Women Writers in the High School Classroom: A Study on the Ethics of Inclusion
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Abstract

This research explores to what extent women writers are included in the English Language Arts high school curriculum, and argues the texts we include give students clear messages about whose voices are valued. Three public school districts from suburban and rural areas in the Midwest were selected for this research. The methods include questionnaires and interviews that demonstrate the experiences of high school Language Arts teachers and were implemented to gain insight into the practices, concerns, and limitations they face. In general, I found that women comprised 25% of the texts teachers included while white men represented 68%. District requirements and approval processes, perhaps understandably, appeared to have a large influence on these numbers. This research reflects on how such textual choices illuminate what voices are considered valuable in the classroom.
Introduction

The field of education experiences near-constant change, because teachers, curriculum committees, administrators, and the diversity of the larger culture reflect on and incorporate new ideas, methods, standards, systems, and beliefs about what an educated young person should learn. Despite the growth and transformation that has occurred in the profession over the last few decades, one element of the English Language Arts tends to stay the same: the literary texts we use to teach students (Applebee 1992). We might well ask, why do schools continue to teach the same texts decade after decade? Society’s expectation that “great books” must be taught to preserve a cultural tradition helps to explain why the western canon with its so-called ‘dead white male’ writers remains solidly in place among most high school Language Arts recommended reading lists. The literary canon has outlined our curriculum for years by defining which texts are worthy of reading and discussing as a culture (Gilmore 2011). However, in what ways might these choices affect the teaching of literature—in particular, the kinds of literary and social texts that can introduce secondary Language Arts students to critical thinking about feminisms, gender, and sexualities, among other identities our students struggle to understand and negotiate?

Historically, the type of literature taught in the classroom has varied little. Although great literature continues to be created and redefined, teachers turn to the same white, male voices students have been reading for decades (Applebee 1992). This is not to say canonical texts should be ignored; however, limiting the number of voices shared in the classrooms tells students other voices do not need to be heard. A crucial part of an educator’s job is to include a variety of literary and non-fiction voices on syllabi so that students encounter the multicultural world in which they live. Diversity needs to be seen in many forms including gender, ethnicity,
race, place of origin, and historical moment. Although a fear exists that adding new literature will lead to a loss of “the classics”, educators need to understand the classics do not cover everything students need to know in our diverse, contemporary culture. As the world changes, we also need to change the types of literature taught in the classroom (Wolk 2010).

If women writers are still underrepresented and misunderstood in secondary Language Arts curricula, it is time for a change. As a society, we’ve reached a moment of vital importance for gender equality and, as just one solution, adding more representative voices to the canon is essential for students’ growth, understanding, and human empathy (Carter 2007). Incorporating diverse and varied voices becomes an important task as we use literature to understand more about human nature and to interpret and critique past, present, and future possibilities for equality, inclusion, and justice. If we leave voices out of the canon, students may never become aware that alternative ways of being and knowing exist in the world.

High school students present an important audience for learning about the obligations of social responsibility and interdependence of mutual recognition. Students in high school begin making real world applications and look at current events through a more critical eye. Although most literature taught in high school is not current, a range of voices and perspectives on history still reveals to students how important diversity and variety of thought is. Learning to respect the viewpoints of different races, ethnicities, socioeconomic backgrounds, and in this case, genders, teaches students to look at a situation from multiple angles, and also to understand more about themselves (Harper 1998).

Educators must consider how we incorporate these varied voices. In other words, it is our social responsibility as educators to make sure women receive an equal amount of time in our literature classes. Of course, just because an educator includes certain types of texts in the
classroom, does not mean diversity is represented. An understanding of how teachers demonstrate these voices to students in the classroom becomes vital. Students not only require a variety of voices in their literature, but should also be constantly questioning the significance and importance of these voices. Teachers must ensure students approach these diverse texts with a critical mind, social awareness, and a desire to understand difference through their own perspective (Bender-Slack 2010).

Of course, teachers are not the only individuals who have access to the content taught in the curriculum. A teacher’s role in the classroom is complex and there are many political as well as academic issues to handle. Recognizing this complexity, it will be necessary to look at other barriers that stand in the way of diverse texts being incorporated into the curriculum. These barriers include but are not limited to district processes, parents, and students (Gilmore 2011). My research also includes a consideration of how the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) affects the types of literature taught in the classroom. The CCSS have been widely adopted across the United States and have been used in Illinois the past few years.

Our society grows more and more diverse, but choices of which writers to teach remain limited to white, often aristocratic, and educated males. For this reason, I sought to learn if there is a relative absence of women writers and other diverse voices taught in a representative sampling of high school classrooms, and what might this say about our ethics of inclusion and representation in the classroom.

**Literature Review**

**Early Research: 1995-1999**

For several decades, scholars debated whether and how women’s literature and feminist approaches could be incorporated into the classroom. Sharon Bernstein’s “Feminist Intentions:
Race, Gender and Power in a High School Classroom” (1995), Helen Harper’s, “Dangerous Desires: Feminist Literary Criticism in a High School Writing Class” (1998), and Delane Bender Slack’s “Why Do We Need to Genderize? Women's Literature in High School” (1999) all examine how attention to women’s and gender issues can play a role in writing and literature classrooms. These scholars explore issues of gender identity, considering the ways gender stereotypes influence students to read important works with biases they may not realize. In other words, high schools’ tendency to privilege white, male, canonical literature risks leading to the mistaken belief that humans share universal experiences.

Bernstein’s research does not focus on the content taught in classrooms, but notices an unequal distribution of power among males and females leads to a difference in the way students behaved in class. Bernstein notes:

Girls in the class participated very differently than most of the boys. Physically they stayed in their seats and seldom got up or walked around the room. They would talk quietly with other students sitting near them or they would not talk at all. When the girls did participate in class discussions, they would usually face the teacher and speak directly to her. (Bernstein 1995)

Bernstein’s argument matters because it reveals the effects of unequal power dynamics, a difficult causation to “prove”, but a likely correlation, Bernstein asserts. Because women’s voices are represented less often in the classroom, girls’ agency may be inhibited in the classroom themselves. Educators must consider what we teach in the classroom has a direct effect on students themselves.

Harper’s argument centers on analyzing how we teach students to read texts in the classroom. She argues:
For feminists, reading and writing practices cannot be separated from the social and historical contexts in which they are deployed. In other words, there can be no innocent or neutral approach to literature: all interpretation is ideological. Even a choice to ignore gender relations is an ideological statement—that gender does not matter. (Harper 1998)

Teachers cannot simply add diverse voices to the curriculum, but must also analyze the relationship between authors and their messages. To ignore an author’s background when teaching a text risks promoting ignorance and misunderstanding in students. Therefore, the root of the problem not only lies in whom we teach, but how we teach. Incorporating a text written by a female to simply add a woman’s name to the course list will not solve any problems. Social and gender issues that come up from the text also need to be explored. Ignoring diverse viewpoints and perspectives might seem like a “safe” way for teachers to remain neutral in the classroom; however, the choice to disregard certain writers limits students’ acceptance towards difference. Students will assume if they do not have to read a given writer, she does not matter. This ignorance creates an unfair privileging of canonical texts; the canonical texts will continue to be heard and minority writers will continue to be unread for another generation.

