

Between Morality and Market: Authorial Negotiation and the Politics of Writing Sensitive Themes in Philippine Children’s Literature

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Abstract. This study explored how Filipino authors of children’s literature negotiate the inclusion of sensitive themes—such as grief, gender, mental health, and death—within a conservative and market-driven publishing environment. Guided by Bourdieu’s theory of cultural production, Foucault’s concept of discourse and power, and Stephens’ ideological framework of children’s literature, the study employs qualitative interviews with contemporary Filipino authors who engage with complex topics in their works. Findings reveal that writers navigate tensions between morality and marketability through creative negotiation, employing symbolism, child-centered narration, and developmental framing to make difficult subjects accessible and acceptable. Despite facing censorship, editorial intervention, and institutional constraints, these authors use their craft as a form of *creative praxis*—balancing ethical sensitivity with artistic agency. The study concludes that Filipino children’s authors act as cultural negotiators who expand the boundaries of representation and empathy, redefining the role of children’s literature as a transformative space for social awareness and inclusive storytelling in the Philippines.

Keywords: *children’s literature, negotiation, censorship, discourse, power*

Introduction

Children’s books are among the most influential cultural artefacts in a child’s early life, shaping not only imagination but also moral outlook, identity, and social understanding. Beyond the influence of parents, peers, and teachers, children’s literature acts as a conduit for values, norms, and cultural narratives—introducing young readers to a wider world of relation, difference, and meaning (Kholibekova, 2023). These texts often serve as the child’s first encounter with structured cultural discourse, offering narratives that mediate the known and the unknown, the safe and the challenging (Ismail, 2023). Because storytelling is inherently ideological, what appears—or is omitted—in children’s literature reflects conscious and unconscious decisions about what children should know and how they should interpret the world. Thus, the stakes of children’s literature lie not only in entertainment but in the formation of reader-subjectivities and cultural citizenship.

Traditionally, children’s books in many contexts emphasized moral instruction, clear behavioral norms, and educational aims—often embedding obedience, resilience, and conventional values within narrative frameworks. However, contemporary children’s literature has changed significantly in recent decades. Globalization, technological change, and shifting social attitudes have influenced the kinds of stories written for children and the themes that publishers are willing to circulate. Contemporary children’s books increasingly include discussions of diversity, identity, disability, migration, race, gender, mental health, grief, violence, and social inequality. Themes that were once considered inappropriate for children are now more visible in books intended for young readers. This thematic shift signals a reframing of childhood itself—from a protected space of innocence to one of agency, reflection, and growing

complexity. In turn, authors, illustrators, and publishers are negotiating new expectations about what children can safely see, discuss, and understand.

However, the rise of “sensitive” or “controversial” themes brings significant tension into children’s publishing. Topics that were once considered taboo—such as death, grief, mental illness, war, and gender identity—are increasingly present in children’s literature, provoking debates on who gets to decide and what is appropriate for young readers (Min, 2024; Nel and Reynolds, 2021). Advocates have argued that such themes enhance children’s social awareness, emotional resilience, and critical engagement, while opponents express fears that exposure might undermine childhood innocence or disturb developmental norms (Fecke et al., 2022). These debates are amplified by institutional and commercial gatekeeping, with publishers, educational systems, parents, and policymakers frequently mediating which stories reach children and on what terms. In effect, the conflict is not only about content but about control—control of narratives, readership, and literary markets.

In the Philippine context, these global and literary-thematic shifts meet a cultural, institutional, and market environment that is deeply influenced by religious values, educational norms, and commercial constraints. Philippine children’s literature has historically been oriented towards moral-didactic frameworks and mainstream readerships, with limited space for narrative experimentation or the highlighting of marginalized voices (Sagun & Luyt, 2020). Filipino authors who seek to engage with taboo topics—mental health, gender nonconformity, loss, social inequality—must often negotiate not only their creative impulses but also the expectations of editors, publishers, school curriculums and parental gatekeepers. Market forces further complicate the landscape through commercial viability, readership preferences, and institutional commissions that play a significant role in determining which narratives are published and circulated. Thus, the tension between morality and market presents a distinctive challenge for children’s book authors in the Philippines, where cultural conformity and creative innovation coexist uneasily.

Despite these constraints, many Filipino children’s authors persist in writing stories that challenge normative boundaries and engage with “difficult truths”. They deploy strategies such as symbolism, allegory, child-perspective framing, and developmental calibration to render mature or sensitive themes accessible and appropriate for young readers (Mastaliparsa et al., 2022). However, there remains a significant gap in research regarding how these processes of negotiation—creative, institutional, and cultural—actually unfold in the Philippine children’s publishing field. This study, therefore, investigated how Filipino authors of children’s literature negotiate the politics of writing sensitive themes in a market-driven, morally-inflected environment. It examined how they balance creative expression, social responsibility, and commercial imperatives to produce narratives that are both meaningful and viable. Ultimately, by mapping these authorial negotiations, the study highlighted how children’s literature can transform from a tool of conformity into a medium of empathy, critical engagement, and social awareness.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

This study is anchored on theories of cultural production, discourse, power, and ideological representation to examine how Filipino children’s book authors negotiate the inclusion of controversial themes within a conservative and market-driven publishing landscape. These frameworks collectively foreground the tensions between creative autonomy and institutional constraint, highlighting how power, culture, and ideology shape literary production.

Bourdieu's Theory of Cultural Production

Pierre Bourdieu's (1993) theory of cultural production provides the sociological foundation for understanding the dynamics of the children's publishing field. According to Bourdieu, literary production occurs within a structured field of power where various forms of capital—economic, cultural, social, and symbolic—interact. In this field, authors, publishers, critics, and audiences participate in a continual struggle for legitimacy.

