

Discussing Gender Roles and Equality by Reading *Max: The Stubborn Little Wolf*

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Mr. Paredes, a fourth grade teacher in a bilingual classroom, explained his approach in selecting particular pieces of children’s literature that address gender roles and equity:

My hope is that the students will be able to identify the stereotype and challenge it. Most students can tell when something is unfair even when they don’t know how to express it in the right terms. Hopefully, by talking about the situations in the book, the students will know the language and the words and feelings for certain stereotypes. They will be able to look at their own world and life and be able to spot situations similar to what went on in the book and challenge it out in the real world, not just in the classroom.¹

With this in mind, one can imagine his expectations and the student conversations one morning as they read *Max, the Stubborn Little Wolf* by Marie-Odile Judes, a story about a wolf who wants to be a florist against his father’s wishes of him becoming a hunter like him. The father, unwilling to accept the son’s choice of career, devises several ways of discouraging him from becoming a florist.

Mr. Paredes began the day’s lesson by asking his students to brainstorm different jobs that people can have when they grow up. Students listed: teacher, nurse, basketball player, host, singer, FBI agent, police, and firefighter. For each profession listed by the students, Mr. Paredes asked if a woman, man, or

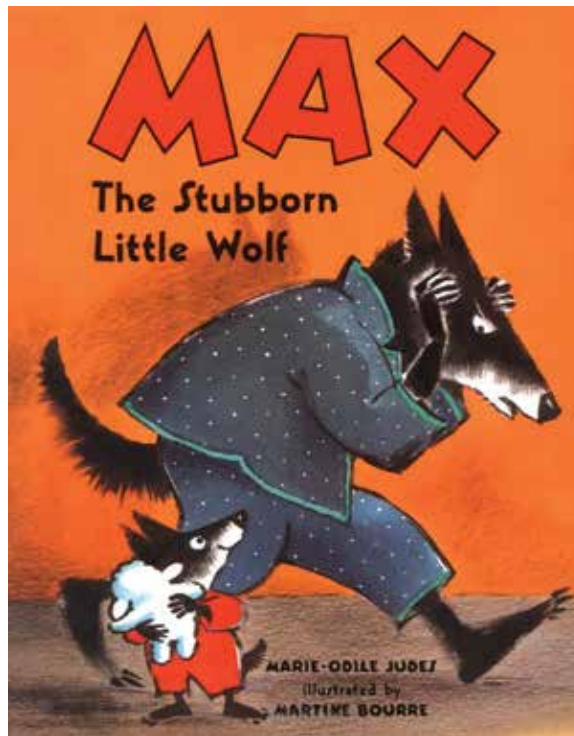
both could make the career choice. The fourth grade students readily believed that most of the professions were open to both genders—except the firefighter role.

Juan explained, “Firefighters have a dangerous job, and it’s for men to do.” Sitting by his side, Abel joined in, “It’s hard work and it’s what guys do.” Mr. Paredes, hearing no objection from their classmates, explained, “I met a woman firefighter the other day when I went to visit my brother at a firehouse. She fights fires side by side with him.” The students were a bit doubtful but acquiesced, allowing Mr. Paredes to mark “firefighter” on the white board as both a girl and boy profession.

The students’ responses prompted Mr. Paredes to tell a story about his own childhood. “You know, I remember visiting my cousins when I was a child. I wanted to play with my cousin Blanca’s Easy-Bake Oven, but some of my other cousins made fun of me and wanted me to play football with them instead. I did it anyway, and do you know that soon several of them came to learn to bake, too? In the end, our parents bought a second oven for the boys.” Mr. Paredes told the story as a way to introduce *Max, the Stubborn Little Wolf* and to promote thinking about gendered roles.

Discussing Gender

Traditionally, social expectations regarding gender led boys to adopt “masculine” domineering roles and encourage girls’ “feminine” passivity.² These expectations limited freedom



of choice for both genders. For example, as late as the 1970s, schools were assigning only boys to “shop class” (wood, ceramics, and electronics) and only girls to “home economics” (sewing, cooking, and child care). Often, girls would be excluded from the ballot for class president.