Slack argues that leaving women, minorities, poor, and uneducated voices out of the curriculum will misrepresent what a true American experience is. Students understanding of what American identity is will become warped if they do not hear these voices (Slack 1999). Voices left out of the classroom are assumed unimportant and inconsequential. A lack of exposure to women writers in the classroom may cause students to question why these voices deserve attention. Slack’s argument also highlights the complexity of what encompasses an “American” experience. By not sharing a full spectrum of “American texts”, students will have a distorted image of what it means to be identified as an American. Canonical texts support the
idea that American identities focus on whiteness, wealth, masculinity, and power, which only represents a small demographic in America (Slack 1999).

Some of these researchers have seen students who experience disgust at the thought of female sexuality, feel threatened by the idea of feminisms, and believe women writers turn away male students. Of late, such open expressions of sexism and racism once again seem to have gained a new resurgence, which means this scholarship remains relevant despite being nearly two decades old. Issues concerning gender equality and gender inclusiveness still exist in our high schools, and in a public sphere that sometimes seems to have devolved rather than made progress on women’s issues. There are no guarantors of social progress: an educator must vigilantly address the rise of regressive social bigotry, and one way to work against such prejudice involves the study of diverse texts.

**Recent Research: 2003-2010**

More recent articles such as Thea Renda Abu El-Haj’s “Challenging the Inevitability of Difference: Young Women and Discourses about Gender Equity in the Classroom” (2003), Stephanie Power Carter’s “Reading all that White Crazy Stuff:” Black Young Women Unpacking Whiteness in a High School British Literature Classroom” (2007), and Delane Bender-Slack’s “The Role of Gender in Making Meaning of Texts: Bodies, Discourses, and Ways of Reading” (2010) look at women and gender issues as a whole and how they contribute to interpretations of literature. The topics include how gender affects the meaning of a text, how gender and racial diversity call for necessary changes to the literature curriculum, and how differences among fluid notions of gender can be taken advantage of to achieve gender equity in the classroom. Each scholar provides evidence to argue that more voices must find their way
into the classroom. The more aware students are of other voices, the more they will realize the
devalue of equal representation of women’s texts and perspectives.

El-Haj examines how teachers approach the teaching of diverse texts articulating: “many
feminist scholars have long argued that different, more critical questions must be asked: How is
difference produced within and through the curriculum, pedagogy, and institutional arrangements
of schooling and how might these be reshaped to combat inequity” (El-Haj 2003)? Adding a
variety of authors to the literary canon alone will not fully address diversity issues within
schools. Still, teachers can employ these writers to inspire students to think outside their own
experiences. Carter complicates the discussion by integrating gender and race. She argues:

It is crucial that we continue to familiarize ourselves with epistemologies that have
evolved from the lived experience of those whom we teach and study; otherwise, we run
the risk of misrepresenting and silencing the very voices we seek to understand and hear.

(Carter 2007)

Excluding diverse voices from the classroom not only succeeds in silencing those particular
authors, but the students that would have identified with them. Teachers who wish to reach
students in their classrooms must consider how they will do that if they are only teaching white,
male authors. Bender-Slack (2010) researches how students react to a discussion of gender in
the classroom, arguing that the inclusion of certain topics is not as important as how teachers
approach and discuss these topics (Bender-Slack 2010). Including diverse voices is an important
step, but looking at how diverse texts impact students’ understanding is even more crucial.

**Canon Research: 1992-2011**

More recent scholarship looks beyond women’s issues in general, unpacking the relative
absence of changes within the high school literary canon. Arthur Applebee’s “Stability and
Change in the High-School Canon” (1992), Steven Wolk’s “What Should Students Read” (2010), and Barry Gilmore’s “Worthy Texts: Who Decides?” (2011) all address the issues adhering to classics in the high school classroom. These arguments provide a unique layer to this project. While the perspectives these scholars bring refresh the conversation on the literary canon, it is ironic to note that all of these scholars are also men.

Applebee argues that, “the English curriculum is white, male, and Eurocentric, marginalizing the contributions of women and of people from other cultural traditions” (Applebee 1992). Not only has the literary canon hardly changed in the last fifty years, but it leaves out voices that are not white males. Applebee’s study also looks at a list of “top-ten” titles taught across schools. From these lists, Applebee concludes that “81% were by male authors, 98% by white (non-Hispanic) authors, and 99% were written within the United States (63%), United Kingdom (28%), or Western European (8%) tradition” (Applebee 1992). This study was conducted nationally and across a variety of schooling systems back in 1992, revealing the lack of voices shared across the country at the time. More recent data should be gathered to see, beyond the local districts this study examines—whether those percentages have changed in the twenty plus years since. The numbers shown here should be a shock to those who read them. Many people boast that we live in a global age with more access than ever toward different perspectives, yet students are still limited to Western male perspectives in the classroom.

Wolk continues the argument, stating, “if we want to nurture lifelong readers and thinkers, to cultivate social responsibility, to make reading relevant to the 21st century, and to bring joy to reading, then the status quo will not suffice” (Wolk 2010). Focusing on “classic” white, male voices not only marginalizes other voices, but risks making reading irrelevant for
most students in the classroom. Therefore, adding diverse perspectives into the classroom may also benefit students’ engagement in the classroom. Most educators would agree that all instructional decisions made in the classroom should be made with the learner in mind. Not only would including texts outside the canon be beneficial for students’ ethical perspectives, but also adding different voices would change the way they engage with the text. The more students can personally relate to a piece of writing, the more likely they are to read successfully, or to read at all.

Gilmore argues that “the implicit dictum that these works embody a list of ‘acceptable’ texts—texts worthy of being taught—robs students of both the richest rewards of reading and the most important cognitive work they can do in school” (Gilmore 2011). Gilmore’s argument addresses the essential idea that the voices we choose to share with students indicate which texts are important, and which are not. Teaching the same texts repeatedly also takes away the opportunity for students to engage with texts in a new and meaningful way. There are over a hundred analyses for every canonical text that every student has access to through the Internet. Students will be able engage more personally and authentically with a text that has not been used for decades. This could even challenge students in a way that is beneficial to their learning.

Early Enlightenment to Late 20th Century Theories

Changing the canon to include women will make a real difference, but outdated critical methods still privilege male, universalizing ways of reading texts written by women and gender-fluid individuals. Feminist theories provide key arguments for this research project. Perspectives as varied as Mary Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication on the Rights of Woman* (1792) and, to fast-forward to the present, Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* (1990) that explore both radical rethinking of gender as performativity and classic liberal feminist views on the education of
women, respectively. Wollstonecraft’s foundational argument about the inclusion of women in education reminds readers how far women have come, but also reveals how our gender equality issues have not yet been solved. As Wollstonecraft powerfully argues:

If then women are not a swarm of ephemeron triflers, why should they be kept in ignorance under the specious name of innocence? Men complain and with reason, of the follies and caprices of our sex, when they do not keenly satirize our headstrong passions and groveling vices—Behold, I should answer, the natural effect of ignorance.

(Wollstonecraft 1792)

Sexism stems from the refusal to understand or value the perspectives and potential of women. Wollstonecraft points this out centuries ago, yet sexism still exists today. Neglecting to include women’s voices in the curriculum is a similar action to refusing women to be educated. The result in both of these scenarios is the lack of equality for women’s representation.