In the Philippine context, authors who write about sensitive or taboo subjects often hold limited economic capital and rely heavily on the approval of publishers and educators for legitimacy. Publishers, functioning as *gatekeepers*, determine which texts are “appropriate” for young readers, shaping both creative direction and market access (Fecke et al., 2022; Sagun & Luyt, 2020). Consequently, Filipino authors must negotiate their artistic intent with institutional expectations and moral conventions to secure publication and readership. Contemporary studies have affirmed that similar dynamics persist across Southeast Asia, where publishing systems privilege moral-didactic and commercially safe narratives over experimental or socially challenging works (Comeau, 2024).

Bourdieu's framework thus clarifies the structural limitations that shape authors' choices. It situates authorial negotiation not simply as an individual creative act but as a product of interactions within the broader field of cultural production—a space regulated by power, ideology, and economic imperatives.

Foucault's Concept of Discourse and Power

Complementing Bourdieu's sociological approach, Michel Foucault's (1972) concept of *discourse* provides a lens for examining how dominant institutions and social norms govern what can be said, represented, or circulated in public discourse. Discourse, in this sense, is a mechanism of power that defines what is “true,” “acceptable,” or “appropriate” within a given society. Discourses surrounding innocence, morality, and child protection often shape what is considered acceptable in children's literature. Because childhood is frequently imagined as a period of purity and vulnerability, stories for young readers are often expected to avoid subjects that may appear too complex, disturbing, or politically sensitive. As a result, authors who write about topics such as death, mental illness, violence, sexuality, or gender identity may be viewed as challenging dominant assumptions about what childhood should be.

In the Philippine context, these expectations are further shaped by strong moral, religious, and family-oriented values. Parents, teachers, publishers, and other adult gatekeepers often influence which books children are exposed to and how sensitive themes are represented. Foucault's theory helps this study examine how authors both comply with and resist these boundaries. Their writing becomes a site of negotiation, where subversive meanings may be disguised through metaphor, humor, or child-friendly framing to bypass censorship while still addressing critical social issues.

Ideology and Children's Literature

Children's literature is inherently ideological. As Stephens (1992) and later scholars argued, all children's texts encode values and assumptions about the world, implicitly teaching readers how to interpret social relationships and norms. The growing inclusion of diversity and social justice themes in contemporary literature demonstrates that ideology in children's books has become more dynamic and contested rather than neutral.

From this perspective, Filipino children’s authors act as mediators of ideology. They must balance moral expectations with the need for representation and critical engagement. Their creative decisions—how characters are portrayed, what topics are foregrounded, and how conflicts are resolved—reflect broader ideological negotiations about gender, family, identity, and nationhood. Examining these choices reveals how ideology operates at the textual and institutional levels of children’s publishing.

Conceptual Framework

Drawing from these theoretical lenses, this study conceptualized authorial negotiation as a multidimensional process occurring across three interrelated levels: creative, institutional, and cultural negotiation, as shown in the table below:

Table 1
Dimensions of Authorial Negotiation

Dimension	Description	Key Actors	Indicators/Manifestations
Creative Negotiation	Balancing authenticity and developmental appropriateness when addressing sensitive or taboo topics	Authors	Use of metaphor, symbolism, humor, or framing through parental/child perspectives
Institutional Negotiation	Managing editorial censorship, moral gatekeeping, and commercial pressures from publishers and educational institutions	Publishers, editors	Revisions, rejections, dilution of controversial content, and selective publishing
Cultural Negotiation	Responding to socio-moral expectations shaped by religion, family, and national values	Parents, teachers, religious groups	Public reception, book challenges or bans, media discourse on appropriateness

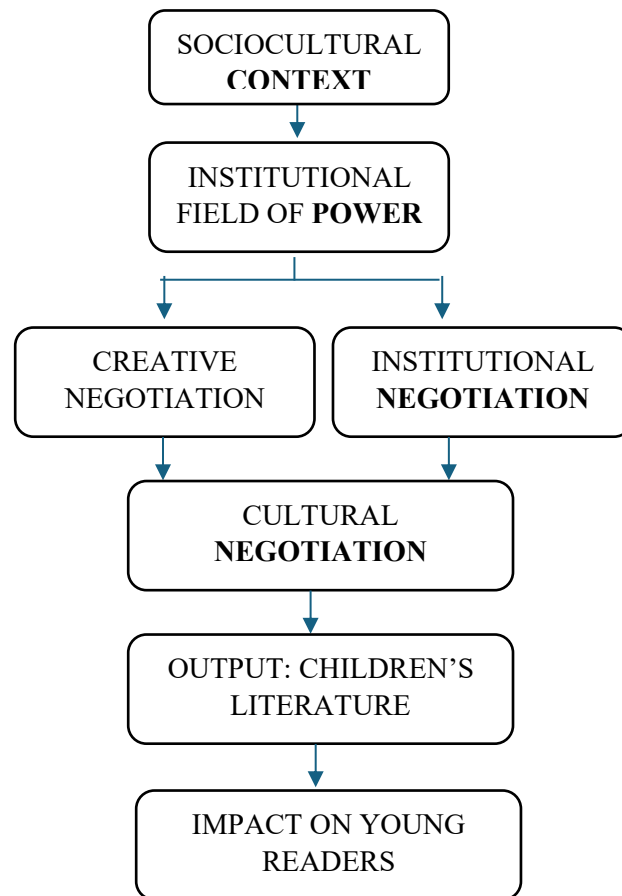


Figure 1
 Conceptual Framework on the Multilayered Process of Authorial Negotiation Among Filipino Writers of Children’s Literature

These dimensions interact to illustrate how Filipino authors work within overlapping systems of power that regulate children’s literature. The creative strategies they employ—symbolic language, narrative framing, or empathetic tone—serve as forms of negotiation that allow them to express difficult truths while maintaining cultural sensitivity.

