

Case Study: Caterina Bonsaver, Librarian, The Cherwell School, Oxford

Addressing Gender Issues with KS3 students through Fiction

The Cherwell School is a comprehensive school in Oxford attended by over 1700 students from 11 to 18 years old. It includes two Sites: North and South; the latter hosting KS3 with its own library. Every year the school holds a two-week reading festival involving 30 classes of year 7, 8 and 9 students. The Festival programme was simple and manageable, and almost all of the activities took place in the library, with games and music at break time, tea and cakes after school and a focus on discussion during library lessons.

The main theme for the Festival was *'gender identity: what does it mean to be a boy or a girl in our society, and what role does fiction play in shaping our understanding of gender issues?'* These questions were inspired by a number of popular and ground-breaking YA novels such as *Buffalo Soldier* by Tanya Landman, *The Art of Being Normal* by Lisa Williamson, and *If I Was Your Girl* by Renee Russo. Another source of inspiration was the January 2017 issue of *National Geographic*, entitled 'The Gender Revolution', whose educational material informed the structure of the discussions. The aim was to refrain from a debate about anyone's sexual orientation but, rather, to address the nature of gender and its impact in our lives through YA fiction. Six authors kindly contributed to the Festival by writing or recording messages for the students in answer to one question: *'At what point in your life did you realise that gender was an issue?'* This was the way the members of the book club (12 students from year 7, 8 and 9) reformulated the question asked by National Geographic to feminist Gloria Steinem and chief operating officer for Facebook Sheryl Sanderberg: *'What was a defining moment in your life, related to gender?'*

Caterina wanted all students to understand the topic, take ownership of it and participate in the discussion. While trying to reword the question, some members of the book club came out with their own answers. A year 8 girl said that she had first become aware of

how gender affected her life on the occasion of her first menstruation. Another year 8 girl said that she developed this awareness after the transition from primary to secondary school. Never before had she realised the importance of being a popular girl, and the consequences faced by those who are not. The involvement of the book club helped Caterina clarify her own ideas, so that when she wrote to the authors asking them to take part in the festival and leave messages for our students, she quoted the two girls' words as examples of what the school was aiming at with their question: a simple and yet effective recounting of a personal experience, a bit of these authors' human and intellectual biographies, to be shared with readers who belonged to a younger generation.

Caterina was thankful for the generosity and commitment demonstrated by Sam Angus, Tanya Landman, Susin Nielsen, Katherine Rundell, Aoife Walsh and Lisa Williamson. Their messages touched upon different themes. Sam Angus emphasised issues of gender inequality especially faced by working mothers, including herself, and the importance of the way boys are brought up for a real change in society. Tanya Landman recalled how she sensed gender inequality by watching adventure movies in which women invariably screamed, fell over, or needed to be rescued. Susin Nielsen shared with our students the first time she felt curious about the body of a boy, the first time she felt that her own body was changing, and *'the pit of despair'* that opened up inside her, her *'mourning the impeding loss of childhood innocence'*. At around six Katherine Rundell was told by the boys in her class that she could not play rugby because she was a girl. She reminded us about the fact that we might not believe a gendered limit to be true, but we will still be affected by the people around us who do believe it, and it is crucial for both genders to keep fighting. Aoife Walsh gave us an insight into "Five On a Treasure Island" by Enid Blyton: it was when she first read this book at the age of seven that her gender awareness started to develop.

George, one of the characters, is actually a girl, an *'outdoorsy, good with boats, and ropes and things'* girl. However, it was not the description of George as a tomboy that shook Aoife Walsh's young conscience, but George's father words: *'I'm proud of you, George. You're as good as a boy everyday'*. Lisa Williamson recorded a video message in which she recalled her own childhood and adolescence between the 1980s and the 1990s, and her work experience at the Gender Identity Development Service at the Tavistock Centre in London as the moment in her life in which she realised the centrality of the gender issue in people's lives.

During the discussion in the library lessons, Caterina wanted to associate each message with a novel by the same author so she matched together the messages, the novels and the classes. The library lessons followed a structure of three main phases: exploring the concept of gender, discussing the expectations for boys and girls in our society and, finally, rethinking the readings through a gender-oriented perspective.

