



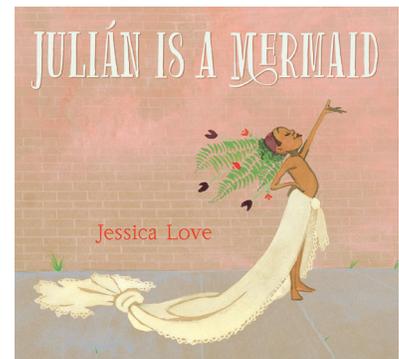
Julián Is a Mermaid: Understanding Gender Expression

Suggested Grade Level: K – 3

Length of Time: One 35 minute class period

Goals

- + To explore the concept of personal expression with students.
- + To embrace differences in the classroom community.
- + To use the book *Julián Is a Mermaid* to introduce the concept of gender expression to students.
- + To highlight caring adults who affirm a child's expression and dreams.
- + To help students cultivate allyship around gender and personal expression.
- + To help students understand that gender is a spectrum and that we cannot know how someone identifies unless they share that with us or unless the author lets us know how the character identifies.



Objective

- + Students will listen to a book read aloud and discuss its meaning.

Academic Standards

- + CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.2.1: Participate in collaborative conversations with diverse partners about grade 2 topics and texts with peers and adults in small and larger groups. (Also SL.K.1, 1.1, 3.2)
- + CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.2.2: Confirm understanding of a text read aloud or information presented orally or through other media by asking and answering questions about key details and requesting clarification if something is not understood. (Also SL.K.2, 1.2, 3.2)
- + CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.2.6 Identify the main purpose of a text, including what the author wants to answer, explain or describe.

About the book

While riding the subway home from the pool with his abuela one day, Julián notices three people spectacularly dressed up. Their hair billows in brilliant hues, their dresses end in fishtails and their joy fills the train car. When Julián gets home, daydreaming of the magic he's seen, all he can think about is dressing up in his own fabulous mermaid costume: a butter-yellow curtain for his tail, the fronds of a potted fern for his headdress. But what will Abuela think about the mess he makes—and even more important, what will she think about how Julián sees himself? *Julián Is a Mermaid* provides a role model of a grandmother who loves and affirms her grandson and his exploration of his interests.

Educators' Notes

There are lots of different ways to be a boy, girl, both or neither. In this book, the pronouns he/his are used for Julián. However, the author, [Jessica Love](#), says that she “deliberately [doesn't] specify in the book how exactly Julián identifies...[she wants] the book to function as a door swinging open...allowing different children to read their own story in Julián's.”

The [Coney Island Mermaid Parade](#) featured in the book is an annual event that has been going on for almost 40 years.

One of the learning objectives of this lesson is to teach children to accept and embrace the many ways students may choose to express who they are through clothing and hairstyles, free of stereotypical gender norms. It is important to help students understand that clothing and hairstyles are unique and different for each of us depending on our individual expression, family and cultural traditions. It is also important to help students understand that our gender identity is “how we feel” and that we all have names and pronouns that we want to be called to feel seen and respected.

It is important to review classroom rules about respect and being an ally when having discussions about gender. Gender-based bullying around identity and expression has a high frequency of occurrence in elementary schools and needs to be interrupted and addressed by educators.

Pronunciation / Translations

Julián (who-lee-ahn); Abuela (ah-bwel-ah) *Grandmother*; Vámanos (ba-mah-nos) *Let's go*; Mijo (me-ho) *Affectionate term for a younger boy. A contraction of the words “mi” and “hijo”—literally “my son”*; Latinx (la-teen-ex) *A gender inclusive term for someone of Latin American descent.*

Materials Needed:

- + *Julián Is a Mermaid* by Jessica Love

Read and Discuss the Book *Julián Is a Mermaid*

Introduction to the book:

Before reading this book to your students, share that the book is called *Julián Is a Mermaid* and that the imagined character, Julián, the child on the cover of the book, uses the pronouns he/him/his. Ask your students to look at the cover of the book and tell you what they see. Let your students know that you are going to be talking about gender expression—how we present our gender to the world through clothing, hair and mannerisms. Everyone has a gender expression, and we cannot assume someone's gender identity (how they feel) or what pronouns they might use (if they use pronouns; some people don't) from their gender expression. Remind students not to assume anyone's gender identity or pronouns based on how they look.

It is important not to make assumptions about how Julián identifies because we do not know. This is an important teachable moment for both educators and students because we cannot know how someone identifies (transgender, non-binary, cisgender, etc.) unless they or the author specifically share that with us. We do know that we can encourage young children to be respectful and open to all the ways young people may express their genders and pursue their interests, with or without labels.

Class Discussion Guide

As there is not a lot of text in the book, take time to look at the illustrations as you read to your students. Let them know that stories can be told with both pictures and words and that you all will be noticing both in this book.

Show your students the inside cover of the book.

- + What do you see?
- + Point out Julián.

Show your students the title page of the book.

- + What do you see?
- + I wonder who that is with Julián?
I bet we will find out in the story.

Pages 1-2. “This is a boy named Julián. And this is his abuela. And those are some mermaids. Julián LOVES mermaids!”