Drawing from Bourdieu’s theory of cultural production, Foucault’s concept of discourse and power, and ideological criticism, the framework (Figure 1) shows how creative, institutional, and cultural negotiations intersect within a conservative and market-oriented publishing landscape. Authors engage in adaptive strategies—such as symbolism, narrative framing, and developmental sensitivity—to address taboo topics while navigating the constraints imposed by sociocultural norms and publishing institutions.

By integrating Bourdieu’s theory of cultural production, Foucault’s concept of discourse, and ideological criticism, this study positioned Filipino children’s literature as a cultural site of negotiation—one where moral norms, institutional authority, and artistic freedom continually intersect. This framework allowed the study to examine

1. how authors internalize and respond to institutional and cultural constraints;
2. what creative strategies they employ to navigate taboos in writing for children; and
3. how their works contribute to reshaping social understandings of childhood and morality.

Through this lens, the study underscored the potential of children's literature as both a mirror and a critique of the society that produces it, capable of fostering empathy, social awareness, and inclusivity among its young readers.

Methodology

This study investigated how Filipino authors of children's literature negotiate the inclusion of sensitive or controversial themes—such as grief, gender, mental health, and death—within a conservative and market-driven publishing landscape. While children's books serve as crucial tools for shaping young readers' social and moral consciousness, the treatment of taboo subjects continues to provoke tension among authors, publishers, educators, and parents. Guided by Bourdieu's theory of cultural production, Foucault's notion of discourse and power, and Stephens' ideological framework of children's literature, this qualitative research draws on semi-structured interviews with Filipino authors known for engaging with complex themes in their works.

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative descriptive research design. This design is particularly suitable for gaining in-depth insights into the hurdles and limitations faced by authors when producing and publishing works with controversial or sensitive themes. The primary purpose of this study was to examine how authors navigate the processes of producing and publishing children's literature. Specifically, it aimed to explore how children's book authors determine what content to include or exclude in their work, and the process by which they create stories with controversial themes that are still considered fit for children's literature. Qualitative descriptive research generates data that describe the key events or experiences from a subjective perspective.

Research Locale

The study's focus is situated within the Philippine context. It explores the literary culture in the Philippines and observes a notable lack of research within the Philippine children's literature landscape on authorial strategies for navigating complex interactions around sensitive themes. Discussions about publishers frequently refer to "publishers in the Philippines", and observations on conservative culture and institutional gatekeeping by entities like DepEd further indicate a focus on the Philippine publishing industry and educational system.

Participants

The participants for this study are authors of contemporary children's books. To be eligible, they must have published at least one book and possess substantial knowledge in incorporating sensitive themes in children's stories. They should also have experience integrating complex or sensitive themes into their work and engaging with such themes in the works of other authors within the genre.

Their perspectives are central to surveying how controversial themes are perceived in their field and identifying the strategies and techniques used by people in their genre to present sensitive content in age-appropriate ways.

Sampling Method

This study employed purposive sampling, also known as judgmental sampling. This involves intentionally selecting participants based on a predefined set of criteria. The method relies on the researcher's judgment when identifying and selecting individuals who can provide the best information to achieve the study's objectives. This allows researchers to gather rich and detailed insights from individuals who are (1) knowledgeable about the phenomena being studied, (2) skilled at communicating their perspectives and experiences, and (3) willing to participate in the study.

Additionally, the study also employed snowball sampling, where researchers would ask participating authors to refer to other authors who fit the study's criteria.

Research Instruments/Tools

This study utilized a semi-structured interview to gather in-depth qualitative data. A semi-structured interview is an "exploratory interview" commonly used in the social sciences to explore the life story of a person or a group. Questions in semi-structured interviews are loosely based on a general framework, allowing for flexibility. Specific topics and questions are prepared beforehand, but new inquiries can be brought forward based on interviewees' responses. This provides an opportunity for interviewers to dig deeper and explore emerging themes leading to more comprehensive results.

The interviews prepared by the researchers were designed to explore the challenges associated with writing and publishing children's books that contain controversial themes. The instrument aimed to gain a deeper understanding of the ethical and creative choices children's book authors make to strike a balance between sensitivity and age-appropriateness in their works. It also sought to uncover how authors manage and respond to the constraints imposed by the publishing industry when dealing with controversial topics.

Validation Procedure

The questionnaire used in this study underwent expert validation. *Expert validation* refers to the process in which experts review the questionnaire to ensure that the questions are clear and relevant to the study. This process ensures content validity, which means the questions are valid to gather data that will be meaningful to the topic being studied.

To further ensure the credibility of findings, *member checking* was conducted. This involves providing the participants with the interpreted data for validation and feedback. Member checking, also known as respondent validation, is a qualitative research technique where researchers and study respondents collaborate to ensure data accuracy. This technique is often used to verify qualitative data gathered from interviews, semi-structured interviews, or focus groups (Birt et al., 2016).

Data Gathering Procedure

The data was obtained through semi-structured online interviews with Filipino children's book authors selected using purposive and snowball sampling. To be selected, they must have published at least one children's book and have substantial knowledge in incorporating sensitive or controversial themes in their work.

An interview guide with open-ended questions was prepared to explore how authors determine content, apply strategies to maintain age-appropriateness, and respond to challenges from publishers or institutions. Each interview lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes and was recorded with the participant's consent. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and anonymized by assigning participant codes. Member checking was also conducted to confirm the accuracy of the interpretations.

Data Analysis

This study used thematic analysis as the primary method of analyzing qualitative data. Thematic analysis is a popular technique for analyzing qualitative data, especially thick descriptive data. Given the study's focus on authors' navigation through the constraints of producing and publishing children's literature, this method is suitable. Following the six steps developed by Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, the researchers interpreted data by

- systematically identifying important themes and features relevant to the research question;
- grouping patterns to capture meaningful ideas;
- refining data to ensure the themes stay consistent; and
- describing the aspects of data that capture each theme to vividly extract analytical commentary.

