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Empowering Female Voices in the ELA Classroom

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## Empowering Female Voices

### Abstract

This study aims to understand how women's voices can be empowered in a high school English Language Arts (ELA) class. Through the use of female authors and female protagonists in the classroom texts, this study seeks to understand if implementing female-driven texts enhances female students' literary experiences, empowers the personal identities of female students, and shapes female students' perspectives of themselves and their peers. This case study includes female students in twelfth grade AP Literature class.

*Keywords:* Female Voices, Equity, Empowering Females, Case Study, English Classroom, Female Protagonists, Female Authors, Females in the Classroom

Acknowledgments

I am indebted to Dr. Jennifer Dail for her words of wisdom, constant cheerleading, and encouragement while I took the longest and windiest road to finish this process. Thank you for reminding me that baby steps forward are still forward momentum. Furthermore, I could not have completed this without the support of Dr. Megan Adams and Dr. Guichun Zong. Thank you both for guiding me, refocusing me, and propelling me to the finish line. Throughout my academic journey at Kennesaw State University, I have been supported by the guidance and support of the Secondary English Education and Education Departments at Kennesaw State University.

## Empowering Female Voices

### Dedication

I dedicate this to my sons, Owen and Holden, for their ongoing encouragement and patience even when I felt overwhelmed. Each of you has listened while I lamented my procrastination or my workload and reminded me that I can accomplish big things. I dedicate this to my parents, Albert and Helen Gurliaccio. Their steadfast love of me and my two sons was an enormous guiding force in my continued education. Their support of me as a single mother was a tremendous factor in encouraging me when I was not sure that I could complete this while raising two teenagers.

Remember to always focus on the step in front of you and not the entire journey!

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## **CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION**

### **Introduction to the Problem**

“In books I have traveled, not only to other worlds, but into my own.” – Anna Quindlen

After years in various industries, I returned to college for a degree in Secondary English Education. A common refrain in many English education classes was how to engage readers with the ultimate goal of creating lifelong readers. Professors and students often discussed how to organically develop students who liked and even actually enjoyed reading. With the heavy demands placed on teachers to meet standardized curriculum, students can be weighed down by course requirements and eventually lose sight of the fact that they once liked to read, so the goal is to get students back to the books and genres they once enjoyed. The overall discourse centered around choosing novels that would appeal to male students. This idea was centered around male students being more reluctant readers than female students. Within my classroom, I found myself gravitating toward male authors and male characters in hopes of appealing to the male students. I included young adult novels by Chris Crutcher, Gary Paulsen, and Walter Dean Myers in the hopes that I was reaching the reluctant male readers in the class. There was a prevalent idea that the female students enjoyed a broader range of stories and would, therefore, still benefit from stories that appealed to the male students. According to Smith and Wilhelm (2002), males' comprehensive reading and writing skills lag behind those of females (p. 3). Since males are viewed as more reluctant readers and are seen as appreciating certain genres of texts, like action stories, those are considered better choices for class novels. Smith and Wilhelm assert that the idea of masculinity and how literacy ties into masculinity is a construct perpetuated by popular culture (p. 6). While it is true that boys can be more reluctant readers, it is also true that the girls

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in the classroom have preferences in reading materials and stories that should be considered. Furthermore, the social constructs that label males as less proficient in literacy skills are changing (p. 7). The preferences of the females in this scenario were relegated to being a secondary consideration to obtain more enthusiasm and engagement from the males in the classroom. Meanwhile, as the girls in class become adolescents and more aware of the dynamics of the world, they are shown over and over again “that history is the history of men. History is His Story, the story of *Man-kind*” (Pipher, 1994, p. 19). This focus on male preferences is not ideal when all readers have preferences in the stories and voices brought into the classroom, and all students benefit from seeing themselves reflected in the authors and voices included.

On several different occasions, I have had students comment on the overwhelming amount of stories written by white males. While I knew this to be an issue, I respected the canon and the scope of knowledge that it brought. As young adult novels written by and for women became more prevalent in the early 2000s, I found myself reading and recommending these books to my students. It was then that I realized that in my days as a college student, I had gone out of my way to take every Women’s Literature course I could find. Through these courses, I was introduced to recent authors like Margaret Atwood, Toni Morrison, and Alice Walker, as well as older authors like Virginia Wolff, Edith Wharton, and Zora Neale Hurston. I now found myself reading stories that I related to and reaffirmed the problems that I had faced in the world. Through Margaret Atwood, I learned about the importance of autonomy and the necessity for women to be able to vote and control their own money. These were rights that I had taken for granted that Atwood showed could be easily removed. Through Toni Morrison and Zora Neale Hurston, I more deeply understood that not all people of every race, ethnicity, and gender experience the same freedoms. I realized I wanted to share these voices and give my students the

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tools to vocalize their own experiences, thereby giving voice to ongoing issues in today's classrooms.

### **Background of the Problem**

Students in public education in the United States read many books, plays, short stories, and poetry during their time in the ELA classrooms. These authors and voices are predominantly white male voices. From *The Great Gatsby* to *The Scarlet Letter* or even more, modern widely read works such as *The Crucible* or *Slaughterhouse-Five* lend primarily male voices to classrooms attended by male and female students. The women characters in many of the canonized works are written by men. They are written as marginalized, dependent, and lacking in the ability to create their own identity and world but instead live at the mercy and whim of the male characters that take center stage. Characters like Daisy Buchanan from *The Great Gatsby*, Penelope from *The Odyssey*, Eve from *The Bible*, and Juliet from *Romeo and Juliet* render women weak, submissive, and missing individual identities.

Motivation to read has been noted as waning as children get older (Applegate & Applegate, 2010, p. 227). This decline in interest is a refrain repeated often by adolescents as they enter middle school and high school. They loved to read and were not sure why or when they stopped feeling that way. Applegate further noted that the change in motivation was linked to an increase in intellectual expectations, as well as the increasing difficulty in reading materials (Applegate & Applegate, 2010, p. 231). This change indicates that teachers at all levels of secondary education should be more aware of the accessibility of the material as well as how the material is scaffolded for student understanding and increased interest (Applegate & Applegate, 2010, p. 232). The texts chosen should not just teach a skill but be recognizable to the student as a valuable perspective worthy of examination. Teachers should consider not just what they have

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historically taught and how that factors into the overall course but instead ask themselves what they want the students to take away from the reading.

The curriculum sets a tone and a mood within a classroom, but even more so in the Language Arts class, where the texts tell the stories of humans and our humanity. In the report of The American Association of University Women, “How Schools Shortchange Girls,” curriculum choices are said to impact motivation both positively and negatively and further influence student growth and development “through the images it gives to students about themselves and the world” (The American Association of University Women, 1992, p. 3). This ideology is backed up and expanded by the knowledge that the literature teachers utilize is “one of the primary conduits” that educators can use to include the notion of equity (Tschida, Ryan, & Ticknor, 2014). When incorporating stories with strong female characters and protagonists, teachers can further meet the needs of today’s diverse and dynamic students and affect how they see the world and their role in society. The stories incorporated help students position themselves within an increasingly complex world.

Georgia Public Schools adhere to the Georgia Standards of Excellence (GSE) for curriculum planning purposes (Georgia Department of Education, 2015). The standards for a high school ELA course include Shakespeare in every grade except tenth when suggesting authors to implement for longer texts and Auden when suggesting poets to read during the course of the year but does not give suggestions other than to recommend that “women, Native Americans, people of color, immigrant” authors should be selected to implement both a diverse voice and cultural history (ELA Multicultural). Assessments for each grade level include two informative essays and two argumentative essays, with the expectation that research will be involved in these essays. Female authors that have been canonized and are more frequently

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included in the standard curriculum are Emily Dickinson, Jane Austen, Toni Morrison, and Zora Neale Hurston, among others; however, these are rare, and few female authors and they are regulated to being an occasional part of the curriculum as the symbolic female authors and characters instead of being an equal part of the syllabus and courses. Authors like Marjane Satrapi, Julia Alvarez, Malala Yousafzai, and Angie Thomas are telling stories that appeal not only to female students but to males as well.

It was not until the discourse surrounding the presidential election between Clinton and Trump that I really examined what messages might be being sent to my students by the texts they read. When a presidential candidate is vocal in his disregard for women, minorities, and people with special needs, it speaks volumes to the state of the overall discourse in the country. As a parent of a child with special needs, I was concerned about how this would affect people's perceptions and if it would negatively impact my child's self-worth. Then, the #MeToo Movement in the fall of 2017 coincided with my professional move from teaching all Senior English courses to teaching the ELA courses for the STEM students at my school. I started to examine the unbalanced representation of female voices in the ELA classroom. My students were now disproportionately male, and I wanted to ensure that female voices were heard within my classroom. These women in STEM are students who should read, analyze, and discuss female authors and female characters but who primarily see male authors. As an English educator, I have made my fair share of "dead, white, male" author jokes while still including those same authors and wanting my students to have a firm knowledge of canonical literature, but in 2017, that changed. I actively considered who the female voices were and how the female characters and authors add value as a voice in the classroom. While I was revamping the tests, projects, and essays that I utilize to encompass more of a STEM focus, I began to get input from

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my students on the ideas that I had whirling around in my head. I let them give me their opinions on making a stained-glass window, a stop-motion film, or a working windmill as a project. I purposefully went through my directions with them before assigning the project to get their input. This helped me to see what assessment choices made them want to push themselves. It also gave me deeper knowledge about the texts that we were reading and how they were responding to these readings. Their overall enjoyment of more modern stories showed me that they wanted to understand the world that we live in now. When the boys enjoyed stories like King Arthur and Beowulf more while the girls responded more to *Antigone*, I knew that I needed to look closer at whose voices were and were not being represented in my class.

To add a more diverse range of authors, I placed a huge map of the world in my World Literature class on a bulletin board. I then added pictures of the novel's covers that we would be reading. I will start with my tried and true *1984*, *Anthem*, *Hamlet*, *Oedipus*, and *Antigone*. When I looked at the map, I noticed an issue. I then added *Hiroshima*, *Persepolis*, and *Born a Crime*. This instantly added more depth and diversity to my course. With respect to gender, *Anthem* and *Persepolis* are written by women, and the main character in *Antigone* is a female, which is an important point within the overall story. Finally, I replaced *1984* with *Animal Farm*. *1984* is a complex and, at times, confusing read for students, and there are some episodes that I felt leaned too far into misogynistic storytelling. With *Animal Farm*, I was able to avoid those issues while still exposing students to a compelling story warning about communism and fascism. With my major texts more balanced, I was then able to choose shorter texts and poetry that give the students a more comprehensive range of exposure to the world. Authors like Alice Walker, Jamaica Kincaid, Nikki Grimes, Sylvia Plath, Gary Soto, Gabriel García Márquez, and Sherman Alexie are now featured.

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Likewise, in Advanced Placement Literature, I looked at the texts that were included and determined that I should keep texts that were rich in storytelling and examining human nature, like *Fences* and *The Road*, and drop texts that were not relatable to the students, such as *Heart of Darkness*. Over the past few years, students in my AP Literature classroom have expressed their preference for more stories like “Girl” by Jamaica Kincaid and “A Worn Path” by Eudora Welty. In an effort to have students more able to engage and relate to stories, I began making changes to the texts we read. Ultimately, I began to wonder how the female students would relate to early feminist writings such as Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening* or Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *The Yellow Wall-paper*.

### **Statement of Problem**

School has the ability to impact an individual’s identity and understanding of the world from curriculum exposure that shapes beliefs about identity, social constructs, roles, and relationships. Therefore, schools have a role in the empowerment and self-actualization of students' identities in public schools through education and curriculum. With female students, however, their beliefs about identity and social constructs could be impacted by an educational system that has focused primarily on including white males in the curriculum. This issue becomes more salient when considering Chimamanda Adichie’s 2009 Ted Talk about the dangers of the single story. Students need a variety of stories to see not only themselves but also others who are not like themselves as having a story worth sharing and including in the curriculum. Students who only know one story about a place or a group of people cannot fully comprehend the place or the people (Adichie, 2009).

For students to have a clear understanding of themselves and the world, voices from a variety of cultures, races, genders, and nationalities should be highlighted in the classroom. In

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this way, literature serves as a window onto the rest of the world and a mirror that shows our place within the human experience (Bishop, 1990, p. 3). People seek out books in which they can see themselves as they are and as they want to be (Tschida et al., 2014, p. 29). However, this need does not translate into the texts taught within the classroom. Females and students from marginalized groups continue to see themselves sidelined in the texts that are used in the classroom (Bishop, 2012, p. 29). This lack of relevant texts in the classroom is problematic because it indicates a significant gap within the classroom and the relevant research on the use of reflective texts within the classroom

This gap shows a lack specifically when it relates to the reflection of female authors, voices, and experiences. This gap can be filled by using texts as reflections of student experience. When teachers move past the ethnocentric and gender-centric texts that have been canonized and include more diversity, students can see themselves in the multicultural and diverse world (Bishop, 2012, p. 29).

Filling this gap in research is pivotal to promoting the acceptance and relevance of a variety of voices within the classroom. The challenge is determining how this gap has affected female voices and how the inclusion of females will impact the students within the classroom.

There is an assumption regarding women and education that there has been a history of subjugation and oppression and that female voices are needed to stop the further subjugation of women in the classroom. This study could help eradicate a system that has excluded not only women but also the voices of people of color and further illuminate what happens when female voices are reflected in classroom texts (Bishop, 2012, pp. 29-30).

### **Purpose of the Study**

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Curriculum studies enable educators to discuss the sociological impact of the school system as it currently exists. Within the Secondary English classroom, the incorporation of more female voices, authors, and protagonists will serve to give the female population a more balanced curriculum with voices from a multitude of diversities. These voices can serve as a reflection of the female students that are within the classroom. The study will attempt to give voice to the marginalized voices by including a female-written and driven text that centers on women's issues. Initial research shows that this inclusion of a variety of voices will assist students in not only seeing their story and place in the world but also seeing beyond their voice and understanding more deeply the perspectives of others. (Bishop, 2012, p. 32).

This qualitative study seeks to understand how incorporating relevant voices in the form of female protagonists and female authors impacts and possibly empowers female students. Students participating in the study will take a preliminary survey to gauge their perception and recollections of the voices they have seen and learned about during their education. Before the study begins, the units will be traditional units with canonical authors and perspectives. Participating students will then complete the pre-study interview to gauge thoughts and perspectives on the inclusion of female voices and characters in the ELA classroom. Students will then be presented with a text focusing on female voices and characters. Afterward, students will complete a post-survey on their perceptions of incorporating a female perspective that is focused on issues that pertain to females and how that affects their perception of voices in the secondary ELA classroom.

A combined framework of Feminist Theory, Critical Theory, Social Justice Theory, and previous research, including Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's video speech "The Danger of a

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Single Story,” helped formulate the research questions and support the validity of further research (Adichie, 2009).

### **Research Questions**

Building an environment that empowers girls in the classroom takes forethought by the instructor into how to establish the expected behavior and norms. Students must embrace an inclusive culture that does not repress voices while empowering others. Therefore, I sought to understand the gender equity issues that continue to occur within the classroom while seeking ways to purposefully amplify female voices through curriculum choices.

1. How does reading female voices in the curriculum inform the female student's perceptions of themselves and the world around them?
2. How does reading female voices contribute to girls' conception of gender identity?
3. How does positioning the inclusion of female voices as an asset in learning instead of a deficit in curriculum impact female students' perspectives of themselves as learners?

### **Significance of the Study**

I am the teacher for all students who have agreed to participate in this study. I have served as an ELA teacher at this school for eighteen years. I believe that empowering female voices is imperative in moving education and society toward a more balanced and equitable structure for all students. This study has the potential to inform not just the need for gender equity within the classroom but also the need for equity in regard to race, ethnicity, learning differences, and sexual orientation.

Due to an increasingly strong belief in the positive effects of incorporating a broad spectrum of voices in the ELA classroom, I will incorporate male and female voices from a

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variety of backgrounds, culturally and economically. These voices will be easily incorporated into the nature of the senior-level Advanced Placement (AP) Literature course I teach.

### **Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations**

This study focuses on females and their perceptions regarding the inclusion of female authors, female characters, and female voices in the Secondary English Education classroom. To create a focused scope, this research focuses on females in an AP Literature class in a suburban metro Atlanta community. This delimitation is intentional, as the curriculum may vary from one community to another. However, the research intends to start a conversation and understanding of the ramifications of including female voices in the classroom. This delimitation creates a necessary delimitation to the scope's focus in an effort to generate future research possibilities.

Case studies generally include observations, and the participants in this study will be observed participating in a Socratic seminar, where they will discuss the texts included in the study. Given the classmate and peer relationships of the students, interviews will be a group conversation, which will help expand participant memory, deepen descriptions, and broaden the overall understanding of the chosen text. This platform will also help to begin a new dialogue, which will help to empower the individual and collective voices of the women participating in the study.

### **Definition of Terms:**

**Gender Roles:** The role or behavior considered to be appropriate to a particular gender as determined by prevailing cultural norms.

**Gender Inequality:** Discrimination based on sex or gender causing one sex or gender to be routinely privileged or prioritized over another.

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**Gender Dynamics:** The relationships and interactions between and among people based on gender.

**Resilience:** Successfully adapting to difficult or challenging life experiences.

**Empathy:** The complex capability enabling individuals to understand and feel the emotional states of others, resulting in compassionate behavior.

**Emotions:** The reaction to experiences, behaviors, and physiological elements.

**Stereotype:** The characteristics that society instinctively attributes to groups of people to classify them according to age, weight, occupation, skin color, gender, etc.