Butler adds an interesting dimension to the topic of gender and questions if it is ethical to insist on any gendered constructs at all. Applebee’s statistics prove that women’s literature is underrepresented in the classroom, but is it ethical to identify someone and the necessity for their work only by their genders? Butler argues and questions:

It is no longer clear that feminist theory ought to try to settle the questions of primary identity in order to get on with the task of politics. Instead we ought to ask, what political possibilities are the consequence of radical critique of the categories of identity? What new shape of politics emerges when identity as a common ground no longer constrains the discourse on feminist politics? (Butler 1990)
If, with Butler, we deconstruct the binaries and constraints of gender identities, is it right to classify the difference between a woman writer and a male writer? Butler’s complex theoretical arguments deserve attention when discussing gender inclusion in the classroom.

**Methodology**

**Research Question**

The overarching research question for this qualitative project: Are texts written by women writers studied as frequently in the high school classroom as texts written by male writers? If so, why is the discrepancy it occurring? This initial question proposes several others: How do our textual choices affect how students interpret social and cultural issues in the world? By carefully excluding women and other diverse writers from the curriculum, what values are we sharing with students? Also, as Butler questions, how do we fight for the inclusion of women while being mindful of the fluidity of gender? I expected to find that women writers were included much less in the curriculum than male writers, and that district processes for text approval would explain this deficit.

**Research Design**

The first part of my qualitative research was conducted using an open-ended questionnaire. I sent out an anonymous, 9-item questionnaire to high school English Language Arts teachers using Survey Monkey. The second part of my qualitative research involved personal interviews that expanded on the information I received from the questionnaire. The interviews were intended to reveal a more in-depth understanding of how texts are chosen for the curriculum within each district, and how individual teachers feel about the processes in place at their school. The questionnaire and interview questions were designed to be applicable to any school district using Common Core State Standards.
Sample

The research for this study was conducted in three Midwest rural, suburban, public school districts. Anonymous questionnaires and independent interviews were conducted with high school English educators across six different high schools within these districts. The three school districts chosen for this research project, which will be referred to as District A, B, and C, were selected because of their convenience and proximity.

The questionnaire was sent out to the entire English department at each high school that participated, providing a chance for any English Language Arts (ELA) teacher in each district to contribute. All of the ELA teachers in these districts were eligible to participate in order to include a range of teaching experience and class types in the results. The teachers who contributed to my questionnaire remained anonymous. They were not asked to identify their gender, race/ethnicity, or which district they worked for—although some volunteered the information. Twenty-four teachers responded to the questionnaire, but only eighteen questionnaires were complete enough to be used for this study. Six questionnaires that responded to one question or fewer were discarded. Eleven respondents completed the questionnaire in full, and seven teachers responded to the first four questions. These questionnaires are the ones that I reference in the results and analysis sections below. The teachers who participated have taught a variety of classes including, AP courses, Honors courses, essentials courses, regular courses, literature courses, composition courses, and film courses. The participating teachers have taught between 2-16 years.

The interview was conducted by asking the administration from each district to reach out to their ELA teachers to find two teachers from each district who would like to participate. The administration provided me with the contact information of two teachers interested in
participating. These teachers volunteered their time for this study. The interviewed teachers will be referred to as Teacher A, B, C, D, E, and F. The demographic information for these teachers can be seen in Table 1.

The demographics for the students in these districts are relatively similar. District A’s student population is 60.5% White, 17.1% Hispanic, 8.0% Black, 6.6% Asian, 6.4% two or more races, 1.1% American Indian, and 0.2% Pacific Islander. Districts B’s student population is 65.7% White, 15.4% Asian, 9.7% Hispanic or Latino, 4.9% Black, 4.1% two or more races, 0.2% American Indian, and 0.1% Pacific Islander. District C’s student population is 50.6% White, 24.5% Asian, 9.2% Black, 10.9% Hispanic, 4.5% two or more races, and 0.2% American Indian, and 0.1% Pacific Islander (Illinois Interactive Report Card, 2015).

Table 1

_Demographic Information of Teacher Interviewees_

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Years Taught</th>
<th>Courses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>District A</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher A</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher B</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>District B</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher C</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher D</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>District C</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher E</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher F</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Latina</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Measures

My advisor and I designed the questions for the questionnaire and interview with careful attention to wording and detail. Due to time constraints, there was no pilot test for the questionnaire.

The questionnaire consisted of nine questions that assessed these teachers’ experiences and analyzed their perceived contributions to the classroom. The content of these questions—concerning curriculum requirements, texts taught in classrooms, and the teachers’ own thoughts about representing feminisms and women writers in the classroom—is included in Appendix A. Teachers’ experiences and opinions were called for in this study, in addition to a general listing of the authors and texts generally taught in their classrooms. Although this questionnaire solicits qualitative responses, I was able to retrieve quantitative data from one of the questions that asked teachers to list which texts they have taught over the last three years. I used this information to determine a quantitative result of how many women writers were being taught in these districts.

The personal interview consisted of seven questions, asking teachers more specifically about the district processes in place at their schools to approve new texts for the curriculum, and how they represented issues outside of the Common Core State Standards in their classrooms; these can be found in Appendix B. The purpose of this interview was to more closely understand how teachers felt about the freedom to express social issues that arguably lie outside the concerns of the CCSS, or if they felt that expressing these issues was important to their students’ learning in general.

Procedures

This project began with initial research on women writers’ inclusion in the high school curriculum through Education journals, educational theory, and feminist theory. Such
scholarship served as a framework to my own questions and concerns regarding the project.

Before any questions or interviews were conducted, my research received IRB approval. All teacher interviewees signed a consent form prior to the interviews.

The schools that participated in this study were chosen because of their proximity to my research base. However, as stated previously, all questionnaires were conducted anonymously and interviews were given to educators I had never met prior to starting my research. The reasoning behind these measures was to reduce possible conflicts of interest.

Prior to conducting my questionnaire and interviews, I received permission from the administration at each high school that participated. The questionnaires were created and sent through Survey Monkey. Administrators who agreed that the questionnaire could be sent to their teachers received a link for the survey. The administrators then passed that link on to their ELA teachers. Individual teachers chose whether to answer the questionnaire or not. The questionnaire was active for six months (August 2015-January 2016). The interviews were conducted in a span of one month (March 2016). The interviews for Teacher B, E, and F were conducted after school. The interviews with Teacher A, C, and D were conducted during the school day during those teachers’ planning periods. The interviews ranged from ten to thirty minutes in length. Data analysis began in late January 2016 and continued through March 2016.

Due to the qualitative nature of this data, the results were analyzed for patterns and consistencies. Inconsistencies in responses were questioned.

Results

Questionnaire

Text selection. Out of the eighteen responses gathered, most teachers have served on a text selection committee in some capacity, although four had not. Although most teachers have
served on a text selection committee, the important work of text selection happens quite infrequently and, curiously, does not seem to affect what is taught. One respondent shared, “I have served on several curriculum writing committees, but our district has not adopted a new text since I have worked here [11 years]” (#23, personal communication, January 4, 2016). Opportunities for teachers to provide input do not necessarily correlate with changes to the curriculum. Another teacher offered, “I have been a teacher at my present level for seven years. I have never been on a text selection committee, though I offered my opinion to those who did serve about what books should be included” (#18, personal communication, December 31, 2015). Teachers do not often have the chance to share their opinion on what texts should be included in the curriculum, and when they do, changes are not necessarily made. Teachers’ lack of agency within this process presents a big problem. The process makes it difficult for teachers to choose which texts would be best for their class needs and their students. Limiting teachers’ influence on text selection also limits their ability to address which texts and topics are most beneficial for their students.

