



Beyond Princess Stories: Helping Our Girls Discover Their Own Stories of Power and Promise

by LYNMARA COLÓN

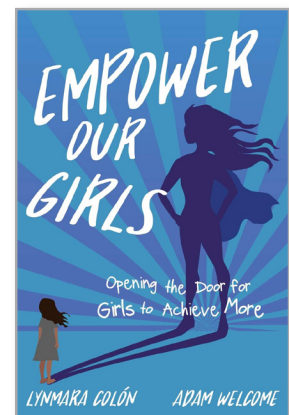
Every girl should have access to books where they see role models and women leaders who have built a path for them in multiple disciplines. When we expose them to more than the “princess story,” we are empowering them to achieve more.

LITERACY CHAMPION: LYNMARA COLÓN



Lynmara Colón brings the perspective of a teacher, assistant principal, and principal—positions she has held since joining education in 2003. As principal of an Elementary School in 2014, she served more than 1,000 students in grades kindergarten through fifth grade and was able to increase reading engagement by leading a culture of literacy, personalized learning, and collaborative learning teams.

Lynmara believes all schools should be run like Disney—providing magical experiences to every student regardless of their background. She now heads the office that provides comprehensive registration services to English learners and immigrant children, including translation and interpretation services, to a school division serving more than 90,000 students. These students represent 124 countries and 149 languages. Colón holds two master’s degrees: a degree in curriculum and instruction, and another in educational leadership. She is currently pursuing her doctorate in education through Old Dominion University. Lynmara is author of [*Empower Our Girls: Opening Doors for Girls to Achieve More*](#).



One to Know: Female Literacy Is Transformational

As a child I loved to read books and role-play some of the stories. One of the challenges I faced was the limited number of books in which the heroine was a female. While we have come a long way and there are many books available in which the superhero is a female, I often worry about the access and availability of these books in our students' classrooms and local libraries. Most of the time the representation of girls and strong lead story lines is limited, leaving girls with stories centered around searching for prince charming, or magazines on how to be popular and liked by many.

As an English Learner, learning to read and write was a transformative experience—one that helped me unlock untapped opportunities, including learning the English language. Literacy is an essential skill that builds confidence and self-esteem to empower girls of all ages, which is why access from an early age is critical for our young girls. Research shows that globally, girls face a greater risk of illiteracy than their male peers. According to the World's Women report (2015) approximately 496 million adult women around the world cannot read and write. This fact is deeply troubling considering that female literacy has benefits that can affect future generations—from reducing infant mortality to increasing women's agency, leadership skills, and civic engagement (Education for All, 2006).

What to Do: Support the Needs of Girls as Learners

1. Conduct book inventories in classrooms and libraries every year. It is only by doing an up-to-date inventory that we can assess the current reality of the books available and representing girls. It is important to know that diversity and representation matters greatly. From current biographies to stories with female characters in different disciplines—both boys and girls should have access to these types of text. Add books that look at matters ranging from embedded issues of class, race, ethnicity, immigrant status, and sexuality to popular culture and personal histories. Bringing a team of people to look at the current inventory of books as well as the representation of textbooks can support our work towards a stronger gender focus in literacy.
2. Create spaces and environments where students can learn about many of the strengths that girls possess as well as many of the challenges they have overcome. Becoming intentional in these areas can help us support classroom discussions, building on girls' identity while creating spaces where they are valued and seen.
3. We know from research that girls often use vivid and descriptive language to express their feelings, fears, and other emotions. By using books to support writing, girls in particular, are more able to express views and emotions that they otherwise would not communicate.

More to Know and Do: Be the Influence

We have come a long way, and have examples of female literacy leaders that support this work. Advocates such as Oprah, Melinda Gates, and Malala continue to model for our girls what it means to live a literacy-rich life and use that knowledge to change the world. However, I would argue that together we can do more. Our educators must become knowledgeable about critical

language that addresses gender issues, paying close attention to how students' language and experiences can be used to support their love for reading. As a young student, I remember one of my teachers taking the time to know me and spending time to shower me with books and support my reading life. I was insecure and young and needed an outlet to express myself. Because of her, I discovered my love for poetry and became a regular at the library, getting lost in books, smelling the pages of many autobiographies, and making that magical space one I looked forward to go to every weekend. She passed on her love for books, something I hope to pass on to a generation of girls. Be that literacy mentor a girl needs! Help them one of them discover the possibilities, empowering her to be the author of a wonderful and impactful story.

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