Today, many parents and educators are actively challenging traditional roles, opening up “avenues of opportunity” in today’s society, and increasing the “degree of personal freedom” for our children. Teachers can be alert for opportunities foster tolerance, to create dialogues that reveal the complexity of gender roles and gender equity.³ Children’s literature is an excellent vehicle for sparking such dialogues. At the heart of children’s books like *Max, the Stubborn Little Wolf* and conversations that Mr. Paredes facilitates around such books are the identities of young children and the freedoms and responsibilities that they will assume as citizens in our democracy.

Critical Encounters

Educators Christina DeNicolo and María Fránquiz illustrate how quality multicultural children’s literature can serve to create spaces for conversations by way of “critical encounters.” When the text disrupts the traditional pattern of talk, “pivotal” moments are created with “transformative possibilities.”⁴ Using more inclusive literature, they say, allows students to see themselves represented and provides them opportunities to see characters in situations that may “question negative stereotypes, discriminatory language, or unfair acts directed toward characters in stories.”⁵ The selection of books is deliberate and intended to create critical encounters between the reader and understandings (or misunderstandings) that he or she may hold. Teaching with critical encounters creates a sense of “disequilibrium,” where students learn as they “question, experience firsthand, view through a new lens and discover the water in which they swim.”⁶

Mr. Paredes carefully selected children’s literature to promote discussion about issues of gender expectations for boys and girls. Mr. Paredes provided his rationale for critical encounters, “I wish there were more gender issue books, especially for boys. So *Max, the Stubborn Little Wolf* hits very close to home. Its subversive and cute, and I love it! Sure, the little wolf wants to be a florist, a stereotypical career for a gay man, but it allows you to bring up the subject of gender roles and stereotypes.”

Children’s literature with animals in real-life scenarios can provide a safer way to discuss and question traditional gender roles and identities. As Mr. Paredes read from the book, text-to-life connections emerged. The father “lays down the law”

“Wolf fathers and sons are hunters, have always been hunters, and always will be hunters, you my son will follow the family tradition and that is that.”

“But I don’t like hunting,” said Max.

“That’s impossible!” roared the big wolf. “All wolves love to hunt.”

Mr. Paredes asked the class, “So what is papa wolf’s big problem?” Candi responded, “That the tradition is that the boys and man of the pack they all hunt, but I think that some traditions are kind of like dumb and not right, you know?” Candi then added, “And then, also, it’s just like, he’s just being, um, himself. Being what he wants.” Mr. Paredes invited students to respond, and Cindy agreed, “sometimes traditions are kind of dumb—because some people can do whatever they want, and it is true, you don’t know what they like and you don’t know what that person wants.”

Analyzing the Narrative

Candi’s understandings reached beyond the tension between Max and his father, as Candi spoke in broader terms about traditions or expectations that can stifle true ambitions. Mr. Paredes extended this conversation by asking the students to respond to several prompts. In the first, Mr. Paredes asked, “What do you think about Papa Wolf and his traditions?” Brenda wrote, “I think that the traditions he and his pack have are dumb—because you have to follow your dreams—” David was not as opposed to Papa Wolf, explaining in his short response, “I think that Papa Wolf really cares about the tradition in his family. He will get really mad if the little wolf breaks the traditions.” The two students provide the kind of opposing stances and rationales that students can and should express.

In a second prompt, Mr. Paredes asked, “What advice would you give Max? What about Papa Wolf?” Brenda’s written response continued, “Max should tell papa wolf that he will never change his dream. Max will never give up something he loves.” David’s response revealed a shift in his thinking, “Max no matter what Papa Wolf says don’t become a hunter. Also you follow your dreams I think a florist is really good.”

Toward the end of *Max, the Stubborn Little Wolf*, Mr. Paredes pointed out, “You know, the mom’s opinion was never talked about.” In the third prompt, Mr. Paredes asked, “What do you think Mama Wolf would say, and why?” Interestingly, Brenda’s written response reverted to gendered roles: “I think mama wolf would understand. Mothers always get to understand what their children think. She would let him be himself.” In contrast, David’s written response gave Mama Wolf much agency, “Papa you’re not going to change Max. Also if Max changes the tradition, you’re not going to die.”

Students’ responses revealed the tensions around the issue of gender roles. Young learners can both accept and be troubled by Papa Wolf’s desire to abide by traditional gender roles. Neither the text nor the discussion resolves the issue of gender roles but they raise issues to which the teacher can return.

