

Young Girls Discovering Their Voice with **Literacy** and **Readers Theater**

Cindy teaches second grade in an urban school. She is concerned about the girls in the class, who are becoming somewhat cruel to their peers. Cliques of girls exclude other girls because they do not dress or act a certain way. To remedy this, Cindy needs to provide a way to help the girls find their inner voice—or true self—in a positive way. She decides these important goals can be accomplished with Readers Theater.



This opening scenario, drawn from visits to several classrooms, provides a glimpse into the beliefs and behavior of young girls who have adopted an idealized notion of beauty. The ideal female, as portrayed in the media, has a perfect body, owns many trendy and costly possessions, and is submissive and sexy. Young girls are easily influenced by the media's portrayal of teens and women, therefore, they may begin to form unrealistic ideas about beauty and begin to judge themselves and each other based on these unattainable standards (Galliano 2003; Brice Heath & Wolf 2005). Early childhood teachers report hearing girls as young as 5 years old discussing their body flaws and planning to diet

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(Gurian 2002; Orenstein 2009). Cliques form, and some girls are excluded because they do not fit the image of the ideal female.

By the middle elementary grades, the self-esteem of many girls depends on particular ways of looking and acting, and more and more girls are unkind to peers who do not look or act a certain way (Safire 2000). This way of thinking can lead to relational aggression, a covert form of bullying and ostracizing, among girls (Brizendine 2006; Kindlon 2006; Lamb & Brown 2006). Often, relational aggression has painful and long-lasting effects. Teachers are seeing girls

engage in this type of aggression at an earlier age than ever before (Wiseman 2002).

Young girls may express relational aggression because they have lost their “voice” (Gilligan 1983; Gilligan et al. 2003). Voice is expressed *physically* with breath and sound, *psychologically* with emotions, and *culturally* with gendered ideals (Sperling & Appleman 2011). Having friends means everything to many young girls, so they may hide their true feelings, or lose their voice, to make or keep friends. Some girls spread rumors to avoid being ostracized, or try to buy friendship with their looks and possessions (Lamb & Brown 2006; Orenstein 2009; Wohlwend 2009).

Fortunately, it does not have to be this way—and literacy can help. Teachers can use book characters and important women in history to help girls hear strong female voices through activities like Readers Theater (Freeman 2007; Sprague & Keeting 2007). Readers Theater—cooperative dramatic reading from a text—gives children an opportunity to step into a strong character’s shoes and hear and speak like that character. Reading and reflecting on narratives helps girls understand the challenges they face in

making their own voices strong (Wolf 2007). As with other academic or social interventions, this literacy teaching strategy is most effective when implemented early in girls' development (Shonkoff & Phillips 2000; Stamm 2007). Because even preschool-age girls may display relational aggression, it is important to introduce them to strong female voices as they begin to develop their voice, their self-concept, and their self-esteem.

Young girls need strong female role models because children as young as 4 years old may begin to think and act in socially stereotypical ways (Brizendine 2006). Children learn gender roles from models, and today girls find female models in the media. Girls observe role models and internalize the reinforcement they receive. For example, if a young girl sees a teenage actress wearing lip gloss and believes the actress has friends because of her beautiful lips, the young girl wants to wear lip gloss too. The young girl believes that wearing lip gloss will help her make friends. She may also reject other girls who do not wear lip gloss, because she believes they do not measure up to the ideal (Lamb & Brown 2006; Orenstein 2009).

On the other hand, if a young girl sees a happy, well-balanced female model behaving in nongendered ways, the girl will mimic her because she wants to experience the same positive reinforcement as the model (Wohlwend 2009). Thus, positive role models help girls find better ways to view themselves (Orenstein 2009).

Characters in books can become models for young children (Roberts and Crawford 2008). Book characters, just like Hollywood icons, show children either gendered or

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nongendered ways to act. The narratives in picture books can help young girls learn the stories of strong women and highlight their positive personal characteristics. After reading, girls can discuss their ideas and participate in activities that further expand their views. Sipe (2001) suggests that when children hear and discuss stories with others, they are more likely to openly express their ideas and feelings. As a result, children become more analytical and creative thinkers.