**Societal Expectations:** The rules that govern one's reactions and beliefs that society considers acceptable.

**Character Exploration:** An exploration of a character's traits, personality, and characteristics within a story.

**Literature:** A person, figure, inanimate object, or animal that drives the story forward.

**Role Model:** A character that readers look to as a good example.

### Chapter 1 Summary

Curriculum studies recognize the gaps in research within the realm of female voices in the classroom and the position of women within that further widens the gap. The power of gender and cultural research helps to encourage conversations that may open doors for future research and educational improvements that will benefit both women and people of color and improve knowledge of a multicultural world that benefits from freedom of thought, personal reflection, and empowerment of voice.

This study examines women's education and the role of utilizing female voices in the classroom. Women's experiences in the world and literature help female students understand

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their personal importance in the world while giving voice and validity to their individual experiences.

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

### **Introduction to the Literature Review**

This study examines two important aspects of public education: the ideal of a free and equitable education for all and the goal of assisting all students in becoming their best selves. Both equity and empowerment of women in education are areas that have gaps that can be examined. Understanding the overarching and current issues in women's education will provide insight into their educational experiences and how to promote women's empowerment best. The goal of this research is to facilitate women speaking out and seeing themselves and the issues that pertain to them as represented within the curriculum of public education.

### **Review of the Research Literature**

The United States educational system was conceived and designed by wealthy men to serve a population that was also predominantly wealthy and male. The remnants of this original system are still evident today, yet the contemporary system serves students of all genders and demographics. According to Woody (1929a), "particularly impressive was a comparative silence - in some educational histories, almost complete - on the subject of women's education; and equally striking, the scant attention given her emancipation and education in the general histories of the country" (p. vii). Historically, the education and empowerment of women have not been worthy of noting or documenting. Woody goes on to say that "while we have modern histories, political, philosophical and educational histories, we still lack one that duly takes into view the education of women" (p. viii). As the world progressed and changed during the eighteenth and

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nineteenth centuries, this began to change. So, it “vastly changed the economic place and function of women, the extension of suffrage, transcendentalism, the movement for equal rights, and many other reform movements concerned with women” (p. vii). However, a commonly held opinion was that the minds of women are inferior to men: “Those of females are commonly either left to nature or, which is worse, warped and biased by frippery and folly, under the name of education” (Woody, 1929b, p. 89). Women should not be educated because their minds are inferior and will be ruined by education.

Industrialization and economic changes within the United States resulted in women working outside the home more but in limited professions such as teaching, housework, bookbinding, and cotton mills. Women were “employed in more than one hundred industrial occupations,” but there were “few opportunities for educated women” (Woody, 1929b, p. 8).

### **History of Women’s Education and Literacy in the Western World**

Historically, education in the Western world has been used to promote the needs of the males in society. At the same time, “women have generally occupied a sheltered place and have not, therefore, received a higher cultural or professional training” (Woody, 1929a, p. 1). Division of labor, education, and duties were based on gender in ancient societies in China, India, and Persia. Greece was an exception, where women had many more rights and freedoms and limited intellectual achievements while still primarily focused on being a wife and mother (Woody, 1929a, p. 10).

With the advent of the Renaissance in Italy and England, women experienced more freedom to pursue intellectual and cultural interests during the sixteenth century. During this time, the ruler was Queen Elizabeth I, who was progressive, and the result was that women of means could study “Greek and Latin grammar; literature; the Christian fathers; works of

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moralists, poets, and orators: history; geometry, and arithmetic (Woody, 1929b, p. 24). The Renaissance eventually gave way to the stricter societies of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century England, where society was more rigid and class-oriented regarding the education of all people, especially women.

In France, the influence of Catholicism and Napoleon significantly shaped women's education. Napoleon's decision that women should believe rather than reason, and therefore, the way to education was through religion, was a pivotal moment. This was because the primary duty of women, according to him, was to serve the men in society. Germany's educational landscape was similar to that of Italy, England, and France until after the Reformation. Martin Luther, a key figure, was of the opinion that children of potential should stay in school longer and together (Woody, 1929a, p. 77).

Across the Atlantic, in the eighteenth century, many scholars declared that women were inferior to men intellectually and physically. However, a few, such as William Alexander, asserted that education is the most significant difference between the sexes (Woody, 1929a, p. 89). This progressive view was further reinforced in 1885, when the American Association of University Women was commissioned to dismiss the misconception that education was harmful to women ((The American Association of University Women, 1992, p. 2), marking a significant step forward in the history of women's education.

By 1700, male literacy had risen to almost 50% while female literacy lagged behind at 30% (Schwager, 1987, p. 339). During the colonial period, literacy continued to grow, with male literacy increasing at a faster rate until 1800 when male literacy was at 80% and female literacy was at 40% (Schwager, 1987, p. 339). This difference has been attributed in part to discrimination against educating women, and the numbers are even more profound when looking

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at people of color. By 1850, the Northeastern region of the United States was seeing increases to almost complete literacy while black women were still at 50% literacy (Schwager, 1987, p. 340).

The first half of the nineteenth century was still mired in the belief that women did not need to be educated, but there were now voices that supported education and rights for women. Among these was the influential figure of Lucretia Mott, who played a pivotal role in shaping the women's rights movement. Her influence extended to Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, inspiring them to fight for equality for women in voting, education, and society. "At a young age, Lucretia rejected the idea that women were spiritually or intellectually inferior to men" (Faulkner, 2011, p. 9). Mott and Stanton went on to co-write the Declaration of Sentiments, a document outlining the rights of women, in an effort to establish rights for women. When slavery was abolished, Mott advocated for voting rights for men and women of color (Faulkner, 2011, p. 141).

By the mid-nineteenth century, significant changes were happening surrounding the idea of women's education. These changes were largely influenced by the women's suffrage movement and the shifting public opinion. On February 14, 1898, Anthony addressed the National American Woman Suffrage Association, stating that when she started working with the suffrage movement, "women who could either write speeches or make them were extremely rare" (Stanton, Gordon, & Anthony, 2013, p. 189). The women's movement not only fought for political rights but also changed the view on women being educated and leading movements.

### **Women's Education and Voice in the Twentieth Century and Beyond**

Moving into the end of the twentieth century and beyond, there is an incredible surge in population, especially in cities, that increases the need for labor, skills, education, and workforce. The Industrial Age arrives, and with it, the needs of employers and employees change. With

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women leaving home for employment, there was a perceived loss of knowledge in the areas of cooking and sewing, and schools were poised to pick up the slack. "By 1916-17, about 20 percent of the public high schools offered courses in home economics" (Woody, 1929b, p. 60).

While Woody's study of women's education was considered comprehensive at the time, it is also notable for the areas lacking: social class, religion, and education of minorities (Seller, 1989, p. 100). Throughout the twentieth century, these were forces at play that caused women's education and voice to continue to be diminished. Woody failed to note the link between social class and the types of jobs that women were entering. Secretaries, teachers, and beauticians are trained for jobs where the pay is much less than other jobs, thus increasing the divide between what men and women can earn (Seller, 1989, p. 102).

During the women's movement of the 1970s, women's education became a topic of discussion (Schwager, 1987, p. 335). It was noted that even into the 1970s, research was lacking on women's institutions and training schools. Compounding this was the idea that educating women could be a source of social change and the dichotomy of the role of women within the home as wives and mothers (Schwager, 1987, p. 336).

Beginning in preschool, research shows that teachers choose activities and materials that will appeal to the boys in the classroom (The American Association of University Women, 1992, p. 2). This bias in engaging boys while neglecting the needs of the girls continues throughout education. Furthermore, teachers engage with males more than females and are less likely to engage with students of color (The American Association of University Women, 1992, p. 2). The education inequity is then parlayed into an imbalance in power within society. While the media is quick to share stories of female bosses, it is because they are still the exception to the rule.

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Power or lack of power affects individual lives and is still ascribed based on imbalances seen in education and within society (The American Association of University Women, 1992, p. 3).

### **Traditional Canon in ELA Classroom**

The secondary English curriculum arose as a hybrid of subjects, including grammar, literature, rhetoric, and history, with the focus to this day being primarily literature (Applebee, 1993, p. 32). Literature studies include a variety of genres, such as novels, plays, short stories, poems, essays, letters, and films, among others (Applebee, 1993, p. 41). Historically, these genres have predominantly featured white male authors, with few women or authors of color. Starting in the 1960s in the United States, there has been a push to incorporate a more diverse population of authors. However, as recently as the 1990s, the numbers were still primarily white (99%) and male (86%), with more women being included, but very few authors of color (Applebee, 1993, p. 178).

### **Women's Voices in Literature: Chopin and Gilman**

Powerful female stories and voices can change how people view each other and the world. One such voice during the end of the nineteenth century is that of Kate Chopin. Her short stories like "Desiree's Baby" and "The Story of an Hour," along with her novella *The Awakening*, share insightful experiences from a woman's perspective. Chopin "dared to write about what women felt and thought" when faced with making a difficult decision (Dodge & Whaley, 1993, p. 86). Her honest female voice has been banned many times over the past century, but it is the honest female voice that female students need to hear as they develop into women. The main character in *The Awakening*, Edna, tells her friend: "I would give up the unessential; I would give my money, I would give my life for my children, but I would not give myself" (Chopin, 1988, p. 70). This is a powerful moment where a student can see the difference

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between taking care of your family and losing yourself to your family. Edna will do everything she can for her family, short of becoming someone that is untrue to herself.

Identity is a topic that many other female American authors have explored. Female American authors like Louisa May Alcott, Laura Ingalls Wilder, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman shared stories of women who were determined to find their identity within society. Gilman's novella *The Yellow Wall-paper* adds a powerful female voice through her description of a woman losing the little power that she has at the hand of her doctor-husband and slowly declining into insanity. It is this shared experience of this character suffering through a mental crisis and losing her little bit of autonomy that is relatable and a powerful lesson for students. Gilman's story of a woman's search for identity was initially rejected and later anthologized with horror stories (Dodge & Whaley, 1993, p. 200). This semi-autobiographical exploration of motherhood, identity, and depression is a potent story that can help teenage women understand what it means to be a woman. It shows the importance of a woman being autonomous and having her voice and identity.

## Women's Voices in Literature

The National Council of Teachers of English asked librarians for a list of authors that should be included in the canon to broaden the selections and be appealing to students. Librarians named Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, and Isabel Allende, among others, as authors that should be added and read in high school (Applebee, 1993, p. 177). While the canon can be and should be revised, it is also the classroom that must change and be revised in order to incorporate a wider range of female voices (Dodge & Whaley, 1993, p. 1).

When a diverse range of authors is integrated into the curriculum, students are no longer confined to a single narrative, but are able to grasp the complex tapestry of the world we inhabit

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(Tschida, Ryan, & Ticknor, 2014, p. 32). They begin to perceive the multi-layered reality of the world, where female voices are an integral part of the narrative. Bishop asserts that literature is a “major socializing agent,” and as such, the literature chosen in the classroom shapes students' understanding of what is deemed appropriate (Bishop, 1990, p. 561). When voices are marginalized and excluded from the broader conversation or curriculum, a statement is made about what is acceptable and what is not in our society and world. Therefore, the inclusion of diverse female voices in the curriculum is not just a choice, but a necessity for a comprehensive and inclusive education.

## Race and Gender

The inherent racial stratification within the existing gender classifications of society is another dimension of the repression of voices that should be examined within the classroom. According to Bell Hooks, “white women in this nation know that whiteness is a privileged category” (Hooks, 2000, p. 55). While women’s voices are less likely to be part of the classroom discussion, women of color receive an even smaller portion of the overall discussion and teacher time. Hooks states that “females of all ages acted as though concern for or rage at male domination or gender equality was all that was needed to make one a ‘feminist’” (Hooks, 2000, pp. 10-11), but the reality is that not all females are given the same opportunities. While females received less feedback, researcher Jacqueline Jordan Irvine noted “that black females were least likely to receive clear academic feedback” (Sadker, Sadker, & Zittleman, 2009, p. 73). According to research from the Pew Research Center, 56% of teachers said that topics related to racism and racial inequality come up in class on occasion.

Creating a multi-cultural and multi-voiced classroom means that we will transform education so that “the way we live, teach, and work can reflect our joy in cultural diversity”

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(Hooks, 1994, p. 34). Teaching students to appreciate the differences and similarities between cultures is fostered through a curriculum representative of the many stories of the world. However, a diverse curriculum is the first step in creating an environment where all voices are valued and heard. Teacher preparation programs focus on content area and pedagogical knowledge, while personal and cultural identity is not considered (Morton, Jackson, & Jackson, 2020, p. 113). Racial mismatch is a phenomenon common in American society where the race or ethnicity of the educator is inconsistent with the students they teach. This situation is linked to a negative impact on students of color worldwide (Morton et al., 2020, p. 115). They elaborate on this point by stating that “a large majority of preservice and current teachers are taught the basics of curriculum, assessments, and content-related material, with relatively little emphasis on behavior management, classroom culture, and relationship building” (Morton et al., 2020, p. 120). For teachers to be well-equipped to meet the needs of their students, these skills need to be in place.

Representation has improved, but it is still lacking, whether it is racial representation or other areas of diversity such as gender, disability, sexual orientation, or language (Jackson, 2023, p. 57). According to Jackson (2023), “In 2018, half (50%) of children’s books published depicted white people, and 27% depicted animals or other/inanimate objects” (p. 58). While this is an increase in the overall representation of Black/African American characters, there is still an issue with these characters being portrayed negatively or stereotypically (Jackson, 2023, p. 58). Due to these inequities, educators need to examine the texts incorporated and then evaluate how best to meet the needs of the students in their classroom. For educators, this is a moving target that can and should be evaluated each year as their students change every year. By giving students texts that reflected their personal experiences, they could “problematize issues related to power and

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privilege” (Osorio, 2018, p. 58). By seeing issues relevant to their background and culture, these students could contextualize and voice the issues they may have experienced. Morton emphasizes this point by stating that the educator’s cultural background “directly impacts the ability of *all* educators, when interacting with students with differing areas of diversity, to meet the needs of students at the highest levels of excellence (Morton et al., 2020, p. 122). This does not mean that a teacher cannot meet the needs of students. However, they should know that when they “make these seemingly small decisions to choose a piece of children’s literature that features diverse characters, they exercise culturally affirming teaching in a way that requires very little additional effort” (Jackson, 2023, p. 59).

## **Women, Sexuality, and LGBTQ+ Intersectionality**

Examining women’s voices cannot fully express the nuances and intersections of what it means to be a woman in today’s educational system. Therefore, it is imperative to acknowledge and consider students' voices concerning the intersection of sexuality and gender. Pomerantz and Raby (2017) found that “sexuality, disability, and mental health” arose as an important part of the conversation in their study (p. 125). They stated that “some schools were much more welcoming than others for LGBTQ+ students” (Pomerantz & Raby, 2017, p. 125).

When contemplating what texts to include in the classroom, teachers should consider voices “based not only on gender but also on race, ethnicity, the elderly, people with disabilities, gays and lesbians, and limited-English speakers” (Sadker, Sadker, & Zittleman, 2009, p. 100). By including a balanced group of voices, students realize that there is a diversity of voices in the local community and the world. Research conducted by the Pew Research Center showed that 29% of teachers said that topics around sexual orientation and gender identity come up in their classrooms sometimes. According to studies and LGBTQ+ research, students feel safer in high

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school than in middle school (Palkki & Caldwell, 2018). However, safety does not equate to feeling seen or heard. Their research shows that openly acknowledging that there are LGBTQ+ identities helps to create a safe and encouraging environment for students (Palkki & Caldwell, 2018). Educators fostering an open and welcoming environment for all students contribute to students feeling open to expressing their voices within the classroom.

Studies have also shown that “students have discussed the need for teachers to create inclusive curricula and ensure that LGBTQ students are represented and supported in the larger school community” (Bloomfield & Fisher, 2016, p. 9). The larger school community can be more inclusive by incorporating authors, historians, mathematicians, scientists, and artists who represent this community. GLSEN (the Gay, Lesbian Student Education Network) has put together a list of principles to encourage safety and inclusion. There has been resistance to these initiatives in communities where “conservative religious groups or right-wing political organizations might brand” these principles as “pro-gay” (Bloomfield & Fisher, 2016, p. 11). However, the ultimate goal is to foster an environment that is safe and welcoming and gives voice to all students.

Ultimately, “multicultural literature should be used as a tool to (a) promote or develop an appreciation for diversity, (b) honor students’ voices, (c) connect to students’ rich linguistic and cultural backgrounds, and (d) promote critical consciousness” (Osorio, 2018, p. 47). Through literature, the teacher shows the importance and admiration of diversity and gives power to every student’s voice.

## **Marginalized Women’s Voices: Equality and Power**

Among the authors highly touted for incorporation into the secondary English curriculum are authors who show a depth and range of the human experience. Toni Morrison, Jesmyn Ward,

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and Margaret Atwood all write stories with strong female and male characters that explore deep themes that can give the reader access to phenomenal writing and a diverse exploration of humanity.

Recently, there has been an increase in banning books that are not from the traditional canon. The books that are being questioned support the views or share the stories of authors and characters of marginalized voices, non-white or non-heterosexuals. Parents are concerned about the sexually explicit materials in some books and that specific stories will cause white students to hate themselves (Klein, 2022). While still trying to broaden the canon to give more representation to women and minorities (Applebee, 1993, p. 177), there is now a push to limit access to books.

In the metro Atlanta area, there has been a push from a small group of conservative parents to limit access to certain novels regardless of whether they are being taught in the classroom or are on the shelves in media centers in these public schools. People write the vast majority of these books of color or examine stories from the perspective of a minority or disenfranchised group. “Amina Borrero, a local parent, serves on a panel reviewing some of those challenges. She said the objections she has seen are often against books by authors of color. Others have noted that challenged books often cover race or gender issues” (Tagami, 2022). The overarching need within the curriculum is for all students to see and hear their voices represented in the classroom.

