into gendered ideals about the enactment of bravery and strength. This study contributes to the literature by offering insight into how children actively negotiate meanings of bravery and strength through engagement with diverse children’s

literature. It seeks to address the following research question: “How does engagement with diverse texts help Grade 2 learners to expand their understandings of how bravery and strength are enacted?”

## **Literature Review**

### **Gender Representations in Children’s Literature**

Children’s literature constitutes an early and influential site of gender socialisation, and plays a significant role in shaping children’s understandings of gender in that it conveys socially acceptable ideas about what it means to be male or female (Adukia et al., 2023; Ullah et al., 2014). Although not uniform, gender portrayals in children’s books recurrently exhibit dominant social norms, with male characters assuming more active and independent roles, whilst female characters are portrayed as more nurturing and dependent (Ferguson, 2018; Lee & Chin, 2019). These portrayals contribute to the normalisation of disproportionate power relations, limit people’s agency, and reinforce stereotypical notions related to appropriate behaviour, emotions, and sometimes, quite alarmingly, career aspirations for males and females (Pownall & Heflick, 2023; Qiu & Yoke, 2024). Whilst more recent children’s literature has begun to offer more diverse portrayals of male and female characters, the shift remains uneven with stereotypical ideologies reproduced in subtle ways (Alexopoulos et al., 2022). This study confirmed that young children, and more particularly the study participants, do not necessarily passively absorb the portrayals as represented in texts; like Dilek and Boldan (2018), we acknowledge their agency as they interpret, negotiate, renegotiate, critique, and make meaning from what they have read. This highlights the significance of exploring how young children engage with, and make meaning of, gender representations in children’s literature, particularly through drawings, as a participatory visual methodology (PVM) that foregrounds children’s perspectives.

### **Diverse Children’s Literature**

Children’s books are a valuable source of information (Derman-Sparks, 2016), yet they are not neutral, often promoting dominant cultural norms that are deemed acceptable (Monoyiou & Symeonidou, 2016). This study demonstrated that if books have the potential to influence how children see the world, then the kinds of books children engage with matters and therefore, diverse representations matter. For this study, diversity in relation to children’s literature refers to texts that portray various lived and imagined realities, gender, culture, and identities amongst others (Dahlen, 2020). We deemed such narratives as important because they offer children different lenses in relation to ways of being and doing, and they also challenge traditional tropes about who is positioned as brave, strong, and heroic (Alexopoulos et al., 2022). This is done through nuanced portrayals of characters that do not rely on gender cues for depicting moral, relational, and emotional forms of courage alongside physical and combat-oriented portrayals (Ingram & Cahill, 2022). The absence of gender equitable books in relation to how characters and events are portrayed, “reinforce, legitimate, and reproduce a patriarchal gender system” (McCabe et al., 2011, p. 198).

### **Considering the Chinese Context**

Within the Chinese context, the availability of diverse books is often shaped by broader educational and political contexts (Yang, 2016). In many public schools, learners are primarily exposed to government authorised, traditional literature that aligns with the promotion of socialist ideals and curricular priorities (Tesar et al., 2019). Many private and international schools are also often subjected to governmental scrutiny in relation to censorship of books (Wong & Kwong, 2019). Thus within this context, representations of gender and sex are often informed by more traditional and normative constructions, where expectations of masculinity and femininity may be reinforced through literature and schooling practices (Liu, 2015; Mann, 2011; Qiu, 2023). As a result, the opportunity for young learners to engage with more diverse literature is often limited. This contextual backdrop is significant for the present study

because the reading club created an alternative discursive space in which learners could engage with diverse texts and reimagine concepts such as bravery and strength with the intention of expanding their possibilities. Although more diverse literature was available, it still needed to conform to the state mandated position of two genders. We recognise that this is a limitation of the study and that ideally, the learners should be exposed to a wider gender spectrum; however, we had to be content with broadening participants' understandings of what it means to be male or female and stretch that thinking to how to enact femininity or masculinity.

