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Literacy Focus: Reading Across Genders

Teachers and librarians are showing kids that books are for everybody, regardless of gender

By Patricia J. Murphy | Nov 01, 2022

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The push to diversify school, classroom, and public library collections has teachers and librarians curating collections of books about and by diverse authors. This diversity includes race, culture, and gender. Here, we look at the ways four teachers and librarians are encouraging their students and patrons to read across genders and why it's important to them, and should matter to all of us.

As a child, **Aurora Lydia Dominguez**'s family and her teachers encouraged her to read books across genres and genders. She believes that these books helped her become the person and the teacher she is today. Now, as the 2022 teacher of the year at Boca Raton High School in Florida, where she teaches English and journalism, and one of Disney's Top 50 educators of 2022, she's returning the favor for her AP and AICE students. She said, "It's all about building relationships with my students. I always keep open communications with them, and help them see stories as stories. We don't focus on if it's a guy or a girl's story. It's *someone's* story, and I choose books that they all can relate to."



Victoria Fondeur

Aurora Dominguez.

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Dominguez does this by carefully matching her instructional book choices to her students' diverse interests, needs, and backgrounds. Recently, she chose *Furia* by Yamile Saied Méndez, about a female Argentine soccer player. The book

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scored big with all of her students. But, that's not always the case. That's when she relies on the trust she has built with her students.

"Sometimes, I may have a hesitant reader who says, 'I don't like to read this or that!'" Dominguez said. "So I ask them to trust me, and I promise them that if they keep reading that eventually *that* book will make them want to read even more!"

Dominguez cheers her students on from the first page to the last. "It's important for me to have them read all of it," she said, "because at the end of the day, my students have friends who are girls. They have friends who are boys. They have friends from different backgrounds and ethnicities—and from every group that

you can imagine. So they have to read [in order] not to shut themselves out from anyone."

Dominguez's recommendations include books on Florida's banned and challenged lists. "Even with the recent challenges, I encourage students to read what they want to read, and need to read," she said. "This reading will help them see different perspectives and become better citizens of the world."

Cindy Christiansen is a sixth and eighth grade ELA teacher at Larson Middle School and a proud reader for #BookPosse (a Twitter group of teachers and librarians who read, share, and promote ARCs of upcoming books) in Troy, Mich., who "talks the talk" when it comes to introducing a world of books across genders. "I start with book talks in the beginning of the school year and continue them throughout the entire school year," Christiansen said. "I pair these books with author video interviews and Face Off videos on YouTube [where authors and readers challenge each other about who knows more about the authors' books], so there's lots of talking and sharing about books with both female and male protagonists between the kids and me."



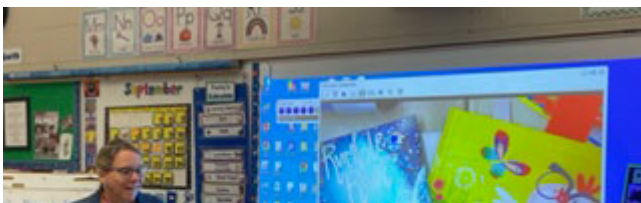
Photo by student Maddie Glass

Cindy Christiansen.

Christiansen credits her extensive classroom library, robust media center collection, and the wealth of middle school books available today for the vast choices that her students have to read across genders. "Middle grade books have been changing," Christiansen said. "Before, there were many more female protagonists than male ones. And I know that boys were looking to be seen in books that didn't have to do with sports. So I'm thrilled that authors today are writing books across genders, because it does make books more accessible to all kinds of readers."

Just recently, Christiansen has added more diverse titles with Native American protagonists, characters living with allergies, and others trying to figure out who they are. "Everyone deserves to be seen," Christiansen said, "Our district does a great job making sure that our teachers are aware of what books are out there, and I try to take advantage of it all."

Christiansen believes this is also sure to be advantageous for her students' futures. "Like education, reading helps prepare students for life. Because as they become adults, they're going to work with many people of different cultures and genders," Christiansen said. "And so by reading about these differences, learning how to speak civilly about issues in books, to have different opinions than others, and to make decisions, it will affect them and others. Ultimately, I want my students to be kind and compassionate toward everyone they meet, and to have a broad view of the world."