When asked how literary texts are selected in their school or district, respondents explained the district has a majority of influence. Thirteen different teachers out of the eighteen respondents pointed to district limitations in their responses. In most situations, “the board has to approve our recommendations. They approved year to year. There is a list of books approved for each course that teachers can choose from” (#10, personal communication, September 20, 2015). In other words, a lengthy process obstructs adding new texts to the list. Once the school year has started, it is unlikely that a new book will find its way through committee to students’ syllabi. The decision to add a new text has to be well thought out and presented to the district with plenty of time to implement. As one teacher stated, “we have a lot of choice, but that
happened only recently due to a push from our Department Chair. I get the feeling that our district administrators would prefer us to have less choice. Changes and additions to our ‘approved’ book list are made rarely due to the cumbersome nature of the process (which is outlined by our district admin)” (# 13, personal communication, September 28, 2015). Although this teacher identifies they have a lot of choice, their choice is still limited within the confines of approved texts list. The administration in some districts is uncomfortable with teachers having freedom, even from a list of texts that have been approved and supported by the school. Although teachers know their courses and their students best, they do not often have the freedom to design their own curriculum. Knowing that the district ultimately determines the curriculum, many teachers may feel hopeless when it comes to providing their input.

Three teachers noted that their school uses a program Springboard, created by The College Board, to determine what they teach. This program outlines all of the reading, activities, and learning goals that will be completed over the course of the school year and leaves little to no choice up to the teachers. In this program, “all texts must be approved through district admin and align with Springboard. We have very little flexibility or choice” (#5, personal communication, September 14, 2015). This program completely limits choice at the hands of the teachers.

CCSS. District administration obviously limits teacher’s text selection, as the process to get texts approved is difficult and lengthy. It seemed worth exploring if the Common Core State Standards affected teachers’ text selection as well. Overall, many teachers answered that CCSS has encouraged them to add more challenging texts and more non-fiction texts. However, CCSS does not tell teachers which texts to teach or how to teach them. One of the standards also asks teachers to include more multicultural perspectives, leading one teacher to say, “We aim to offer
higher Lexile texts and take into consideration task as defined by CCSS. We also work to incorporate more multi-cultural texts in all courses” (#16, personal communication, December 28, 2015). In general, the responses noted that CCSS does not necessarily place any limits on what texts teachers use, but rather, it guides them to use texts that are more challenging and multicultural. “Multicultural” is not defined very clearly by CCSS, which means teachers and districts can interpret the term in many different ways. Although the term “multicultural” may present the opportunity to teach a text from another continent, some districts will choose to keep their multicultural texts more “western”.

**Feminisms.** When asked if feminisms were an important concept to teach to high school students, every respondent unanimously replied yes. The justification for this overall positive answer varied slightly from teacher to teacher. Some teachers were passionate about feminism as a social justice issue and offered:

Absolutely. It is highly politicized and therefore misconstrued. Not being a feminist is to be advocate for the exclusive nature inherent to patriarchy. That doesn’t mean that we go to the other extreme into pure matriarchy, but to seek balance in society is preferable because it is more inclusive and respects the rights of both women and men. (# 14, personal communication, September 30, 2015)

For this teacher, ignoring feminisms as an issue in the classroom is a way of passively subscribing to patriarchy. Another passionate respondent answered:

Absolutely—reading texts from a feminist perspective allows students to critically approach a text while also making relevant connections to the world around them. Also, by making students aware of the issues of power and control that provide the intellectual basis for feminist and post-feminist theory, they are able to understand their own position
in a social power hierarchy, which can empower them to find their own sense of agency.

(# 23, personal communication, January 4, 2016)

Not only can teaching feminisms be a powerful learning tool when approaching a text from a critical perspective, but it can benefit students on a social emotional level as well. Being exposed to different perspectives and beliefs helps students to navigate issues and concerns feminist analyses would raise in their lives. Every teacher agreed that feminism was important, but some were less enthused by the idea. For example, another teacher responded, “I believe it is important to speak about feminists writers and analyze how their views affect their writing and themes, but that’s about it” (# 8, personal communication, September 14, 2015). While many teachers see feminism as an advantage to students in the classroom, others view it as just another element of text analysis that students need to learn how to address. English Language Arts is a subject in the humanities, which means it often leads to an exploration of human culture. When teachers only focus on how certain issues affect the text, they are missing an opportunity to connect with their students on a different level. Feminisms and other important issues can and should be expanded beyond the text to support students’ understanding of the humanities, as well as their understanding of the CCSS.

**Text choices.** Teachers listed which novels they had taught in the last three years. On average, women wrote 25% of the novels included the last three years in these districts. Only 28% of the novels taught were by a non-white writer. Interestingly, of the non-white writers, 71% of them were women. This strong intersection between women and non-white writers suggests that curriculum writing teams attempt to address gender and racial diversity with as few texts as possible, leaving more room in the curriculum for white men. This is evident with this dataset, as white men comprise 68% of the novels being taught. The most common novels
taught by women were *The House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros, *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston, and *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley. Although every teacher agreed that feminism was an important concept to incorporate into the classroom, the number of texts being taught by women is severely limited. Of course, this is not necessarily the fault of the teacher. One respondent offered:

> It should be noted that at the junior level, the number of female-authored texts is under ten, whereas male authors are over fifty! So the options are rather restricted . . . teachers would need to make a concerted effort to include female novels. I cannot say to what extent this has occurred, not because of any intent to avoid female authored texts, but because the process to approve additional books has been restricted and unnecessarily burdensome. (# 14, personal communication, September 30, 2015)

Many teachers argue they are not intentionally avoiding texts written by women. Rather, the problem lies in how many women writers are optioned on the approved text lists.

Teachers also listed what literature they teach written by women (this can include poems, short stories, non-fiction, etc.) and how they approach women’s issues through these texts. Most respondents stated women’s voices are represented more strongly in supplemental texts, although a numerical value wasn’t clear. Poetry and short stories seem to be a strong avenue for women’s voices in the classroom. There was not one standard way to approach women’s issues in the classroom, but the most prevalent answer was that “women’s issues are typically approached in terms of power and control” (# 23, personal communication, January 4, 2016). Other teachers noted that, “It depends on the text and the issues present. In other words, do they pertain to an issue that many women deal with or not” (# 14, personal communication, September 30, 2015)? In general, if women’s issues seemed to be relevant to the text, most teachers would discuss it.
Student responses. After hearing the teacher’s own thoughts on feminisms and the issue of including more women’s texts, I wanted to see how they guided students to look at these readings. When asked if they encourage students to see the value of texts composed by women, one teacher responded, “We offer the value of the text—regardless of author” (#16, personal communication, December 28, 2015). This answer is problematic as it separates the text from the writer’s cultural and social context, reflecting a viewpoint that became popular during the New Critical era in the mid-20th century. Ignoring the context of a writer’s identity will often lead to a misunderstanding of the text itself. If students are unable to situate themselves within the framework of the text, they will lose an opportunity to understand another culture and time period. Most teachers argued the literature presents itself as valuable, simply because they decided to teach it. Teaching the novel in itself is a validation of its value. Another teacher admitted, “My personal bias is that I’ve tended to have read male-authored texts. It isn’t my job to persuade students to value texts composed by women simply because they are women” (#14, personal communication, September 30, 2015). Including valuable women-authored texts into the curriculum should not be done “simply because they are women”, but because the texts are just as valuable as comparable male-authored texts. If educators withhold adding texts written by women simply because the authors are women, perhaps they should also question why they add canonical texts, simply because they are from the literary canon. Another respondent answers, “historically speaking, there just aren’t as many options. But I always emphasize the importance of literature that was groundbreaking and convention-defying, regardless of the gender or race of the writer” (#24, personal communication, January 4, 2016). This teacher argues the lack of representation for women writers in the classroom is based on history, not due to the lack of women writers available on approved district lists. If history truly inhibits the
amount of women writers entering the classroom, perhaps it is a teacher’s place to change that. By representing more women writers in the classroom, educators can begin to change the way society reflects on women writers and their value.