Strecker, Roser, and Martinez (1999) find this to be especially true when children discover favorite characters to whom they become attached.

Finding heroines and acting out roles

Using positive female characters as models for girls is a good starting point. However, library shelves full of books with excellent heroines do little unless those books are used in authentic ways, that is, ways that connect to the everyday lives of girls (Wohlwend 2009). Hearing a heroine's voice inside one's head while reading silently is very different from hearing that voice spoken out loud in a dramatic enactment. Openly voicing a character's words helps the reader learn the subtleties and nuances of how that character feels (Campbell & Cleland 2003).

Many teachers see this effect when young children engage in dramatic play. Dressing up, acting, and sounding like another person helps young children learn how others think, behave, and feel. Play is an important part of childhood and so is literacy (Connery, John-Steiner, & Marjanovic-Shane 2010). Girls need opportunities to voice strong words, and one way to accomplish this is through Readers Theater.

Readers Theater is similar to old-time radio plays in that it encourages an audience to conjure up images from the performers' words. The performers do not have to memorize their lines. They act with their voices, so typically there are no fancy costumes, staging, or props. Readers Theater allows children to gain a deeper understanding of the characters as they read their lines and act out their stories (Stewart 2009). Girls who speak the words of



female protagonists learn what the characters are thinking and many times experience the emotions they feel.

Wohlwend (2009) contends that girls who play and act out alternative selves—imagining they are that person—challenge gender stereotypes. Alternate selves encourage imagination and creativity because they allow a child to become a character physically, mentally, and emotionally (Connery, John-Steiner, & Marjanovic-Shane 2010).

When girls perform during Readers Theater, they speak as strong female characters, feel the emotions the characters feel, tune in to their own true feelings, and find their voice (Campbell & Cleland 2003). Their performances allow for a new perspective on gender that has the potential to reduce the relational aggression seen in many classrooms (Kindlon 2006; Sprague & Keeting 2007). Teachers can use Readers Theater practice times and performances as opportunities to build communities of respect, responsibility, and interdependence.

Finding or developing scripts for girls

Teachers frequently use Readers Theater to improve reading comprehension and fluency, enhance motivation, and build social skills. Strecker, Roser, and Martinez (1999) describe how use of Readers Theater with second-graders provided authentic opportunities for repeated readings and helped children improve their fluency and comprehension skills. Likewise, Campbell and Cleland (2003) find that Readers Theater allows teachers to cover academic standards, tap into children's multiple intelligences, and reduce anxiety in children who struggle with reading.

Researcher and teacher testimonials confirm the benefits of Readers Theater. However, using it in a gendered way to help young girls find the goodness inside themselves through role-playing strong female characters is a new and exciting concept. When girls understand themselves—or find their own voice—they realize they do not have to act in stereotypical ways or with relational aggression.

Teachers can adapt the approach to fit the needs and abilities of children in their classroom. Teachers of young children who want to use Readers Theater with girls and boys can consult various sources to find appropriate scripts. For both girls and boys, scripts can focus on positive character traits like honesty, respect, tolerance, responsibility, perseverance, courage, and generosity (Zambo & Brozo 2009).

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Websites with Scripts

Aaron Shepard's RT Page offers scripts for young readers in various genres (for example, folktales, fairy tales, tall tales, legends, myths, magical tales, fables, fantasy, humor, and historical fiction). It also has an online guide with information on staging, scripting, and performing. www.aaronsherp.com/rt

Literacy Connections: Reader's Theater offers tips for teachers about how to incorporate Readers Theater into their classrooms, with links to other Internet resources. www.literacyconnections.com/ReadersTheater.php

Reader's Theatre Collection has scripts for children in grades K–3, derived from poems, stories, and chants. It is part of Early Literacy, a general site about emergent literacy, so it also includes comprehensive research and resources for teachers of emergent readers. www.readerstheatre.ecsd.net/collection.htm

Reader's Theatre Basics is a no-frills website with basic information on Readers Theater, ways to develop a script, student actor objectives, ready-made scripts, and books about Readers Theater. <http://bms.westport.k12.ct.us/mccormick/rt/RTHOME.htm>

Research References for Reader's Theater provides sources for scripts, a downloadable teacher's guide, and a link to the state standards addressed by Readers Theater. There is also a list of research showing that Readers Theater increases fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. <http://playbooks.com/readerstheaterresearch.shtml>

Teaching Heart: Reader's Theater Scripts and Plays provides many scripts and other essentials, such as tips about voice inflection and the evaluation of performances. www.teachingheart.net/readerstheater.htm

Using Readers Theater to teach these traits helps teachers blend literacy and character education.