Thematic analysis revealed that authors operate within a moral and institutional field defined by gatekeeping, censorship, and market expectations. However, they employ creative strategies—such as symbolism, narrative framing, and child-centered storytelling—to navigate these constraints. The findings highlighted a recurring process of negotiation between morality and marketability, as authors balance artistic authenticity with pedagogical and commercial considerations. Through this negotiation, they exercise what this study identifies as *creative praxis*: the act of transforming constraint into opportunity through ethical, discursive, and aesthetic choices.

The interview transcriptions underwent three phases of thematic analysis:

- Phase 1 - Generating Initial Codes
- Phase 2 - Identifying Emerging Themes
- Phase 3 - Synthesizing Overarching Themes

Phase 1: Generating Initial Codes

In the first phase of data analysis, initial codes were generated from the extracted quotes in the transcripts, based on patterns that emerged from participant responses. Highlights were determined from the interview transcript, which featured patterns of ethical self-censoring, creative writing strategies, commodification of children's literature, and institutional gatekeeping. Twenty-three (23) initial codes were generated, discussing the following specific key points found in Table 1, such as

- limits on acceptable topics; referencing global models; constrained creative freedom
- risk aversion; trend dependency; moral conformity
- alternative publishing as creative freedom; autonomy vs. institutional constraint
- industry scouting; grassroots visibility; hybrid publication pathway
- literature as advocacy; representation; empowerment
- curriculum as creative limitation; institutional homogenization
- hierarchy of openness: alternative publishing ecosystems
- child-centered narration; developmental framing
- institutional reform; advocacy for an inclusive reading culture.

Table 1

Phase 1 Open Coding

Transcript	Initial Codes
“I wanted to touch on family estrangement... but you can’t really put it in a children’s book unless...like Matilda.”	Limits on acceptable topics; referencing global models; constrained creative freedom
“Publishers... their goal is to sell books... sometimes they want to cater to DepEd... very rigid.”	Market-driven priorities; institutional gatekeeping; influence of DepEd standards
“In my self-published version, N*** just goes... but the editor told me to make her promise to come back.”	Editorial control; conservative moral framing; subtle censorship
“They’re always playing it safe... they wait for certain topics to be more popular before they touch them.”	Risk aversion; trend dependency; moral conformity
“I feel like I’m not the right person to tell this story... I’ll allow other people to tell it instead.”	Ethical self-censorship; respect for authenticity; authorial humility
“How you package the controversial topic so it still comes off creative and non-preachy.”	Framing strategy; balancing honesty and acceptability
“If you want to tell a really raw story, self-publishing... frees you from editorial stuff.”	Alternative publishing as creative freedom; autonomy vs. institutional constraint
“Publishers scout works in comiket... if they like it, they’ll propose to publish it.”	Industry scouting; grassroots visibility; hybrid publication pathway
“Stories become products.”	Commodification of children’s literature; neoliberal pressures
“I’d like kids to build empathy... broaden their perspective.”	Educational purpose; transformative potential of literature
“It’s hard to penetrate mainstream publication like AH, L... you have to establish your name.”	Barriers to entry; hierarchy in publishing; credibility as capital
“Will these [sensitive topics] be welcomed in schools or homes?”	Institutional conservatism; audience readiness

“Children’s literature with sensitive topics gives voice to the voiceless.”	Literature as advocacy; representation; empowerment
“The risk is from people who are still close-minded.”	Fear of backlash; sociocultural constraint
“We are boxing what we offer to children... if we only follow learning competencies.”	Curriculum as creative limitation; institutional homogenization
“Publishers have themes... writers aren’t aware.”	Lack of transparency; mismatch of vision and expectation
“Parents from lower-middle classes are picky buyers... books must be worth the money.”	Socioeconomic access; market discrimination
“Mainstream publishers are open, but selective... indie presses are more daring.”	Hierarchy of openness; alternative publishing ecosystems
“My illustrator drew a Bible; publisher changed it for Mindanao market.”	Editorial censorship; market sensitivity to religion
“Always tell the story in the mind of the child.”	Child-centered narration; developmental framing
“NBDB and NCCA should campaign to promote literature that addresses taboo issues.”	Institutional reform; advocacy for inclusive reading culture
“I hope you change names of publishers... I might get gatekept.”	Fear of retribution; awareness of institutional surveillance

Given that these codes overlap with one another, further examination of data was conducted, narrowing down initial codes to eight more cohesive, emerging themes in Phase 2 of thematic analysis.

In the second phase of data analysis, eight emerging themes were identified from the transcript. This phase also involved cross-referencing the data to determine whether each occurrence was unique to a single participant or evident in both. Six of the emerging themes were found to be shared by both participants, namely the themes of Institutional & Market Gatekeeping, Authorial Negotiation and Creative Strategy, Self-Censorship and Ethical Sensitivity, Alternative Publishing as Agency, and Moral Economy of Publishing. Although two of the themes are stronger in Participant 2 (P2), namely, Cultural and Religious Sensitivity and Institutional Reform and Advocacy.

Both participants highlighted institutional and market gatekeeping, noting how schools and publishers shape notions of appropriateness and marketability. Supporting data, such as P2’s quote of DepEd’s boxing of literary stories through competencies, suggest that DepEd’s competency-based curriculum limits how literature is taught and appreciated by confining it within rigid learning outcomes or measurable skills. This is shared in the themes of authorial negotiation and creative strategy, where writers employ techniques such as symbolism and careful framing to navigate restrictive norms.