As society develops, there are new gender identities entering classrooms and literature. I thought it worth asking teachers if they have or have felt the need to include these identities through their reading choices. Most respondents answered they have not had this issue arise, and therefore, have not addressed it in the classroom. However, one respondent answered, “While our school has several students who do not associate with the binary gender roles, we don’t have the flexibility in our curriculum for that to play a role in our text selection” (#23, personal communication, January 4, 2016). As the statistics above report that 68% of the curriculum is comprised of white males, teachers need to question what they mean by “flexibility”.

Interview

Approval process. Teacher A and Teacher B agreed the district approval process for new texts recently transformed into a more involved and difficult process. First, teachers must fill out a form answering “what novel you want, why you want it, where it fits in the curriculum, what would it be replacing, why are we picking this specific novel and not another novel, what standards does it address, and so on” (Teacher A, personal communication, March 8, 2016). After filling out this form, the teachers send it to the Administration and the ELA Department Head for approval. After receiving approval from the Administration and Department Chair, the request is sent to the school board. The school board ultimately determines if they will approve the purchase of the new text. Teacher B noted the earlier process was simpler. In prior years, teachers would discuss a potential text with their Department Head. The Department Head would examine the text to determine whether it would fit the curriculum’s purposes. If the
Department Chair agreed that the new text would be a good addition, teachers would approach the school board for approval.

Although the new process overwhelms both teachers, Teacher A argued the new process has benefits. With the old process, many books lacking in literary merit received approval. The new process ensures texts with value are selected; however, Teacher A wishes there were “a middle ground” (Teacher A, personal communication, March 8, 2015). If my thesis has merit, making teacher proposals for new literature less onerous would be an outcome worth pursuing.

Similar to District A, District B enacted a new process for adding texts to the approved list. In order to teach a new text, two teachers from both high schools in the district must read the selection. If all four readers agree the book would be a good addition, one teacher completes an extended-text evaluation form. Teacher C provided me with the exact form used for this process with example answers of his own. The form asks teachers to identify the unit of instruction the text would be used in, explain how the text fills a curricular need, identify the quantitative complexity (Lexile score), identify the qualitative complexity, consider if students at this grade level possess the necessary critical thinking skills to understand the text, consider if the text reflects a particular cultural lens, consider how the text furthers social emotional learning of students, and to identify what potential sensitive or concerning elements might contribute to anyone feeling uncomfortable with the text. Once the teacher completes the form, they send it to the extended-text committee. If the extended-text committee approves the text, the teacher sends the form to the school board for final approval (Teacher C, personal communication, March 16, 2016).

Teacher C argues the process is necessary because many low-quality texts would make the list when the process was less rigorous. Teacher D does not find the process difficult and has
no issues completing it. She added that for an AP class, she will only select texts that have appeared on the AP test before to best prepare students for the exam.

District C implements a similar text selection process where the district must approve a new selection before moving to the school board for final approval. Teacher E agrees with Teacher C and D that the process to approve books is tolerable, but reveals the decision to add a new text often comes down to money in her district. When a new text is selected for the curriculum, the school must provide the text for the students, which means buying a class set. If more than one class uses the book, the school must purchase multiple class sets. Students are able to purchase their own texts, but the district cannot make this a requirement. Due to these budget restrictions, the board will often suggest using a book the school already has in stock to avoid making a new purchase.

Teacher F explained a majority of teachers do not have a say in the texts selected each year. The curriculum team typically makes these decisions, although teachers may occasionally be allowed to provide input. Two teachers from each grade level make up the curriculum team, and make decisions about what to teach based on the available resources in the district.

**Variety of texts.** Teacher A’s Contemporary Literature class features a list of eleven books. Of the eleven books, there is one women writer and one writer of color. In general, Teacher A finds that parents of students and the school board present the greatest obstacle when it comes to adding diverse texts to the curriculum. Although the course is meant to include more modern texts, she argues many people are afraid of modern texts because “they tend to have sex in them and language” (Teacher A, personal communication, March 8, 2015). The stigma surrounding modern texts might be responsible for keeping women and people of color out of the curriculum. Teacher A reflects on one decision to keep *A Thousand Splendid Suns* out of the
curriculum, proving my point. District A included *A Thousand Splendid Suns* one year in their Honors English 1 course, but received criticism from parents. Because of parent disapproval, teachers could not use this text in their curriculum the following year. Teacher A remembers a fellow teacher suggested an unnamed alternative text “because it’s set in South Africa and it’s more westernized” (Teacher A, personal communication, March 8, 2015). This problematic substitution rightfully bothered Teacher A, because the school’s effort to include diverse texts ultimately led to non-Western voices being omitted. Teachers ultimately substituted *A Thousand Splendid Suns* with *Lord of the Flies*, which Teacher A argues is just as graphic, if not more graphic, than *A Thousand Splendid Suns*.

Teacher B’s unique selection includes a multitude of diverse texts. Of the six novels being taught in her Modern World Literature class, there are two women writers and four non-white writers. She adds the class also studies an array of short stories and poetry from China and Japan. In Teacher B’s sophomore English class, teachers are required to follow Springboard, which has all of the texts and excerpts selected for teachers. However, since the theme in Springboard for English 2 is “Culture”, there is a very diverse range of texts and authors. Teacher B shared thirty different texts and excerpts of texts she uses from Springboard. Of those thirty readings, seventeen of the writers are women and twenty-two are non-white writers.

District B follows a four-unit plan with one anchor text per unit. Unit One is fiction, Unit Two is non-traditional fiction, Unit Three is memoir, and Unit Four is a non-memoir piece of non-fiction. The extended texts Teacher C used this year were *Of Mice and Men* by John Steinbeck, *Antigone* by Sophocles and *Julius Caesar* by Shakespeare, *The Color of Water* by James McBride, and *Blink* by Malcolm Gladwell. Although the extended texts in this course do not represent any women writers, Teacher C argued he teaches several supporting texts by
women. Each unit is nine weeks, and Teacher C affirms many diverse voices are shared through supplemental texts in each unit.

In her freshmen course, Teacher D is teaching *Maus* by Art Spiegelman, *The Color of Water* by James McBride, *Romeo and Juliet* by Shakespeare, *Antigone* by Sophocles, *Dandelion Wine* by Ray Bradbury, and *Of Mice and Men* by John Steinbeck this year. Similar to Teacher C, all of the texts were written by men. The senior class is reading *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston, *The Sound and the Fury* by William Faulkner, *The Importance of Being Ernest* by Oscar Wilde, and *Much Ado About Nothing* by Shakespeare. The students are able to pick a choice novel, but their selection must be a text that has appeared on the AP exam in the past. Teacher D also noted she supplements these texts with diverse voices through the use of short stories.