The first phase consisted of reading together the definition of gender provided by The World Health Organisation: *'Gender refers to the socially constructed characteristics of women and men – such as norms, roles and relationships of and between groups of women and men. It varies from society to society and can be changed. While most people are born either male or female, they are taught appropriate norms and behaviours – including how they should interact with others of the same or opposite sex within households, communities and work places. When individuals or groups do not "fit" established gender norms they often face stigma, discriminatory practices or social exclusion – all of which adversely affect health. It is important to be sensitive to different identities that do not necessarily fit into binary male or female sex categories. We clarified the meaning of concepts such as 'socially constructed', or 'norm', and in what ways values and perceptions could change from one culture to another, and over time.'*

Working in groups, students listed and shared with the rest of the class what, in their views, were the expectations for girls and boys in our society. Caterina soon realised that dynamics among the students within each group could deeply affect the quality of the discussion.

Furthermore, they generally tended to avoid mention of their own lives. Many of them would rely on what looked like a repetition of stereotypes such as *'Women are asked to stay at home and cook'*, or *'A man is supposed to be the breadwinner'*. Only after insisting with more questions and examples did she manage to have them talk about their own generation.

From that moment on, however, boys especially were on a roll: *'A boy is supposed to be sporty. He doesn't show his emotions, and mucks about with friends. A boy is tough, rough, and doesn't walk away from a fight. Girls make a fuss of everything, and are resentful. A boy is more violent in dealing with his peers, but he can forget the next day.'* With the exception of a student, sitting on his own, who whispered that a boy is asked to be *'good-mannered, a gentleman'*, these were the ideas repeated over and over again by hundreds of boy students. Girls were more discreet in expressing their opinions. That said, it was a girl who, at the beginning of a library lesson, decided to get rid of preambles and break an embarrassed silence with the words: *'I hope I won't get a detention if ask this, but does what we have down there count in these expectations?'* (the girl, as it turned out, was a passionate footballer).

The opinions Caterina managed to obtain from girls can be summarised as follows: *'Boys are expected to be stupid. Girls should be cleverer than boys. The way a girl looks is very important: her hair, her makeup, and her clothes. A girl is expected to be gentle, and polite, and to love the colour pink. Maybe there are no expectations at all on boys and girls, we are free. It's unfair that we have the expression "man up", but not "women up".'* With a year 9 class this imbalance between boys and girls was completely overturned as soon as, almost by chance, she mentioned a short documentary that had just appeared on the online version of *The Guardian*, addressing the issue of childless women. A lively conversation started among girls about the expectations imposed on women as necessarily nourishing, motherly human beings. This made Caterina think that the initial insistence on stereotypes concerning adults, rather than young people, that she had noticed at the beginning of the Festival might have been the expression of a genuine interest, and a genuine anxiety, about the students' own future as women and men. During each library lesson, she made sure students understood that there was no intention to deny differences between

men and women. This induced Caterina to share with them some of her own life experiences as a mother and wife. In so doing, she underlined the fact that what mattered was to protect freedom of choice, and, at the same time, to keep alive an ongoing doubt about the genuineness of that freedom, as the environment in which we grow up, whether we like it or not, affects our choices and the way we perceive ourselves. The discussion on expectations on boys and girls included, usually at the end, reading aloud one of the messages written by the authors that had been contacted, followed by an introduction to their work. This eased the passage from societal issues to fiction as the object of discussions and the novels Caterina introduced to students in more detail were: *The House on Hummingbird Island* by Sam Angus, *Buffalo Soldier* by Tanya Landman, *We Are all Made of Molecules* by Susin Nielsen, *The Wolf Wilder* by Katherine Rundell, *Too Close to Home* by Aoife Walsh and *The Art of Being Normal* by Lisa Williamson.

The next step was to encourage the students to discuss the readings that they had done so far, and possibly to reinterpret them in terms of gender. Caterina asked, in particular, which boy or girl character appeared to confirm, expand or defy the expectations on boys and girls that they had just reviewed. The book characters that the students mentioned more frequently were: Katniss from *The Hunger Games*, Alice from *Alice in Wonderland*, David and Leo in *The Art of Being Normal*, Jo from *Little Women*, Conor from *A Monster Calls*, Christopher from *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Nighttime*, Dennis from *The Boy in the Dress*, Greg from *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* and Pippi from *Pippi Longstocking*. Some students mentioned characters from books they were familiar with thanks to the English syllabus, such as Lenny from *Of Mice and Men* or Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. Many students tended to focus on characters that, presumably, overturned stereotypes and appeared to be running joyful and rewarding lives. This prompted Caterina to point out that independent-minded people, especially if young, more often than not paid a high price for their freedom of choice, and that they were often condemned by society or a part of it. The fictional tomboy girl, in other words, could end up being a stereotype in its own right, a literary one. But how to distinguish the stereotypical rebellious character from the

representation of a powerful and empowering demolition of stereotypes?