Research indicates that students who read insightful texts from their own experiences help them create a valuable institutional and affinity identity (Gee, 2000, pp. 3-7). Students’ exposure to texts that support their perspectives culturally or affirm their sexuality has been researched, but perspectives regarding women’s gender identity as a separate aspect of identity

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have been examined less frequently. It matters whose voice is telling the story and whose story they are telling.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The paradigmatic worldview for this study is that of a social constructivist. This study focuses on how to appeal to and empower women in the ELA classroom through the use of female protagonists and authors. Since both female characters and voices are presented in lower percentages, it is important to assess the perception by female students of the primarily male voices presented and then get their reaction to incorporating a more equity-based representation of gender. Social constructivism seeks understanding social relationships and how they might impact students (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 25).

Through this lens, the research is both something that can be observed and, since humans are social learners, something that is social in nature. This interpretive framework will guide this study by providing a lens through which to understand the utilization of the incorporation of female voices. Creswell & Poth (2018) state that the primary concepts of social constructivism focus on the researcher's aim to understand the individual experiences that form the participant's perspective . To this end, each student constructs their reality through their individualized perception. This framework impacts my research construct in that I will utilize observations, surveys, and interviews as the primary means of data collection. By conducting a qualitative case study that includes the female students enrolled in my AP Literature course, I will have access to their responses to the pre- and post-questions, Socratic Seminar discussions, and observation data. This will allow me to assess their reactions and responses to the changing voices within the classroom.

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The incorporation of more female voices means that female students will have the ability to learn about subjects that may be more intersectional in nature and help them to explore aspects of their personal identity. Moreover, the female students will be able to delve into the voices and internal dialogue that have predominated their education. Incorporating a more diverse group of voices in the classroom gives students the personal voice and advocacy to take ownership of their education (Middleton & Parks, 2014, p. 75).

Vygotsky determined that social interaction is fundamental to the development of individual identity. This theory is fundamental to how students interact, communicate, and learn in the school setting. According to Vygotsky, man is best explained through a historical examination of behavior within the context of society (Calvo Tuleski, p. 62). This theory can be seen as an explanation of the current status quo in education. While there is a mixture of students within a typical ELA class, the texts read are still predominantly male and Caucasian. This sociocultural theory that Vygotsky developed means that students learn from each other and their environment (1978). In this way, students learn and possibly accept hidden societal biases, and for actual change to happen, society must make changes (Calvo Tuleski, 2015, p. 63). Vygotsky noted that the more competitive a society is, the less likely it is to evolve due to human nature (Calvo Tuleski, 2015, p. 67).

The ideas espoused by Vygotsky and Sociocultural theory define culture and gender as a construct of society (Gray-Rosendale & Harootunian, 2003, p. 32). If culture and gender are ideas created by society, then the idea of how gender roles and cultural norms work is also shaped by humanity. Feminist theory applies to education when looking at the ELA classroom by balancing the readings so that there is an equal number of male and female authors. It is

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important in all classrooms that students see themselves represented and see role models of what they can attain.

Social constructivism seeks to look at the world we live in and the view of the people in that world (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 24). The students in the AP Literature ELA classroom come to the school and the course with a set of experiences. These experiences have taught the students to have a distinct set of beliefs about school, classes, English classes, and the voices and texts that are normally presented in the ELA classroom. While the teacher will provide guidance and a menu of choices for the responsive genres, the students will drive the research project through their personal choices in research topics and genre choice.

Glesne (2016) states that “interpretivism as a form of social science research grew out of the work of eighteenth-century Immanuel Kant” (p. 8). Kant’s work was expanded upon by many researchers and philosophers who believed that the world must be interpreted in order to be understood. This study will seek the participants’ understanding of incorporating female voices and how these choices impact their engagement, knowledge, and critical thinking.

### **The Feminist Lens**

Understanding and advocacy lead to change according to the theories that are fundamental within the feminist framework. By looking at the issues surrounding the role of female voices in Secondary English Education through this viewpoint, there can be a true analysis of where the issue stands in today’s classroom. Feminist studies provide a framework for understanding the continued lack of female voices in the classroom and what that means to the empowerment and self-identity of women. According to Bell Hooks, “Feminism is a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression” (Hooks, 2000, p. 1).

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Within the Secondary English classroom context, the Feminist Lens means examining the voices and how much each voice is represented. Furthermore, examining who amplifies or represses the voices within the classroom is important. Hooks stated that “As contemporary feminism progressed, as women realized that males were not the only group in our society who supported sexist thinking and behavior - that females could be sexist as well - an anti-male sentiment no longer shaped the movement's consciousness” (Hooks, 2000, p. 3). Finally, what hierarchy is being used to determine the voices that are heard or are repressed. The ultimate goal according to “the original radical foundations of contemporary feminism which called for reform as well as overall restructuring of society so that our nation would be fundamentally anti-sexist” (Hooks, 2000, p. 4). Within the movement to end sexism, conversations and meetings were held where “women took turns speaking to make sure everyone would be heard” (Hooks, 2000, p. 8).

Hooks wrote in *Teaching to Transgress* that historically, “the prevailing pedagogical model is authoritarian, hierarchical in a coercive and often dominating way, and certainly one where the professor's voice is the ‘privileged’ transmitter of knowledge” (Hooks, 1994, p. 85). To this end, teachers need to be aware and ensure that the diverse range of student voices within a classroom are being heard. Fostering an open, non-sexist dialogue can be done through: “a non-hierarchical model for discussion,” which will give “every woman a chance to speak” (Hooks, 2000, p. 8).

### **Identity as an Analytic Lens**

The identity of an individual is dependent on their personal view of themselves within the context of the classroom and school that the student attends (Gee, 2000, p.3). This institutional identity is partially dependent on external forces outside of the student's control, including factors such as curriculum, in order for this identity to form and then later be validated (Gee,

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2000, p. 5). Personal identity, according to James Gee, also includes an affinity aspect. The affinity identity aspect is dependent upon sharing or participating in an activity (Gee, 2000, p. 7). This affinity identity can be formed within a class or peer group when students read, analyze, and share perspectives on a shared text.

Bell Hooks stated, "Identity politics emerge from the struggles of oppressed or exploited groups to have a standpoint on which to critique dominant structures, a position that gives purpose and meaning to struggle" (Hooks, 1994, p.89). By examining identity within the curriculum and texts within a course, individuals will learn about identities beyond their own experience. According to Gee (2000), in modern society, people are able to choose their identity and are not restricted to the previous establishments that dictated these choices. While the pre-modern era may have restricted the identity that an individual could create, there is still a need for individual identities to be recognized by others and expressed through education and conversation.

## **Gender Roles, Inequality, and Dynamics**

Stereotypical gender roles have been shown to still be pervasive in the classroom. Rebecca Alber (2017) stated that "by the time students are in seventh and eighth grade, the female students are much quieter and less outspoken than they were in primary grades." Gender-specific ways of behaving are taught to students in their classes and at a young age. For instance, "male-female differences are reinforced every time a teacher uses gender to group or line up students or handles misbehavior differently" (Liu, 2006, p. 425). Meanwhile, there is still a significant wage gap and separation of careers by gender. Alber (2017) noted, "Education is a vital tool in helping close this wage gap." Women are still less likely to be promoted to leadership roles, hold managerial positions, or serve as board members (Wong, Shi, & Yeung,

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2023). The same study showed that “girls obtained better school grades and subjective ratings by teachers,” while “boys are also more likely to have poorer conduct, drop out, and be expelled” (Wong et al., 2023, p. 2). Despite girls outperforming boys in school, it is notable that there is not only a wage gap but also that males are more likely to be promoted and succeed in the workplace.

### **Human Experience: Resilience, Empathy, Emotions**

Within the context of the texts that are read in the Secondary English classroom, there are many themes that explore the human experience, including the human capacity for resilience, empathy, and emotional reactions. Within this topic, there are widely varying expectations for girls and boys. “When researchers asked middle school girls and boys to recall” the emotions that they experienced, “most males denied experiencing” uncomfortable emotions like fear, sadness, disgust, or guilt (Sadker, Sadker, & Zittleman, 2009, p.130); the irony is that so many texts reinforce the male stereotype of not expressing emotions which further reinforces their inability to understand how to process human experiences involving emotions. Sadker et al. (2009) say that “while parents encourage empathy in daughters, they fear that caring boys may be seen as too gentle (p.131). The lack of emotional resilience and empathy seen in boys can be seen as a factor in the imbalance in the classroom since the girls are expected to be caring and well-behaved. In contrast, the boys have more behavioral issues. Researchers have stated that parents, schools, and educators can help “in developing such empathy and nurturing skills in boys (Sadker et al., 2009, p.131).

### **Societal Issues: Stereotypes, Expectations**

Societal expectations and stereotypes can be seen as closely related since expectations from parents, teachers, and society add to the ongoing nature of stereotypes. Geneva Gay (2018)

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points out that “expectations are manifestations of beliefs or assumptions” (Gay, 2018, p. 69). As such, these interconnected beliefs determine the rules that govern one’s reactions and beliefs and the characteristics that contribute to stereotypes. Gay (2018) went on to say that “negative beliefs about students of color... generate low expectations for their personal and academic performance” (Gay, 2018, p. 69).

Whether a student is perceived positively or negatively can greatly impact their overall education and the expectations of that student. Those who are seen in a negative light are often disadvantaged and are then excluded “from participation in substantive academic interactions” (Gay, 2018, p. 70). Among the factors determining the number of positive academic interactions a student has is gender, ethnicity, language, racial identity, and social class. While female students receive higher marks, they receive fewer positive interactions with teachers. The correlation between achievement and positive interactions is “particularly troubling because of the overrepresentation of Latino Americans, African Americans, and Native Americans in low-track curriculum options and low-status classes” (p.73).

## **Character Exploration, Literature, and Role Models**

Studies have shown the importance of representation in the texts utilized in the classroom. According to Kaitlyn Jackson, by “choosing diverse books in which diversity is not the main point, [educators] tell their students whose identities are mirrored in the texts that they matter here” (Jackson, 2023, p. 55). Through equal representation, students are more likely to find authors and characters in the literature they are reading that they can relate to and possibly role models of the possibilities available to them in the world. In addition, “books are typically one of the few ways [students] can experience diversity” (Jackson, 2023, p. 56). These texts help educators approach difficult subjects and show students that there are biases and discriminations

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in the world that need to be addressed. In addition to adding diversity to the texts, students are being shown that there are people who look like them who are “valid and good” (Jackson, 2023, p. 56). The importance of the representation goes beyond gender or skin color and includes the importance of inclusion with topics regarding sexuality or special needs,

### **Chapter 2 Summary**

A fundamental gap exists within the representation of diverse voices in the public educational curriculum. Women’s experiences and voices have been marginalized over the historical course of education in the United States. This gap continues today due to a reliance of many educators to focus on the works that have been canonized by the academic community. Additionally, many educators are unaware that they are focusing on male voices in their curriculum and within the classroom dynamics until they see the data.

By filling this educational gap with a broad range of voices, students will see themselves reflected in the curriculum and be exposed to a much more diverse and wider range of voices and experiences from around the world. Incorporating diverse voices helps to bridge gaps and lend credence to the individual as a voice within the classroom setting.

## CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

### **Introduction to Chapter 3**

As an educator, I believe humans should serve and empower each other. Through my service as an educator, I have seen how education can empower students to achieve. Educational experiences are filled with impactful moments of communication between teachers and students. Examining the influence of specific texts on the culture and perspectives of the females in the AP Literature classroom will enable the researcher to examine the relationship between texts and empowerment. This study examines how different texts shape the female student's view of their voice in the realm of education and the educational canon of literature.

This study aims to empower voices that may have been silenced or ignored through a methodology that reveals the impact of female voices within the classroom. Facilitating conversation allows females to voice their experiences and gives this study a feminine perspective. The researcher will analyze the data and what it might mean for women and education. Women “depend on close, intimate friendships,” and conversations in small focus groups will encourage participation (Sadker et al., 2009, p. 154).

The research questions used for this study are as follows:

1. How does reading female voices in the curriculum inform the female student's perceptions of themselves and the world around them?
2. How does reading female voices contribute to girls' conception of gender identity?
3. How does positioning the inclusion of female voices as an asset in learning instead of a deficit in curriculum impact female students' perspectives of themselves as learners?

### **Methodology and Research Design**

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The teacher implemented a single case study approach in which the teacher used a fixed number of students as participants in the case study. A case study is appropriate for this study due to the unique nature of this research. The teacher examined the curriculum used within a classroom to see if changing the texts used affects the female students within the classroom (Stake, 1995, p. 1). To examine the curriculum and gain insight into its impact on the students, a case study is the most effective method (Stake, 1995, p. 3). Utilizing a case study enabled the researcher to maximize the knowledge gained from the students who participated (Stake, 1995, p. 4). The real benefit of the case study is the depth of information that can be gained rather than more generalized information (Stake, 1995, p. 8).

### **Data Collection**

Initially, all students who agreed to participate were given a pre-study survey. This questionnaire included ten questions that ranged from easy questions like What is your name and What is your age, to more in-depth questions about their experiences reading in the past. The questions were formulated to allow the researcher to ascertain how much reading the participants have done in the past and what types of books, authors, and characters they have read. Finally, the last couple of questions addressed specific experiences with female authors and characters and how classroom discussions impact their experiences with literature (Appendix A). For the purpose of data collection, it was essential to understand the individual experiences of the students and how they might inform the first two research questions. Specifically, did the students have a preconceived understanding of how reading female voices in the curriculum impacted their perspective, and did their previous experiences reading female voices contribute to their conception of gender identity?

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The interviews were conducted in one of two small group discussions. These discussions were in the style of a Socratic Seminar and took place immediately after the students had read the chosen text, *The Yellow Wall-paper*. There were two small group discussions or Socratic Seminar sessions and two individual question sessions, one for the pre-study questions and one for the post-study questions. Through the discussion groups, an in-depth understanding was gained regarding the student's backgrounds and experiences in the classroom and with female voices in the classroom. Participants were forthright in sharing their opinions and understandings of the impact of curriculum and classroom dynamics on their perceptions of themselves and the world around them. Furthermore, the students directly discussed their perception of the curriculum, how it affects their conception of gender identity, and how the inclusion of female voices has impacted their perspectives of themselves as learners.

Follow-up interviews were conducted individually and as needed to clarify responses.

There were seven post-study questions. Questions focused on what stories and characters stood out from the course, including the text used for data collection. Finally, the last several questions focused on students' understanding of representations of female voices in the classroom, what they may have learned from the study, and whether their understanding of the inclusion of female stories had changed.

The discourse obtained during group and small group interviews was especially powerful, given the influential nature of group meaning-making during conversation. The pre-study questions (Appendix A: Interview Questions) were conducted in the teacher's classroom during the early phase of data collection. Participants were invited to participate in one of two interview sessions. After reading the chosen text, students participated in the group discussion or Socratic Seminar to gauge the impact of the text (Appendix B: Observation Protocol). The discourse of

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the Socratic Seminars and the group interviews are a powerful means for assessing the meaning-making that happened during the collaboration of the discussions.

In the data analysis, the researcher examined the perspectives that arise as students grapple with their understanding of gender and female identities within the ELA classroom. Each student was assigned a pseudonym to eliminate any possibility of their identity being shared. The researcher then analyzed the transcriptions of the interviews and the Socratic Seminars and used an axial, ATLAS.ti, coding to look for ways to categorize and identify themes. The researcher then looked for common trends and themes with the different data sources to ensure triangulation (multiple methods and multiple participants). The focus was then on the more prominent themes so the researcher could gain a deeper and more analytical understanding of the topic. The trends and themes were then examined about the overarching research questions and how they informed the study in regard to participants' understanding of curriculum choices, female voices and characters, and gender identity.

### **Research Site, Target Population, Sampling Method, and Related Procedures**

The study was conducted in a twelfth-grade English classroom at a high school in a small city in the southeastern United States. The high school has approximately 2000 students, and the ethnic breakdown is as follows: 61.4% White, 18.4% Latino, 12.3% Black, 4.8% Two or More Races, 2.7% Asian, .2% American Indian/ Alaska Native, and .2% Native Hawaiian/ Pacific Islander. The gender breakdown of the school is 52% male and 48% female. The total economically disadvantaged is 21%, the Free Lunch Program is 18%, and the Reduced Lunch Program is 3%.

The students who participated were in one of the researcher's two AP Literature courses. These courses are planned like a college freshman overview English course, and students that

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enroll have chosen to take this course, which is known for being more rigorous than Advanced Composition or Honors Advanced Composition. For this reason, there is a strong focus on reading from a broad range of authors and then discussing and writing analytically about the themes and motifs in the readings. My classroom sizes range from 24-32 students.

### **Consent**

The teacher sent home consent forms with the students for the parents/ guardians. The teacher then emailed parents to let them know the consent form was being brought home. Of the students who return the forms and are willing to participate, the teacher will choose several to interview in addition to participating in the classroom curriculum. The students chosen to participate will be female so that they can give feedback on their opinions of the curriculum. Additionally, I set aside time to call the parents/guardians of the interviewees to clarify any information and allow them time to ask questions or voice concerns. While none of the parents/guardians felt the need to meet, I felt this step is important in an era when there has been an increase in parents and the public questioning curriculum and books being utilized in the classroom.

### **Procedures**

The researcher requested and obtained permission to conduct the study from the district's Office of Research Services and from Kennesaw State University's Institutional Review Board. Data from the pre-study questionnaire, Socratic Seminars, and post-study questionnaire were transcribed and then uploaded to ATLAS.ti to identify trends and subjects of interest related to the overall scope of the study.

### **Day One**

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After turning in the consent forms, all participants completed the pre-study questionnaire (Appendix A). The questionnaire was then transcribed and uploaded to ATLAS.ti. All participants were then given a copy of *The Yellow Wall-paper* to read and annotate.

### **Day Two – Three**

Students were given time to read and annotate their copy of *The Yellow Wall-paper*. Students were asked to attend the Socratic Seminar ready to discuss the story and share their thoughts and perceptions of the text.