### **Strength and Bravery in Children's Literature**

Literature is an influential social sphere that reflects the culture, morality, and values of a society, and thus play a significant role in influencing children's understandings of the world (Jesudas & Alteib, 2024; Qiu & Yoke, 2024). It also influences young readers' perceptions of abstract concepts such as bravery and strength, actively constructing what these traits entail and who is positioned as possessing them (Madaminovna, 2025). Fictional texts especially, function as an important ideological site through which the readers' perceptions, values, and viewpoints can be shaped (Jesudas & Alteib, 2024). Historically, the portrayal of bravery and strength in children's literature have been constructed along gendered and stereotypical ways most often associated with male characters hinging on physical power, intelligence, determination, and individual triumph (Bosak et al., 2008; Kinsella et al., 2017). Such representations strengthen narrow and exclusionary understandings of the notions of bravery and strength, placing boys as "natural heroes" whilst marginalising girls and others whose forms of courage and strength are emotive, interpersonal, or moral, rather than physical (Qiu & Yoke, 2024).

Diverse children's literature can challenge these rigid gendered representations of bravery and strength in their nuanced portrayals of male and female characters, often representing bravery and strength as emotional resilience, being empathetic, persevering, and moral actions (Meland, 2020; Moya-Guijarro & Ventola, 2022). In doing so, it positions both female and male characters as agentic, capable, and courageous in diverse ways. Therefore, through engagement with diverse texts, children are empowered to challenge and question gender stereotypes and in this way, deconstruct and reconstruct more inclusive understandings of notions such as bravery and strength (Monoyiou & Symeonidou, 2016). This conceptual shift underpins the basis for exploring how Grade 2 learners interpret and represent bravery and strength as their drawings and discussions reveal how diverse texts mediate the meanings children attribute to these concepts.

### **Theoretical Underpinning**

Theoretically, this study was informed by social constructionism. A key tenet of social constructionism is that reality and knowledge are not fixed, but socially constructed within the communities and the social realms people operate in (Burr & Dick, 2017). This is done through discourse, language, and interactions between people (Galbin, 2014). Related to this is the belief that there are multiple, context-specific realities (Burr, 2024). Informed by this, our study demonstrated that children's understandings of bravery and strength are shaped by social, cultural, and textual interactions. In this way, social constructionism provided a lens through which to examine how meanings related to bravery and strength are produced, negotiated, and renegotiated.

From a social constructionist perspective, the participants were regarded as individuals who had agency and as active meaning-makers, rather than inactive recipients of knowledge. This was informed by the belief held by social constructionism that knowledge is not simply passed on from adults to children; instead, it is actively constructed through social interactions, language, and experiences (Berger & Luckmann, 2016; Burr, 2024). This understanding underpinned the use of drawings as a PVM within the reading club context because we believed it was a site of social interaction that allowed participants to

construct, co-construct, configure, and reconfigure their understandings. This is because social constructionism views knowledges and realities as created, rather than discovered (Andrews, 2012).

## **Methodology**

### **Research Paradigm, Approach, and Design**

This study was located within an interpretivist paradigm, which seeks to elucidate how individuals construct meaning within a specific context (Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022). This fits well within the scope of the study because our aim was not to seek objective or universal truths, but rather to explore how young learners within their unique Chinese context made sense of abstract concepts such as bravery and strength through their engagement with literature and PVM. This is also consistent with tenets of social constructionism, which assert that realities and knowledges are socially mediated and manifold. Central to the interpretivist orientation is the privileging of children's voices in the process of meaning-making (Brown, 2019). Therefore, by employing PVM as a method for data generation, participants were positioned as active contributors to the meaning-making process and in so doing, foregrounded their perspectives, beliefs, and values.

A qualitative case study design was adopted to explore Grade 2 Chinese learners' insights into bravery and strength as gendered constructs. A case study design allows for an in-depth, contextualised exploration of phenomena (Algozzine & Hancock, 2017), which for this study entailed an exploration of Grade 2 Chinese learners who partook in a reading club as a bounded system. Thus, the reading club was positioned as a shared social space for literacy engagement where participants construct, co-construct, negotiate, and renegotiate subjective meanings, drawing on ideas from texts (Álvarez-Álvarez, 2016). A qualitative approach was appropriate because it emphasises participants' subjective views in the meaning-making process (Merriam, 2022).