Securing an Identity

Using children’s literature to raise and discuss issues about gender can affirm and nurture a young child’s identity. Mr. Sánchez, a third grade bilingual classroom teacher, read *La Mitad de Juan* by Gemma Lienas to his students. In this

picture book, everyone he knows tells Juan not to cry, not to color with silver, and not to wear pink, as girls do. A saddened Juan decides to put away his pink shirt and his silver marker, along with some tears he has shed, in a box that he buries in his garden. He sets out to play soccer and fight like boys, as he is “supposed” to do, but Juan is not happy inside. He encounters a fairy who stands next to him as they glance in a mirror and sees that only half of him is reflected back. Through the fairy, Juan realizes that, in order for him to be happy and complete, he needs all that he has put away in the box.

Before beginning the book, Mr. Sánchez asked, “What are some things that boys or girls do at your house that you do not think they should do?” Haydäe responded, “Well, sometimes my cousin [a boy] will grab my makeup and put it on.” Mr. Sánchez opened up the discussion to the rest of the class: “What do you think about that? Can boys wear makeup?” Valentina immediately responded, “I’m not used to it, I feel like something is going on. It’s kinda’ weird.” Mr. Sánchez asked them to consider, “What would you do if someone decided your favorite toy made you weird?” Silence fell upon the room, as the children began to contemplate the consequence of being thought of as weird. In the ensuing discussion, many held fast to ideas that what “boys do and what girls do” is different.

After reading the book, Mr. Sánchez engaged the students by having them create a Venn diagram with one circle labeled “boys,” another labeled “girls,” and an overlapping space. The teacher read aloud the following traits, *cariño* (caring), *valiente* (valiant), *presumir* (to boast), *héroe* (hero), *fuerza* (physical strength), *sentimientos* (sentimental), and *decidido/a* (decisive, with female/male marker), asking students to assign the traits to boys, girls, or both genders. Half of the class (itself consisting equally of boys and girls), chose to place all of the characteristics in the overlap area, indicating that the traits could be associated with either gender. The other half of the class chose more traditional placements. Five of the girls placed “*presumir*” (presumptuous) as an exclusively female trait, while two boys assigned physical strength or heroism only within the male domain. To conclude, Mr. Sánchez stated his own interpretation of the book’s theme: “there are not boy or girl games or toys—just what makes you happy.”

Accepting Me As I Am

Teachers who initiate such conversations should be aware that they may be questioning norms about gender that are influential in schools and society more generally. Mr. Álvarez used *Amazing Grace* by Mary Hoffman to raise questions about such norms. The picture book centers on a young African-American girl who loves acting and enjoys putting on her own plays for her family. When the opportunity arises to try out for the class play, she auditions for the role of Peter Pan. After her classmates explain to her that Peter Pan has to be played by a white boy, Grace goes to her grandmother for advice. It is through grandmother’s wisdom that Grace finds

the courage to pursue her dream of auditioning, regardless of her gender and race.

Mr. Álvarez asked his third grade bilingual students, “Why do you think that Grace’s classmates didn’t think she should audition for the Peter Pan role?” Marta answered, “Because she is a girl!” Joaquin added, “Cause she’s Black.” Mr. Álvarez probed deeper, “But how did they get that idea? Where do you think they learned that Peter Pan can’t be a girl or African American?” Marta added, “From their teacher...” Mr. Álvarez asked, “How did you learn what Peter Pan looks like? Where have you seen Peter Pan?” Abraham exclaimed, “I saw a movie of Peter Pan!” Itzabel cried out, “Cartoons!” Mr. Álvarez asked, “How about books?” To which Griselda responded, “Yes.”

Mr. Álvarez proposed the following question, “So, if all we’ve ever known is about Peter Pan being a boy and white, then that is the way we will think. Is it okay to have a black Peter Pan? How about a girl Peter Pan?”

Broadway and film buffs will recall that in the classic 1955 televised adaptation of *Peter Pan*, Peter was indeed played by a woman: Mary Martin.