Teacher C provided me with the district’s list of approved texts. Of the three hundred and eighty-six texts included in this list, I discovered women comprised 20.7% of the list while non-white writers accounted for 14.2%. 69.7% of the texts had white male authors.

In Teacher E’s American Literature course, students read *Into the Wild* by Jon Krakauer, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston, *The Crucible* by Arthur Miller, *The Scarlett Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne, and *The House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros. Teacher E also mentioned teaching F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, and J.D. Salinger, but did not mention any specific texts. Teacher E states most of the texts taught in this class are written by while males; however, she also brings in diverse voices through supplemental texts. Teacher E struggles with the idea that this might just be providing students with a “sampling”, but feels it is the best option available to her (Teacher E, personal communication, March 10, 2016).
Teacher F is currently teaching *A Lesson Before Dying* by Ernest J. Gaines, *The Old Man and the Sea* by Ernest Hemingway, *The Catcher in the Rye* by J.D. Salinger, *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald, and short stories by Stephen King and Edgar Allan Poe in her American Literature course. In her Comparative Literature course, she is teaching *The Taming of the Shrew* and *Macbeth* by Shakespeare, *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley, *The Things They Carried* by Tim O’Brien, *Siddhartha* by Herman Hesse, and a lot of non-fiction pieces that relate to the current world.

**CCSS.** While the CCSS do not outline which texts a teacher uses, each district curriculum implements the CCSS in a different way. Teacher A and Teacher B agreed the CCSS do not limit their textual choices at all, but rather, the CCSS allows them to incorporate more diverse texts into their classroom. The CCSS are skill-based rather than curriculum-based, which means teachers can virtually use any text to teach students the corresponding skill. Teacher A and B also agreed there was room within the standards to explore cultural and social issues that come up within the texts.

Both Teacher C and Teacher D feel the CCSS have changed the way they approach texts and select texts for the classroom. Teacher C reveals District B revamped their curriculum upon adopting the CCSS. As a member of the curriculum writing team, Teacher C is privy to knowledge on the changes that were made. To address the CCSS, District B split the curriculum into the four units mentioned previously. Within each unit, the writing team ensured every standard was being addressed. They organized the curriculum to connect the texts being taught with certain standards from the CCSS. As far as the texts being used, Teacher C argues the CCSS required the district to implement more rigorous texts. This means they have moved texts like *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee, to the 8th grade level in order to make room for more
challenging texts in the high school curriculum. Teacher D states she has added more non-fiction to her curriculum. Prior to the CCSS a fiction comprised a majority of the curriculum. Students now read a wider variety of genres and styles.

Teacher E serves on the curriculum-writing team for her school and states the curriculum was vertically realigned to ensure certain skills from the CCSS were being incorporated into the curriculum. However, Teacher E argues the texts they teach have not necessarily changed as a result of the CCSS. Teacher F has only experienced teaching using the CCSS. However, she feels it has changed the way teachers approach the text in the classroom, stating, “Before it was really about the book, now it’s about like what we do with the book” (Teacher F, personal communication, March 24, 2016).

**Student responses.** When asked how students respond to women writers in the classroom, both Teacher A and Teacher B noted students did not react any differently when they were reading a text written by a woman writer. However, Teacher A noted students often assume they are reading a text by a male, even if the author is a woman. For example, many students would refer to Harper Lee as “he”. Although students did not have any opposition to reading a text written by a woman, many male students resisted reading novels about women’s issues. Teacher A and B noted a lot of their male students struggled reading *The Bell Jar* because “it’s girl stuff” (Teacher A, personal communication, March 8, 2015).

Teacher A and B also agreed students should be encouraged to read a range of voices in the classroom. Teacher A was more hesitant about her classroom being a platform for certain issues. She argued she has to take student interest and her parent audience into account. Parent disapproval can also limit the conversations many teachers might want to have in the classroom. She considers her school to be conservative and argues many parents reject social and cultural
issues being taught in the classroom. Teacher B fights more vehemently to include issues into the classroom, and argues these topics are often what contribute to students being interested in a text. She believes students see the importance of these issues and will connect more with the texts they are reading as a result.

Teacher C doesn’t believe his students respond any differently when reading a text by a women writer or a text about women’s issues. However, he says as a male teacher, he does his best to be a “non-critical purveyor of the literature” (Teacher C, personal communication, March 16, 2016). Therefore, he hopes students will make their own interpretations without influence from his own opinions. Teacher C also believes there is plenty of room in the curriculum to discuss diversity and cultural/social issues that come up within certain texts. However, Teacher C generally allows the discussion to navigate to what students are most interested in.

Teacher D has had a few experiences where male students were not willing to read texts written by women. When *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston and *The Awakening* by Kate Chopin were options on a choice text list, Teacher D remembers that only females typically selected those texts. Teacher D does believe students should read a range of voices, but also asserts she won’t “deliberately select a text because it is multi-cultural, or because it is a female writer” unless her purpose is to provide students with another lens (Teacher D, personal communication, March 16, 2016).

Teacher E believes students should have exposure to a range of voices, but also struggles with how to express certain viewpoints in the classroom. She articulates there is a difficulty in expressing important to ideas to students, while ensuring you’re not insulting an ideology that might exist at a student’s home. Teacher E acknowledges many families within her school community are racist and because of this, she finds it challenging to address social issues in a
way that won’t insult the general population’s viewpoints. Teacher E had a student respond to the poem, “The Skin I’m In”, written by a black writer, saying “well, I don’t get it, we don’t have racism anymore” (Teacher E, personal communication, March 10, 2016). Moments like this make Teacher E realize students are unaware of most social issues, as the issues do not pertain to those individual students. Instead of ignoring the arguments, Teacher E tries to address them in a way that is relevant to modern times and relatable to students on a personal level.

Teacher F often incorporates social and cultural issues in the classroom through supplemental texts and independent research projects, but realizes students do not always understand particular issues, such as the complexity of gender fluidity. If a student lacks personal experience with an issue, they have difficulty relating to it. Teacher F finds it easier to incorporate these conversations into the classroom with upperclassmen students, who have had more exposure to complex social and cultural issues.

**Springboard.** District A uses a program called Springboard. Springboard was created by The College Board and is designed to incorporate CCSS while preparing students for college courses. The program is described as a “customizable pathway integrating rigorous instruction, performance-based assessment, and exemplary professional learning” (The College Board 2016). Most of the texts taught in Springboard are excerpts of novels, short stories, and poems. However, there are usually one or two full novels incorporated into the program. Teacher A and Teacher B identify positive and negative associations with Springboard. Teacher A feels the freshmen Springboard program attempts to include diverse texts and perspectives. However, “every minority character is poor” (Teacher A, personal communication, March 8, 2015). She believes Springboard attempts to incorporate diverse voices, but only succeeds in the stabilizing of stereotypes.
Teacher B uses the sophomore Springboard program. She enjoys that the variety of excerpts allows students to access a multitude of voices; however, she believes students lose the valuable process of reading an entire text. She also argues culture is “prescribed” in Springboard. The program expects that students will have the same understanding of culture and access the texts in the same way, which is not the case in a multicultural classroom. While Springboard attempts an exploration of social and cultural issues, Teacher B feels the need to address it more deeply than Springboard.