### **Drawings as a Participatory Visual Methodology**

A PVM positions participants as active contributors in the meaning-making process, thus recognising its potential to relay complex and nuanced ideas that extend beyond spoken and written language (Barley & Russell, 2019; de Lange et al., 2015). This study employed drawings as a PVM because for young children, drawings offer an accessible and developmentally appropriate mode of expression that allows them to express thoughts, feelings, and ideas that would be difficult to articulate verbally (Mayaba & Wood, 2015). We believed that drawings would give insight into how the participants interpreted and reproduced, or opposed gendered meanings, because drawings often reveal internalised social norms, values, and assumptions (Inözü, 2018; Leigh, 2020). Through their drawings the participants exercised their agency by selecting characters, actions, and attributes that they believed represented strength and bravery, offering nuanced insights into how gendered meanings are imagined, challenged, and reconstructed.

### **Contextualising the Study**

The site of the study was a private bilingual school in Beijing, China. The participants were Grade 2 learners who had English as their second language. The participants all came from relatively wealthy backgrounds and attended Beijing Bilingual Fun School (pseudonym), which was geared towards preparing learners for tertiary education outside of China, but still had a strong ethos in relation to upholding Chinese values. Therefore, these children may have already been exposed to a range of children's literature and familiar with some of the traditional stories. Ethics was granted by the university ethics committee. Consent

granted from the Beijing Education Bureau and school principal. Letters of invitation were sent out to all Grade 2 learners and six responded: one girl and five boys. We acknowledge this imbalance of sexes as a limitation even though considering the interpretivist tradition, the aim was not about representativeness, but in-depth exploration and meaning-making. However, the ratio of males to females may have influenced the nature of insights generated. We recognise that the fact that the study leader was male may have encouraged more boys to participate; it might have been perceived as a male preserve, and so we were encouraged that a girl was comfortable to join a seemingly male group. All participants granted assent and their parents granted consent. In line with ethical requirements, participants selected names of book characters that they used as pseudonyms throughout the study: Terry 8-year-old boy; Drake 8-year-old boy, Little Red Riding Hood, 8-year-old girl, Pikachu, 8-year-old boy; Gruffalo 8-year-old boy; Harry Potter, 8-year-old boy.

### **Trustworthiness**

To enhance the trustworthiness of this study, we adopted the criteria posited by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Credibility was strengthened by using multiple data sources including the participants' drawings as well as their written and verbal feedback allowing for triangulation and a more comprehensive understanding of participants' meanings. Dependability was supported through a clear and transparent description of the research design, data generation, and analysis processes—enabling the study to be followed and evaluated. Confirmability was addressed by adopting a reflexive stance on the part of the researchers by acknowledging our roles in the interpretive process while grounding analysis in the participants' visual, written, and verbal data. Finally, while this study is context-specific, transferability was supported through detailed descriptions of the research context and participants, allowing readers to determine the applicability of the findings to other settings.

### **Data Generation**

Data were generated for 16 weeks over a 3-month period. Participants gathered for 16 reading club sessions as part of an after-school activity in a comfortable space in the school library. At the weekly gatherings, participants had access to a wide variety of traditional and diverse children's books. As a group, participants decided which books would be read weekly. Participants appeared to prefer reading diverse, non-traditional stories, because of the 16 books read, 10 were books we classified as diverse and the remainder, traditional. Their reasons for this included the peculiarity of the titles or the idea that they could learn something from the books. Some of the titles of books read include, *Princesses Can Be Pirates too* by Christi Zellerhof, *Not All Princesses Dress in Pink* by Jane Yolen and Heidi Stemple, *10 000 Dresses* by Marcus Ewert, *The Paper Bag Princess* by Robert Munsch, *Freddie and the Fairy* by Julia Donaldson, and *Sleeping Bobby* by Mary Osborne and Will Osborne amongst others.<sup>2</sup> Once a selection was made, the book was read aloud in round-robin style. Participants either shared books or if just one copy of the book was available, it was projected using a document camera. After each book was read, participants engaged in discussing the books. A model for talking about text (see Addendum A) informed by Chambers (1993), but adapted for this study was used to stimulate discussions and scaffold the participants' responses, given their English second language (ESL) proficiency. Participants were not bound to use the model for talking about text and were free to express their ideas in a way that felt natural to them.