### **Day Four**

Students attended and participated in one of two Socratic Seminar sessions. During these sessions, students shared their thoughts and opinions of the text, its themes and characters, and how it relates to the world today.

### **Day Five**

Students were given the post-study questionnaire to answer and return to the researcher.

### **Location**

It was preferable for the Socratic Seminar, pre and post-question interviews to take place in the classroom setting of the participants. However, online video conversations via a secure platform would have been utilized if necessary. The school classroom setting was ideal since it is a place where the participants are familiar with their surroundings.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis focused on the themes that developed during the pre-and post-questions and the Socratic Seminars. The researcher then looked at the interpretations within the identified categories of information. The text taught was *The Yellow Wall-paper* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, and the unit spanned about two weeks. To set up routines and establish a rapport with

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the students and classes, this was one of the last units during the second semester of the school year, and the unit started in April of 2023. The school year in this district starts classes on the 1st of August, giving the students and teacher time to adjust to the classroom dynamic. Throughout this unit, students explored gender identities and beliefs while learning about historical and personal identities and beliefs. The hope was that students would participate in defining their personal identity ideology while analyzing and deconstructing readings (Dodge & Whaley, 1993, p. 32.). Students then participated in Socratic Seminars, which covered topics of gender and equality in society and the classroom.

The teacher took detailed notes during the discussions and recorded them. The researcher also conducted interviews before and after the unit to garner student thoughts and opinions. The teacher's role was to record the data without inserting themselves into the data; therefore, my role was to ask questions and learn more about the students, their knowledge, and their understanding of gender and gender identities. The interviews were informal and conversational.

ATLAS.ti software was utilized to code and analyze the data. ATLAS.ti enabled me to easily see the trends in themes and topics that occurred in the pre-questions, Socratic Seminars, and post-questions. Afterward, I merged this data to look at the prevalent themes within the different areas of the study.

### **Chapter 3 Summary**

A need exists for studies that examine female voices in Secondary Education, specifically how to empower female voices through the incorporation of female authors, characters, and interests. This qualitative study focused on the perceptions that the participants have of the use of female voices and characters in the curriculum. Using a qualitative approach, the participants' experiences, thoughts, and perceptions will be gathered to inform the impactfulness of the study.

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By using a qualitative study format that focuses on the individual, the researcher was able to get a deeper understanding of the thoughts and perceptions of the participants.

## CHAPTER 4: DATA ANALYSIS & RESULTS

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to describe the understandings that the female students in the secondary English classroom had about female voices in the classroom and to describe how their educational beliefs and understandings impacted their view of literacies with respect to female empowerment through the curriculum. In choosing to look at the effect that the voices of female authors and characters have on the empowerment of the voice of the female student, I first had to examine my positionality and relationship to power. As a female teacher and researcher, I entered this study aware of my gender-based epistemology including the ideology of teaching as a women's profession (Schwager, 1987, p. 336). Therefore, this study has been constructed through the feminist lens, as outlined in chapter two. As both a female student and teacher, I felt that I had a clear understanding of my positionality and the voices of the female students in my suburban high school setting.

### **Description of the Sample**

Due to my interest in observing how female students are impacted by female authors and characters, purposeful sampling was used to ensure that the research participants could respond to the research questions from a position of experience. Participants were students in the 12th-grade Advanced Placement Literature course taught by the researcher. This increased the likelihood that the research participants could offer more insight and a more in-depth account of their experiences over the course of their entire years in the high school classroom.

Within the population of female students in the researcher's classes, thirty-seven students met the criteria. These students were asked if they would be interested in participating. The thirty-one who responded in the affirmative were then given consent documents. Because this

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study focuses on empowering female voices, I wanted to include as many of the students in the study who wanted to participate as possible. Of the thirty-one students, all chose to read the assigned novella *The Yellow Wall-paper* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman and then complete the questionnaires and attend the group discussions. My hope was that including a more significant number of participants would give me a broader and deeper understanding of what female students are seeing and experiencing in the classroom. After I received the forms back from the participants, I scanned and retained a copy of each consent form. Each research participant was then assigned a number and later given an alias in order to protect their identity.

The participants were all students in my two senior-level AP English Literature courses. Of the thirty-one participants, all were in twelfth grade and about to graduate, except for one student who was a junior in a senior-level course. Furthermore, the majority of the participants were 18 at the time of the study, with the exception of six who were still 17 years old. Finally, when looking at ethnicity, 22 participants were White, two were Latina, three were Asian, two were Black, and one was both Black and White (see Table 1). Broken down by percentage, this meant that 70.9% were White, 6% were Latina, 9.6% were Asian, 6% were Black, and 3% identified as Black and White.

**Table 1**

*Table of Participants*

Alias	Age	Ethnicity	Grade
Murphy	18	White	12
Gina	17	White	12
Callie	18	White	12
Maud	18	Black	12
Anna	18	White	12
Kelly	18	White	12
Mallory	18	White	12
Layne	18	White	12

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Amber	18	Latina	12
Lisa	18	White	12
Naya	18	Asian	12
Nell	17	Black	11
Stacie	18	White	12
Polly	18	White	12
Hattie	18	White	12
Kirby	17	White	12
Stephanie	18	White	12
Suzanne	18	White	12
Pam	17	White	12
Ellie	18	White	12
Bella	18	Latina	12
Bailey	18	White	12
Michelle	17	White	12
Greta	18	White	12
Becky	18	White, Black	12
Sally	18	Asian	12
Heather	18	Asian	12
Elizabeth	18	White	12
Teresa	17	White	12
Lily	18	White	12

### Summary of the Results

This qualitative study focused on the personal experiences of female students in the secondary English classroom with the hopes of understanding those experiences and perceptions, particularly regarding the inclusion of female authors, female characters, and female voices in the curriculum and in the classroom. The following research questions guided this study:

- (a) How does reading female voices in the curriculum inform the female student's perceptions of themselves and the world around them?
- (b) How does reading female voices contribute to girls' conception of gender identity?
- (c) How does positioning the inclusion of female voices as an asset in learning instead of a deficit in curriculum impact female students' perspectives of themselves as learners?

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This chapter provides an overview of the data I analyzed and an explanation of the themes created from the data collected from the questionnaires and Socratic discussions of the text. The findings in this chapter are based on the analysis of the primary data sources: pre-study questions, two semi-structured discussions, and post-study questions. The research participants were individually given the pre-study questions to answer, the two Socratic-style discussions were conducted as a group in the classroom setting, and the post-study questions were again given to participants individually. The purpose of the pre-study questions was to gather background on the participants and their previous experiences. The discussion sessions allowed participants to respond specifically to the text they read and expound on their individual and collective experiences in the classroom and high school setting. After participating in the group discussions, the post-study questions allowed students to share their overall experience in the study and expand on their understanding of female voices in the classroom.

### **Detailed Analysis**

There were some noticeable trends in the pre-and post-surveys, as well as the discussions. Within the pre-study questions, several themes stood out and showed the participants' perspectives. Students repeatedly mentioned topics related to canonized literature and the American Dream, patriarchy and social hierarchy, and diversity and representation.

Initially, many of the responses focused on the literature that students have seen in the past and the themes and topics that those texts revealed. Anna shared that “the commonality between many texts is their significance in shaping American and English Literature.” This reveals participant awareness that the literature studied is primarily rooted in Western culture. Mallory added that many texts “are centered around the same themes, such as family and the American Dream, and these texts are less appealing to me.” This comment supports the idea that girls are

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affected by the chosen texts. Mallory stated that “texts that have deeper themes” are more appealing. Naya shared that so many of the texts that they have read in the past “acknowledge the idea of the American Dream” and “were written by men.” While Nell added that several texts read in AP Literature were “interesting and intriguing” because they dealt with “many real-world topics.” Novels that participants mentioned that stood out as not fitting the typical mold were *Oryx and Crake*, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, *Dracula*, and *All the Light We Cannot See*. It is interesting to note that while several of these are written by men, they do not focus solely on the men and the male voices. Each of these works either pushes against the typical Western canon, shares female perspectives, or satirically examines society and societal rules.

The next notable trend from the pre-survey was responses focused on the pervasiveness of the texts that support the patriarchy, social hierarchy, and lack of balanced media representation. Participants were well-versed in the need for a more balanced representation of society. Sally stated that many of the texts she read “mostly pertained to family struggle, men’s struggle, sexism,” and when there were female characters, they were often “disrespected and oppressed.” At the same time, Heather thought that many of the female characters stood out because of the unfair treatment they received. Overall, the participants shared that the texts that they had read in the past did not always focus on topics that were important to women. Teresa felt that many of the typical texts she has read tried “to skirt around and not to mention or shed light on sensitive topics.” These sensitive topics were often focused on topics that are important to women. Teresa went on to state, “Women characters are not important in the stories, and if they are written in, they are dependent, weak, oppressed, and disposable.” Meanwhile, Maud pointed out that she does not “remember there being a lot of female authors.” This substantiates the participant's pre-

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study feelings that they were not seeing many female authors, and if there were some, they could not remember who the authors were.

Hattie stated that she has noticed “that the portrayal in media and literature” of some female characters made her realize the importance of how people are portrayed “because harmful images promote stereotypes.” This perspective was shared by Bailey, who pointed out that while literature and texts have evolved, there is still a “majority and minority. If you are in the minority, you get looked down upon”.

Finally, the pre-surveys revealed that many of the participants saw a need for more diversity. The students specifically mentioned the need for more texts dealing with civil rights, LGBTQ+ topics, and female representation. Elizabeth mentioned that prior to taking AP Literature, there had not been many “controversial topics such as civil rights and personal identity or LGBTQ.” The participants that did recall female authors mentioned reading Margaret Atwood, Laure Halse Anderson, and Emily Dickinson but also mentioned that they felt that many of the female characters were flat, like Linda Loman from *Death of a Salesman*, or exaggerated evil, like Lady Macbeth. Anna pointed out that previous class discussions in AP Literature had shown her the “importance of differentiation” and reading a diverse range of literature.

Within the discussion transcripts, four categories and 11 themes encapsulated the overall understanding that the participants took away from their experiences before, during, and after the study (see Figure 1). Afterward, I organized the themes based on the overarching category to which they correlated. The data was then organized into the following four categories: gender, human experiences, societal issues, and character. Within each section, I have given definitions for each theme. Finally, within each discussion section, there are examples from the data, primarily quotes from the discussion groups.

**Figure 1**

*Categories and Themes Matrix*

<b>Category</b>	<b>Theme(s)</b>		
<b>Gender</b>	<b>Gender Roles:</b> The role or behavior considered to be appropriate to a particular gender as determined by prevailing cultural norms.	<b>Gender Inequality:</b> Discrimination on the basis of sex or gender causing one sex or gender to be routinely privileged or prioritized over another.	<b>Gender Dynamics:</b> The relationships and interactions between and among people based on gender.
<b>Human Experience</b>	<b>Resilience:</b> The ability to <b>successfully</b> adapt to difficult or challenging life experiences.	<b>Empathy:</b> The complex capability enabling individuals to understand and feel the emotional states of others, resulting in compassionate behavior.	<b>Emotions:</b> The reaction to experiences, behaviors, and physiological elements.
<b>Societal Issues</b>	<b>Stereotype:</b> The characteristics that society instinctively attributes to groups of people to classify them according to age, weight, occupation, skin color, gender, etc.		<b>Societal Expectations:</b> The rules that govern one's reactions and beliefs that are deemed acceptable by society.
<b>Character</b>	<b>Character Exploration:</b> An exploration of the traits, personality, and characteristics of a character within a story.	<b>Literature:</b> A person, figure, inanimate object, or animal that drives the story forward.	<b>Role Model:</b> A character that readers look to as a good example.

***Gender***

The students' experiences regarding gender experiences in the classroom fell into three themes that reflected the students' beliefs and feelings about their voices in the classroom: (a) gender roles, (b) gender inequality, and (c) gender dynamics.

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**Gender Roles.** Overall, the participants were easily able to voice their perceptions and concerns regarding gender roles within the classroom, whether they pertained to student behavior or incorporated female authors in the classroom. According to one of the participants, Gina, “You can definitely sense a difference in a story written by a woman. They portray their female characters as stronger and more independent in comparison to how a male would portray them”. The participants in this study overall agreed that there was a marked difference in how female authors and male authors portrayed women. Anna further elaborated that “the various texts and characters read... have mainly depicted women as at the whim of the men in their life – most often by societal indoctrination”. Layne took Anna’s comment one step further and stated, “Many of the texts written by male authors that included female characters seemed to display a lack of compassion for their actions as compared to the texts written by female authors.” The students in this study openly discussed what they described as a disparity when examining the depth with which many authors’ depicted women. However, the characters are not always balanced, which should be considered when examining the voices that are included. Polly further added to the discussion that the “majority of the female written texts portray women in a completely different light than male written stories, which portray women as dependent and submissive.” While younger girls have strong-willed characters to admire like Heidi, Junie B. Jones, or Jo March, by adolescence the classic characters are Juliet, Ophelia, and Lady Macbeth.

Several of the participants felt that the idea of women as being dependent and/or submissive correlated with the time period in which these were written. For instance, Stephanie stated, "A lot of the women, like Linda Loman and Rose Maxson, are submissive to their husbands [because] they have authority over them and do not appreciate... them. Marie-Laure is written as a helpless girl. Lady Macbeth is evil.” While the participants saw that the time period

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in which a text was written or took place made a difference, they still saw females being written in the framework of needing help or being passive more often than was called for by the plot.

When the participants read and responded to *The Yellow Wall-paper*, they were able to draw parallels between the main character, known as The Woman, and her plight in the text and the clear plot by her family to keep the woman and her situation contained and controlled. This is the case with The Woman in *The Yellow Wall-paper*, and the participants could see clearly that her lack of power was making her mental and physical health worse. Amber responded, “There is something to be said about how there are efforts to hide what is wrong with her and lock her in her room, and she just sits in the window and says that if John would just let her go downstairs.” This response puts the woman in the position of internalizing her situation more and more and slowly retreating into herself and the innermost parts of her mind instead of turning to her family for support and help. The participants understood and yet struggled with the gender roles of the time period. Amber elaborated that she thought that an overarching theme is “how women are not allowed to have things wrong with them. They have to be the caretaker; they have to be the one who does everything.” Several participants could see that the woman in *The Yellow Wall-paper* was impacted by stereotypical gender roles and that the husband, John, was trying to fulfill his love and duty to his wife by protecting her from her hysteria.

Layne commented that this gender role is furthered by “women’s need to people-please.” Amber noted that while the woman was being held prisoner in her room, she still “mentions that... she is supposed to be doing more, but she cannot, and she gets frustrated”. Her inability to make decisions for herself is consistently shown to the reader. Amber related this to women today, stating she thinks this is “something that’s still going on.” Women can feel trapped by their gender defined roles while worrying that they need to do more and help more.

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Callie elaborated on this power struggle, stating that this expectation of girls as caretakers starts very early and that “in elementary school [teachers] would always put the bad kids or the bad boys with the well-behaving girl to try to fix them.” This further defines girls in the mother or caretaker role by having elementary-aged girls put in charge of their peers and expected to help control their behavior.

Murphy was able to relate the relationships in *The Yellow Wall-paper* to her grandparents, stating, “It reminded me of the dynamic of my grandparents.” She went on to say that her grandmother has complained that her grandfather does not listen to her, and Murphy believes that it is because “he does not care.” She stated that when she was younger, she did not understand what was going on, but in retrospect, she can see that her “grandpa [is] kinda the worst to my grandma.” While society can be seen as drastically changing since *The Yellow Wall-paper* was published in 1892, there are elements that are very relatable to the overall society and the women of today. For women to gain power and equity, they are still working within the confines of prescriptive feminine ideals.

**Gender Inequality.** According to Greta, “texts by women usually question gender norms and roles and work towards equality.” Other participants felt that works read by a female author were more complex in general. This idea was backed up by the participants in the study. Becky stated, “Women write texts that are really complex; I feel I can understand female perspectives more” after reading a text authored by a woman. Heather elaborated that the “stories written by women often include or describe the female experience in society, and they often face oppression, disadvantages, or unfair treatment.” This contrasts with the female characters written by men. Heather points out that many female characters written by men are one-dimensional and stereotypical. Characters like Rose Maxson from August Wilson’s *Fences* and

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Linda Loman from Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* are housewives whose lives are focused on the home. Their life is in support of the man who goes out into the world and earns a paycheck. Bailey pointed out that her understanding of female characters has "expanded based on the powerful female leads and makes female characters seem more significant." This statement shows the importance of students seeing themselves reflected in the literature taught in the classroom. Therefore, it is important for educators to look at the books and other texts that they are incorporating into their curriculum and look for a diverse range of texts.

Furthermore, equity within the ELA classroom involves who is participating. Greta added that after our group "discussion, [she] realized all females feel overpowered by males in the classroom." Greta's observation shows that the inequality moves beyond the texts and into the overall dynamics of the classroom. Mallory's feeling was that her "voice is taken more seriously in discussion with other female students than in a mixed environment where male students often have the floor."

Anna stated, "Although female voices are more common in my classroom this year, the male voices that are present seem to take a sense of empowerment that has been persistent in the media and the course of my life." Many of the participants had a realization that the representation of male voices throughout their education and their lives had been an unwavering theme. Kelly perhaps summed up the overall sentiment during this part of the discussion best when she stated: "I realize now that my voice is important to making these connections in a group discussion setting and vouch for more books written by women or involving women's experiences." Several of the participants felt that an enormous part of overcoming the gender inequality that exists within the texts that are taught is to also give the female students a forum to speak about how gender issues show up in the classroom. Kelly perhaps summed up this part of

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the discussion best when she stated: “I realize now that my voice is important to making these connections in a group discussion setting and vouch for more books written by women or involving women’s experiences.” Several of the participants felt that an enormous part of overcoming the gender inequality that exists within the texts that are taught is to also give the female students a forum to speak about how gender issues show up in the classroom.