Historians will recall that in William Shakespeare’s time, men played all of the female roles, from Juliet to Lady Macbeth—as it was considered uncouth for a woman to appear on a stage. We can share these facts with children, and remind them that when role-playing in today’s world, it is okay for anybody to play any part. Sure, that can lead to some funny or unexpected combinations, but it also helps the actors—and the audience

Finding Quality Children’s Literature

Children’s books can spark conversations about issues of fairness, stereotypes, and discriminatory acts and language. The Amelia Bloomer Project, ameliabloomer.wordpress.com, recognizes books highlighting gender inequality, taking on roles against the expectations of society, and in which the protagonist grows by empowering themselves and others.

The Notable Social Studies Trade Books list, www.socialstudies.org/notable, is published each year by NCSS as an insert to the May/June issue of *Social Education*. A pdf of the most recent list is available to NCSS members only, but lists from other previous years (2000 onward) are available free.

Other sources of books with social justice themes concerning issues of class, race, and ethnicity include: The Carter G. Woodson Award and Honor Books, www.socialstudies.org/awards/woodson; The Jane Addams Children’s Book Award, www.janeaddamspeace.org/jacba; Children’s Books by and about People of Color, ccbc.education.wisc.edu/books/pcstats.asp; The Pura Belpré Medal, www.ala.org/alsc/awardsgrants/bookmedia/belpremedal; and The Tomás Rivera Award, riverabookaward.org

also—to see an event through the eyes of another human being, someone who is different from oneself. And that is a skill worth learning. 🌍

Notes

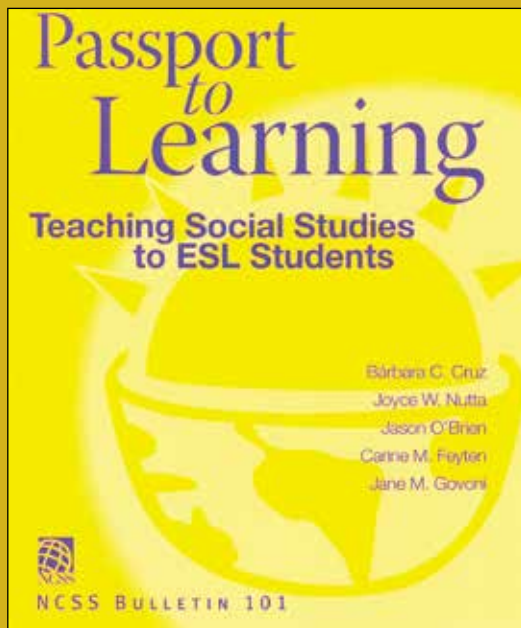
1. For this research, we observed three teachers as they discussed gender equity with their elementary students. The teachers (names are pseudonyms per university research guidelines) were part of a larger study that focused on Latino male elementary teachers who teach in bilingual programs and were recent graduates of a masters program in bilingual education at a major southwestern university. Mr. Paredes had taught for eight years; Mr. Sánchez for nine years; and Mr. Álvarez for seven years. We selected these teachers because of their approach to literacy instruction: they read aloud picture books, had discussions with their students, and engaged in extension activities. Samples of student writing have been corrected for spelling.
2. Connell, Robert William. *Gender and Power: Society, the Person and Sexual Politics* (Stanford University Press, 1987).
3. Francine M. Deutsch, “Undoing Gender,” *Gender & Society* 21, no. 1 (February 2007): 106-127.
4. Christina P. DeNicolo and María E. Fránquiz, “Do I have to Say it?": Critical Encounters with Multicultural Children's Literature,” *Language Arts* 84, no. 2 (November 2006): 157-170.

5. Ibid, 158.
6. Roberto E. Bahruth and Stanley F. Steiner, “Upstream in the Mainstream: Pedagogy Against the Current,” in: Rudolfo C. Chávez and James O’Donnell eds., *Speaking the Unpleasant: The Politics of (non) Engagement in the Multicultural Education Terrain* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1998) 127-146.

Children’s Book Cited

- Marie-Odile Judes; Martine Bourre, illust., *Max, the Stubborn Little Wolf* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001).
- Gemma Lienas; Africa Fanlo, illust., *La Mitad de Juan* (Barcelona, Spain: La Galera, 2008).
- Mary Hoffman; Caroline Binch, illust., *Amazing Grace* (New York: Dial Books for Young Readers, 1991).

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