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# Goodnight, Woke?

Erik Ellis\*<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Stanford University (California, USA) – United States

## Abstract

As Florida Governor Ron DeSantis fights to become President of the United States, he also continues to fight what he considers "woke" propaganda in schools. Among his targets: picture books that teach empathy for diverse people and families-and thus diverse communities. Conservative politicians and their constituents in the U.S. increasingly recognize the power of picture books to shape children's values and worldviews. A genre that used to fly under the radar as innocuous or "mere fun" is facing intense scrutiny for teaching communal concepts such as empathy, diversity, and integrity. Conservative activists are infiltrating school boards across the country, trying to censor "inappropriate" picture books that promote tolerance and other characteristics central to the project of the political left. Of course, picture books haven't always been so "woke." Historically, picture books have an abysmal record of featuring protagonists who are not white males. Even in recent decades, "modern children's picture books continue to provide nightly reinforcement of the idea that boys and men are more interesting and important than are girls and women" (Hamilton et.

al). Gender and racial stereotypes continue to be a problem as well. Fortunately, the push for diverse books launched in 2014 has gained momentum with movements such as Black Lives Matter, and publishers are not only releasing more multicultural and inclusive picture books but are also recruiting more diverse authors and illustrators.

My media-rich presentation will focus on the unique challenges and rewards of teaching undergraduate writing & rhetoric students at Stanford University to create all-original picture books (words and illustrations) with the "expert insights" of children at a local elementary school. The project, which I have led for 12 years, values overlapping communities-the teams of students who collaboratively create the picture books, the children and their teacher in the classroom, the school, and the university. Students' final picture books become part of the library collections both at the elementary school and at Stanford. To date, in the overall liberal political climate of Palo Alto, no picture book has been challenged for being too "woke." Yet the threat looms-a reminder to celebrate empathy, tolerance, diversity, and the various communal "life skills" that the picture books promote (without sounding preachy!).

I will highlight not only the incredible range of picture books that Stanford students have created over the years, but also the crucial role of students' scholarly research in crafting them. For example, one recent student researched picture books that ato teach more expansive conceptions of gender, because her group was aiming to create such a book. While conservative activists would likely critique various published picture books for being too "woke," this student articulated her concerns that well-intentioned

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\*Speaker

efforts to promote gender inclusivity could ironically backfire and solidify gender stereotypes. By not only writing essays and giving class presentations about such research, but actually letting their research inform the picture books they create, Stanford students are helping to promote meaningful community values.

**Erik Ellis** has been teaching for the Program in Writing and Rhetoric at Stanford University since 2011. He holds a BA from Beloit College, an MA in journalism from the University of Colorado at Boulder, an MFA in creative writing from New York University, and a Ph.D. in Rhetoric, Composition, and the Teaching of English from the University of Arizona. <https://news.stanford.edu/2018/03/01/stanford-students-creating-big-life-lessons-books-like-kids/>