When discussing the different texts that the participants read, many instances of gender inequality were pointed out. According to Gina, “In *The Importance of Being Earnest* where one of the women in the story is not allowed to have her ‘silly, little opinions’ and that they have silly, little emotions.” While Oscar Wilde’s *The Importance of Being Earnest* was written to satirize the overall stiff and formal society of Victorian-era England, part of that ridicule focuses on gender, gender roles, and the inequality between the genders. So, while Wilde seems to diminish the women’s opinions, there are also many instances where Wilde makes fun of the role of the Victorian male. Wilde’s social commentary was quickly picked up by the students in the group, with several of the students commenting that this play should stay in the course curriculum.

Callie pointed out that in *The Yellow Wall-paper*, the husband, John, will say that he is making decisions that affect The Woman but will spin it as him doing this “for the sake of you, for the sake of me, for the sake of the child.” John’s decisions are made solely by John and for the woman because of the inequality that is the basis of their relationship. Callie went on to state that while there may be an element of the woman being depressed due to postpartum issues, she did not think that that was the only issue since the woman “does not talk about the baby a lot in a motherly way.” The question for the participants was the deeply rooted inequality that was affecting the woman and causing her depression due to an overall lack of power over her own

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life. So, while this work is over 130 years old, the participants saw value in examining the story and how it applies to the world today.

Gina pointed out that to this day, we live in a society where if a woman goes to the doctor for health issues, “the doctor will sometimes chalk it up to... your period” instead of looking more deeply at the root cause of the ailment. Layne felt that this inequality stretches to the doctor in *The Yellow Wall-paper* as well as doctors today because women’s health can be more difficult to diagnose. Layne stated that not only is “endometriosis incredibly difficult to diagnose, but there are also many mental disorders that make it difficult for women to get a diagnosis.” These differences in treatment were pointed out as a source of ongoing inequity between men and women.

This inequality carries over into the secondary classroom, where boisterous behavior from the male students is more likely to be dismissed than the same behavior from the female students. According to Murphy, when boys act rambunctious, the teacher will dismiss it as “they are just being boys,” but the “second that girls get rowdy, the teacher is upset.” Murphy elaborated that “guys get a free pass” for many of their ongoing classroom behaviors. Amber agreed with this sentiment, adding, “But if it was girls who did that, or even if it was in a different class with a different teacher, it would have been nipped in the bud so fast.” The idea that the male students are allowed to be more boisterous and rambunctious was agreed upon within the discussion group. Participants felt that some teachers were more likely to shut down the males than others, but most teachers allowed more disruptive behaviors from the male students.

The participants also noted that within their peer group, there is a difference in how high-achieving students are treated. Callie stated, “You are considered a try-hard if you are smart, but

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with a guy, it is that he cares so much about his academics, and he is going somewhere.

Moreover, if a girl is smart, she is a know-it-all.” This comment resonated with Gina, a member of the school’s STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) program.

According to Gina, “It is the same in the STEM program, or look at this class. I feel like there are very few men in this class, but if there were more, I do not know if it would be the same situation.” The insinuation is that the equality the participants felt existed in the researcher’s classroom was potentially due to a larger number of females than males within the class.

Overwhelmingly, the participants noted that it was much easier to be taken seriously and to voice their opinions in a classroom that was not predominantly male. Lisa added, “That is something I see a lot too. When females voice their opinion, it is ‘Oh, what did someone else say?’ When males say it, it is the law. It is what they say.” The participants were able to recall specific situations where their voices were ignored in favor of seeking the opinion of a male student.

According to Murphy, “I was drum major last year and this year and last year I had a partner [drum major] who was a girl and this year I have a partner who is a boy. Last year, I got so much more respect even though I had less experience than I do this year because this year, the other drum major was a guy, and everyone was literally ballistic over him.” According to Murphy, her authority was not questioned last year when both of the drum majors were female, however, this year her authority has been questioned when she has to give orders. Murphy stated that she would have to tell the other students, “This is what I am telling you to do.” This contradiction was seen by Amber, who stated that “when it is a woman in a leadership position, you have a whole extra thing to do.” She believes that women must do more to prove themselves as a leader. She elaborated that she is “in a position now where I am president of something, and there is a male vice-president underneath me and lots of times people will go to the vice-president instead

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of me, or I will get questions from the male-presenting officers that were not asked to the rest of the group. Alternatively, anytime I try to use my authority to get something done, it is immediately... 'power hungry or bossy, annoying' even if it is something like sitting on the stage and giving an announcement." Murphy piggybacked on this, stating that "When guys say something, they are considered powerful and commanding and confident, but girls are seen as like, pardon my French, bitchy and bossy." Murphy reiterated that women in charge are considered "annoying and bossy" which has caused her to be "cognizant of the fact that [she has] to balance being strong while not being too strong and people losing respect completely." This was something that many of the students felt that a male would not have to think about at all.

Gina felt this dichotomy was evident in other clubs and organizations within the school. According to Gina, women are more likely to seek leadership roles, while males in leadership roles are less likely to do the necessary work. As an officer in the school's Student Government Association, Gina noted that "almost everyone in a leadership position or on the executive board who does anything is female." If there is an inequity within that organization, it is due to a lack of male members.

The participants also pointed out that the double standard of rules and how they apply to males versus females shows up in the school dress code and how the clothing of the females is much more closely monitored than the clothing of the boys. There is a dichotomy between what males and females can wear. According to Stacie, "Girls have a wide variety of things that we can wear, but guys just wear a shirt and pants every day, but if we wear a t-shirt and sweats and do not switch it up, then we are sloppy or lazy." This disparity extends to the girls being treated like they are unclean if they do not dress in cute clothes. Layne said that "people act like women do not wash their clothing. There is this idea that if you wear the same thing twice within a one-

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week radius of each other, then it is dirty and ‘do you not own a washer and dryer’!” Callie pointed out that “girls wash their clothes... more than guys do” while the perception is that you are dirty if you dress down too often.

Stacie and Kelly pointed out that there is also a polarity within sports. Kelly shared, "I feel even with sports in general, the recruiting process and expectations between guys and girls is completely different." Kelly went on to share that the different expectations included social media, "I feel this could go for any sport, it was no posting anything with any cussing in it, be careful what you post, nothing that insinuates that you are drinking or smoking or doing drugs but then guys will post while in their jerseys videos of them cussing the other team out and they have like eighty offers [to play college sports] for girls, like for softball, the first thing that a coach is going to say is go to your social media and clear it out because you do not want any bad reputations or anything." The participants playing sports felt that there is an incredible amount of scrutiny on female athletes' behavior as role models. In contrast, bad behavior from male athletes is ignored or overlooked on a regular basis. Furthermore, there was a feeling that regardless of how busy they were, female students needed to keep up in all areas of their lives, while the male athletes received much more understanding if they fell behind because they had been preparing for a big game. Stacie stated, "It makes me mad because I go to practice four days a week and on the weekend, and I was doing sideline, comp, and my team, and as soon as I miss an assignment because I needed sleep, then it is ‘oh you are slacking off’ but if a boy was like I had a baseball game last night then ‘no, ‘it is fine.’"

Stacie pointed out her concern that there exists much misogyny within cheer. Part of the issue is related to the fact that there are so many females in cheer and very few males. This

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disparity leads to a situation where males are highly valued and females are devalued. Stacie stated:

In my sport, specifically, there is much misogyny—much misogyny in cheer. When you are recruited to cheer, it is very different from doing another sport in college. You do not get recruited; you must try out, so you must decide what school you attend and then try out. If you want to cheer in college, you have to consistently push on a school and then hope that you make it, or you just have to try out and cross your fingers. There's not really a like, I'm dead set on going to a certain college. But for boys, if they want to cheer in college, they will pay for the guys, but they won't do that for the girls so teams like the Sting Rays will pay for the guys to cheer.

Stacie's comments show that the disparity between genders results in financial gain for male cheerleaders. At the same time, the overabundance of females in the sport means that the females are vying for a limited number of spots and are much less likely to be offered scholarships to cheer for a team.

The devaluing of women's sports and women in sports extends to social media, according to the participants. Teresa, a high school soccer player, shared that something very prominent on social media platforms was the downplaying of a female athlete and her accomplishments. Teresa stated that on these platforms, people would state things like, 'I wonder what the rank of the person you played with was.' People on these sites also started doing in-depth analyses of her stats in order to diminish her accomplishments. According to Teresa, people on social media "went into depth on the stats of the person she played with rather than her stats." The implication was that the male player was far superior and "the only reason she got anywhere" was because, overall, "women are worse than a high school boys' team. And it has been a meme

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for years.” Elizabeth, another soccer player, added that the “Women’s World Cup, FIFA, gets zero coverage [compared] to the Men’s World Cup. FIFA comes around every four years; it is a grand, awesome thing. It is; it is cool. But when have you ever seen anything for the Women’s World Cup? I have not seen it. Ever.” Nell pointed out that the school’s “women’s basketball team was undefeated this year. Moreover, I think I made it to the final four brackets. I could be wrong about that, but a great team this year. Zero coverage.” Overall, the participants had many examples showing that football is still the favored sport in high school and that boy’s teams are always more recognized and promoted than the girl’s teams. Bailey, a high school basketball player, shared that “no one comes to our games. They show up for the boys’ team.” Additionally, the later or headlining game time is still always given to the boys’ team. Greta stated that this downplaying of women’s sports extends to national coverage, stating, “ESPN coverage of women’s sports is not just lacking; the comments about the women players are not good.”

The participants also felt that the disparaging of women’s sports and women in sports extended to the male students speaking over the female students when it came to classroom discussions about sports. According to the participants, a couple of their teachers often discuss baseball and basketball, and according to Kirby, “If you do not like sports, you are lame or not as cool, but if you do, then what are their stats? What are their names? You cannot win.”

In describing the difference between male and female cheerleaders, Stacie was passionate about how frustrating it has been to feel much more scrutinized and less valued than her male counterparts. This scrutiny extends to how the female cheerleaders look. According to Stacie:

I could talk about cheer for so long. Like the look, you must have the look to make the team. One thing that will always push me over the edge is that just because I am not blonde does not mean that I do not have the skills to be on the team, which is so

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frustrating. As soon as I dyed my hair back to brown, I stopped getting so many callbacks, which is absolutely wild.

Stacie's experiences show that women are still held to a physical ideal, whereas a man's hair color is never considered. The students felt the disparity in how men and women are perceived goes far beyond hair color. According to Pam, "many women's sports are not considered at all." Kirby felt that this is especially apparent in a sport like "competitive cheerleading." Greta added that "women cheerleaders are more ripped than" most male athletes.

Amber shared that this same inequality where male cheerleaders are treated as unique is prevalent within theater:

I have 7 years of private voice lessons and over 30 shows of experience, and I have been paid for my tech work, so technically, I am a paid professional, and people will still gush over the guys who do tech for turning on, for clicking a button and I am the one who is applying everyone's lights at the same moment, and it's just frustrating. They claim that the girls need so much experience. I've been told to my face, you're not gonna get anywhere unless you get your butt in private dance lessons, but guys will walk up with maybe two shows of experience and be treated like they're God".

Whether it was the actors or the technology aspect of theater, the students agreed that the variance in treatment and expectations between the males and the females was extreme. Lisa shared that the male actors "don't have to be off-book on an off-book day. It can just be 'awww'". Layne agreed, adding: "I have known multiple male leads who... the week of shows still do not know their lines or music, and it is just glossed over". Other participants agreed with this comment, with Amber stating, "I have a story: last night we had a scene between a male actor and a female actor. The guy did not know his lines, did not know it, and one of the teachers

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that was watching yelled at the girl that you needed to be able to improve to cover for him.”

Amber, Lisa, and Layne all agreed that no one told the male student that he needed to know his line, but rather, the female student should be ready to smooth over his mistake.

According to Callie, if a girl posts the same kinds of things on social media that a guy posts, then “people will say you are a party girl or wild or unhinged or even like a whore or something like that, and then guys are just seen as ‘oh, he is just a guy, they won a big game, they are celebrating.’ In every area of school and extracurriculars, the participants were aware of this system of different rules for the males and the females. Lisa summed up the prevailing view on this equity by stating, “Guys are praised for participating in female-dominated fields while women are ridiculed for trying to participate in male-dominated fields.”

The participants pointed out that women are often described and judged for being emotional. Murphy said that society still acts like “a woman should not be in that position or job because she has too many hormones or the second that a woman gets upset, she is crazy or deranged, but with a man, he is commanding or passionate.” The patriarchal society enables women to be diminished as emotional while allowing men to become dependent on the expected privilege of being a male.

Murphy further elaborated that she “saw an interview at a rally and the interviewer asked if the people thought there should be a female president and they were like ‘no with all of those emotions she would start a war in two seconds.’” However, Murphy pointed out that the reality, according to others, is that “all wars have been started by men.” The participants were aware of the gender bias embedded in the idea that one gender would be a better leader.

Throughout the entire discussion group, the participants were often heard deferring to others and letting each other speak or finish a thought or apologizing to each other if two people

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spoke at the same time. Which triggered Callie to ask the group, “Have you guys noticed, are you allowed to be interrupted during your presentations during classes? The guys are not allowed to be interrupted, but you are.” Lisa was quick to jump in with: “Wait, that is so true. The number of times I have had to just stand there and take what people are saying during a presentation, but then a guy will get up there and look at the teacher. The teacher will say, ‘Okay, I need everyone to be quiet for them’”. Layne not only agreed but stated, “I have noticed that in my family environment, too. If my brothers get interrupted, my parents will give a little snap and say, ‘Hey, he was talking,’ but I will be talked over immediately by like five different people, and no one cares. No one cares. My brothers are immediately given more respect”.

Throughout the discussion, there were deep moments where the participants felt the camaraderie of knowing that they had all experienced similar situations. Lisa made a comment that really encapsulated the overall frustration that these students have felt. According to Lisa: “feminism sounds like a female empowering word when it just means equality. This shows that the second a word has a female connotation, it is immediately looked at as negative. Especially going back to tomboys in Disney movies: ‘Oh, she is not like other girls; she is - the fact that somebody is feminine is frowned upon’”.

Several participants pointed out that the medical inequality seen within *The Yellow Wallpaper* is still pervasive today. While the world has changed and evolved, Murphy pointed out that when it comes to an ADHD or Autism diagnosis, “it is now so much harder to get diagnosed as a woman since there weren’t studies done on women. Layne wondered if there was a purposeful disparity in the types of diagnosis that a woman receives compared with a man. She questioned the medical field, stating:

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It almost feels like, I do not know how true it is and I don't know the ratio of diagnosis for every disorder, but it feels like a lot of mental illnesses or learning disorders that are seen as more harmless tend to be [what] men [are diagnosed] with. I know rates of diagnosis are high in men for ADHD, autism, I think OCD as well. So, rates for diagnosis for things that people consider harmful to the person but harmless to the people around them a lot of time are men. But women are [diagnosed with] borderline personality disorder, bipolar, psychosis, because women are seen as crazy.

When looking at medical support for women, Murphy elaborated on the overall conversation, saying: “I did a lot of research on autism, and all the studies say it is more prevalent in boys, and so the studies are done on boys, so all of the traits that are so-called autistic traits are the ones that are more prevalent in boys because all of the studies were done on them.”

**Gender Dynamics.** Stephanie mentioned that so many characters in literature are written in a way that they are “submissive to their husbands.” The power dynamic that this sets up is one where female students are watching women as secondary characters who are housewives, cooks, and caregivers to the children instead of seeking out their adventure. In August Wilson’s play *Fences*, Rose Maxson says, “There are many people who do not know they can do no better than they do now. That is just something you got to learn” (Act I, Scene 1, Page 14). While Rose is primarily speaking about how Black Americans are uneducated about their choices, this also applies to female characters and to the females who are reading these texts. People need to be shown that they can strive to do better and can be the main characters in their own stories.

Polly admitted that in the classroom setting, males often find ways of controlling or ridiculing the females through the gestures and faces that they make, which “make us discouraged to speak out. This is for girls in general; often, it feels the men have a hierarchy of

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opinions.” In this way, the females are made to feel uncomfortable or that their voices and opinions are less worthy. Polly further added that she is “more self-aware of [her] decisions” because of this dynamic. She said that she is “more comfortable expressing [herself] in even split [classes] due to the lack of seriousness... in the male-dominated classes.” Greta agreed and stated that this power dynamic has resulted in “over the years, it has changed negatively, my voice in the classroom has decreased due to the snarky comments and opinions of certain boys in the classroom.” Overall, the gender dynamics within the secondary classroom setting were of concern for these students. While Becky felt that her “voice in the actual class... has stayed the same but with everyone in the study [she felt] understood and heard.” This idea that some classrooms and class dynamics do not allow females to feel understood is important for educators to understand so that there can be a shift in the system to create real change. The female participants overwhelmingly described trying to participate in a class or get attention from teachers, while the male students acted boisterously and maintained control of the class.

The participants were looking for positive female voices before agreeing to become a part of the study. This was described by Stephanie when she shared that “texts written by women and/or that included female characters showcased the women as strong and capable. These women often took prominent roles in many of the storylines.” Participants noticed when women's voices were or were not highlighted in the classroom curriculum and how that added to the overall tone of the class dynamic. Ellie further backed this statement with the following: “In the texts and characters written by women, they are described as strong and capable. They seem to have more representation”. The participants were cognizant of the gender dynamics within the texts and recognized when stories were representative of diverse voices.