Discussion

Questionnaire

District processes. Text-selection processes present difficulties across these three districts. Many obstacles stand in the way of a text being added to an approved text list including the process itself, the department head, the district, the school board, and finances. Even if a new text receives approval for the district list, there is no guarantee it will be taught in the classroom. Curriculum teams typically decide which texts align with the curriculum each year, leaving little choice to individual teachers (# 23, personal communication, January 4, 2016). Teachers from my questionnaire responses, who suggested they did have a lot of choice, are still limited to the texts on the approved district list.

There are many understandable reasons in place for this difficult process. The department is able to map out the curriculum so students are not repeating texts in different English classes. The process also confirms schools have enough supply of the text to provide students, ensuring they do not have to purchase their own copies. Districts also check for quality to ensure students only read texts of literary merit. However, these strict procedures lead to a dependence on the literary canon. Teachers understand their choice in selecting a text is limited
and are therefore not likely to go through the lengthy process for new text approval. These difficult processes create a system that is difficult to interrupt with new ideas and texts.

**Text choices.** Eleven respondents shared the novels taught within the last three years in their classroom. After combining the averages from each respondent, I found women writers represent 25% of the novels, non-white writers represent 28% of the novels, and white men represent 68%. These numbers reveal white men are prioritized in the classroom. The curriculum limits the number of women and non-white writers being taught to make room for more white male voices. Does this not show students that white males’ voices are more important 68% of the time? This is not to say the novels written by white men on this list have no worth. However, are these novels so incredibly valuable that we need to consistently exclude women and other diverse voices from the classroom? I believe this is the message we wrongfully send to students.

Many respondents acknowledged specific reasons women were not included as frequently as male writers. A respondent argued there simply weren’t as many women writers available on their approved text lists (#14, personal communication, September 30, 2016). Their opinion articulates teachers are not purposely excluding women’s voices, but that teachers have limited options when it comes to what women writers they are able to teach. Once again, district approval processes are to blame. Another teacher argued historically, there are not as many women writers available to teach (#24, personal communication, January 4, 2016). This biased claim expresses a major problem with the marginalizing of women’s voices. The belief that women simply did not contribute as much worthy literature as men limits the power of women and their voices in the classroom. Believing that historically, women have had less valuable contributions exposes the passive sexism that exists within school systems.
Women’s issues in the classroom. Every teacher who responded agreed the study of feminisms was valuable for students; however, teachers would not necessarily lead students toward that discussion unless it was essential to the text. Although the number of women writers represented in the curriculum is shockingly low, it is encouraging to hear every respondent finds feminism and women’s issues to be important concepts to take on in the classroom. That said, an educator’s job, first and foremost, is to ensure students are meeting the CCSS. If students are able to meet these standards in a way that includes an exploration of different issues, they have accomplished a lot. Although women writers appear to be an afterthought, women’s issues being incorporated into the classroom is still an important accomplishment.

Interview

Approval process. All three of the districts in this study have a similar process in place for adding new novels to the approved district list. A teacher has to fill out a form, justifying the purpose and significance of the novel they want to add to the list. The next steps are to gain approval from their department head, the district, and the school board. Some teachers find this process to be burdensome and difficult, but most teachers agree it is a necessary process to ensure that quality texts are being selected for the curriculum. However, as stated previously, this process becomes problematic as it ensures women and non-white writers are underrepresented. Teachers are extremely busy, and most would decide to choose a text from the existing list before going through the extended process for text selection. Knowing how limiting the approved texts lists are in regards to women writers and non-white writers, these in depth processes ensure many voices will stay out of the curriculum. District A is unique in that they currently use Springboard, a program that pre-determines all of the texts being taught including novels and supplemental texts. While this program attempts to bring in diverse
writers, it completely limits the choice at the hands of the teacher (Teacher A, personal communication, March 8, 2015). By prescribing the definitions and experiences of culture, Springboard also stabilizes biases and stereotypes that exist around different social and cultural issues.

Teacher C provided a completed copy of the extended text evaluation document used in District B. One question on the form is, “Does this text reflect a particular cultural lens/viewpoint? Please Explain”. Teacher C’s answer to this question for the text The Prize Winner of Defiance, Ohio was “The narrator and setting (through the eyes of a daughter in a 1960’s small Ohio town) would not alienate any readers” (Teacher C, personal communication, March 16, 2016). This answer is problematic for sure. In this example, it appears Teacher C is trying to convince the district this text will be acceptable because it reflects a culture a majority of students can understand. The term “alienate” signals that Teacher C and the district are concerned about different cultural viewpoints affecting their students in a negative way. Protecting students from the inclusion of different perspectives teaches students other voices should be feared. As teachers, we should not be protecting students from feeling “alienated” by another culture. Our goal should be to cultivate understanding and acceptance towards different voices by providing students with a variety of perspectives. Limiting viewpoints in the classroom will only lead to ignorance and bias.

**Variety of texts.** Across these six teachers’ novel lists for the year, women represented 17% of the texts, while non-white writers counted for 23.4%. On District B’s approved text list, women comprised 20.7% of texts and non-white authors represented 14.2% of texts. These results prove women and non-white writers are an afterthought in the curriculum. Every teacher I interviewed made a point to say women’s voices and other diverse voices are included into the
curriculum through the use of supplemental text. These supplemental texts can be poems, short
stories, essays, articles, etc. While it is comforting to know we are not completely excluding
these voices from the curriculum, classifying that these texts are “supplemental” to the
curriculum, rather than “core” texts sends a poignant message. These choices declare “other”
voices do not need to be studied in depth; rather, they simply seek to enhance the voice of the
white male author that is worthier of studying.

Many teachers articulated they have an audience in mind when selecting a text. The
audience these teachers refer to extends beyond the students, and reaches to parents, districts,
school boards, etc. Teacher A noted the teachers were encouraged to choose a multi-cultural text
that was more “westernized” (Teacher A, personal communication, March 8, 2016). This
problematic language reveals the trouble in teaching to an audience. Is it at all ethical to leave
out more “eastern” voices because the parents and the school board will feel more comfortable?
If we are purposely shutting out voices in the classroom because the philosophies that are
represented in a text do not match those of our own country, we are cultivating a lack of empathy
and understanding toward other perspectives and cultures.

Teachers also select the same white male authors repeatedly because of the expectation
students will study certain “canonical” texts in high school. For example, every student is
expected to study Shakespeare, and many believe Hemingway and Fitzgerald are the foundation
of any American literature course (Teacher E, personal communication, March 10, 2016). This
belief articulates one of the major problems within my study. Students will begin to value the
texts we bring into the classroom, simply because they know they were chosen for a reason. By
actively excluding women’s voices and other diverse perspectives from the classroom, aren’t we
teaching students these voices are not worth reading? Students will begin to assume we are not
including women in the curriculum because their voices are not as valuable as the men we have been teaching for decades.

**CCSS.** The CCSS do not express which texts teachers should use in the classroom. Depending on how the district implements the CCSS, some textual choices are changed, but this is not always the case. Districts B and C have had to rewrite their schools’ curriculums as a result of the CCSS being implemented, but they have not necessarily had to change which readings they use. The CCSS only encourages teachers to incorporate more rigorous, multi-cultural, and non-fiction texts into the classroom. Therefore, the CCSS are not limiting by any means, but rather forces teachers to move further from the literary canon (Common Core 2016).