Participants were invited to make two drawings as a way of gaining insight into their understandings of strength and bravery. The first drawing was done in Week 1 as a representation of their initial understandings and the last drawing in Week 16 to capture any shifts in thinking. For the first drawing, participants were given the prompt: "Draw a picture of a book character that you think is brave and strong." For the final drawing, participants were given the prompt: "From the books we have read, draw

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<sup>2</sup> A full list of the books read over the 16 weeks is provided as Addendum B.

a picture of a character that you think is brave and strong.” The prompts were also given in Chinese. Alongside their drawings, the participants were also asked to give written and verbal feedback. In all instances, the participants’ written and verbal feedback was the same. Given that the participants were all ESL, we acknowledge that their linguistic limitations may have constrained their written and verbal feedback. However, the convergence of visual, written, and verbal data further strengthened the interpretations of their drawings.

### Data Analysis

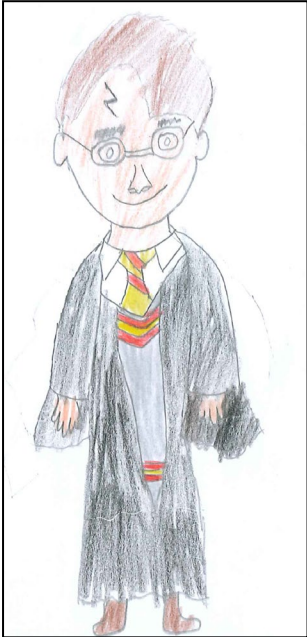
Thematic analysis (TA) relates to systematically identifying, organising, and offering insight into meaning across data sets (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Participants’ drawings were regarded as visual texts and therefore TA was used to explore patterns in the participants’ representations of bravery and strength. Guided by the interpretivist paradigm, an inductive approach to TA was employed. Inductive thematic analysis relates to searching for meaning within the data set rather than predetermined categories. In this way we moved from data to themes to theory and literature (Liu, 2016). Using inductive TA allowed for themes to be generated from the participants’ drawings and their verbal and written feedback, which accompanied the drawings. Thus, in this way, recognising that meanings were co-constructed and contextually situated.

### Results and Analysis

From the participants’ initial drawings, two themes were generated: Bravery and Strength as Physical Power and Combat; and Superhuman Abilities as Markers of Bravery and Strength. Within the first theme, a sub-theme was generated as well: Relational Strength Within Combat Narratives. These initial drawings reflect dominant, stereotypical constructions of bravery and strength.

#### Theme 1: Bravery and Strength as Physical Power and Combat

The first theme of the participants’ initial drawings of characters who are brave and strong is closely linked to battle, defeating wickedness, and physical power. The drawings and the accompanying feedback frequently denote weapons, engaging in combat, and defeating opponents, reflecting popular narratives that associate bravery and strength with heroism, aggression, and dominance.

|   |  |
|---|--|
|  | <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Terry</b></p> <hr/> <p>Harry Potter is very brave because he and his two friends battle with Vordemort and won.</p> <p>In this drawing, Terry depicted Harry Potter as a symbol of strength and bravery and, together with his verbal and written feedback, he justified this because along with his friends, he (Harry Potter), defeated Voldemort. This depiction reflects an understanding of strength and bravery associated with battle, valour, and the defeat of an antagonist, drawing on dominant narrative tropes popular in children’s literature that associate bravery and strength with battle, and victory over evil.</p> |
|---|--|



**Drake**

sun wu kong his from the book xiyouji.  
I think his strong because he has a powerful weapon  
named jin gu tang and he has many  
powers.

In this illustration, Drake depicts Sun Wukong, rationalising that he believes he is strong because he possesses a weapon and special powers. This depiction supports an understanding of bravery and strength as rooted in physical power, weaponry, and superhuman abilities. It reflects prevalent heroic narratives in children's literature where strength and

bravery manifest through remarkable capabilities.

### Sub-Theme 1: Relational Strength Within Combat Narratives

Within the broader theme of Bravery and Strength as Physical Power and Combat, a sub-theme of Relational Strength Within Combat Narratives emerged.