Another recurring theme was self-censorship and ethical sensitivity; both participants acknowledged the fear of backlash and demonetization. Supporting data, such as Participant 1 (P1) stated that “I’m not the right person to tell this story,” revealing a heightened awareness of moral and cultural boundaries. This suggests that authors often fear societal expectations and institutional pressures, where they are forced to publish generally accepted themes, leading to cautious negotiation between creative freedom and ethical responsibility. This is shared among participants, where they tend to disregard such themes due to societal pressure and what many call inappropriate literature. This shows how moral and market forces intertwine to shape literary production in subtle yet powerful ways.

The moral economy of publishing further illustrates how commodification and selective consumer preferences influence which stories reach the market. This is supported by both participants stating that “Stories become products” and “Publishers control what the outcome of stories will be”. Table 2 consolidates the emerging themes shared and/or unique to each participant.

Table 2

Phase 2 Emerging Themes

Emerging Themes	Codes	Shared or Unique?	Supporting Data
1. Institutional and Market Gatekeeping	Power of publishers, schools, and curricula in defining appropriateness and marketability.	Shared (P1 & P2)	“DepEd is rigid” (P1); “Boxing literature through competencies” (P2)
2. Authorial Negotiation and Creative Strategy	Techniques to convey sensitive themes within acceptable bounds (symbolism, framing, tone).	Shared	“Package controversial topics creatively” (P1); “Tell story in the mind of the child” (P2)
3. Self-Censorship and Ethical Sensitivity	Internal moral/ethical limits; fear of backlash.	Shared	“I’m not the right person to tell this story” (P1); “Fear of close-minded readers” (P2)
4. Alternative Publishing as Agency	Self-publishing and indie presses as sites of creative freedom.	Shared	“Self-publishing frees you” (P1); “Indie publishers more daring” (P2)
5. Moral Economy of Publishing	Commodification and moral filtering of stories.	Shared	“Stories become products” (P1); “Parents as selective buyers” (P2)
6. Cultural and Religious Sensitivity	Adjusting content for diverse audiences and avoiding offense.	Emergent (stronger in P2)	“Changed illustration for Mindanao market”
7. Institutional Reform and Advocacy	Calls for NBDB/NCCA support, awareness campaigns.	Emergent (P2)	“Institutions should promote inclusive reading”
8. Representation and Empathy	Literature as a voice for marginalized children.	Shared but expanded	“Build empathy” (P1); “Give voice to voiceless” (P2)

Synthesis of these emerging themes resulted in six main themes synthesized in Table 3, such as Negotiating Constraints: Between Morality and Market, Strategies of Negotiation, Censorship and Self-Censorship, Alternative Pathways and Creative Agency, Children’s Literature as Advocacy, and Hope for Institutional Support. These six main themes branch out into subthemes highlighted by specific illustrative quotes from the transcript. Negotiating constraints; between morality and market branch out into gatekeeping, curricular boxing, and market filtering, illustrated by P1 stating “DepEd is rigid,” and P2 stating “Boxing what we offer to children.”

Table 3

Phase 3 Cross-Participant Thematic Integration

Overarching Theme	Subthemes	Illustrative Quotes
Negotiating Constraints: Between Morality and Market	Gatekeeping; curricular boxing; market filtering	“DepEd is rigid.” (P1) / “Boxing what we offer to children.” (P2)
Strategies of Negotiation	Symbolism, child perspective, narrative framing	“How you package the controversial topic.” (P1) / “Tell story in the mind of the child.” (P2)
Censorship and Self-Censorship	Editorial changes; ethical restraint; fear of backlash	“Editor told me to make her promise to come back.” (P1) / “Publisher removed religious illustration.” (P2)
Alternative Pathways & Creative Agency	Indie and self-publishing; writer communities	“Comiket, café libraries.” (P1) / “Southern Voices, Bookmark more open.” (P2)
Children’s Literature as Advocacy	Representation, empathy, inclusivity	“Kids build empathy.” (P1) / “Give voices to the voiceless.” (P2)
Hope for Institutional Support	Role of NBDB, NCCA, and policy reform	“Need institutional support.” (P1 summary) / “Institutions should campaign to promote literature.” (P2)

Results and Discussion

This study explored how Filipino authors of children's literature negotiate the inclusion of sensitive or controversial themes within a conservative and market-driven publishing landscape. Through thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews with two Filipino children's book authors, the findings reveal that their creative decisions emerge from a dynamic interplay between moral norms, institutional pressures, and artistic intent. Drawing on Bourdieu's (1993) theory of cultural production, Foucault's (1972) concept of discourse and power, and Stephens' (1992) ideological framework for children's literature, this discussion demonstrates that negotiation is not merely an act of compromise but a form of creative praxis situated within systems of power.

Between Morality and Market: Navigating the Field of Cultural Production

Both participants describe the Philippine children's publishing industry as governed by moral and institutional hierarchies that fundamentally shape what stories reach young readers. P1 observed that "publishers... their goal is to sell books... sometimes they want to cater to DepEd... very rigid," while P2 remarked, "It's hard to penetrate mainstream publication like AH, L... you have to establish your name."

These statements illustrate what Bourdieu (1993) conceptualized as the field of cultural production—a structured space where legitimacy, taste, and authority are distributed according to cultural and symbolic capital. Within this field, publishers and institutions like the Department of Education (DepEd) function as gatekeepers, reinforcing conservative moral standards that define what qualifies as "child-appropriate" content. This gatekeeping mechanism creates what can be termed a moral economy of children's literature, wherein texts become simultaneously cultural artifacts and commercial commodities subject to dual forms of valuation.

The commodification of children's stories was explicitly articulated by P1: "Stories become products." This transformation reveals a tension inherent in the contemporary publishing landscape—between literature as art and literature as merchandise. Market pressures demand that books appeal to multiple stakeholders: not only children but also parents, teachers, school administrators, and curriculum developers. As P2 noted, "Parents from lower-middle classes are picky buyers...books must be worth the money," highlighting how economic accessibility intersects with content acceptability to create additional barriers for challenging narratives.