Many websites offer Readers Theater scripts and guidance (see “Websites with Scripts”). Teachers may also write their own scripts based on stories their students enjoy.

When choosing stories for girls, look for a female protagonist with a strong voice whose story explains how she overcame challenges. Find stories that are substantive, lively, and at an appropriate reading level for the girls who will read them (Campbell & Cleland 2003). Familiar works with favorite characters are good starting points. The stories of beloved characters like Molly Lou Mellon, the fictional character in books by Patty Lovell, and Ruby Bridges, who was the first African American to integrate a New Orleans public school as a young girl, are appropriate, interesting scripts for young girls (see “Books with Strong Female Characters”). Strive for balance when writing scripts from picture books. Make the script broad enough to capture the characters' voices and narrow enough to keep the readers focused and occupied (see “Developing Readers Theater Scripts for Girls,” p. 32).

Enacting scripts: Cindy's use of literacy and Readers Theater

The remainder of this article explains what happens as the 17 girls and 12 boys in Cindy's classroom prepare to present the scripts she developed in Readers Theater.

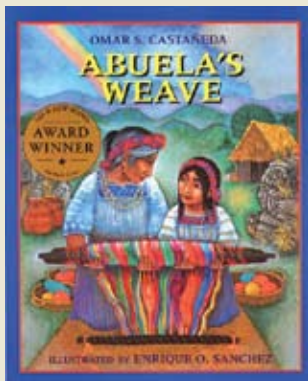
Cindy assigns children to groups based on their gender. Girls perform Readers Theater scripts with strong female protagonists, and boys do the same with scripts featuring male protagonists.

As Cindy casts the characters for these scripts, she considers each child's personal, social, and emotional

Books with Strong Female Characters

***Abuela's Weave*, by Omar S. Castañeda. 1995. New York: Lee & Low Books.**

Abuela's livelihood is threatened because machine-made weavings are appearing in the markets, and because people are afraid of her birthmark. When she disguises her looks, Abuela saves the day, because curious onlookers purchase her weavings and other items.



***Anna Banana and Me*, by Lenore Blegvad.**

1987/1999. New York: Aladdin. Distributed by Econo-Clad Books. Anna Banana is a fearless young girl who plays with a timid boy and eventually becomes his friend.

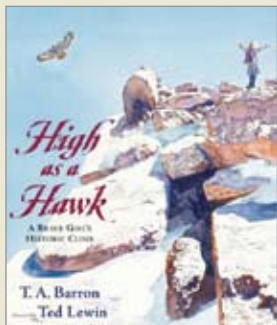
***Beatrice's Goat*, by Page McBrier. 2001. New York: Aladdin.** Beatrice, a Ugandan girl, works hard to support her family, but her real dream is to go to school.

***Boom Town*, by Sonia Levitin. 2004. New York: Orchard.**

When her father seeks his fortune in gold out West, Amanda must move from the home she loves. Despite this hardship, Amanda becomes a hero. She forms her own business baking gooseberry pies, and her resources save the dying town.

***Emma and the Silk Train*, by Julie Lawson. 1997. Toronto: Kids Can Press.** Emma desperately wants some silk to make a dress. When a train derails, she works to achieve this goal by gathering the silk that has spilled out.

***Fire Station Number 4: The Daily Life of Firefighters*, by M.Y. Fortney. 1999. Minneapolis: Carolrhoda Books.** The story depicts a typical day of three Livermore, California, firefighters. The book provides unique information on apparatus, women firefighters, and fire safety and prevention.