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The participants also pointed out that males deal with issues because of the societal imposed patriarchy dynamic. Stacie pointed out that it was important to “talk about the other side,” too. Moreover, went on to state that dislikes that men “feel like they cannot express emotion”. Layne quickly added that this issue is “very relevant to this conversation because it all stems from the same patriarchy. For men not to be allowed to express their emotions is an expression of misogyny”. Nell found it “literally embarrassing” that men are not allowed to express themselves openly. Kelly shared that her boyfriend has apologized for showing emotion. According to Kelly, after he finished playing his last high school soccer game, “he came off the field crying, and he was like holding it in”. Later, he apologized for crying in front of her, and she responded that he should not apologize for expressing sadness in front of her. It is important for males as well as females that the patriarchal dynamics that control male and female emotions be torn down.

An interesting part of the discussion arose when some participants pointed out that women do not always support women and women’s voices, whether in the classroom or a social situation. According to Murphy, “There are some girls, which I do not find - I don’t want to call it a survival tactic, but that’s the only thing I can think of, but there are the girls that I like to call people girl’s girls. But the girls that aren’t girl’s girls but are ‘pick me’ where they’re like guys are right and they get in with a group of guys and they kind of hate on girls.” According to the participants, a “pick me” girl is someone who needs male validation. In seeking male validation, these girls are negating their voices and the voices of their female classmates.

This behavior also stems from the males who are quick to shut down the opinions of females. At the same time, the participants stated that this did not happen in my class and that it was happening in other classes. According to Sally, if you express an opinion “and they disagree,

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you can see it on their faces.” The male students are quick to “look at you for saying anything,” according to Kirby. While Stephanie shared that she “cannot say a word,” other students like Polly said they “no longer try to participate.” More troubling was how several participants felt that several males in their graduating class go out of their way to minimize and make fun of one very outspoken female classmate and that this behavior happens in many of their classes.

Elizabeth said that when this particularly vocal female expresses herself, “the wall of boys” will interrupt and shut her down and that she “see[s] their faces and them looking at each other.”

Sally added, “They're so critical. Anytime a woman will speak.”

One final comment that Murphy made in this area was of interest. According to Murphy, “I’ll ask guys, not unprompted, but I’ll ask them, ‘Are you a feminist?’” It will come up as a topic, and they’ll say, ‘Oh. I wouldn’t call myself that.’” This is an interesting commentary on how some young men still feel about gender, gender dynamics, and the idea of supporting women and women’s issues. Greta admitted that she does not “know if it’s true. However, it seems more of the female-presenting people are [progressive] while most of the male-presenting people are conservative, and even if it’s not true, it’s still so prevalent.’

## *Human Experience*

Participants' experiences within the category of Human Experiences are organized into the following themes: (a) resilience, (b) empathy, and (c) emotions.

**Resilience.** When considering the characters that were encountered during the course, Stephanie pointed out that Lady Macbeth and Marie-Laure “are memorable because they survived traumatic events and were role models to those around them.” It is this idea of resilience that is memorable. While Lady Macbeth ultimately lost this resilience, Marie-Laure maintained it throughout *All the Light We Cannot See*. Bella stated that Marie-Laure, Linda, and

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Rose all “went through many trials and tribulations and stayed optimistic through them all.”

Resilience stood out to several of the participants. Linda from *Death of a Salesman* and Rose from *Fences* can, at times, be seen as simplistic female characters, but they are survivors, along with Marie-Laure. Michelle emphasized Marie-Laure, saying she “was memorable because she endured a major transformation throughout the novel by adapting and persevering.” Adapting and persevering are powerful lessons for students to take away from literature. Becky shared that “Marie-Laure was memorable... because she represented strength”.

Throughout adolescence, females are relegated to the category of weaker than men, and they look for signs of their strength and power. Layne shared that she has “come to understand through the study that reading female authors in a classroom opens up the space for the female student to relate and discuss their struggles as women, as well as providing male students with insight into female experiences.” In order to empower female voices, male voices also need to be heard. The participants felt that hearing female voices expanded their understanding of other women. While they felt other females listened to them more seriously, they did not want to leave male voices out of the conversation.

Notably, several students mentioned the idea of resilience as standing out when looking at what made the characters and stories memorable. In stories like *Death of a Salesman* and *Fences*, which are focused on the male protagonists with their wives as secondary characters, participants found the strength of these female characters unforgettable.

**Empathy.** Overall, participants expressed that there was a deeper understanding of the emotions and feelings presented by the female authors and voices. One strong exception was the character of Marie-Laure in the novel *All the Light We Cannot See* by Anthony Doerr. Several participants felt that Marie-Laure enveloped the human experience in a way that was empathetic

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and stood out from other male-written characters. Greta stated, "Marie-Laure was memorable to me because she represented strength behind her struggles." While Mallory added that she has "come to understand through the study that reading female authors in the classroom opens up the space for female students to relate and discuss their struggles as women, as well as providing male student insight into female experiences." It is this opening up of spaces for women to express their voices that is reflective of students finding and expressing themselves candidly within a classroom setting.

Several of the participants spoke about how participating in this research enlightened them and led them to a deeper understanding and empathy for their fellow female students. According to Gina, "I realized that many of my peers have felt the same way I have on things and that we can help each other." While students may have felt that their situations are much improved from characters like *The Woman in the Wallpaper*, Linda, and Rose, there are still ways to support each other and allow the female voice to be better heard. Cailey said, "As a female, I already had a good understanding [of the female voice], but it has expanded and grown this year." This shows that even those participants who felt they had a good understanding of the female voice and their voice still broadened their understanding through reading female-driven pieces, which expanded their empathy and knowledge of others. Gina expanded this by saying "I have realized that female voices are so important because it helps students relate and connect to texts".

**Emotions.** Within this theme, I looked at the emotions that the participants expressed with respect to the texts as well as the classroom setting. The ability of a character to have emotions and express them was a topic that was brought up during the study. Mallory stated that the female characters in certain texts (*The Yellow Wall-paper*, *All the Light We Cannot See*, *The*

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*Importance of Being Earnest*) seemed to have more depth than some of the others we read. They were allowed to display emotions such as anger and ambition instead of just being there to support male characters, as in *Fences* and *Death of a Salesman*. In this sense, the participants felt that emotions were part of the power dynamic of how women were able to express themselves.

A frustration some participants expressed was that so many “of the stories we have read have included female characters either being in a lesser, dependent position to men or facing oppression, abuse, and/ or violations at the hands of men,” stated Kelly. The fact is that many characters are shown as having to fight to be respected and not be abused. Kelly went on to say that “this stands out to [her] as saddening and disappointing.”

## *Societal Issues*

Societal issues are organized into the following themes: (a) stereotypes and (b) societal expectations.

**Stereotypes.** Bella felt that “texts written by women are more toned to call out the injustices and highlight them. If it is written by a man, it sometimes shows the women as looked down upon.” A couple of the participants stated this idea that texts written by men are more likely to promote female stereotypes. In contrast, texts written by female authors call out injustice and highlight the need for female students to read texts that reflect themselves. Heather stated, “Women characters are often written stereotypically or face experiences like the ones in the texts we read.” This response highlights that not only are the male characters the focus in many works written by men, but the females are in some way facing obstacles that might be particular to their female roles. While several participants complimented the works written by men, the participants in this study could relate to the stories and characters written by women. They related to their struggles. Polly said, “To prove the point of male-written texts, you could

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take Rose (*Fences*) or Linda (*Death of a Salesman*), but they are portrayed as very defenseless and dependent. You could argue that these were social norms at the time, but there is such a lack of detail on these characters.” Although it is a fair assessment that society has changed since *Fences* or *Death of a Salesman* was written and published, these characters still show an aspect of society that subverts or downplays a woman's role in the house and society. Pam simply stated that “female characters have a softer personality.” Are females required to have a softer or gentler personality, or is this a stereotype many authors have slipped into?

Teresa and Kirby pointed out some famous politicians and political commentators and how they use their platforms to perpetuate stereotypical gender roles. Teresa shared that “it is not just men saying that. It is also female representatives in the government or [someone] like Candace Owens.” Kirby added that Owens had stated that “women should be in the kitchen” while Candace herself is not in the kitchen but a woman of color with a powerful platform telling other women to conform to certain stereotypical societal roles. Teresa stated the obvious dichotomy of this stance that “women should stick to being in the house and stick to their roles as a wife and mother rather than participate in silly stuff such as government, which is ironic considering she is a woman in government, right?” To which Michelle stated that these stereotypical roles are “very unbalanced.”

Several participants spoke about how these forced, unbalanced ideas about men's and women's roles are backed up by complaints about women's health and gender differences, which is very similar to the situation in which *The Woman* finds herself trapped in her bedroom because of biological differences. According to Greta:

I think also not ... just mental health but also women's physical health is dismissed ‘It's just your period; there's nothing wrong with you.’ And you have endometriosis or

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speaking anecdotally when my sister first got sick: ‘it’s just anxiety’ or ‘you’re just stressed’ and she has physical stuff going on. So, women in the medical field, whether it’s their profession or they are a patient, are still surprisingly dismissed.

The conversation then turned to the differences in care for males and females. Kirby pointed out that care for women is much more likely to be harmful than care for men:

Especially with reproductive care. Like getting an IUD or birth control is extremely damaging for your body. It’s totally throwing off your hormones all the time. Like when people go off birth control it is like going through a second puberty because your hormones are having to rebalance themselves. You get acne, you’re getting like, it’s insane. Um then also like getting an IUD inserted, some women describe it as the worst pain they have ever felt. Some women who have given birth have said that an IUD is more painful than having a child.

The students felt that there was much more care in making sure that when a man has a vasectomy, according to Kirby, “there’s no pain” because they are given “local anesthesia and they get two weeks off of work, a doctor’s note, and prescribed pain killers after the procedure.”

The conversation then turned to comparing what they had heard about women’s reproductive care, with several students being concerned about women having autonomy over their bodies. Sally stated that the unequal autonomy given to women reminded her of the following:

Women who want to get their tubes tied ... and doctors will dismiss them like they have a restriction on what they can do with themselves but then men getting [a vasectomy] is an easy procedure and done in like a day basically, and women have to go through these long periods of time, and how many kids do you have, and your husband has to approve

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of it. And it just kinda ties back to the fact that women are so restricted and dismissed.

And also going along with the fact that men have control of a lot of things - when women give birth 'the husband stitch' that doctors will do that!

According to the Great, the husband stitch is often performed "without consent" of the woman. Kirby stated that doctors will add "an extra stitch to tighten you up. Husbands can request an extra stitch." Greta added that if a woman tears during childbirth, "they make it tighter." At the same time, Kirby added that "people have reported that it makes sex extremely painful" for the woman but more pleasurable for the man. The participants had personal anecdotes to back up Greta and Kirby's assertions that this is done without the woman's consent and that the husband gets to make the decision for the wife. Pam stated that this "literally happened to my mom after she had me. She wanted to get her tubes tied, but they said she needed more kids and to get my stepdad's written permission. I love my brothers; I am glad that they are here. However, my mom should have had that choice." While Kirby responded with a succinct "What is THAT?! That is crazy." Greta pointed out that this is further proof of a lack of self-government for women: "The husband or any guy has ... control over a woman's body because they are legally tied together."

While students were very candid about their views, they were also concerned about offending others or saying something too controversial, as noted when Kirby stated:

Not to get super controversial but that also bodily autonomy also goes back to like Roe V. Wade and like abortion is also health care cause like some people think that pro-choice is like pro-abortion but it's just letting the people have the right to choose. You don't want one, don't get one. It goes back to men specifically having an opinion on women getting an abortion and it's bad but it's like 'okay but that's not your body' but

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then they'll say that the infant also has bodily autonomy and should have the right to that decision. People at my job have tried to talk to me about abortion and (claps hand) said stuff like that about how also the infant has rights to their own body as well. So it's not the mother's body anymore to decide.

The participants were very aware that their views might not be liked by everyone. However, the overwhelming viewpoint was that women's voices, opinions, and bodies were all being subjected to the power of men.

**Societal Expectations.** The idea of society placing expectations through characters and texts was expressed by Maud when she shared that so many texts: "mainly [depict] women as at the whim of the men in their life. Most often by societal indoctrination." This opinion was echoed by several of the participants, like when Polly stated that so many stories "portray women as dependent and submissive." In particular, participants felt that the female characters were underdeveloped in order to further emphasize the importance of the male characters. According to Elizabeth, part of what stood out about the female characters written by male authors is how Linda, Rose, and Marie-Laure "is how they are treated by the male characters. Elizabeth says that the mistreatment of these characters is "repeated in real life, yet the authors of these stories write them no other kind of experiences apart from oppression." In these scenarios, it is the duty of the female characters to support the men around them. Elizabeth then brings up the idea of whether these are the types of stories that authors should be writing. This leads to the idea that there could be an inverse connection between the stories written and what happens in real life. Art does not just imitate life; it can also be symbiotic.

Several participants spoke about the expectations that their male classmates or their families have regarding what types of media they allow themselves to watch. According to

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Stacie, “I’ve asked guys before what their favorite Disney movie is, and they’ll be like ‘oh ewww’ or like ‘I don’t watch Disney movies,’ or I’ll ask them who their favorite princess is and you know what the answer is if they answer? It’s *The Princess and the Frog* or *Up*. Never *Cinderella*.” These are deeply rooted ideas of what is acceptable or unacceptable for male behavior. Layne added:

I love *The Princess and the Frog* though. It goes back to what we were talking about earlier about men not being allowed to express certain things like my younger brother is much more feminine than my brother is. He’s little, he’s 8 years old and the amount of times - I can’t even count on both hands - that I’ve heard him be told to be less sensitive, to suck it up so he can be strong, that he shouldn’t be upset about skinning his knee or something because boys shouldn’t cry, or that if my parents found him watching a barbie movie with me, he was asked why he wasn’t watching a boy movie, asked over and over when he was going to start playing sports again, this is an 8 year old kid and the amount of vitriol that coming at him from all sides for not living up to the standard for this idea that society has created to the point of berating him for not cutting his hair because he wants to have it longer. They’re constantly telling him that he needs to cut his hair because he looks like a girl. It’s very, very - it’s not even concealed.

Layne’s position that men are not allowed to express certain emotions is a poignant one. Lisa pointed out that in her family, the stereotyping of behaviors according to societal expectations happens to both her brother and her. Lisa stated: “My father is kind of the same way; he has very conservative views, and my brother has longer hair than me, and my dad doesn’t do anything to change it, but he expresses his opinion - like it’s aggressive sometimes. He tells [my brother] he’s disappointed and he tells me he’s sorry he didn’t raise me well enough because I have short

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hair and my hair isn't natural and I don't wear dresses enough which is absolutely insane to me that my own father is doing that!" The participants felt pressure from their families and society that they should look and behave in a certain way. This pressure extended to their male siblings, and the participants developed a well-developed understanding of how these pressures affected both themselves and their siblings. Finally, Murphy stated that her "parents are much more accepting. They do pile stuff on me, but at the same time, they are also like, 'do what you want, you can be who you want, it doesn't matter, we're going to love you regardless.'" Murphy received the type of validation that is needed by teenagers as they figure out their own identities.

Societal Expectations also showed up within the classroom setting with participants noting there were times that teachers seemed to cater to the male students and times where teachers would be quick to quiet the boys in order to hear the female voices. Greta asked the group if they had a certain middle school teacher to remind everyone how she would say: "Boys, be quiet; I want to listen to my girls." Several participants agreed that they remembered that while Sally pointed out that there were also some high school teachers who "would not put up with the guys" dominating the conversation. Greta stated that the "guys are guys" mentality still predominates. Kirby responded that overall, "that's the harmful mindset that a lot of schools have, too." While Greta added that the male with the behavioral issues "that person continues to get praised."

Students then wanted to address the biased rules when it comes to the dress code again. Teresa said that although there is currently no dress code at the school, they have female coaches who will hold a dress code over them and say that wearing "a crop top" is "validation" of bad behavior from the student-athlete. At the same time, the student thinks it is only "a cute outfit." The coaches will "threaten... with the 'you won't play' kind of talk." Becky added that outfits

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that include “pajamas, crop tops, and you can’t wear a sweatshirt without a t-shirt on underneath” are all likely to get a female student-athlete in trouble, while this is not happening with male student-athletes. According to Becky, the coaches will justify the separate rules by asking the team, “What are we trying to portray here? What are you trying to look like at school? She said if you wear a crop top, it’s inappropriate; pj pants make you look lazy, and as a female, you need to work extra hard to portray yourself.” While the school and district no longer maintain dress code rules, the participants felt that, as a society, there is still a stigma that females should dress so as not to make men uncomfortable. Kirby cited a rule from middle school where “you had to wear a top long enough to cover your butt if you were wearing leggings.” Adding that these types of rules are “catering to men.” Teresa said that it’s not “my responsibility” to dress in a way that makes the male students comfortable. With Sally adding that female students “have to cater to men, you have to do things, so men aren't trying to do things or are disrupted by you”. Kirby said this rule applies to all females “even if you don’t like men,” which resulted in a lot of laughter and clapping from the group in agreement.

Greta then brought the topic around to parental expectations of dress stating that “it’s not just in school or a professional setting. I don’t know about y’all’s parents, but in my life, like my parents hate when I wear leggings. I’m [wondering] why are you commenting on that. I don’t know if it’s a Southern thing or if it’s just parents being overprotective or what. However, it just, the whole conversation, no matter where it evolved from, needs to stop.” Physical appearance rules go beyond just outfits. According to Kirby, things like “facial piercings or tattoos [are taboo] because those aren’t seen as inherently feminine.” Kirby added that “my dad is super conservative and saw my septum [piercing] and he was like ‘can you flip that up?’. The first question he asked was, “Can you hide that.”

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### *Character*

The category of character is organized into the following themes: (a) exploration, (b) literature, and (c) role model.

**Exploration.** Many of the participants in the study were able to show examples of female characters having a wide range of traits and characteristics. However, the women written by men were more submissive or lacking in depth compared with the characters written by the female authors. Pam felt that among the weak and submissive characters portrayed by men, Lady Macbeth stood out: “Lady Macbeth or Marie-Laure (stood out) because of how strong and determined they are.” These two female characters stood out to many of the students.