**Little Red Riding Hood**



The clever lion because she helped  
little Rabbit fight a mean giant  
and litt Rabbit very like the giant  
And help little rabbit pick her's house  
to the other place.

In this illustration, Little Red Riding Hood depicted The Clever Giant as brave and strong, not solely because she confronted the mean giant, but also because she guarded and aided the rabbit, carrying its house to safety. This drawing with its accompanied feedback restructures the notion of battle-oriented strength by integrating care, safeguarding, and support—proposing that strength and bravery can also be conveyed through relational and benevolent gestures rather than by hostility and domination only.

### Theme 2: Superhuman Abilities as Markers of Bravery and Strength

The second theme from the participants' initial drawing associated bravery and strength with extraordinary, fantastical capabilities. Participants portrayed characters with supernatural powers and invulnerability suggesting that bravery and strength are linked to possessing exceptional traits.

### Pikachu



I think Jack and Annie are brave and strong because they can get to lots of places on the magic tree house and never get hurt. Jack and Annie are my favourite book: Magic tree house

Pikachu has drawn Annie and Jack from *The Magic Tree House* as characters who are brave and strong because of their ability to get to multiple places without getting harmed. This may suggest that he associates bravery and strength with invulnerability and exceptional mobility, positioning the characters as brave and strong because they navigate danger and unknown situations without risk. This depiction reflects a fantastical framing of bravery and strength where safety, exploration, and extraordinary capabilities are conflated with valour, reinforcing popular notions that bravery and strength are tied to superhuman or miraculous powers.

### Harry Potter



Jack in "Magic tree House" because they have many super power to go back to many place for many reason.

Harry Potter also depicted Jack from *The Magic Tree House* as brave and strong because he possesses superpowers that allow him to travel to many places. Like Pikachu's drawing, Harry Potter also connects bravery and strength with extraordinary abilities, particularly ease of movement and power beyond what humans usually do. Of particular interest, is the absence of Annie, which positions Jack as the sole heroic symbol. This in a way, indirectly replicates gendered narratives that favour male characters as sole enactors of bravery and strength within adventure contexts.

Analysis of the participants' second drawings generated two themes which reflected more nuanced understandings of gender: Rethinking Heroism Through Female Agency and Clever Resistance and Bravery and Strength as Emotional Resilience and Identity Affirmation.

#### Theme 1: Rethinking Heroism Through Female Agency and Clever Resistance

The first theme from the participants' second drawing highlights the participants' representations of females as active agents who save the day and solve problems. These depictions challenge gendered narratives in relation to bravery and strength by positioning a female character as a courageous protagonist who uses intelligence, rather than combat or weaponry, to overcome challenges.

### Little Red Riding Hood



The paper bag princess became  
she helped the prince to get out of  
the dragon cave

Little Red Riding Hood depicted The Paper Bag Princess, wearing a paper bag as a dress, smiling, in front of a cave. In her feedback, she noted that The Paper Bag Princess was brave and strong because she helped the prince escape from the dragon's cave. In this representation, the princess is a proactive hero, rather than led by the plot. In this way, it challenges dominant narratives where princes typically save princesses. The happy portrayal of the princess also challenges visual tropes in children's literature where heroes and heroines are often portrayed as aggressive and stern. Thus, the portrayal also suggests that bravery and strength can be conveyed through positive emotions and confidence.

### Harry Potter



she was brave to "fight" with  
the dragon and was clever to  
save the prince.

Like Terry, Harry Potter also depicted The Paper Bag Princess wearing a paper bag as a dress and this time, with her hands behind her back. He explained that The Paper Bag Princess is brave and strong because she was able to "fight" the dragon and was clever to save the prince. The scare quotes are significant because they signal that the princess does not use combat to save the day as seen in children's literature generally; instead, she uses wit and intelligence to outsmart the dragon. This depiction thus challenges dominant portrayals of saving the day by positioning the princess as an involved and clever rescuer with her relaxed portrayal challenging visual tropes associated with heroism and aggression and physical supremacy. Together, the feedback and visual components suggest an alternate framing of heroism characterised by confidence, cleverness, and positive emotions.