This question allowed Caterina to suggest the idea that fiction, and especially children's fiction, can either mirror the way we would like the world and ourselves to be represented, without really affecting the status quo, or voice out subversive drives that empower the child character as well as the reader. In three classes this theme was further developed into a broad discussion about the reasons why we read, and whether or not reading can actually improve us as human beings. Only two students admitted that some novels had actually moved them to the point of changing the way they had commonly considered issues such as love and friendship. The rest of the students who took part in this discussion, among whom were avid readers, denied that literature could exert such a power. A year 8 girl student pointed out that rarely can reading transform us that deeply, because what you read about, after all, is happening to somebody else. Regardless of any possible identification dynamics, she continued, you remain aware of the otherness of the character. Another girl echoed her by saying that readers never lose sight of the fact that what they are reading about has never really happened. After all, we call it Fiction.

When their English teacher observed that reading can really transform people but only if this is sustained by a certain degree of emotional intelligence, students appeared to be fascinated and taken aback at the same time. Is encouraging and cherishing emotional intelligence in the students the ultimate goal of a school library? This thought stayed with Caterina while listening to the debate.

As stated in the school's website, The Cherwell School wants its students *'to behave responsibly, courteously and with consideration for the needs and right of others.'* The school's aims include the concept of Responsibility, explained as follows: *'As a community of individuals, we recognise that we have a range of responsibilities. Team work and collective responsibility support the success of individuals, the school and the wider community.'* The school considers inclusion among the students and staff a priority and has demonstrated this by encouraging the formation of two LGBTQ+ groups at both North and South Sites, and through staff training specifically addressing LGBTQ+ issues, key terms, links to support and possible scripts for challenging HBT language.

Caterina wanted the library to be involved in these initiatives, and she wanted Fiction to be at the centre of the school's reflection about these themes.

Several references were used to instigate this project:

- www.nationalgeographic.com/magazine/2017/01/3-questions-gloria-steinem-sheryl-sandberg
- www.who.int/gender-equity-rights/understanding/gender-definition/en
- www.nationalgeographic.com/pdf/gender-revolution-guide.pdf
- www.theguardian.com/world/video/2017/mar/08/childless-women-why-is-society-so-scared-of-us-video
- www.cherwell.oxon.sch.uk
- Chamber, Aidan (2011) *Tell Me: Children, Reading and Talk with The Reading Environment* (Stroud: Timble Press)
- Luries, Alison (1998) *Don't Tell the Grown-ups: the Subversive Power of Children's Literature* (New York and London: Back Bay Books)
- Nikolajeva, Maria (1995) *Children's Literature Comes of Age* (London: Routledge).

Throughout the Festival, and after, all the copies of the books discussed that were held by the library were constantly on loan and it soon became necessary to display and discuss other books by the same authors, or to arrange a waiting list. A year 9 girl decided to attend the Women of the World Festival at South Bank Centre (London) with her mother, and she wanted Caterina to know that the discussion during the library lessons had inspired her. Another year 9 girl thanked her after a library lesson saying that she wanted more of these discussions in the library. Thanks to the Cherwell Reading Festival, Caterina became aware of the need for a LGBTQ+ display in the library beyond the one usually arranged during Pride Month. More importantly, after this project many students, including boys, started asking her about books related to LGBTQ+ issues with very direct questions, such as *'Can you recommend a book about a boy who wants to be a girl?'* Indeed the most remarkable outcome of the Festival was that the relationship between the students

and Caterina improved significantly. She had started working at Cherwell only some months earlier, and after the discussions during the library lessons, in which all the individuals involved felt that there was no right or wrong answer, students started feeling less shy in her presence, asking for book recommendations more frequently or sharing with her some of their thoughts about their latest readings.

The legacy of this project is evident. There is now a Cherwell Reading Festival every year between February and March and, whereas Caterina organised the first one on her own, more members of staff are now involved and some of the activities take place beyond the Library. She carried on involving authors in the following events realising that she needed to share their contributions with the students, their parents and the staff members in a form that would stay beyond the festival. The library magazine, *The Library Tales*, was born and represents the legacy of that first year of the festival.

Advice:

1. The First Cherwell Reading Festival was informed by Aidan Chambers's idea that there is no topic too complex to be addressed with children, and that the best questions are those for which the adult who is posing them has no single answer themselves. Make sure that the students understand that this is your approach from the beginning of the discussion: it will help them relax and enjoy the discussion.
2. You need a well-defined structure for the library lessons. At the same time, though, be flexible whenever you think that the discussion has finally taken off; it would be a pity to interrupt it because you need to move on to the next activity.
3. When you contact the authors, be very clear about what your expectations are regarding their involvement, and what your project is about. At the same time, be concise, I think they appreciate it.