- + What language is the word “abuela” from?
- + Do any of you know Spanish or speak Spanish at home?
- + Ask your students if any of them are multilingual. Ask them to name some of the other languages that they can speak (or understand).
- + In what setting or place are Julián, his abuela and the mermaids?
- + The subway. See if any of your students notice that the mermaids are outside the subway on page 1 and inside the subway on page 2.

Pages 3-4, 5-6, 7-8. Show these pages to your students. Give them time to take a close look at each illustration.

- + What happened to Julián on these pages?
- + Do you think it is real, imaginary or both?
- + Why is Julián holding a book on page 3?
- + Do you think the book helped Julián become a mermaid?
- + Can books help you imagine that you are someone or something else?

Pages 9-10. “Vámonos, mijo. This is our stop.”

- + Ask, “What did Julián’s grandmother say in Spanish?” (if some of your students do not know Spanish)
- + “Let’s go, my son.” (Affectionately, “mijo” can also mean “sweetie” or “honey.”)
- + What are the mermaids doing on this page?

Pages 11-12. “Abuela, did you see the mermaids?” “I saw them, mijo.”

- + In what setting or place are Julián and his abuela walking? What clues in the picture tell you this?
- + What time of year is it? What clues in the picture tell you this?

Pages 15-16 and 17-18. “Julián has a good idea.”

- + Take time to look at the illustrations on both two-page spreads.
- + What is Julián’s good idea?
- + How do you think Julián feels when he has finished dressing up?

Pages 19-20 “Oh!” Uh-oh.

- + How do you think Julián’s abuela feels about his idea?
- + How do you think Julián feels after seeing his abuela’s expression?

Pages 23-24 “For me, Abuela?” “For you, Julián.”

- + What did Julián’s abuela give to him?
- + How do you think Julián’s abuela feels about his idea now?
- + Earlier, did we correctly guess how she felt?
- + How do you think Julián feels now that his abuela has given him something for his costume?

Note to educators: At some point in the story, you may have students who share that they would not be allowed to dress as a mermaid or that they would not want to be a mermaid.

- + When this comes up, pause and ask your students, “Why do you think Julián wants to dress up like a mermaid?”
- + Have students name some of things that they like to pretend to be.
- + Ask, “What if you were told that you couldn’t or shouldn’t pretend to be something? How would that make you feel?”
- + Let your students know there are lots of different ways children can dress. There are lots of ways to be a boy or a girl or both or neither. “We all get to like what we like.”
- + This is a good time to message students that at [NAME OF SCHOOL], everyone gets to wear what makes them feel happy and comfortable without being teased. We all get to BE WHO WE ARE without being teased or bullied by anyone else.
- + If you have students who say that they have family members who say that boys can’t be mermaids (or don’t wear dresses), let your students know that home and school can be different. One response can be, “Home and school can be different. Here at [NAME OF SCHOOL], students can wear what makes them happy.”

Pages 25-26 “Where are we going?” “You’ll see,” says abuela.

- + Pause on this page. Where do you think Julián and his abuela are going?

Pages 31-32 “And they do.”

- + Where did Julián’s abuela take him?
- + How does that make him feel?
- + Let your students know that the parade is based on an actual parade that happens every summer on Coney Island in New York City.

Closing discussion or comments for after the book.

- + Do you think Julián would be teased for being a mermaid at our school?
- + Most likely your students will say yes.
- + What is the behavior called when someone is being unkind to another person?
 - » Students may say that it is being mean or a bully.
 - » Make sure to remind students that it is called bullying behavior.
 - » This is important because behaviors can change—we do not want to cast students into a role as a bully. We want their behavior to change.
- + What are some ways we can work together in our classroom so that everyone can wear clothes and have their hair the way that makes them happy and comfortable—so they can BE WHO THEY ARE?
 - » Answers might include: talking with or befriending the targeted student (Julián), confiding in an adult, talking with the student who is being mean, causing a distraction to help stop the harassment or speaking up in the moment and saying, “STOP.”

Extensions

- + Do this lesson along with [Be Who You Are: With The Book by Todd Parr](#).
- + Do a lesson with your students about pronouns with [They, She, He Easy as ABC Understanding Names, Pronouns and Gender Expression](#).
- + Pair this lesson with [Children Just Like Me: Gender Expression](#), which offers an activity to show what kinds of clothing and hairstyles students like to wear.

Assessment and evaluation

- + Assessment for this lesson will be mostly informal. Notice if your students are using the term “gender expression” and if they understand the meaning of the term.
- + Observe your students and notice whether they are showing ally behavior around gender expression. The goal is for students to accept the ways each individual in their class chooses to express their gender throughout the school year without being teased or bullied.
- + As an accepting climate is developed in your classroom, notice if more students feel welcomed to express themselves freely in clothing, hairstyle or forms of play and interactions with peers.

Additional Resources from Welcoming Schools

- + [Lessons to Understand Gender](#)
- + [Diverse Children's Books with Transgender, Non-Binary and Gender Expansive Students](#)
- + [Resources for Gender Inclusive Schools](#)
- + [Be Prepared For Questions and Put-Downs Around Gender](#)
- + [Defining LGBTQ Words for Elementary School Students](#)
- + [Welcoming Schools Professional Development Training](#)



Illustration: *Julián Is a Mermaid* by Jessica Love