Every teacher agrees the CCSS leave room for teachers to talk about social and cultural issues within the classroom. Teachers agree these issues are important to discuss, but also struggle trying to make these issues relevant to students’ own lives and appropriate for a “conservative” community. Bringing up social and cultural issues in the classroom does not mean you tell students what to think. It simply exposes them to different views, thoughts, and feelings on the world. Teaching students to understand these viewpoints through a critical lens should not be upsetting to any community, as it simply builds students’ analytical skills.

**Student responses.** Most of the teachers believed their students did not respond any differently when presented with a text written by a woman or surrounding women’s issues. However, many of the teachers stated students often didn’t understand how to approach certain issues when brought up in the classroom. For example, when given a choice, most males will avoid a book that is written by a woman writer. Students can also become confused when presented with issues like gender fluidity and racism, because these issues have not yet existed in their worldview (Teacher F, personal communication, March 24, 2016). The fact that students
have trouble understanding these concepts proves we must purposefully attempt to bring more social and cultural issues into the classroom. Students do not believe sexism or racism exists because they have not read voices that have experienced this in the modern world. Protecting students from these issues does not benefit them in any way, but only serves to create more boundaries for students who do encounter these issues. Limiting the conversations in the classroom leads to ignorance and a misunderstanding of what is going on in the world today. In order to generate more empathetic and critical students, social and cultural issues must become embedded in the curriculum.

**Implications**

This data identifies a significant problem within our schools, but does not present a solution as clearly. Because every district will vary in its processes, populations, and principles, there is not a definable solution for each teacher. Discussing the importance of adding more women and diverse writers to the high school curriculum with colleagues, students, parents, and administration is one way to start finding a solution. Every teacher should discover how their own district handles curriculum text selection and new text approval so they can begin to make changes as they see fit. Overall, finding room for the inclusion of women and other diverse writers, and discussing the social and cultural issues that arise from these texts is crucial. Creating small changes over time will eventually lead to a curriculum that is more diverse and culturally aware.

**Limitations**

The validity and reliability of this research might be tested by several limitations including sample size, and the closeness of the districts both in location and in demographic.
Sample size. This study was only able to include three districts, which may limit the results in scope. Although each district has different curriculums and procedures in place, having a larger sample may have led to more valid and reliable results.

Location similarity. District A, B, and C, were chosen because of their proximity and convenience, but this provides another limitation. Because the communities that belong to these districts are close in proximity, the resulting cultures of the districts are similar. Finding districts that were more diverse from each other would have made the research more reliable.

Demographic similarity. These districts have slight variations in racial demographic, but all of them maintain a majority of white students. Finding districts that had a more diverse student and teacher population could have affected the results of this study. These districts were all in rural and suburban areas of a similar middle-class population, which also limits the data.

Conclusion

The data collected in this research study has consistently shown that women writers and other diverse voices are an afterthought to white male writers. Although women and other non-white writers are incorporated into the curriculum through supplemental texts, we still cannot say there is an equal representation across the literature we teach students. Excluding these voices from the curriculum not only inhibits students’ knowledge about social and cultural issues in their world, but also teaches them the white male writers we choose to teach are of more value than women and non-white writers.

The reason behind this exclusion can be pinpointed to a few factors. Long and arduous text approval processes in place at these districts keep teachers from adding new texts to the approved district lists. The amount of choice teachers have also limits the voices we include. Typically, curriculum writing teams will decide which texts will be incorporated into the
curriculum based on what fits their learning goals and what texts they have readily available. Money and budgeting can be an issue, as districts may not have the funds to purchase an entire class set of a new text. The district and school board might also try to purposefully leave out more diverse texts, as they fear it will upset their conservative communities.

There are obstacles educators will face when trying to incorporate new voices into the classroom, but it is a necessary action. In our modern world, we can no longer ignore the perspectives, insights, values, and ideas of other voices. English Language Arts teachers have a unique platform where they are able to teach students what they need to know, while also teaching them about the social and cultural issues that lie outside the world around them. It is time for ELA teachers to take advantage of this opportunity by incorporating more women and diverse writers in the high school curriculum.
References


APPENDIX A

My name is Kaitlyn Sparkman and I am a student at North Central College. I am researching how often women writers and feminist texts are included in the high school literature curriculum. I am opening this topic to women writers and feminist texts because women writers may not be writing about feminism at all, whereas not all feminist texts have to be written by women. My personal belief is that feminism is concerned with women’s equality to men. I would truly appreciate any input or opinions you have on this topic as an educator, and appreciate the time given to complete this survey.

Feminism (n.) Advocacy of equality of the sexes and the establishment of the political, social, and economic rights of the female sex


Introduction Questions:

1. How long have you worked at your present position? Do you or have you served on a text selection committee? What levels and kinds of Language Arts classes do you typically teach?

Curriculum Questions:

2. How are literary texts selected in your school or district? Are changes made term-to-term? Is there much flexibility and choice within your department?

3. In what ways do the CCSS affect your selection of literary texts?

4. Do you believe feminism is an important concept and movement to teach to high schoolers—why, or why not? And if so, how do you justify including these viewpoints?

Literature Questions:

5. What novels have you taught in the last three years and for what levels/classes? What learning goals motivated your selections?

6. What literature written by women have you taught in the last three years, and for what levels/classes? No matter the sex of the writer, how are women’s issues approached?
7. How do you approach teaching women writers and/or feminist texts to your students?

8. Do you encourage male students to read women writers as often as female students read male writers? How do you persuade them of the value of texts composed by women?

9. Does the issue of students who do not identify with binary gender roles arise? If so, how do you make reading choices and recommendations for that cohort?
APPENDIX B

Interview Questions for Secondary Education English Language Arts Teachers

1. I would be interested to know a little bit about your background.
   a. How long have you worked at your district?
   b. What classes do you currently teach?

2. Tell me a little about the texts that you are currently using in your classroom
   a. Do you feel there is a range of diversity in the texts you are able to teach?
   b. How many women writers are on your approved book list?
   c. How many of the writers are persons of color?

3. Can you describe the process of getting new books approved by your district?
   a. Is it difficult?
   b. Is there room to explore both historic and contemporary human struggles—for example, concerning equality and inclusion for women and persons of color?
   c. Do the Language Arts standards make it more or less difficult explore differences/identity matters?

4. Now let’s talk a little about student responses.
   a. How do your students respond to women writers in your classroom?
   b. Does your school have a “chick lit” section, or an ample number of texts (literary or non-fiction) focusing on gender? What do you think of it? If you have materials aimed at gender-specified readers, in what ways do you encourage such reading—and to a range of differently identified genders?
   c. Is it possible to hold students and teachers accountable to L.A. core standards and at the same time pursue social, cultural, and political ideas the humanities value?

5. Should students be encouraged to read a range of voices in the classroom? Do you believe that your classroom is a platform for these issues?

6. What changes in your teaching or understanding of English have you experienced since the CCSS were implemented? Do your choices of writers/texts/themes reflect the shift to core standards, or do you try to blend in previous approach(es) to emphasize issues and/or methods that were effective for you, or that matter to you?

7. What do you think about “Springboard,” if it’s in place at your school?