***High as a Hawk: A Brave Girl's Historic Climb*, by T.A. Barron. 2004. New York: Philomel.**

This is the true story of 8-year-old Harriet Peters, the youngest person to climb Long's Peak.

***Little Granny Quarterback*, by Bill Martin Jr. & Michael Sampson. 2001. Honesdale, PA: Boyds Mills Press.** Spunky Granny, who was a star quarterback in her day, leaps into her television to help her favorite team.

***Mailing May*, by Michael O. Tunnel. 1997. New York: Harper Trophy.** Because May is unable to afford a train ticket to visit her grandmother, her Uncle Leonard mails her on a delightful journey.

***Mama and Me and the Model T*, by Faye Gibbons. 1999. New York: Morrow Junior Books/HarperCollins.** When the new Model T arrives, Mama proves to her family that she can drive just as fast and courageously as any man.

***Mary Smith*, by Andrea U'Ren. 2003. New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux.** Mary Smith has a very untraditional job as a waker-upper. She blows peas at doors to wake up people for work.

***My Mother Is a Doctor*, by Charnan Simon. 2006. New York: Child's World.** This is a child's story of living with a mother who has a fast-paced, life-saving career.

***The Name Jar*, by Yangsook Choi. 2001. New York: Dragonfly Books.**

Unehi moves to the United States from Korea and is embarrassed by her unpronounceable name.

***Officer Brown Keeps Neighborhoods Safe*, by Alice K. Flanagan. 1999.**

New York: Children's Press. The book takes you through the day of Officer Deborah Hawes-Brown, deputy chief of the Hartford, Connecticut, Police Department, as she works to keep children safe.



***The Other Side*, by Jacqueline Woodson. 2001. New York: Putnam Juvenile.** Two racially different girls cross a symbolic fence despite warnings from their mothers.

***Something Beautiful*, by Sharron Dennis Wyeth. 1998. New York: Dragonfly Books.** A girl who lives in poverty takes on the challenge to find beauty in her world.

***Stand Tall, Molly Lou Melon*, by Patty Lovell. 2001. New York: Penguin Putnam.** Molly Lou Melon must move away from the grandmother who loves her and attend a new school. Being small and funny looking, Molly Lou becomes the subject of bullying until she turns the tide.

***The Story of Ruby Bridges*, by Robert Coles. 2004. New York: Scholastic Paperback.** This is the story of a courageous girl, Ruby Bridges, who attended a New Orleans elementary school after court-ordered desegregation in 1960.

strengths and needs. For example, for some of the girls who act with relational aggression Cindy might assign roles that address this behavior, such as a character who is bullied. This helps them understand how it feels to be bullied. Cindy also ensures that each character has lines of equal importance and length, so children will not feel embarrassed when reading their parts. To engage children who struggle with reading, and provide inconspicuous support, she makes sure their lines contain high-interest content, repeated phrases, and familiar vocabulary. Cindy assigns their parts, previews difficult vocabulary, and provides mini-lessons in decoding strategies. The assignment for all

of the children includes reading their parts to peers and to family members at home.

Building literacy skills is important, but Cindy is more interested in the transformative power of literacy. Voice is expressed *physically* with breath and sound and *psychologically* with emotions, so, for some scripts, Cindy makes sure girls who display relational aggression—that is, the girls with lost voices—find their voice by reading the words of strong female protagonists.

The task is not easy for some girls. For example, Mara, whose self-esteem appears to be based on how she looks and what clothes and toys she possesses, struggles to say the words of the confident Mary Smith. Mary Smith was a bold and brave woman who had an unusual job as a “waker-upper.” Armed with a pea shooter and other noisy objects, Mary Smith acted as a human alarm clock who woke the town’s workers with noise. Cindy helps Mara by modeling Mary Smith’s bold and forceful voice. Mara practices raising and lowering the volume, pitch, and tone of her voice; altering the pace of her delivery; varying stress on words and syllables; and projecting her voice into an open room.

