

Clarifying Gender Diversity and Sexuality with Literature in ELT

Introduced by David Valente

In April 2022, the romantic-comedy series, *Heartstopper* was released on the streaming service, Netflix, which can be considered a reflection of the wider coming-of-age not only for LGBTIQ+ representation, but also for the celebratory amplification of gender diversity and sexuality in mainstream media. Written by Alice Oseman, the series is an adaptation of her young adult webcomic and graphic novel of the same name, initially self-published in 2016, subsequently becoming a successful four-volume series, published by Hachette Children's Group between 2018-2021. The fifth and final volume is due to be released next year, and the positive reception both the screen and literary formats received may be optimistically indicative of an increasing visibility of – and space for – characters with diverse genders and sexualities.

Given the range and complexity of diversity-related terminology, Banegas and Govender (2022, in press) offer a useful clarification, which can be applied to the **Recommended Reads** in this issue. They explain, 'gender is a social construct that is typically conflated with sex (anatomical and physiological bodies) and sexuality (the presence or absence of desire and sexual attraction)' (p. 4). However, these terms and their socially constructed nature are frequently misused and minimally focused on in ELT. Thus, a problematic mismatch emerges between what children and teenagers are encountering outside of school and the content of their English language lessons in school. A call to action is clearly required for teacher education to embed an explicit gender perspective at both the pre-service and in-service levels to raise teachers' awareness and equip them with strategies for mainstreaming a focus on gender diversity in the classroom. The Center for Applied Transgender Studies for example, provides a highly comprehensive resource site of scholarly background reading: <https://www.appliedtransstudies.org/publications>

The citation above is from the introduction to an edited volume, *Gender diversity and sexuality in English language education: New transnational voices* (Banegas & Govender, 2022, in press) which aims to shine a bright light on gender diversity and sexuality, specifically within the field of English language education. The volume further contributes to global amplification efforts by giving transnational voices the space to share insights and learning from a range of teaching contexts. Framed from a post-structuralist theoretical lens, the editors argue that when

embedding a gender perspective in ELT, 'meaning-making in the English language classroom thrives on harnessing difference and diversity as productive resources for (re)reading and (re)designing the world in more equitable and culturally sustainable ways' (p. 7).

The four literary formats recommended here have significant potential for contributing to this vital rereading and redesigning process. They comprise a collection of interviews with teenagers, a middle grades novel, a book of 'big questions' and a picturebook. The suggestions for creative response tasks accompanying each recommendation offer inspiration and support for teachers embarking on this long overdue amplification journey, which when it comes to many English language learning contexts around the world, has really only just begun.

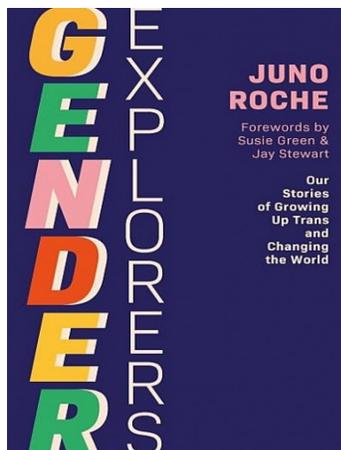
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Roche, Juno (2020)

***Gender Explorers. Our Stories of Growing Up Trans
and Changing the World***

London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers

Recommended by Thorsten Merse

'That's me!' This proclamation can be considered both a common thread and a connecting force running through *Gender Explorers*. Indeed, it opens doors into the complex worlds and identities of young trans people whose gender diversity becomes accessible, visible and intelligible through their life-affirming stories told during the interviews in this book. Thanks to Juno Roche, trans

writer and internationally recognized trans campaigner who created *Gender Explorers*, readers do not only encounter the empowering, rich experiences of trans youth – they are similarly challenged to question a society that is largely organized around the narrow confines of clear-cut bi-gendered and cis-normative rules and expectations.

Juno Roche acts as principal interviewer, indicative of their approach to the book. They carried out the interviews while attending weekend residencies with the charity Mermaids, and a range of Saturday youth clubs at Gendered Intelligence. Mermaids aims to support trans, non-binary and gender non-conforming children and teenagers as well as their families. Similarly, Gendered Intelligence centres on youth work activities to diversify society's understandings of gender identities. Roche speaks with more than twenty trans children and teenagers, their parents and friends, as well as caregivers and role models involved in Mermaids and Gendered Intelligence.