Another criticism is the overall lack of defining characteristics in some female characters. Hattie stated that a “lack of details on Rose (*Fences*) and Linda (*Death of a Salesman*) made them memorable. They were just briefly explained, and the only real character trait given to them was being motherly. The sons of the main characters had more details.” While a lack of details can be an authorial choice to make a character feel universal, this choice was often in stark contrast with how the male characters were described and portrayed. Sally felt that “Rose also stood out because of her story and what she was subjected to.” At the same time, Stephanie stated that “this study has definitely made me recognize the importance of female characters more and think about their complexities.” She stated, “In *Macbeth*, Lady Macbeth is portrayed as evil.” While Lady Macbeth's decline is an interesting study, her overall characteristic is that of a power-hungry, evil woman.

Stephanie later pointed out that “Margaret Atwood's stories always stand out to me because she writes dystopian feminist books. I like her poems as well as *The Handmaid's Tale*. The... female characters [written by men] stand out with their submissiveness in *Fences* and

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*Death of a Salesman.*” Other participants agreed and also noted the importance of female authors in creating depth within female characters. Sally stated that she thought “the woman from *The Yellow Wall-paper* stood out because of her story in general.” After looking at the limits on female autonomy during the time period in which *The Yellow Wall-paper* was written, Gina stated that “the main character's story [in *The Yellow Wall-paper*] stood out for her time trapped in the room”.

Elizabeth questioned what was going on with *The Woman* beyond what the story explicitly states: “My question is, since the groove is always there, has she been doing it the whole time? Is it an unreliable narrator? Is there a woman there? I don’t know.” In comparison, other students questioned the cause of her overall mental and physical issues. Greta felt from the beginning that there were more than just mental issues since *The Woman*’s story started “weirdly because she was also physically ill,” to which Elizabeth added: “ I thought she was having anxiety or was really anxious about many things and that is why – because back then it was just like hysteria ‘you’re crazy’ if you had anything mentally wrong with you so I feel like that’s why they put her in a confined space with the bed nailed because she had anxiety, but it seemed more like a really intense thing.” Finally, Bailey asked “was she postpartum?” while pointing out that “she had a baby.” The group was rattled by the fact she had just had a baby but was now locked in her room. Throughout the discussion, students would occasionally go back to Kirby’s point that the entire story *The Woman* “was in her bedroom” while clearly depressed. Bailey determined that *The Woman* must have had “postpartum depression [because] back then they just didn’t realize that was a thing.” The overall misunderstanding added a layer of sadness to the story since there was an understanding that this story was meant to show the mistreatment of women, and even the husband’s sister was involved in keeping *The Woman* locked up.

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**Literature.** *The Yellow Wall-paper* was the main text that all participants read. It was written by a female author and focused on a female character. Gina stated that the story was “haunting and introspective.” Gina elaborated that the struggle of the main character, The Woman in the Wallpaper, “to be heard and taken seriously made her memorable.” While the main character in *The Yellow Wall-paper* is not heard by those around her, her struggle is heard and resonates with women over one hundred and thirty years later. Anna stated that The Woman in the Wallpaper “was physically and mentally blocked by her husband. She was suffering from postpartum depression, and with the setting being the late 1800s, she was in a room by herself for weeks - leading her to spiral.” Many of the participants had a deeper understanding of the literature we read and how the plight of this character can be representative of issues that are still relevant today.

According to Layne, “The female characters in each of the texts [*The Yellow Wall-paper* and *All The Light We Cannot See* and *The Importance of Being Earnest*] seemed to have more depth than some of the others we read, and they were allowed to display emotions such as anger and ambition as opposed to just being there to support male characters as in *Fences* and *Death of a Salesman*.” Interestingly, Layne felt that there was a depth in these works that did not exist in others, although comparatively, *The Yellow Wall-paper* is a much shorter work than the others. Charlotte Perkins Gilman is able to convey the issues of this woman without ever naming the woman in a way that stands out to readers. Suzanne stated, “Atwood’s writing style is concise, sparse, and detached. Her writing draws you into the story, weaving characters past and present”. While Atwood’s works, such as *The Handmaid’s Tale*, are much more expansive than novellas, such as *The Yellow Wallpaper*, students still felt the complexity underneath both of these works.

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With *The Yellow Wall-paper*, there is the central question of how much of the deterioration of The Woman is caused by the room and how much is caused by her condition. According to Elizabeth, “She is slowly going crazier because of the house.” Elizabeth went on to say that The Woman is “stuck in her room the entire day and being fed these lies of ‘oh, you’re sick’ but it doesn’t seem like she is sick because in the beginning, she says her husband says she isn’t sick but then treats her like she’s deathly ill and locks her in a room with barred windows and a bed nailed to the floor.” The participants were very clear that the woman’s lack of autonomy was a major factor in the decline of her mental and physical health. Stephanie said that she “didn’t like the husband very much until the very end because he’s actually insecure about her at the very end and he’s like ‘want to make sure you’re ok’ sort of but not throughout the whole thing.” It was clear that the husband was secure in the knowledge that he was doing the right thing for his wife throughout the story until he sees her final psychotic break. Kirby said, “I kept annotating ‘he’s dismissing her, he’s dismissing her,’ her feelings, what she’s saying, just invalidating what she’s saying. They did not even want her to write; they didn’t want her to do anything. Just sit. Moreover, her husband is out most nights for cases which I don’t know how much I believe that.” Elizabeth thought that while “he did love her,” the husband did not know “how to approach it or he didn’t want to approach it cause when she told him she was feeling mentally not well he immediately shut down like ‘don’t even think about that, I don’t even want to hear anything about that, you’re going to get sent away.’ He was dismissive of her out of fear of losing her as his wife mentally.” While Maud was not sure that he loved and cared for his wife: “I don’t know how much I believe that. He’s in the city, and his wife is locked in a room, and he’s disappearing for days on end.”

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The dismissive response of the husband worked to propel the story forward, but the wife was unable to gain any independence. Mallory stated that “he cared for her, but the way he talked to her bothered me. Specifically, the scene with him at night when she was up and walking around and she wanted to wake him and say, ‘Hey, I’m not feeling mentally well’”. He was asleep, and he called her little girl. And I’m like, that is weird, that made me a little uncomfortable”. Elizabeth and Bella agreed with Elizabeth, adding that “it was creepy.” And Bella stated:

It just felt like infantilizing - like treating her like she needed to be coddled. She tells him multiple times, like at the beginning of the story, before she starts devolving, that she wishes she could do things on her own, she wishes to see the garden, she wishes to go and walk and do things and be an acting member of society, and she wishes she could work. She couldn’t go back to work until she was well [because the husband] felt like that was unwise.

Heather stated that The Woman “questions the order of her husband because she feels like it would be better to do things, and I feel like it would make me less depressed and less want to just sit around and do nothing.” Hattie added, “Even if she tried to convince someone that there was something else wrong with her, her husband and brother would step in and say, ‘she’s fine.’” Societal rules would have dictated that her care remains in the hands of the men in her family, so nothing would have been done to change her circumstances.

Teresa was confused at the ending and stated: “I don’t get why he passes out!” To which Lily summarized one of the main theories about the ending by stating that “she is the woman in the wallpaper.” Elizabeth added clarity by stating: “I was going to say that by the end of the story, she’s devolved into the psychotic break.” Moreover, Pam shared her thoughts on the

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overall intention of author Charlotte Perkins Gilman that *The Yellow Wallpaper* “being in the room to me represented how women in that time were trapped, and they didn’t have jobs and things like that.” This lack of personal sovereignty was a clear theme to the participants. Teresa stated that the story is a “huge metaphor for women,” and while it may not have happened in real life, “it’s just how women - how women are treated and to represent it in a story to represent how people can see the mind of a woman and can see her going insane and to see that women go insane.” Kirby took the idea one step further, adding that “it’s potentially a metaphor for the human intricacies.”

Greta added an analysis of the wallpaper as a symbol, stating that the wallpaper is a representation of women because there are “the parts where it's okay in some places but deteriorating... in other places is not just representative of her but women in general and not just in that time period but throughout society where we’re supposed to be nurturing and humble and kind and on the inside she is, but things can be bad [and] you can’t show it.” And while this story was first published in 1892, the participants saw how it is a story that relates to today. Kirby said that she thought “ in the most recent years there’s been this weird uprising of men wanting the 1950s docile wife back like that whole like there’s things on the internet, and it might just be because the internet is so open now but seeing stuff on the internet of men talking about like ‘oh, I want a wife like who is quiet or does the dishes and does the household chores and stuff.” This return to more of an ideal of a more stereotypical role of the woman as a housewife and mother could also be seen as a direct reflection of the #MeToo movement, which started in 2017 but gained more attention over time as more and more women shared their stories through social media.

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**Role Model.** The characters that most impacted the participants were often the ones that they felt sympathy for or learned from. For instance, Callie said that Marie-Laure “was a very strong young woman despite all her adversity.” While *All the Light We Cannot See* is written by a male author, participants felt that the character was written as strong and determined instead of weaker and more subservient like Rose and Linda. Anna stated, “Linda from *Death of a Salesman* was a devoted 1950s housewife who never wavered from her love of her husband, even pushing her children away for his happiness even though he didn’t treat her well.” These are the characters that the participants were most likely to push against and not be able to relate to. While Marie-Laure is a role model they found Linda frustrating and difficult to understand.

When it comes to looking at characters that could be role models, Suzanne stated that “Margaret Atwood stories always stand out to me because she writes dystopian feminist books. I like her poems as well as *The Handmaid’s Tale*”. Several students, like Suzanne, knew that the characters they would enjoy as role models were written by strong female authors.

### Chapter 4 Summary

Overall, the female students who participated in this study felt that it was incredibly important to open the door to opportunities for non-male students to have a conversation about women, voice, and gender in the classroom. Several students verbally told me that after the collection of data had ended they were relieved to share issues that had been on their minds for some time and that I should continue the practice of having discussions just for the female identifying students.

While I thought female students might relate more to female authors and characters, it was interesting to hear their opinions on the female characters written by men. The participants

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articulated that these characters lacked depth and that this was a direct result of men writing to entertain other men. They found the female characters to be flat and stereotypical.

I was surprised by how many of my students felt that the male students in the classroom went out of their way to shut down commentary from female students or about female characters. The males acted in a way that could be considered to be a form of microaggressions to control the flow of conversations in the classroom. In this way, the male students are able to stop conversations about subjects that make them uncomfortable or that they do not feel pertain to them. This led me to realize how often I might have seen and not recognized this controlling behavior on the part of the male students and instead labeled their behavior to be “goofy” or “immature.”

## CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

### **Introduction**

Exploring women's issues is at the heart of this study. The students in this study expressed the importance of their voices being heard and unhindered by the males in the classroom. The purpose was to explore and understand the relationship between female students in the classroom and the use of female characters and voices in the texts used in the course. The following research questions guided this study: (a) How does reading female voices in the curriculum inform the female student's perceptions of themselves and the world around them? (b) How does reading female voices contribute to girls' conception of gender identity?; and (c) How does positioning the inclusion of female voices as an asset in learning instead of a deficit in curriculum impact female students' perspectives of themselves as learners? While the research findings revealed the participants' beliefs surrounding female voices in the secondary classroom, their experiences with expressing their voices, and the usage of female characters and authors, it did not explicitly show if these results indicate a broader underlying systemic issue.

In this chapter, I examine this research study's findings and discuss the results as they relate to the guiding research questions. I will then discuss the results as they pertain and are connected to the previous research examined. Lastly, I will consider the limitations of the findings and the implications for future research.

### **Discussion of Findings**

The study's results show that while students were engaged and more vocal when a female character or voice was included in the classroom, the participants were aware and concerned about the overarching issue of systemic uplifting of male voices and behavior with the duality of female voices being relegated to the background. The participants' viewpoints were well aligned

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with each other in a unified concern that women's voices are still not heard. The discussions with participants confirmed that they shared similar beliefs about gender.

One of the most interesting aspects of the study was how many of the participants had well-formulated ideas and understandings regarding the differences in how females and males behave in the classroom, how teachers respond to female and male students, and how males treat women overall. The participants were very aware of what it meant to be a feminist and could voice their ideas surrounding what needed to change for both females and males. The participants furthermore had a well-defined idea of patriarchal concerns and how those impact both women and men.

Based on the findings, I was able to identify and describe the core themes the participants discussed in the pre-and post-questions and during the Socratic Seminar. There were four major categories: gender, human experience, societal issues, and character. Within these categories, each was broken into two or more themes. Under the gender category, participants discussed gender roles, gender inequality, and gender dynamics. Within the category of human experience, the themes of resilience, empathy, and emotions arose. For societal issues, participants discussed issues of stereotypes and societal expectations. Finally, under character, the sub-categories were exploration, literature, and role models.

The first research question guiding this study was, *how does reading female voices in the curriculum inform the female student's perceptions of themselves and the world around them?* Overall, the participants came to the study with well-formulated perceptions of themselves and their world. I found that they were easily able to articulate what it meant to have a female voice in the curriculum. Furthermore, they had strong feelings about the female characters that were written by men. While they found many of the characters lacking and stereotypical, they thought

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that Lady Macbeth, written by William Shakespeare, had a rare depth and drive of character that stood out to them. This idea is supported by research that has shown that “In textbooks used until quite recently, researchers found that females were underrepresented. This was reflected in the number of text lines, the proportion of named characters, etc. Moreover, females and males were portrayed stereotypically (e.g., females shown as nurses, males as doctors and lawyers)” (Liu, 2006).

Furthermore, Marie-Laure from *All the Light We Cannot See* by Anthony Doerr showed initial weakness but grew in strength and determination as she grew up during the story's plot. These instances of multi-faceted characters written by a male were the exceptions. During the majority of the discussion, participants pointed to The Woman in *The Yellow Wall-paper* and Offred in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* as characters that spoke directly to the issues that are relevant to women. Ideally, this should inform teachers that they need to “set up expectations for balanced consideration of the females and the males” when designing the curriculum (Dodge & Whaley, 1993, p. 43).

Students mentioned many strengths of reading literature written by women, including “you can definitely sense a difference in a story written by a woman.” Callie went on to say that women authors “portray their female characters as more strong and independent in comparison to how a male would portray them.” Other participants, like Layne, felt that female authors show more compassion. Mary Pipher states in *Reviving Ophelia*, “Girls know they are losing themselves” (Pipher, 1994, p. 20). Strong female characters should not be a “special unit of women's literature” or “isolate[d] stories about girls,” which adds credence to the idea that stories about strong females are not taught in the same units as characters about men (Dodge & Whaley, 1993, p.39). Similarly, this philosophy of inclusion of voices also applies to stories

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about people of character. According to Kaitlyn Jackson (2023), “choosing books that feature characters of color in which diversity *is* the point is also needed” (p. 57). Ultimately, women’s voices and diverse voices need to be included because these voices are a part of society and should have equal representation. These stories show students that their participation in society and the world is of value. It teaches them to imagine a future full of possibilities. Bell Hooks (2000) states that the importance of studying women’s voices is not to “trash work by men” but to “intervene on sexist thinking by showing that women's work is often just as good, as interesting, if not more so, as work by men” (p. 20).

Often it was the limitation of the female characters as written by male authors that stood out to the participants. According to Layne, “texts written by male authors that included female characters seemed to display a lack of compassion.” Rebecca Alber (2017) stated in her research that “after thousands of observation hours in various classrooms and grade levels, the research team reported that the number of gender stereotypes in the lessons and teaching practices was ‘startling’”. Hattie added that the “majority of the female written texts portray women in a completely different light than male written stories, which portray women as dependent and submissive.” Hattie’s opinion is backed up by research. Jackson’s research found that “children’s literature continues to remain heavily reflective of the societal default—White, upper middle class, heterosexual, able-bodied, neurotypical, cisgender male, English-speaking, and Christian” (Jackson, 2023, p. 58). Meanwhile, Becky felt that “texts written by women usually question gender norms and roles and work towards gender equality.” Overall, there was a clear understanding that female voices and characters written by women were much more complex and a better representation of real women. Students noted that while they may not have been aware that they were primarily reading male authors, it was enlightening when they did read

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female authors. Pipher states, "Simone de Beauvoir believed adolescence is when girls realize that men have the power" (Pipher, 1994, p. 21).

A couple of the students pointed out that because of the study, they were now more aware of voices that are and are not being represented in the classroom. Elizabeth shared that "stories written by women often include or describe the female experience in society." Starting with children's picture books, "across all dimensions of identity, especially race, the progress in creating and publishing books featuring diverse characters has been slow, but the reality remains that the majority of children's literature continues to feature white characters and animals/inanimate objects" (Jackson, 2023, p. 58). While students may not have noticed that they had previously been exposed primarily to white male characters and voices, they were quick to understand and point out that female and diverse representation was important.

The broader aspect of how the participants view themselves regarding the world around them saw the students pointing out larger issues of stereotypical representation in all aspects of media. Students mentioned the disproportionate focus on male athletes and male sports. Participants noted that in sports like soccer or even female-driven sports like cheerleading, there are far more scholarships, press coverage, and financial gain for males. At the same time, Title IX was passed by Congress in 1972, the decades since have seen the cause of gender equity ebb and flow. In 1972, Title IX "outlawed sex bias in school athletics, career counseling, medical services, financial aid, admission practices, and the treatment of students and employees" (Sadker et al., 2009, p. 50). However, since then, "Reagan and then later in the first and second Bush years, the federal government would switch sides, question the cause of gender equity, and eventually work to weaken Title IX (p. 49). The weakening of Title IX shows that gender equity is still a work in progress that needs to be considered when looking at education and the voices that are being

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represented. According to Pomerantz and Raby, “Athletics often provided girls with a flashpoint of recognition: girls got the worst rink times, cheapest uniforms, smallest audiences, and least administrative support, while boys got everything including glory, resources, and attention” (Pomerantz & Raby, 2017, p.99). The participants felt the disparity whether it was in the number of spectators, ridicule from their male peers, or lack of school recognition. Geneva Gay states that “some media programs are making genuine advancements in making society more ethnically inclusive and egalitarian (Gay, 2018, p. 175). There is still a large gap between equal representation, equal compensation, and non-stereotyping representation. Pomerantz and Raby noted that while girls “are seen as capable of straddling traditional femininity and masculinity simultaneously,” this has not “translated into a broad shift in power” (2017, p.38). Instead, women are straddling both male and female roles. They are now working full-time, taking care of a disproportionate amount of the household duties, and fighting for their voices to be heard.

