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Gender Diversity Curriculum Lesson

Katherine Lewis

For Every Gender: Being Who We Are

Early Elementary (K-2)

English Language Arts/Reading

Do *you* have a gender? When and how did you know this gender term fit you? Based on this gender term, how are you expected to dress, to talk, and to behave? How do some people react when you do not meet these expectations? Although each of us has a gender, most often, we are given a gender label by other people and then expected to express ourselves in ways that align with the roles and stereotypes currently attached to that gender. Such rigid expectations erase gender diverse experiences and limit the ways in which we, as diverse and complex humans, are allowed to express ourselves. In this way, we are all affected by gender.

We learn many things in schools, from basic skills to socialization and learning to navigate both our own and others' complex identities. Gender is one of many identity categories that we learn about and express from a very early age. Within our social institutions (such as schools), we learn which gender identities and expressions are deemed either appropriate or inappropriate in these settings. We carry these lessons and all the associated consequences with us throughout our educational experiences. In other words, gender starts to impact our lives from an early age and continues to inform the way we express ourselves and interact with others. Teachers have an important role to play here; we serve our young students best when we regularly encourage conversations about gender in our classrooms.

With the following lesson, we (as diverse and complex humans and as inclusive elementary teachers) have an opportunity to help young students explore and challenge such gender roles and stereotypes. Through reading and discussing several books featuring main characters who challenge gender roles and stereotypes, we also provide our students opportunities to compare literary characters and to make connections from the self to a character. In this way, this plan includes the integration of English Language Arts learning goals (particularly those focused on understanding and then comparing characters).

The two texts selected for this lesson are *Morris Micklewhite and the Tangerine Dress* and *Elena's Serenade*. *Morris Micklewhite and the Tangerine Dress* is a story about a little boy named Morris who has a vivid imagination and enjoys wearing a bright, tangerine dress in the play center at his school. Some of Morris' classmates tease him about wearing a dress, claiming that dresses are only for girls. *Elena's Serenade* is a story about a little girl in Mexico who desires to become a glassblower like her father; however, in her cultural group, glassblowing is viewed as an activity solely for boys or men. Although the following lesson is organized around these two texts, many children's books featuring characters that challenge gender roles and stereotypes could be used in place of these texts (see list of possible books in **Using Similar Texts** in **Extension Ideas**).

Reflection

As teachers, we can prepare to have conversations about gender with our young students by exploring the role gender has played in our own educational experiences. As I recount my experiences in school, I remember feeling frustrated about not being able to share the things I liked without others questioning me and sometimes picking on me. From as early as I can remember, blue was my favorite color. I chose blue toys and blue clothes and my blue crayons always dwindled away long before the other colors. Some of my peers posed questions like, “why do you want the boy one?” and explained that “blue is for boys.” The comments confused me but did not change my mind—blue was *my* favorite color.

As a girl, how I was expected to behave was tied up in colors, clothing, toys, books, and games. In the social world of school, there were games to be played only by boys and games to be played only by girls. Books were segregated into boys’ interests and girls’ interests. Competitive games, both in the classroom and on the playground, were often structured as “boys versus girls.” Within these gendered settings and experiences, my peers did not view me as *girly* and I quickly became known as a *tomboy*. By the time I entered middle school, *tomboy* morphed into a variety of homophobic slurs. Failing to meet stereotypical expectations of what it meant to be a girl had consequences, it seems.

Many years later, I observed similar situations as an elementary school teacher. By the middle of Kindergarten, kids were informing each other about which colors and toys were only for girls and which ones were meant only for boys. When I taught Kindergarten, we talked (a lot) about how all the colors and toys were for all the kids. Gender roles and stereotypes were already a regular part of conversations and decisions for these five-year-olds. I often wonder—did I do enough to help my young students question these stereotypes? Did I see and support my gender diverse students?

I remember the Morrises and the Elenas but, in my story, they were Williams and Olivers and Stellas and Emilys. In first grade, William came to school with painted fingernails each day; he loved bright reds, rich purples, and occasionally, neon greens. He was a creative child who danced and sang and collected flowers from the school garden. My class entered first grade believing only girls could paint their nails; so, we talked at great length about these gender stereotypes. My students had a lot to say about the rules for girls and boys. We talked and talked some more. Our small first-grade community learned ways to love and support each other. When a few third-grade boys were teasing William about his nail polish on the school playground, two of my first-graders intervened and explained that fingernail polish is for boys *and* girls. I was so proud of them.

Fellow teachers, perhaps your gendered experiences in school were also wrapped up in rigid roles and stereotypes. Maybe you currently have a William in your classroom or you will teach a Morris or an Elena. When we facilitate conversations about gender in our classrooms and help our students challenge these roles and stereotypes, we begin to understand how gender affects us, our students, and all people.

Learning Goals

1. Students will be able to identify gender roles and stereotypes.
2. Students will be able to compare attributes of characters in a story.