What unfolds is astonishing multiperspectivity on trans lives and experiences which emerge in a dense narrative that is unprecedented in the world of children's and young adult literature, nonfiction publications or media representations – even if these already engage with LGBTIQ+ identities and issues. Such dense narrative 'isn't about proving or disproving, believing or disbelieving, challenging or not challenging the validity of trans children and their parents or carers' (p. 10). Rather, the goal of the book is 'to allow them, the young trans and nonbinary people so often talked about, the space to talk to us' (p. 11). In this space of finding and sharing voice, a sometimes refreshing and sometimes alarming dynamic of listening to young trans people unfolds.

It is refreshing because these children and teenagers reinvent what it means to be, and to become, a gendered human being in the most diverse possible ways. They proudly report that trans is their superpower, which they use creatively to experiment with – and expand on – an otherwise restrictive system of pronouns in patriarchal, binary and cis-normative language. They share powerful stories of caring families, teachers and friends who put unconditional love and support first – instead of doubting the capacity of children to know who they truly are. Even though this book focuses on trans identities, the trans children and teenagers are also eager to construct visions of their lives in which being trans is only one facet of their identities – next to aspiring to become doctors, to fight for climate change, or to go to arts college. Their voices create a new – freer and more fluid – multi-gendered world in which trans youth become the gender bosses or gender explorers of their own powerful existence.

At the same time, however, the book does not stop at this celebratory notion of pride.

Alarming and unashamedly, it unmask and unpacks the toxicity and restrictiveness of a social system – and hence, of schools and families – in which gender can often and still only be realized as two options, being clearly female/feminine or clearly male/masculine in a strictly cis-normative world. The stories are indicative of the top-down pressures and interventions by grown-ups who doubt the existence of trans children and teenagers, and in doing so, create stigma, isolation and depression.

These stories challenge us to rethink the alleged everydayness of school uniforms, changing rooms, colour codes, class registers and attendance lists, and how they complicate and police trans youth struggling with the symbolic heavyweight of this everydayness. At the same time, the interviews with parents / caregivers also shed light on the honest despair of some adults, suffering from restrictive gender systems on their journeys towards accepting their children and teenagers fully for who they are. The reader cannot but understand that it is the world around these trans children and teenagers that needs to adjust and change – and not the children and teenagers themselves. Interestingly, the last interview creates an exciting juxtaposition to these more alarming insights. Here, Juno Roche carries out a fictitious interview with their younger self, Pansy, to depict a gloomy gendered past that once was – and a brighter gendered future as it should be.

In educational settings, *Gender Explorers* is a must-use, must-read resource whenever teachers and learners strive towards affirming a world of gender diversity in all its facets, and challenging the pervasiveness of strict and limiting gender expectations that affect everyone. Working with *Gender Explorers* aligns with the current climate in English language teaching, and in pedagogy more widely, where engaging with LGBTIQ+ issues has gained increasing momentum, but where the T in LGBTIQ+ has all too often been neglected or even silenced (e.g., Mayo & Rodriguez, 2019; Merse, 2021; Paiz, 2019). The book additionally enables flexible classroom and reading scenarios as the language complexity of the interviews differs, depending on whether they are with younger children or older teenagers, so that readings can be chosen according to the learners' language levels. As a text collage, the book does not necessitate a linear read-through, so learners and teachers can dive into individual stories and engage with these readings more deeply. Ultimately, and given the educational mandate to create inclusive, diverse and socially just learning opportunities, the call to action in the book also applies here: 'Use it or we'll lose them in the process' (p. 11).

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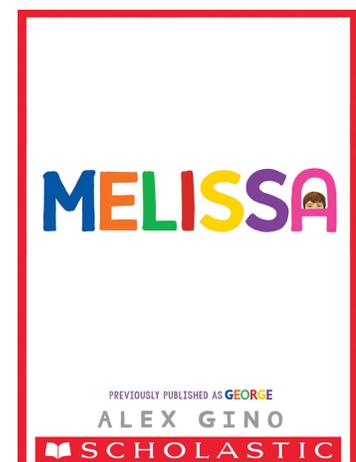
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Gino, Alex (2015)

Melissa

New York: Scholastic Press

Recommended by **Rafaella Potestades**



Learning another language helps introduce a world of ideas and feelings to children. And yet, while gender and sexuality are fluid concepts, they are still often taught in a binary, essentialist, and stringent manner in English language education. This is often characterized by standard gender pronouns and heavily gendered adjective use. Therefore, the ways gender and sexuality are defined in many ELT contexts may reinforce stereotypes and gender ideologies. Restrictive gender ideologies may negatively influence children's understandings of gender diverse identities

(Jaworski & Coupland, 2014; Tannen, 1996). Children's literature can help convey complex concepts through colourful narratives, immersive scenarios, and lovable characters. Stories can hold socially transformative functions and refuge to LGBTIQ+ children if diverse gender identities and expressions are interwoven into compelling narratives.