Cindy also leads Mara and the other girls in warm-up activities. They imagine they are characters like Astute Annie, Brave Barbara, and Eager Esther (these are characters you may create in your classroom). During the warm-ups, the girls face each other and think up short lines to voice. For example, Brave Barbara may say she is not afraid of the dark, and Eager Esther may say that she is always ready to accept a challenge, like standing up for someone who is being bullied. These warm-up sessions get the girls ready to take on their larger roles.

For other Readers Theater productions, Cindy assigns major roles to girls excluded from cliques. She assigns smaller Readers Theater parts to girls with lost voices, the girls who have bullied or ostracized others. The girls who do not receive major roles become angry and emotional. Cindy acknowledges their hurt feelings and, in a side conversation, tells them that each part, big or small, contributes to the overall production. Cindy helps everyone understand that all contributions matter and that each person has a responsibility and value to the production team.

Cindy expects the girls to respect each other and the roles they have been assigned as they work on Readers Theater. She invites each girl to sound her voice to the best of her

Girls perform Readers Theater scripts with strong female protagonists, and boys do the same with scripts featuring male protagonists.

Developing Readers Theater Scripts for Girls

1. Select scripts that are appropriate for young girls from Internet sources, or develop your own scripts from poems, magazine articles, speeches, songs, short stories, or picture books. Strive for balance when selecting materials. Make sure stories contain dialogue that captures the characters’ voices. The dialogue must be exciting and interesting enough to keep young children focused and occupied.
2. Revise the selected material as a script for young readers. Maintain the heart of the story, but turn it into dialogue and omit unnecessary lines. To ensure that the audience can follow along, include two narrators in addition to the other characters in the story.
3. Determine the number and type of roles for children. Assign choral lines to the audience, who will actively interpret the story. These parts may echo or announce important words or phrases; play the conscience, cynic, devil’s advocate, or comedian; add sound effects; or announce introductions or closing remarks.
4. Rearrange the text. Break the story into short parts with a few lines at a time for each reader. Short parts promote the basic philosophy of Readers Theater: acting with one’s voice. No one child should read more than 10 words at a time. Divide sentences among readers as necessary.
5. Make final edits and test out the script with a read-through. Edit as needed and add creative touches and strong voices when possible.
6. Credit the author and cite the book. If children enjoy the performance, they may want to read the book later.

Adapted from M. Campbell and J.V. Cleland, *Readers Theatre in the Classroom: A Manual for Teachers of Children and Adults* (New York: IUniverse 2003), 23–26. © The authors. Used with permission.

ability, and says each girl has the right to be heard. If a girl makes a mistake, Cindy offers ideas to help her step into her character's shoes, feel her emotions, and find her voice. If a girl becomes critical or makes fun of others and their mistakes, Cindy takes her aside. She reviews what she has been seeing, and asks the girl to explain what she is doing and why. The girl and Cindy then problem-solve appropriate behaviors and words. Cindy helps the girls see that struggles with parts and errors in reading are opportunities to learn and grow.

Cindy expects the girls to interact as a community of learners and to accept responsibility for their production. The girls negotiate daily goals with Cindy, and she monitors their commitments as they work on Readers Theater scripts. Over the first week, Cindy sees improvements in the girls' sense of responsibility and in the community atmosphere.

Marti, a popular girl assigned a small role, announces that she will work with Alora, a less popular girl who has the leading part in Omar Castaneda's *Abuela's Weave*. Cindy realizes this is not easy for Marti, because she wants the lead, so she closely monitors the girls. Cindy points out to Marti the importance of her part and how this part is key to the overall production. Cindy also helps Marti understand that even with a small part, she can help others like Alora. Marti can listen to Alora read her lines and make sure the correct words are read.

From the discussion Marti sees the importance of her small part and gains insight into how she can contribute to the learning of her peers. This helps Marti and Alora see themselves as equals. As the girls in the class begin to help each other and work together, Cindy notices a decrease in incidences of name-calling, spreading rumors, and excluding peers from activities.