However, this field is not entirely static. Within its constraints, authors strategize continuously, learning to balance creative goals with the realities of market demands and moral expectations. Their accounts reveal how the politics of legitimacy in Philippine children's literature both reproduces and occasionally disrupts established hierarchies of taste that traditionally favor didactic and morally "safe" narratives. The authors' positioning within this field—often with limited economic capital but growing cultural capital—shapes their capacity to negotiate and, at times, transform the boundaries of what is permissible in children's storytelling.

Negotiating Boundaries: Creative Strategies of Subtle Resistance

Both participants described employing sophisticated creative strategies that enable them to address sensitive subjects without directly violating moral or institutional expectations. P1 explained that "You can still touch on family estrangement... but you package the controversial topic so it still comes off creative and non-preachy." Similarly, P2 emphasized, "Always tell the story in the mind of the child."

These narrative tactics demonstrate what Foucault (1972) conceptualized as resistance within discourse—recognizing that power is not only constraining but also productive. Authors strategically deploy literary devices such as metaphor, symbolism, allegory, and humor to embed difficult truths within child-friendly narrative frameworks. By framing complex emotions like grief, alienation, or gender questioning through accessible imagery and child-centered perspectives, writers subvert the boundaries of dominant moral discourse while remaining legible—and thus acceptable—to institutional gatekeepers.

This approach represents what can be termed *discursive tact*: a form of rhetorical navigation that allows authors to explore taboo subjects (death, mental health, non-normative gender expressions, and poverty) in ways that cultivate empathy rather than controversy. The capacity to balance subtle critique with narrative sensitivity exemplifies what Bourdieu would describe as practical mastery—the ability to "play the game" of the field while simultaneously introducing new possibilities and expanding its boundaries.

For instance, P1's reference to *Matilda* as a model for addressing family dysfunction illustrates how Filipino authors look to internationally successful precedents to legitimate their own boundary-pushing narratives. This intertextual strategy serves a dual purpose: it provides cover by aligning controversial content with established, commercially successful texts, while also signaling to readers and gatekeepers that such themes have already been deemed acceptable in global children's literature markets.

The strategic use of *developmental framing*—presenting mature themes through a child's cognitive and emotional lens—emerged as particularly significant. This technique not only makes difficult content more accessible to young readers but also serves as a protective mechanism against censorship. By grounding challenging topics in authentic child experience and psychology, authors can argue that their

work reflects rather than imposes adult concerns, thus maintaining the appearance of child-centeredness that is central to the legitimacy of children's literature.

Censorship and Self-Censorship: The Internalization of Power

The authors' experiences reveal that censorship operates simultaneously as an external institutional force and an internalized self-regulatory mechanism. P1 recounted an editorial intervention: "In my self-published version, N*** just goes... but the editor told me to make her promise to come back." This imposed moral resolution neutralized the story's ambiguity, transforming an open-ended narrative about autonomy into a reassuring tale of eventual compliance—a shift that fundamentally altered the text's ideological implications.

Similarly, P2 described how "my illustrator drew a Bible; the publisher changed it for the Mindanao market." This modification reflects the publisher's awareness of religious and regional sensitivities, demonstrating how market segmentation intersects with content regulation. Such editorial interventions exemplify Foucault's (1972) notion of disciplinary discourse, wherein institutional routines normalize and reproduce dominant moral frameworks. The censorship becomes effective not through overt prohibition but through subtle adjustments that accumulate to shape the boundaries of representational possibility.

However, censorship is not imposed solely from above. Both authors admitted to practicing self-censorship rooted in ethical considerations and pragmatic awareness. P1 reflected that "I feel like I'm not the right person to tell this story... I'll allow other people to tell it instead," while P2 acknowledged fear of backlash from "close-minded" readers and expressed concern about professional consequences: "I hope you change names of publishers... I might get gatekept."

This self-policing corresponds to what Bourdieu terms *habitus*—an embodied awareness of one's position within the field that generates practical dispositions toward action. Authors internalize cultural expectations and preemptively adjust their creative choices to maintain acceptability and access. However, this self-limitation is not merely defensive. It also reveals an ethical dimension to authorial practice. Both writers conceptualize restraint as part of their cultural responsibility, demonstrating sensitivity to questions of authentic representation, particularly regarding marginalized communities whose stories they may not have lived experience to tell.

The intersection of institutional censorship and self-censorship creates what can be understood as a double bind: authors must navigate external gatekeeping while also managing internal ethical constraints. This dual regulatory system is particularly acute for writers addressing LGBTQ+ themes, mental health, or religious questioning—topics that remain contentious in the Philippine context. As P2 noted, "The risk is from people who are still close-minded," acknowledging that resistance may come not only from publishers but from parents, educators, and community groups who wield informal but powerful influence over what children read.

Alternative Spaces: Reclaiming Agency through Independent Publishing

Both participants identified independent publishing and self-publishing as crucial avenues for maintaining creative autonomy. P1 emphasized that "if you want to tell a really raw story, self-publishing... frees you from editorial stuff," while P2 observed that "mainstream publishers are open, but selective... indie presses are more daring." These accounts highlight the emergence of alternative literary fields—what

Bourdieu might characterize as subfields of restricted production—where value is defined primarily by creativity, authenticity, and community solidarity rather than profit maximization or institutional approval.

Independent publishing ecosystems in the Philippines include small presses, comic conventions (comiket), café libraries, and digital platforms that allow writers to bypass traditional gatekeepers. P1 described how "publishers scout works in comiket... if they like it, they'll propose to publish it," illustrating how grassroots visibility can create pathways to mainstream recognition. This suggests a more complex, hybrid model of literary circulation wherein alternative spaces function not as permanent alternatives but as incubation sites for narratives that may eventually gain broader acceptance.