Alex Gino's *Melissa* (2015) is an example of such a potentially transformative story featuring a transgender girl in the fourth grade who wants to play the protagonist, Charlotte in *Charlotte's Web*, but her English teacher dismisses this idea because she is 'a boy'. Against the odds, Melissa perseveres in letting her classmates, friends and family members know that she is not George – she is Melissa. The book is a rich literary text for English language teachers to raise children's awareness of the lived realities of people's diverse sexual orientation, gender identity and expression (SOGIE). Stories such as Melissa's that focus on gender and, most importantly, being transgender through a child's lens – like many other courageous protagonists in children's literature, affirm 'this is me and no one can tell otherwise'. While some characters fight for their princess, countries, or their castles, Melissa fights for her authentic self. The language level and the way the concepts are conveyed make the book accessible for lower-secondary English language learners.

Melissa is accompanied by discussion points that can spark classroom explorations to develop a deeper understanding of gender. Scaffolding these discussions with language support and ideas underpinned by a caring approach, enables gender diverse children to freely share experiences and to ask questions in a safe space. The book can be a springboard for addressing issues of gender equality, empathy, and solidarity. In addition, through exploratory questions, children can understand where and when Melissa experiences discrimination and violence, and then brainstorm ways to create safe spaces for gender diverse children at school (and beyond). These safe spaces are crucial as language education has had the tendency to formalize and enforce the gender binary on learners (Tannen, 1996). Gino's book, and similar titles, can provide resources for children to learn beyond gender stereotypes and traditional gender ideologies.

This story can also be a useful entry point for learners to develop critical thinking as they are challenged to understand gender beyond the binary and its related grammatical implications. Melissa highlights the importance of using correct gender pronouns as characters in the story remind her of (and even enforce) her sex assigned at birth through 'he / him' and her deadname, 'George'. Melissa expresses her feelings of frustration, anger, and sadness each time this happens

and surfacing these feelings can help children understand why gender pronouns are important, why they should be respected, and how they are also examples of correct grammar. For example, the use of 'they' is considered grammatically accurate by the American Psychological Association (n.d.).

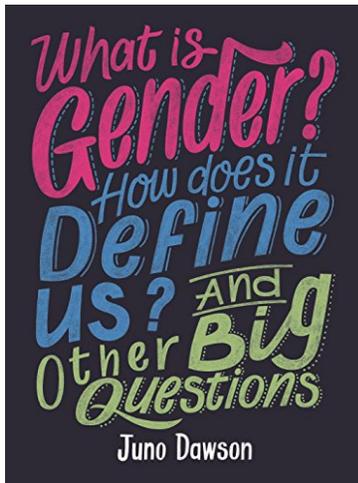
Following this exploration of thoughts and feelings about being misgendered, role plays can provide further opportunities for children's creative responses while enabling them to challenge gender stereotypes and the binary. They can draw up an action plan of ways to make their classroom and school a safe space for socially-marginalized schoolmates who may be discriminated against. This not only occurs in relation to their gender identities and/or sexual orientations, but also intersectionally in relation to their ethnicities, religions, ages, disabilities, and languages. To increase creative expression, children can experiment with the concepts and the lexical sets they have learned through the visual arts, creative movements, and literary arts. They can draw and/or write creative texts about what gender identity means for them, and/or express how they understand these concepts through group dance and musical pieces.

I urge English language teachers to approach gender and sexuality with kindness and care. I believe that it is essential to establish a safe space for learners to better understand gender diversity while balancing this with one's curiosity about difference. As 'speech community veterans' (Jaworski & Coupland, 2014), English teachers can help children to freely explore gender identities and expressions, while simultaneously reaching their English language learning potential.