## Theme 2: Bravery and Strength as Emotional Resilience and Identity Affirmation

The second theme of the participants' final drawing foregrounds bravery and strength as expressive, moral, and identity-focused attributes. Participants portrayed characters who, despite criticism, pursued personal interests or resisted perceived social norms. This illustrates a shift in understandings of bravery and strength as everyday acts of authenticity, resilience, and willpower.



Drake

Because she cross the desert by her self and she can blow glass better then anyone.

Drake drew a picture of Elena smiling. He explained that Elena was brave and strong because she crossed the desert by herself and learned how to blow glass better than anyone else. This portrayal positions bravery and strength as determination, self-confidence, and capacity building. The happy, confident portrayal further suggests that bravery and strength can be associated with confidence and fulfilment, reiterating the idea that aggression and physical dominance are not the only ways of enacting bravery and strength.

Pikachu



From the books that are read on reading club I think Talula is one of the brave characters because she is brave enough to do tap dance instead of balay.

Pickachu illustrated Talula, smiling, as a character who is brave and strong. He explained that she attempted tap dance even though she was more skilled at ballet. In this way, the portrayal positions bravery and strength as a willingness to step outside familiar territory and to embrace challenge and vulnerability. Her happy portrayal may signal that bravery and strength are associated with self-development, self-confidence, and positive sense of self, rather than perfection.

Terry



I think Morris is very brave because he is a boy and he wears a tangerine dress. The boys do not want to play with him, and the girls said he can't wear a dress. But Morris didn't change, he wears the tangerine dress everyday.

Terry depicted Morris wearing a dress and appearing to be content. He explained that Morris is "very brave" because he was a boy wearing a dress and as a result the boys would not play with him and the girls told him he could not wear the dress. Despite the rejection from his peers, Morris chose not to change and continued to wear the dress daily. This portrayal positions bravery as resisting gendered

norms and social pressure and in so doing, positioning strength as the ability to maintain one's individuality even when facing marginalisation and critique.

## Discussion

The study explored Grade 2 Chinese learners' insights into the notions of bravery and strength by engaging them with traditional and diverse literature in a reading club, and by using drawings as a PVM. The analysis of the participants' initial and final drawings revealed a notable shift in their conceptualisations of bravery and strength. Initially the participants associated bravery and strength with weaponry, combat, extraordinary powers, and physical dominance, which reflected dominant cultural narratives associated with these notions (Bosak et al., 2008; Kinsella et al., 2017). Characters such as Harry Potter, Sun Wukong, and Jack and Annie were portrayed as brave and strong because they conquered adversaries, possessed powerful weapons, or could travel without harm. These portrayals align with hegemonic conceptualisations of heroism customary in children's literature whereby notions such as bravery and strength are often masculinised and linked with physical domination and aggression (Adukia et al., 2023; Kinsella et al., 2017; Ullah et al., 2014). From a social constructionist perspective, these initial drawings exemplify how children draw on accessible cultural discourses to construct meanings related to bravery and strength, reproducing normative narratives they come across in media and literature (Galbin, 2014).

Following sustained engagement and the availability of diverse texts in the reading club, and the fact that the participants grew and matured in the process, the participants' understandings shifted and, in their drawings, they presented more nuanced understandings of bravery and strength. These include enacting bravery and strength through female agency, emotional resilience, and identity affirmation. In their final drawing, participants depicted girls saving princes, characters persisting when faced with social pressures, and individuals pursuing personal interests despite the difficulties faced. These shifts indicate that exposure and engagement with diverse literature can broaden children's conceptualisations of bravery and strength beyond gender binaries (Alexopoulos et al., 2022). The diverse portrayals of characters provided participants with alternative representations that disrupted narrow, gendered, and heroic tropes, allowing them to restructure, reconstruct, and re-author their understandings of what it means to be brave and strong. These findings suggest that children's understandings of notions such as bravery and strength are not fixed, but are socially constructed and responsive to social interactions as posited by social constructionism theory (Berger & Luckmann, 2016; Burr & Dick, 2017).