While these independent venues lack the distribution reach, marketing resources, and institutional legitimacy of established publishers like AH or L, they provide critical refuge for dissenting voices. They enable writers to maintain artistic integrity, experiment with form and content, and cultivate micro-audiences that value thematic boldness over conventional marketability. Moreover, these spaces foster writer communities characterized by mutual support, shared resources, and collective advocacy—forms of social capital that partially compensate for limited economic capital.

The significance of alternative publishing extends beyond mere market access. It represents a form of symbolic resistance wherein Filipino authors collectively reclaim ownership of narratives that might otherwise be silenced by moral conservatism or market caution. By creating parallel circuits of production and circulation, these authors challenge the monopoly of mainstream gatekeepers over what counts as legitimate children's literature. This development resonates with broader patterns documented in Southeast Asian publishing, where independent initiatives increasingly contest dominant cultural production models (Comeau, 2024).

However, participants also acknowledged the limitations of alternative publishing. Financial sustainability remains precarious, visibility is restricted, and the stigma of self-publishing can undermine an author's credibility within mainstream literary circles. As P1 noted, establishing one's name through traditional channels remains important for long-term career viability. This suggests that rather than replacing mainstream publishing, alternative spaces currently function as complementary zones that expand but do not fundamentally restructure the field's hierarchies.

Children's Literature as Advocacy: The Ideological Turn Toward Empathy

Both participants articulate a clear social and pedagogical vision for children's literature that extends beyond entertainment or moral instruction. P1 expressed her motivation: "I'd like kids to build empathy... broaden their perspective," while P2 described children's books as vehicles to "give voice to the voiceless." These statements position literature as a tool for fostering critical empathy—the capacity to recognize, understand, and respond to others' experiences, particularly those marked by marginalization or difference.

This perspective resonates strongly with Stephens' (1992) argument that children's fiction is inherently a carrier of ideology—either reinforcing dominant social norms or challenging them by presenting alternative visions of social reality. Rather than adhering to the traditional moral-didactic framework that emphasizes obedience, piety, and conventional values, these Filipino authors advocate for literature as a space for ethical imagination. This shift aligns with contemporary scholarship suggesting that

inclusive storytelling nurtures children's awareness of diversity and cultivates dispositions toward social justice (Tillot, de Jong and Hurley, 2024).

P2's characterization of children's literature as giving "voice to the voiceless" explicitly frames authorial practice as a form of representational advocacy. This entails not only including previously excluded identities and experiences but also challenging the narrative frameworks that have historically rendered certain lives invisible or unintelligible within children's texts. By introducing young readers to characters experiencing poverty, family disruption, grief, mental health challenges, or gender questioning, authors create opportunities for recognition and validation—both for children who see themselves reflected and for those learning to perceive experiences beyond their own.

This advocacy orientation reflects what can be termed an *ideological evolution* within the Philippine children's literature field: a gradual shift from literature as top-down moral instruction to literature as a dialogic space wherein children encounter complexity, ambiguity, and difference. Rather than prescribing correct behavior or belief, these narratives invite readers to engage with questions, sit with discomfort, and develop more nuanced understandings of human experience.

However, this progressive vision coexists uneasily with persistent institutional conservatism. Both authors expressed frustration with curricular constraints that limit literature's transformative potential. P2 observed that "We are boxing what we offer to children...if we only follow learning competencies," suggesting that outcomes-based educational frameworks can inadvertently homogenize literary content. This tension between literature as art (open-ended, exploratory) and literature as a pedagogical tool (goal-directed, measurable) remains a central challenge for Filipino children's authors seeking to expand the boundaries of representation.

Reimagining the Field: Toward an Inclusive Literary Ecology

Both participants expressed cautious optimism about systemic change while identifying specific institutional interventions that could support more inclusive children's literature. P2 specifically called for the National Book Development Board (NBDB) and National Commission for Culture and the Arts (NCCA) to "campaign to promote literature that addresses taboo issues," while both authors emphasized the need for greater transparency in publishing expectations and stronger protection for artistic freedom.

These appeals signal the emergence of a counter-discourse within the field—one that challenges the moral and market orthodoxies currently dominating Philippine children's publishing. Within Bourdieu's framework, such advocacy represents an attempt to redistribute symbolic capital: to redefine what counts as legitimate children's literature in favor of inclusivity, diversity, and empathetic engagement with difficult topics. Within Foucault's framework, these calls mark moments of discursive resistance—efforts to transform what can be said, represented, and circulated regarding childhood, grief, gender, mental health, and social inequality.

Ultimately, the findings suggest that Filipino children's authors increasingly function as cultural intermediaries: translating complex social realities into narratives accessible to young readers; mediating between traditional values and emerging recognition of diversity; humanizing experiences that dominant discourse renders invisible or unacceptable. Their work, situated "between morality and market," demonstrates the enduring capacity of children's literature to resist silence, provoke understanding, and inspire compassion—even within constraining conditions.

Conclusion

This study examined how Filipino authors of children's literature navigate the complex terrain between moral expectations and market demands when addressing sensitive themes such as grief, mental health, gender, and death. Through qualitative interviews analyzed using Bourdieu's theory of cultural production, Foucault's concept of discourse and power, and Stephens' ideological framework, the research reveals that authorial negotiation is a multidimensional process occurring simultaneously at creative, institutional, and cultural levels.

The findings demonstrate that Filipino children's authors operate within a field characterized by significant constraints: moral gatekeeping by publishers and educational institutions, market pressures that prioritize commercial viability over thematic experimentation, and sociocultural norms rooted in conservative religious values. These forces collectively limit what can be represented in children's texts and how such representations are framed. However, within these constraints, authors exercise considerable agency through what this study identifies as creative praxis—the strategic deployment of narrative techniques that render difficult subjects accessible and acceptable without diluting their substantive meaning.