When **Kim Gutierrez**, a second grade teacher at Kent Lake Elementary in South Lyon, Mich., is not reading books, she's buying books, sharing books, and encouraging her students to choose diverse books, including those featuring characters of different genders.



Photo by Sheryl Hemker

Kim Gutierrez.

“And then, I’ll say to them, ‘That’s a fairy tale! So, now, who wants to read a fairy tale?’ And, then lots of kids raise their hands, and some boys are like ‘what?’”

She does something similar when introducing sports books. “I’ll say there’s this awesome book about soccer. I may reference that there’s a girl or a boy in it, and say, ‘You’re going to love this book. It’s all about soccer,’” Gutierrez said, “and, the kids soon realize that fairy tales aren’t just for girls, and sports books are not just for boys. I’ve found that it’s all in the way you present them.”

Gutierrez reads as many as two to four picture books aloud each day to expose her students to as many stories as she can for them to fall in love with books. Her motto? “The more diverse—the better!” Gutierrez said, “I make sure there’s great diversity in these books so my students see themselves *and* others represented racially, culturally, and across genders.”

While she’s ensuring diversity, she’s also modeling behaviors to promote lifelong reading. “Sometimes, I’ll pick up one book, and say, ‘This is my favorite book’ or ‘I don’t like this book,’ and put it down. And, then, I’ll take another and say, ‘I’m going to give this book another try,’” Gutierrez said, “This way, my second graders can learn that there are many wonderful and different books to choose from, and that the way to grow as readers is to find books that speak to them, and those they want to read.”

Aubrey Simons, the school librarian at Bluebonnet Elementary School in Lockhart, Tex., and a member of #BookAllies (another Twitter group for reading, sharing, and promoting ARCs), creates a welcoming space for reading across genders, and has books for everybody. In fact, there’s even a section in her library called “Everybody Books.” “Initially, these books were labeled “E” for easy,” Simons said, “now they are “E” for everybody books—books that kids at any reading level can read and enjoy on their own and/or with someone else.”

But, now, with Simons’s focus on diversity and the inclusive manner in which she instructs her students, her whole library could be called “Everybody Books.” Her instruction begins on day one with a library orientation, when she welcomes her students back—or for the first time—to the library, and to all the possibilities it has to offer.

“We talk about book choice and not judging a book by the cover, because you just might like what’s inside,” Simons said, “and not letting other people judge your reading choices.” This year, she folded in conversations about reading across genders. She has seen first-hand a need for this kind of dialogue. It happened when a first-grade boy chose a Yasmin book by Saadia Faruqi, which has a female main character.

“He was checking out his book, and he got in line to return to his classroom. And then another first-grade boy behind him said, ‘Why did you check out *that* book? It’s a girl book!’ And my heart sank. I could see his face fall because he was so excited to read it,” Simons said. “I went over to him and said, ‘All of the books in our library are for everybody. I



Photo by kindergarten teacher Lori Hernandez

Aubrey Simons.

don't have any *just boy* books and I don't have any *just girl* books.”

This interaction informed not only the boys involved, but the whole class as well as future interactions and lessons. “I specifically instruct my students, for example, ‘Even if a book looks like a princess book, that doesn't mean only girls will like it or can read it.’”

She also finds books for kids to read who might be discovering and/or struggling with their gender identities. A few recent discoveries include *The Red Crayon* by Michael Hale, about a red crayon who feels blue, and *Dazzling Travis: A Story About Being Confident and Original* by Mary Carmona Dias, about a boy who loves pink and glitter. Simons wants all of her students to see themselves, for them to accept others, and to remove gender labels and stereotypes whenever she can.

“I don't think that our experiences as people fall into specific categories that are exclusively ‘girl’ or ‘boy.’ There's no single ‘girl experience’ or ‘boy experience.’ We just have ‘people experiences,’” Simon said. “And, even if it's not a gender or group that you're a part of, it's important to hear and to read these stories. Because when you read them, you can develop a kind of empathy that comes from walking in somebody else's shoes, and help create a community of acceptance.”

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