The drawings portraying *The Paper Bag Princess* to illustrate bravery and strength, show how the participants reconfigured gendered narratives related to these notions. Linked to this is also how they portrayed her—smiling and relaxed—thus further disrupting typical visual depictions of heroism that associate bravery and strength with aggression or sternness. In these portrayals, they highlight that bravery and strength can coexist with joy, poise, and independence (Ingram & Cahill, 2022). The conclusions drawn from this resonate with gender performativity and social constructionism perspectives that emphasise that gendered identities and roles are socially constructed and open to negotiation and challenge (Berger & Luckmann, 2016; Butler, 2025; Lorber, 2018).

The participants' illustrations of Talula, Elena, and Morris underscored bravery and strength as inner strength, determination, and owning your identities. Elena's voyage across the desert to become a glassblower was understood as courage rooted in unconventionality and self-development, whereas Talula's choice to partake in ballet despite struggling, was highlighted as bravery for taking a risk. Morris's determination in wearing a dress, despite exclusion and rejection was interpreted as self-love and self-respect, and resistance to rigid gendered norms. Morris's exclusion by his peers exemplifies the argument by Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (2013) that although gender performances are open to everyone because we all have agency, there are conditions as to who can perform what with impunity. The positioning of Morris, Elena, and Talula by the participants aligns with Butler's (2016) rejection of essentialist assumptions related to ways of being and doing that assume masculinity and femininity are inherently connected to male and female bodies. In their drawings, participants showed that they understood that

bravery and strength are performative and open to restructuring and reimagination across gendered identities. These depictions also transcend dominant interpretations of bravery and strength in traditional children's literature to include moral, emotional, and identity-based components, aligning with more inclusive understandings of these notions as interpersonal and ethical, as opposed to exclusively physical. These findings speak to the transformative potential of engaging young children with diverse literary inputs that can expand their understandings of ways of being in the world, and support more inclusive understandings (Dahlen, 2020; Derman-Sparks, 2016).

From a social constructionist perspective, the findings validate that children are active meaning-makers who interpret, negotiate, and occasionally challenge the meanings entrenched in cultural texts (Dilek & Boldan, 2018). The reading club served as a sociocultural space where participants could engage with diverse literature, discuss characters (Álvarez-Álvarez, 2016) and events, and visually symbolise their interpretations. The shift from combat-based to relational and identity-based conceptualisations of bravery and strength highlights how children's meanings are shaped through interaction with diverse texts and peers. The use of drawings as a PVM aided the participants, who are ESL speakers, to communicate complex and nuanced understandings that they may not have easily been able to do using spoken language.

## **Implications**

From a pedagogical perspective, the findings highlight the potential of engaging readers with diverse literature for expanding conceptualisations of bravery, strength, and other gendered norms. For classroom practice, this may imply the deliberate selection and inclusion of diverse literature and dialogic engagements with texts. In this way, classrooms become sites of social change where normative assumptions are disrupted and reimagined.

## **Methodological Reflections**

The use of drawings as a PVM enabled the elicitation of participants' perceptions, especially given their age and ESL status. The consistency between the participants' drawings and their written and verbal feedback strengthened the trustworthiness of the findings and allowed for the triangulation of visual and verbal data. Positioning the participants as active agents, and steering away from guiding them towards preconceived notions, aligned with the interpretivist positioning of this study, which enabled authentic portrayals from participants as meaning-makers.

## **Limitations**

This qualitative study involved five boys and one girl; the imbalance of sexes is acknowledged as a limitation especially given the study's focus on gender representations. The participants' ESL status may also have constrained their in-depth verbal and written feedback.

## **Conclusion**

The study demonstrated that young children's understandings of bravery and strength are socially constructed, and responsive to pedagogical and literary input. Initially, the participants' representations signalled combat-based and super heroic narratives. Engaging with diverse texts enabled them to reimagine ways of being and doing related to bravery and strength as relational, emotional, and identity-based attributes. These findings foreground the transformative potential of diverse and gender-fair literature, and participatory pedagogies in supporting children's engagement with gender and identity related concepts by expanding the possibilities for how bravery and strength are imagined and enacted. From a social change and social justice perspective, the study highlighted how early intervention in the form of diverse literature can challenge exclusionary narratives and promote and cultivate more inclusive imaginaries related to gender and identity.

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