Key strategies of negotiation include the use of symbolism and metaphor to address taboo topics indirectly; developmental framing that grounds mature themes in authentic child experience; child-centered narration that maintains focus on young protagonists' perspectives; and tonal calibration that balances honesty with age-appropriate sensitivity. These techniques allow authors to introduce complexity and challenge normative assumptions while remaining legible to gatekeepers who regulate access to young readers.

The study also reveals the dual nature of censorship in Philippine children's publishing. External censorship manifests through editorial interventions, content modifications for different markets, and selective publishing that favors morally conventional narratives. Internal self-censorship emerges from authors' internalized awareness of field constraints, ethical considerations regarding authentic representation, and pragmatic concerns about professional consequences. This double regulatory mechanism creates a challenging environment but also paradoxically generates creative innovation as authors develop increasingly sophisticated methods for navigating restrictions.

Significantly, independent and self-publishing platforms are emerging as crucial alternative spaces that partially redistribute power within the field. These venues enable authors to maintain artistic integrity, experiment with controversial content, and build audiences receptive to progressive themes. While they cannot yet replace mainstream publishing, they function as important incubation sites for narratives that may eventually gain broader acceptance, thus gradually expanding the boundaries of what is considered legitimate children's literature in the Philippines.

The authors' accounts reveal a clear shift toward conceptualizing children's literature as a form of social advocacy rather than mere moral instruction. Both participants articulated visions of literature as a tool for building empathy, broadening perspectives, and giving voice to marginalized experiences. This represents an ideological evolution within the field—from literature as prescriptive pedagogy to literature as a dialogic space wherein children encounter diversity, complexity, and ethical questions without predetermined answers.

Theoretical Contributions

This study makes several contributions to scholarship on children's literature and cultural production. First, it extends Bourdieu's field theory to the specific context of Philippine children's publishing, demonstrating how cultural and symbolic capital operate within postcolonial, market-driven literary environments. Second, it applies Foucauldian discourse analysis to reveal how power circulates through both explicit and internalized regulatory mechanisms in children's literature production. Third, it expands understanding of authorial agency by showing how writers transform constraints into opportunities through strategic creativity—what we term *creative praxis*.

The study also contributes empirically by documenting practices and perspectives of Filipino children's authors, a population underrepresented in international children's literature scholarship. It provides insight into how global trends toward inclusive children's literature manifest within culturally specific contexts characterized by particular configurations of religious influence, institutional structure, and market dynamics.

Implications for Practice and Policy

The findings suggest several practical implications for stakeholders in Philippine children's literature:

Publishers can play a crucial role in creating a more supportive environment for socially conscious children's literature by increasing transparency in editorial expectations and submission criteria. They may also consider developing dedicated imprints or series for books that tackle sensitive themes such as grief, mental health, gender, and social inequality. At the same time, editors would benefit from training that helps them balance market demands with literary quality and the broader social value of diverse narratives. The establishment of ethical guidelines for handling sensitive content could further assist publishers in making informed decisions while avoiding unnecessary censorship.

Educational institutions likewise have an important role in broadening the range of children's literature used in classrooms. Curriculum reforms can incorporate more texts that engage with complex emotional and social issues, helping students encounter a wider spectrum of experiences and identities. Teachers may also need professional development opportunities that prepare them to facilitate discussions of difficult topics in age-appropriate and constructive ways. Stronger collaboration among schools, authors, and publishers could help identify and promote children's books that support both literacy development and social-emotional learning.

Cultural agencies such as the National Book Development Board and the National Commission for Culture and the Arts can further strengthen the field by creating funding mechanisms, grants, and awards that recognize children's books addressing marginalized or controversial themes. Public campaigns that challenge narrow ideas of what is "appropriate" for children may also help shift public attitudes toward more inclusive storytelling. In addition, these agencies can support research documenting the educational and emotional benefits of diverse children's literature, while also providing protection and institutional support for authors who may face criticism or backlash for progressive work.

Finally, authors themselves remain central to the continued expansion of Philippine children's literature. Writers can continue refining narrative strategies that make difficult themes accessible and meaningful for young readers. Building professional networks and communities of practice may also provide authors with emotional support, shared resources, and opportunities for collaboration. In response to the constraints of traditional publishing, authors may strategically explore alternative platforms such as independent presses, digital publishing, and self-publication. Beyond their creative work, authors can also participate in broader advocacy efforts aimed at transforming the structures and values that shape children's literature in the Philippines.

Filipino children's authors who address sensitive themes perform crucial cultural work. They expand the imaginative and ethical horizons of young readers, create representational space for marginalized experiences, and challenge restrictive notions of what children can understand and discuss. Their creative negotiation—situated between morality and market, constraint and possibility—demonstrates that children's literature can function not as an instrument of ideological reproduction but as a site of transformation.

By rendering visible what dominant discourse conceals, by cultivating empathy across difference, and by inviting children into more complex understandings of human experience, these authors redefine children's literature as a transformative medium capable of fostering the critical consciousness and compassionate engagement necessary for creating more inclusive, just societies. The work reminds us that how childhood is narrated—what is shown to children, what to shield them from, whose stories to tell, and whose stories are silent—profoundly shapes the kind of future we collectively create.

As the Philippine children's literature field continues evolving, the authors in this study exemplified a hopeful possibility: that creative courage, strategic innovation, and ethical commitment can gradually transform even deeply entrenched systems of cultural production. Their persistence in writing difficult truths, their willingness to navigate complex negotiations, and their vision of literature as empathy-building advocacy suggest that change, while slow and contested, remains possible. The question now is whether the field's institutions—publishers, schools, cultural agencies, and audiences—will embrace this transformative potential or continue privileging comfort over courage, convention over creativity, and market safety over meaningful engagement with the full complexity of children's lived realities.

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