Cindy encourages interdependence, such as that shown by Marti and Alora, as she begins removing the scaffolding she has offered children whose reading skills were at a lower level than that of others in the class. When children pose questions, Cindy refrains from immediately supply-

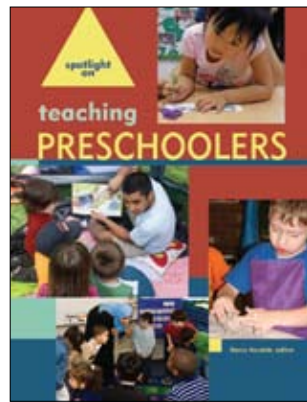
ing answers. She asks the girls, "What do you think?" and helps them negotiate resolutions. Cindy builds interdependence by giving pairs or triads of girls small, manageable challenges to complete together. For example, Cindy might ask the girls to help their partner say her lines with expression or select important words from one of the parts and perform them with both body and voice. Another challenge might be closing their eyes, envisioning their partner

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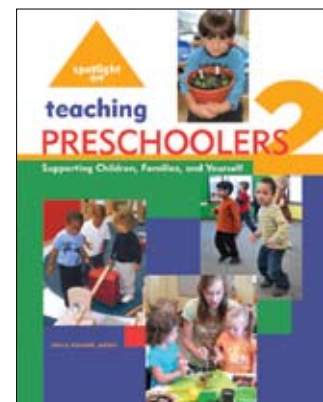
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successfully reading her role, and then telling her about the experience.

The classroom focus on respect, responsibility, and interdependence leads to wonderful performances and celebrations. When Melissa, who tends to keep to herself, confidently voices the words of the self-sufficient Amanda in a performance of Sonia Levitin's *Boom Town*, the girls give her a standing ovation. When Alora, a dual language learner who is often reluctant to speak up, voices Abuela's words, the girls rush to give her a hug. When Marti and the other girls who were cruel play their small parts, everyone cheers.

The boys, who are also a part of the classroom community, act respectfully, sitting on the edge of their seats as Julie Lawson's Emma gets swept away by the current. They cheer when Andrea U'Ren's Mary Smith shoots her peas. During Readers Theater performances, all ears listen to the girls' voices and all eyes witness their confidence. The girls find their voice as they absorb and speak the words of strong female protagonists for themselves and their peers.

Moving forward

Although Readers Theater has already led to a decrease in relational aggression, Cindy knows she must continue preventing and addressing the problem. Participation in Readers Theater helps the girls learn from female protagonists, but it is also important to learn from real women. In the weeks to come, both girls and boys work on several activities. The suggestions described below include specifics related to building girls' voices, but educators can also adapt them for the boys in their class.

The girls find their voice as they absorb and speak the words of strong female protagonists for themselves and their peers.

Community models: Invite women working in nontraditional jobs (such as a highway construction worker, police officer, or firefighter) to visit the class to discuss their jobs. Before the visits, introduce relevant children's books (for example, Alica Flanagan's *Officer Brown Keeps Neighborhoods Safe*; Charnan Simon's *My Mother Is a Doctor*; and M.Y. Fortney's *Fire Station Number 4: The Daily Life of Firefighters*). Have the girls perform Readers Theater scripts based on the women featured in the books.

Adult females as teachers: Ask female family members to visit the class to share a talent such as carpentry, cooking, or painting. Choose books related to the talents shared that children can read and discuss.

Sport sisters: Invite female athletes from local middle and high schools to visit the class. They can talk with the girls about their sport and, when possible, demonstrate skills. Children can read and discuss books related to the sport and practice the skills at recess.

Female buddies: Have adolescent girls from civic or neighborhood groups like the Girl Scouts serve as buddies for the younger children. Each pair of buddies can work on reading, writing, math, art, music, and other subjects.

House construction and truck driving: Set up centers with games and activities that boys are typically drawn to, such as materials to paint and build with and noisy objects to create sounds. Encourage girls to explore materials they may never have tried before.

These activities and others can stretch girls to try new things and play with new objects. They can also expand young girls' horizons and let them hear strong voices and see female characters in nontraditional roles. Activities like these, along with Readers Theater, create an environment where girls can be themselves, expand their views of gender, and find a voice of their own. Girls can gain insight from and become transformed by the texts they read, the voices they hear, and the activities they do.

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