Key Gender Diversity Terms and Concepts

- Gender
- Gender roles
- Gender stereotypes
- Gender diverse

Prior Knowledge and Skills

Before participating in this lesson, students should be familiar with several important reading comprehension terms, including:

- Character
- Character traits
- Character map

Students should also know how to create basic character maps. For example, students may have experience sketching a character in a journal and adding simple labels with describing words and/or have experience completing a basic character map using a graphic organizer selected by the teacher.

Students should also be familiar with (and have experience practicing) a simple Writers Workshop format (i.e., whole group story time/mini-lesson followed by independent writing time and ending with partner or whole group presentations/quick shares of writing).

Additional skills required for participating in this lesson include: listening, following directions, fine motor skills, phonemic awareness, and oral skills.

Differentiation

The lesson anticipates learners with little to no difficulty listening, following directions, using fine motor skills, and expressing themselves through both oral and written communication. Teachers will, however, be working with diverse groups of learners with varied ability levels. To meet the needs of all students, it is important that teachers take care to organize open-ceiling activities, allowing for flexibility and student choice.

The independent writing activities (i.e., character maps) are meant to be open-ceiling in that students may choose to create maps in a journal or use a prepared graphic organizer provided by the teacher. With these built-in choices, students have an opportunity to choose the level of structure/support that matches their learning style and needs. Advanced students have space for adding more details about characters (in journal format) and students who require more practice with mapping characters benefit from using the graphic organizer.

Teachers should modify the requirement for minimum number of character descriptions/labels, depending on the grade level. For example, a kindergartener might think of two or three labels for a character, while a second-grader might list at least four descriptors.

Teachers should also allow for multiple modes of presenting student work. Some students may need accommodations, such as assistive technologies (e.g., tablet with applications for enhancing communication), to share their writing with peers. Teachers should also take care in determining the best

setting for sharing writing. Based on student learning styles and needs, should final maps be shared in small groups, with partners, or in a whole group setting?

Finally, some content may pose a risk to our gender nonconforming students. Particularly, the chart with columns labeled “For Girls,” “For Everyone”, and “For Boys” may appear, at first, to reinforce a gender binary. Knowing this risk, teachers should take great care to recognize gender diverse identities through the language used to describe gender. For example, during the introduction, it is important that teachers explain (and repeat) the following: “Some people are girls; some people are boys; some people are both boy and girl; and some people are neither a boy nor a girl.” In this sense, teacher language plays a vital role in recognizing and affirming gender diverse identities.

Advance Prep for the Teacher: Knowledge

Before teaching this lesson, teachers should know about gender diverse identities and experiences and should understand:

- Concepts of gender roles and stereotypes,
- Gender as socially-constructed, and
- Differences between sex and gender.

Teachers should also take care to plan teaching statements that include all genders (see final paragraph in **Differentiation** section above).

Advance Prep for the Teacher: Materials and Setup

Resources

- *Morris Micklewhite and the Tangerine Dress* by Christine Baldacchino
- *Elena’s Serenade* by Campbell Geeslin

Materials

- Whiteboard and dry-erase markers
- Chart paper and markers
- Student journals and character map/graphic organizer-2 copies for each student
- Prepared sticky notes (see description below in this box)
- Writing supplies for each student (pencils, erasers, crayons, etc.)

Setup

The classroom should be organized in a way that allows for a variety of instructional grouping strategies. Whiteboard and chart paper should be visible from students’ desks/tables and from a designated storytelling space (ideally, a large carpeted area near the board and chart paper).

Before introducing the topic, the teacher should prepare the following:

- A large **chart** with three columns labeled as follows: “For Girls,” “For Everyone,” and “For Boys.”
- A class set of **sticky notes** (i.e., one for each student and two or three additional notes to use as examples for guided practice) that describe/show a variety of activities, behaviors, etc. For K-2 students, these notes should feature simple words, simple pictures, or both a word and an image (e.g., an image of a dress or the word *art*).

Lesson Sequence

With a three-fold focus on gender stereotyping, gender regulation, and gender diversity, the following lesson includes guided classroom discussions about the many ways people express and live their gender. This lesson includes three components (Introduction, Challenging Gender Stereotypes, and Challenging Gender Roles) and spans more than one class period. Although all three components are connected, the timelines are flexible. Teachers introduce the lesson whole group and, after sharing and discussing each text, students move back to desks to independently write in journals. The goal is to encourage students to challenge gender roles/stereotypes and to understand that the activities, behaviors, etc. that many people think are only for boys or only for girls are actually for everyone.