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Dawson, Juno (2017)

***What Is Gender? How Does It Define Us?
And Other Big Questions.***

London: Wayland

Recommended by Angelos Bollas

I recently asked some of my college students about a book that addresses issues related to gender and sexuality in language that is simple, accessible and relatable for a young teenager (though, not limited to a young audience). The discussion that followed was very interesting, and the students expressed dissatisfaction with many texts about gender and sexuality, and stated that they are written in language that is opaque, distant, and inaccessible. Indeed, they are not wrong. For example, people outside of particular academic disciplines would find reading Judith Butler's work challenging (Nussbaum, 1999).

My students also expressed how growing up is an already complex process with people learning who they are and how they feel, as well as who everyone else is and how everyone else feels. Coupled with an explosion of often conflicting and ever-changing, gender-related rules that people are presented with daily on popular media, this can be very difficult to navigate. Examples include the way femininity and masculinity are dictated in the singular on magazine covers (Projansky, 2007) and in US high school dramas (Terzian & Ryan, 2015). Children and teenagers have to figure out their own selves and understand how the world works, while adults have to adopt to new truths, new ways of being, and new ways of understanding society.

This is exactly what Juno Dawson does in *What is Gender? How Does it Define us? And Other Big Questions*. Or, actually, this is exactly what Juno Dawson does not do. And, this is what is brilliant about this book. It does not tell you how to be or what to be in this world. Nor does it tell you how others should be and act. Rather, it highlights the plethora of ways there are to be in the world, that it is absolutely fine not to be one thing or the other, and even not to know how you

feel about yourself. Dawson's use of clear language makes the book accessible for English language learners from lower secondary and older. For example, she usefully unpacks a stereotype as '[...] another word for characteristics or assumptions about a group of people. These ideas about people can come from our own experiences, from our family and friends and from books, films and other media. Stereotypes are different all around the world and they can change over time' (p. 12).

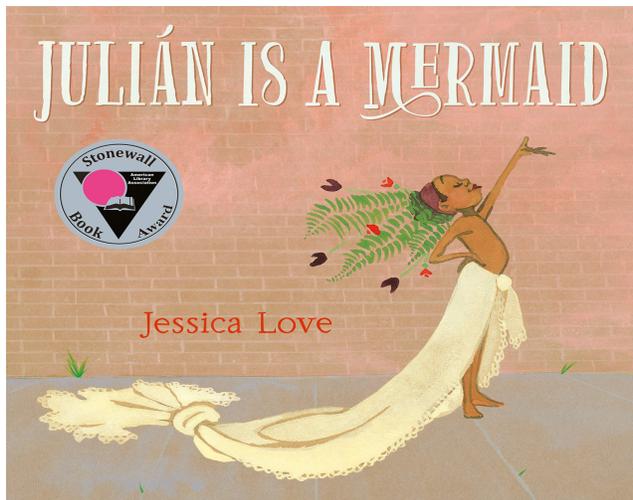
In these 48 pages, Dawson manages to explore complex questions, such as what gender or sex is – in a simple and direct, but suitably inconclusive manner. For each of the focal questions, discussions rather than definitions are given, allowing for flexibility and highlighting that each person experiences themselves differently, and that this is absolutely fine. To further illustrate how unique self-perception is, Dawson includes the voices of other people, such as Krishna Isha and Andrew McMillan, both famous activists who use their platforms to educate people about gender and sexuality. By sharing personal experiences of sex, gender, and sexuality, the book further highlights that these are not categories or boxes that people have to fit in; rather, they are as diverse as the people on the planet.

Toward the end, Dawson includes a 'What's Your Gender?' section providing readers with reflection questions to consider about themselves while, at the same time, reassuring them that they neither have to have answers, nor will their answers remain the same over time. The book includes short 'Think About' sections, whereby readers are invited to reflect on an aspect of their gender and sexuality. For example, the first 'Think About' poses this question: 'Why does it matter whether you're a boy or a girl?' (p. 4). This could be used as a prompt for classroom discussion, provided that rules about respectful communication are in place, or as a prompt for reflective writing. Another activity is for learners to research well-known personalities who have publicly addressed matters of gender and sexuality, beyond those already focused on in the book; learners could deliver presentations, orally and/or in writing about the lives of these people and the messages they are aiming to communicate. The simplicity of this book is what makes it versatile for English language educators. If we are truly interested in teaching children and teenagers ways to respect themselves and one another, and in providing them with a better world, we need more books like Dawson's, *What is Gender? How Does it Define Us? And Other Big Questions*.