The second research question was, *how does reading female voices contribute to girls' conception of gender identity?*

The responses ranged from Pam wanting to see more “female leads represented in a positive connotation to Ellie stating that it has helped her to “understand more about female voices and their complexities. Elizabeth stated that she “didn’t realize how often these patterns repeat in female characters,” which changed her understanding of how women are portrayed by male voices and female voices. Pomerantz and Raby (2017) point out that while gender norms are still somewhat set ideals, they can change from one context to another, however, the expectation for popular girls is still “linked to being pretty, thin, nice, attracted to boys, ‘hot’, fashionable, and demure (Pomerantz & Raby, 2017, p. 63). While women are diminished for being stereotypical and emotional, Bell Hooks points out that society’s “patriarchal masculinity

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encourages men to be pathologically narcissistic, infantile, and psychologically dependent on the privileges (however relative) that they receive simply for having been born male” (Hooks, 1994, p.70). Pomerantz and Raby stated that in their study “boys talked about the unique pressure on girls to be attractive” (Pomerantz & Raby, 2017, p.69). Women are under pressure about their looks, weight, and clothes in a way that boys are not. This inequity in how females are spoken about and regarded compared with their male peers is jarring because “women who have spent years learning the lessons of silence in elementary, secondary, and college classrooms have trouble regaining their voices” (Pomerantz & Raby, 2017, p.10). The females are silenced and yet mandated to quietly accept a large amount of vocal criticism. This blatant inequity can, according to Pipher, create a dichotomy where women suffer “from power envy” (Pipher, 1994, p. 21).

The participants recognized that patriarchal patterns of behavior were negatively impacting both male and female students. According to Liu (2006), “Girls tend to receive higher grades than boys in math and science courses through high school, but they are less likely to choose careers involved in science and engineering. Over the long run, the impact of gender bias shapes destiny for everyone and society” (Liu, 2006). Bell Hooks (2000) points out that “as long as females take up the banner of feminist politics without addressing and transforming their sexism, ultimately the movement will be undermined” (p. 13). The fact that the participants recognize how these patterns negatively impact everyone within society shows that progress is being made toward creating a more equitable representation of voices.

Several participants mentioned their appreciation that they now know that they are not the only ones to feel overwhelmed by the males in the classroom or that they feel more comfortable expressing their concerns as a female when males are not a part of the discussion. Hattie stated

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that it was enlightening to realize “how often the faces that the males make alone make us feel discouraged to speak out” and that removing them gave females the room needed to express themselves. Hattie elaborated that “often it feels like the men have a hierarchy of opinions.” Removing the men enabled several of the participants to put words to the feelings that they had and to realize that other female students feel similarly.

While the male authors and voices were found to be very stereotypical, with women acting “defenseless, dependent,” it was noted by participants that characters like Linda Loman “stand out... as saddening and disappointing,” according to Lily. When participants encountered female characters with more depth, they stood out. Suzanne noted that Atwood’s writing style “draws you into the story, weaving in the character's past and present.” This idea of a multi-faceted female character contributes to the idea that female representation is important in helping students formulate their identities, whether as individuals or as females.

The third research question was, *how does positioning the inclusion of female voices as an asset in learning instead of a deficit in curriculum impact female students’ perspectives of themselves as learners?*

Anna stated that she now has an understanding “that [she has] to be confident and persuasive in order to be taken seriously in any capacity.” Participants repeatedly mentioned the idea that they need to assert their voices and take themselves seriously. Layne stated that she “realized that [her] voice is taken more seriously in discussion with other female students than in a mixed environment where male students often have the floor.” While Suzanne shared that she has “grown more confident in [her] voice in the classroom in the past year.” According to Liu (2006), “Boys often interrupted when girls were talking, and girls would arbitrarily be assigned tasks like taking notes during the discussion, rather than being active in carrying out the assigned

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experiment or offering opinions. In one study, the researchers noted that the teacher was unaware of such problems until the data was shown.” The first step for educators is to take a step back and see if there is an imbalance within their classroom.

Sally felt like her understanding of herself as a learner had changed but noted that while participating in the Socratic Seminar for the study, she felt “understood and heard.” Perhaps most importantly, Elizabeth felt that her “voice is important to make these connections in a group discussion setting” and vouched for the importance of incorporating “more books written by women or involving women's experiences.” Pam reiterated that “there need to be more female leads represented in a positive connotation.” Anna stated that she now knew she needed to be “confident and persuasive in order to be taken seriously,” and this idea has “been supported through the course.” Mallory noted her preference for having discussions with other female students rather “than in a mixed environment where male students often have the floor.” Mallory’s comment shows the deeper understanding that some of the participants have as female learners while also highlighting the need for educators to support an environment where all voices have the opportunity to be shared and valued by the class.

### **Discussion of the Results in Relation to the Literature**

The results show that more studies are needed in this area. While women’s education and voices have changed over time, the fact that women’s voices are not heard has not changed or been completely resolved. While female voices and characters are more prevalent today, there is still a deficit when it comes to classroom texts that feature female voices. The literature shows that the women’s voices, which are written by men and are the most often represented in the classroom, do not reflect the complicated lives of women, and women are often represented as

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simplistic or stereotypical characters. On the other hand, female characters written by women are more complex and represent the complexity that women deal with in today's modern society.

Bell Hooks advocates for the inclusion of a diverse range of voices in the classroom, including a diverse representation of women. According to Hooks, there is a lot of misunderstanding surrounding the concept of being a feminist. "Females of all ages acted as though concern for or rage at male domination or gender equality was all that was needed to make one a 'feminist'" (Hooks, 2000, pp. 10-11). The participants were not exposed to the writings of Bell Hooks and yet were able to similarly articulate their knowledge of the misunderstandings that their peers have about the meaning and need for feminism as a tool to get rid of sexism in society. Hooks is concerned with the idea that sexism be removed as a barrier for women and is adamant that "as long as females take up the banner of feminist politics without addressing and transforming their sexism, ultimately the movement will be undermined" (Hooks, 2000, p. 13). Hooks feels that women need to address their own biases in order to help the movement move forward. This does not negate that society as a whole needs to deal with sexism but rather points out that women need to assess their patriarchal ideas. Several of the participants discussed their own experiences with female peers who would go out of their way to undermine other women and support the views of the males in their classes.

According to Bell Hooks (1994), in order for gender equality to progress, women need to confront "their own sexism towards other women" (p. 10). This realization is needed for "the direction of the feminist movement" to "shift to a focus on equality in the workforce and confronting male domination" (Hooks, 1994, p. 10). According to Liu (2006), "implicit as well are the norms conveyed about life roles (marriage, heterosexuality)" (p. 425). Regardless of the recent resurgence of traditional roles and careers like housewife, nursing, and teaching for

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women, women need to have equitable representation of voices within the classroom to help gain an equal voice. Instead, the high proportion of white women as teachers sets up an increased possibility of racial mismatch within the chosen texts. Jackson (2023) described this issue as “of particular importance due to the reality that over 80% of the teaching force is made up of White women” (p. 60). To create an environment that is representative of the voices within the classroom, educators need to be aware of a multitude of differences, including racial, ethnic, gender, and learning.

Within the classroom, there are still many disparities in the education of girls and boys. According to Alber (2017), “After thousands of observation hours in various classrooms and grade levels, the research team reported that the number of gender stereotypes in lessons and teaching practices was ‘startling’” (p. 97). Teachers have learned through their own experiences in the classroom that by dealing with the behaviors of male students, they are able to achieve a better level of classroom management. From grade school forward, girls are taught to wait patiently while boys are taught that they can act out to gain attention (Pomerantz & Raby, 2017, p. 9). These lessons move forward into the middle and upper grades, with teachers learning “that the way to ‘manage’ a class is to control the boys” (Pomerantz & Raby, 2017, p. 9). These disparities in the management of male and female students start in elementary school. Pipher (1994) points out that there is “a long history of ignoring girls this age” (p. 21). Instead, teenage and adult female voices need to be added back into the narrative and shown as dynamic, diverse, and original voices.

The observations from the participants point to the need for educators to assess their own bias when it comes to gender in the classroom. Alber (2017) also stated that she “recently tallied by authors gender in three language arts textbooks currently in use in the second-largest school

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district in the United States, Los Angeles Unified (LAUSD). In the eighth-grade language arts textbook, less than 30 percent of the authors were female” (p. 97). This points to the more significant problem of determining what texts and voices should be represented in the classroom. There is a push to incorporate the classics or the canon while, at the same time, a need to diversify the voices included so that they are more representative of the students in the classroom. Furthermore, there is an idea today that gender equality has been achieved and “that boys are now the ones experiencing gender inequality” since girls are more successful in school than boys (Alber, 2017, p. 97). According to the book *Still Failing at Fairness*, gender bias in children’s books was looked at in relationship to books that are American Library Association award winners, Caldecott selections, and top-selling children’s picture books and “contemporary children’s books tell twice as many male-centered tales than female” (Sadker et al., 2009, p. 91).

Sometime between grade school and middle grades, the males become more outspoken while the females lose their voices. According to Alber (2017), she has observed that by the time students are in seventh and eighth grade, the “female students are much quieter and less outspoken than they were in primary grades” (p. 97). Through classroom behavioral education and classroom management, teachers show females that they are valued for being quiet while males are valued and gain attention for being outspoken. These observations are backed up by Pomerantz and Raby (2017). The authors found that “girls felt that boys received the bulk of their teachers’ attention, while the boys felt that girls received the bulk of their teachers’ praise and trust” (p. 96). Ultimately, though, “teacher voices are particularly important because neither instruction nor assessment in literacy in the United States may be particularly conducive to addressing the issue of thoughtful literacy in the form of broad-based research projects” (Applegate & Applegate, 2010, p. 232). Teachers are tasked with thoughtfully choosing

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curriculum to meet the needs of their diverse and changing populations. “Males of all ages need settings where their resistance to sexism is affirmed and valued. Without males as allies in the struggle, the feminist movement will not progress” (Hooks, 2000, pp. 12-13). In a post-feminism world, the idea that equality has been reached is often touted while women’s voices are still repressed. “Post-feminism produces an illusion of gender equality” (Pomerantz & Raby, 2017, p. 126). This illusion needs to be examined and questioned so that gender equality can advance.

Overall, Bell Hooks reiterates the opinions expressed by the participants: "Feminism is for everybody" (Hooks, 2000, p. 10).

### **Limitations**

While the study resulted in deep and meaningful findings, there were limitations within this study. The study is limited to the participants and the perceptions and insights that those participants brought to the research.

While as many participants as possible were included to gain a broader scope of opinions, the study was limited to the participants and their experiences. The vast majority of the participants were White Americans. While the population within the school is 61.4% White and 2.7% Asian, the students in the Advanced Placement course were 70.9% White and 9.6% Asian. Furthermore, while the general school population is 12.3% Black population and 18.4% Latina, but the percentage of Black students in the study was 6% with another 6% Latina. The researcher was limited to the students who were in two twelfth-grade AP Literature courses. While these students were admittedly thoughtful and well-spoken on their opinions, there was less diverse voices represented in the AP Literature courses than in the overall population of the school. In this instance, the limitation was twofold. There is a need for more minority voices to be

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represented within the study. However, there is also an overall need for more representation and participation of people of color in the honors and AP classrooms.

### **Implications of the Results for Practice**

The study shows that female students are not only more engaged when they feel represented and seen in the texts that they read but will connect on a deeper level with the larger themes and character development of the work. These show that it is important for educators to look at the population of students within their classroom and determine the voices that would be the most educational and compelling for those students. While it is important for students to see themselves in the literature, it is also of vital importance that students see others represented and see that the voices of others are valid and important.

This study's key finding is the need to normalize diverse voices within the classroom. However, the voices need to be used meaningfully to show the importance of diversity without feeding into ongoing stereotyping issues. Educators will, at times, need to move into uncomfortable areas to create a more inclusive classroom.

Moving into equality within the classrooms can be achieved through the implementation of regular discussion and feedback that affirms students moving into new spaces. Furthermore, the encouragement of student participation helps to promote inclusivity through the regular inclusion of the wide range of voices and experiences that are represented by the students. Teachers emulate the need for representation of voices through the choice of diverse texts and open dialogue. When teachers thoughtfully create an environment that emulates inclusiveness through considerate inclusion of diverse voices, they are showing their students that the world can be one of equal representation.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

This study shows that women thrive when their voices are heard and the characters and authors represent their perspectives. This indicates that more research could be conducted in relation to empowering female voices. Furthermore, this study has implications in the areas of sexual identity as well as other aspects of personal identity. The study was limited by the fact that most of the students and, therefore, participants identify as White females. Future research could explore female voices in the classroom that incorporate a more diverse population of female students and voices. Additional studies could examine the impact of teachers of color on the student population, specifically in relation to students of color and their voices and achievements in the classroom.

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## Appendix A

### Interview Questions

#### **Pre-Study Questions:**

1. What is your name?
2. How old are you?
3. How would you describe the texts that we have read so far this year?
4. What stories and characters stood out the most?
5. What make these stories and characters stand out?
6. Have you been exposed to female authors in the classroom?
  - a. Do you remember any of the authors?
7. Have you been exposed to female characters in the classroom?
  - a. Did any of the characters stand out?
8. How do your classmates' ideas and understandings about the reading influence your ideas about the texts?
9. What have you learned about humans and society from the texts that we have read?
10. Are you able to make connections between these stories and your life?

#### **Post-Study Questions:**

1. How would you describe the texts and characters from the second unit?
2. What stories and characters stood out?
3. What about these stories and characters made them memorable?
4. Has your understanding of representation of female voices in the classroom been changed or expanded?

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5. Has your understanding of your voice in the classroom as a female been changed or expanded?
6. Has listening to classmates discuss female voices changed your perspective of representation of women in curriculum?
7. Has studying female characters and authors changed or expanded your perception of female voices in literature?

**Appendix B**  
Script to Call Parent/Guardians

Good afternoon name of parent,

My name is Jacqueline Vance, and I am your student's teacher for AP Literature.

I am calling to let you know about the research study that I will be conducting this semester in your student's class. I am currently a doctoral candidate at Kennesaw State University, and I will be conducting an 8-week study on the impact of incorporating more female authors and characters into the curriculum and how that impacts female student's perceptions of the curriculum in the course. I have chosen several students to participate in the study, and your student is one that I have identified as being a potential participant. If you have time, I would love to explain more about participation would entail.

I will conduct interviews with your student prior to and after the study. The questions will help me to understand whether the texts read, and the class discussions had an impact on their perception on female voices in the classroom. This is the only part of the study that will be conducted outside of the regular classroom. I will meet students before or after school or during their lunch so that they do not miss instructional time in other classes.

Participation will not affect your student's grade.

Do you have any questions for me? If you are willing to allow your student to participate, I will send home the consent form for you to sign and return.

Thank you so much for your time.

**Appendix C**  
Parent Consent Form

Dear Parent/ Guardian,

I am a doctoral candidate at Kennesaw State University in the Department of Secondary English Education. My study is examining the effect of including female authors and characters on the female students in the class. Students will be identified by an arbitrarily assigned number and no names will be recorded or revealed in the course of the study. I am asking your permission to allow your child to participate in the study.

Sincerely,  
Jacqueline Gurliaccio Vance

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My signature below indicated that I have read the information provided and have decided to allow my child to participate in the study titled “Empowering Female Voices” to be conducted at my child’s school between the dates of 9/26/2022 and 10/28/2022. I understand the purpose of the research project will be to assess the impact of female voices in the curriculum and that my child will participate in the following manner:

1. Answer pre-study interview questions
2. Participate in Socratic Seminars regarding the texts we read
3. Answer post-study interview questions

Potential benefits of the study are:

1. Exposure to new authors and their experiences
2. A broader understanding of the diversity in the world
3. Exposure to a broad range of voices that will allow students to see the diversity in the world

I agree to the following conditions with the understanding that I can withdraw my child from the study at any time should I choose to discontinue participation.

- The identity of participants will be protected. (Describe how you will protect the identity of participants.)
- There are no foreseeable inconveniences or risks involved to students participating in the study.
- Participation in the study is voluntary and will not affect student grades. If I decide to withdraw permission after the study begins, I will notify the instructor of my decision.

If further information is needed regarding the research study, I can contact:

Jacqueline Vance

770-843-0358

[Jacqueline.vance@cherokeek12.net](mailto:Jacqueline.vance@cherokeek12.net)

Signature \_\_\_\_\_  
Parent Date

Student Name \_\_\_\_\_

**Appendix D**  
Research Matrix

<b>Research Question:</b>	<b>Theoretical Framework:</b>	<b>Data:</b>
<p>How does reading female voices in the curriculum inform the female student's perceptions of themselves and the world around them?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Social Constructivism</li> <li>● Feminist Theory</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Socratic Seminars</li> <li>● Student Interviews</li> </ul>
<p>How does reading female voices contribute to girls' conception of gender identity?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Social Constructivism</li> <li>● Feminist Theory</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Socratic Seminars</li> <li>● Student Interviews</li> </ul>
<p>How does positioning the inclusion of female voices as an asset in learning instead of a deficit in curriculum impact female students' perspectives of themselves as learners?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Social Constructivism</li> <li>● Feminist Theory</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Student Interviews</li> </ul>