Introduction: On Gender (10-15 minutes; whole group seated at tables/desks)

1. Tell students we will talk about gender; write “gender” on board and ask, “what is gender? Do we know?” Listen to and repeat a few answers from students.
2. Explain:
 - a. Everyone has a gender.
 - b. Gender is about how a person feels inside.
 - c. People cannot see how you feel inside.
3. Write “how you feel inside” next to “gender” on the board. Explain that a person’s gender can be:
 - a. *girl*,
 - b. *boy*,
 - c. *both boy and girl*, or
 - d. *neither girl nor boy*.
4. Tell students we will now be sorting things people like and do into gender categories.
5. Introduce/explain chart: “Today, we will sort these sticky notes into one of these groups. I am going to show you a note and we must decide- Is it just for girls? Just for boys? Or for everyone?”
6. Read/show two or three of the prepared sticky notes; ask students to vote for where the note should be placed on the chart; repeat final decision (e.g., “So *most* of us think that ___ are just for girls. I will place this note under the category *For Girls*”).
7. Give one note to each student, explaining that they will place it on the chart when they come to story time; give students time to study and think about their sticky note example.
8. When ready to transition to story time, ask each student to place their note on the chart as they sit down on the rug.
9. Teacher reads aloud each column heading and the associated notes. Tell students, “let’s think about all these things we said are just for boys, just for girls, or for everyone. Today, I am going to share a story with you about a child named Morris. After we read this story, let’s come back to our chart and see if there are any notes we want to move to a different spot on the chart.”

Challenging Gender Stereotypes (35-50 minutes; whole group seated in storytelling area followed by independent writing time at tables)

1. Engage in an interactive read aloud of *Morris Micklewhite and the Tangerine Dress* (or a similar text); focus on making connections from self to character and describing character traits.
2. Explain (after reading) that Morris challenged gender stereotypes and that gender stereotyping means *believing unfairly that all people with the same gender like and do the same things*.
3. Ask students to identify some gender stereotypes in the story.

4. Ask students if there are any notes they want to move. Students move notes and explain why they moved them; teacher clarifies/repeats changes (e.g., “After learning about Morris, we decided that wearing a dress should move from *For Girls* to *For Everyone* because Morris’ gender was not *girl*, but he wore a dress.”)
5. Tell students they will create a character map for Morris. “Think about what Morris likes, wears, and does. First, sketch Morris with a pencil. Then, think of and label Morris with describing words.”
6. Students work independently on character maps while teacher walks around, providing support to individual students.
7. After independent writing, tell students to meet as a group to quick-share their character maps. Each student reads descriptions about character and then shares one similarity and one difference they have with the character.

Challenging Gender Roles (35-50 minutes; whole group seated in storytelling area followed by independent writing time at tables)

1. Engage in an interactive read aloud of *Elena’s Serenade* (or a similar text); focus on making connections from self to character and describing character traits.
2. Explain (after reading) that Elena challenged gender roles and that gender roles means that *some people think some jobs and activities are only for some genders* (e.g., “For example, some people might think that only boys can drive trucks and that a girl or someone who is both a boy and a girl cannot drive trucks.”).
3. Ask students to identify some gender roles in the story; ask “how did Elena challenge these roles?”
4. Ask students if there are any notes they want to move on the chart. Students move notes and explain why they moved them and teacher clarifies/repeats changes.
5. Tell students they will create a character map for Elena.
6. Students work independently on character maps while teacher walks around, providing support to individual students.
7. After independent writing, tell students to meet as a group to quick-share their character maps. Each student reads descriptions about character and then shares one similarity and one difference they have with the character.

Extension Ideas

Comparing Characters

As a follow-up activity, the teacher could lead a whole group discussion focused on comparing the two text characters. Using a Venn Diagram displayed on the whiteboard (e.g., Labeled “Morris,” “Both” (center), and “Elena”), the teacher guides students in naming and listing some of the ways Morris and Elena are similar and how they are different from each other. The completed Venn Diagram could then be displayed as an anchor chart that could be referenced in future discussions focused on comparing literary characters.

Using Similar Texts

The teacher could plan additional lessons focused on challenging gender roles and stereotypes using different children’s book titles. Some texts to consider include:

- *Ada Twist, Scientist* by Andrea Beaty
- *Made by Raffi* by Craig Pomranz
- *Pearl Power and the Toy Problem* by Mel Elliott
- *Rosie Revere, Engineer* by Andrea Beaty

- *10,000 Dresses* by Marcus Ewart
- *My Princess Boy* by Cheryl Kilodavis
- *One of a Kind, Like Me/Unico Como Yo* by Laurin Mayeno
- *Jacob's New Dress* by Sarah Hoffman and Ian Hoffman

Addressing Gender-Based Bullying

Following the exploration of several literary characters who challenged gender roles and stereotypes, the teacher guides students in collaboratively creating a plan for addressing gender-based bullying at school. First, students practice imagining that one of the children's book characters was a fellow student (i.e., "What if Morris Micklewhite was a student in our class?). Students then brainstorm ways to welcome, include, and stand up for the character (i.e., "What should we do if someone is picking on Morris? What can we say?"). Students then participate in role playing activities focused on intervening in gender-based bullying situations.

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