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Dr Angelos Bollas is an early career researcher interested in masculinity, sexuality, and cultural studies. His PhD (Dublin City University) examined representations of HIV/AIDS as social suffering in contemporary popular media, and he is now investigating representations of masculinity in contemporary celebrity culture.



Love, Jessica (2018)

Julián is a Mermaid

New York: Candlewick Press

Recommended by David Valente

Jessica Love's debut picturebook, *Julián is a Mermaid*, which won a Stonewall Book Award, centres on the eponymous character, Julián, and opens with the protagonist, an Afro-Latinx child, happily riding the subway accompanied by his Abuela (grandmother) one day in New York City. Watching Love's read-aloud of this picturebook for the Klaus Flugge Prize in 2020 (https://youtu.be/7G4OkfCbq_I) shows how the verbal text in the first opening foregrounds that he

is a boy. He starts dreaming about becoming a mermaid after seeing three women dressed as mermaids on their way to the Coney Island Parade – an artistic celebration marking the arrival of summer. The sparseness of the verbal text creates several gaps which can prompt multiple potential interpretations of the narrative by primary-aged learners (circa 8 to 10). The inclusion of the Spanish words in the US version (though unfortunately absent from the UK version) represents the characters' multilingual identities. Love's scrumptious use of watercolours, gouache, and ink art creatively depict the visual narrative in such a way that delicately illustrate ethnicity as Julián transitions from human to mermaid.

Aspects of visual significance include the celebration of Black hair as Julián transforms, accompanied by the image of the vividly coloured koi fish with the pearl necklace in its mouth. While reading-aloud, it would be useful to elicit the children's predictions of what the fish and the necklace may represent. These are a visual allusion to a pivotal moment or turning point when later in the book, Abuela finds Julián dressed as a mermaid, wearing her makeup and the curtains from the apartment for his mermaid's tail and ferns woven into a headband. A further moment of tension arises as the visual text invites contemplation of what Abuela might say – another valuable stage for inviting predictions during a read-aloud. Wearing a dress with the same pattern and colours as the koi, Abuela hands Julián a pearl necklace to accompany his outfit and off they go hand in hand to the Mermaid Parade – joyfully affirming his diverse gender expression.

During an interview at the Edinburgh International Book Festival (2020, August 23), Love explains how Julián's character was inspired by her own experiences of getting to know a gender-diverse child. She also shared her motivations for creating this compelling story with the aim of authentically representing children who are gender non-conforming. However, it is important for teachers to invite children's personalized interpretations of each visually significant opening. For example, the prologue illustration and the first opening both have considerable potential for evoking character-based predictions and inviting contemplations in English.

Based on ideas in Valente (2022, in press), learners could brainstorm what they notice about Julián's reflection in the prologue illustration and the similarities and differences from his actual appearance in front of the mirror. This could be creatively extended to a guided visualization, where the children, with eyes closed, picture themselves in their mind's eye looking in the mirror. They then contemplate whether their reflection differs from what their classmates see on the outside. Opening their eyes, they use their thoughts to draw their own versions of the mirror image with

themselves and their reflections, and finally, they display their mirror reflections as a classroom gallery to share everyone's interpretations.

Children can use the first opening to describe changes they notice about Julián's physical appearance and clothing in each of the five images. They can also describe changes in the setting from the subway train to the ocean and suggest what this represents. For some children, Julián could be a child who loves to dream, for others the character could be someone who enjoys pretend play and dressing up, and some children may interpret the visuals as representing gender creative expression or possibly, gender transformation. These personalized response activities could be supplemented with space for the stories and voices of real children, in this case, those who are transgender. As Farrar, Arzipe and McAdam (2022) highlight, 'exploring a challenging theme in a fictional context cannot guarantee a safe transfer of compassion and understanding in a real-life context' (p. 51) and to facilitate such transfer, the picturebook could be readily supplemented with text and image ensembles (Serafini, 2014), curated by the teacher and the learners. With the support of parents and caregivers, children in upper primary (circa 11 to 12) can research on child-safe search engines and share these discoveries as multimodal ensembles. This curation process helps prompt the involvement of parents and caregivers who, as influential adults, have a role in encouraging empathy with children who identify as transgender or genderqueer. In this way, the socially constructed nature of gender can be explored in a manner which remains both age-relevant and linguistically accessible.

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