



Invisible Women

Gender Bias in the English Curriculum

Research findings by *End Sexism in Schools* demonstrate the gender imbalance in the English curriculum. **Rachel Fenn** discusses these findings and suggests steps every department can take to audit and make changes to what they teach.

“The most popular texts studied remain those authored by white men, about white male experiences.”

‘We are what we read’ is a commonly cited maxim. From a young age, we learn about the world from the stories we hear. Our moral codes are reinforced in the fairy stories we listen to at bedtime, and our perception of what is ‘normal’ is shaped by patterns in the narratives we experience. For much of modern history, normative narratives have revolved around white, patriarchal values that reinforce active roles for men and white people and passive roles for women and people of colour.

Over the last twenty years, a recognition of the exclusionary, discriminatory and limiting nature of these has led to increasing amounts of writing for children by and about people from a range of more diverse backgrounds. However, this diversity is still not reflected in the diet of literature studied in schools. As Penguin and the Runnymede Trust’s ‘Lit in Colour’ report (2021) has shown, the most popular texts studied remain those authored by white men, about white male experiences.

Gender and the curriculum

While recent, much needed addressing of racial diversity has revealed a significant under-representation of BAME voices on the curriculum, no comparable research has been undertaken to investigate gender imbalance. This is despite the increased recognition of sexual harassment and misogynistic behaviour in schools experienced by girls, revealed in UK Feminista and NEU’s report ‘It’s just everywhere’ (2017) and the scandal of the ‘Everyone’s Invited’ website. Ofsted’s 2021 report into the website’s findings commented on how boys have a sense of ‘superiority’ that makes them feel they can treat girls as they wish. They recommended that the solution was an improved RSE curriculum focusing on consent.

However, this focus on RSE as a panacea for misogyny has ignored the role of the academic curriculum in forming and reinforcing patriarchal values in children,

which is what leads to misogyny and violence towards women in the first place. The reality is that pupils leave RSE lessons and walk into classrooms where they're taught a curriculum that directly contradicts everything they've just been told about respect and equality. If we don't tackle the misogyny that's embedded into the curriculum, everything else will only ever be window dressing.

End Sexism in Schools

I am one of the founders of grassroots campaign organisation End Sexism in Schools. Unsatisfied with PSHE being touted as the only solution to misogyny, we wanted to research what was being taught by and about women in our classrooms, and our first project was to undertake an England-wide survey of the literature texts studied at KS3. This research has never been done before, as it is a huge task; every school has the flexibility to teach what they like at this level, so each had to be researched individually.

After six months of research carried out by 60 volunteers, who between them researched the English curriculum of over 1500 schools in England, we have been able to prove unequivocally that gender bias overwhelmingly exists within the English curriculum.

Key findings:

(Please note these statistics are preliminary and may be subject to slight change on publication of our full findings.)

- 65% of schools – a clear majority – teach no whole texts by female writers over the three years of KS3
- 27% of schools teach only one whole text by a woman over the three years of KS3
- 7% of pupils study a whole text by a female writer at KS4
- The majority of school pupils in England never study a whole text by a female writer between the ages of 11 and 16
- While 25% of text options on the curriculum at KS3 are by female authors, in practice, only around 15% of these are designated as compulsory
- 1% of plays on school curricula are by female playwrights
- 18% of novels on school curricula have a female protagonist

1. Women writers are relegated to the sidelines

Where women's writing is featured on the curriculum, it is often taught in extract form, such as individual poems or speeches. Extracts tend to be taught in a single lesson, leaving little time to explore the writer and their work in depth. When taught alongside whole texts written by men, which take weeks to teach, this sends a clear message that women's writing is of less importance and value. Not teaching whole texts by women is inexcusable; women are 51% of the population, and the teaching of their writing should therefore take up half of all curriculum time.

2. The same texts dominate across every year group

Five novels dominate the teaching of KS3 English and feature heavily in every year group: *Of Mice and Men* by John Steinbeck, *Animal Farm* by George Orwell, *A Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens, *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* by John Boyne, and *Lord of the Flies* by William Golding. When it comes to plays, in every school there is a predominant diet of Shakespeare, with a sprinkling of J B Priestley's *An Inspector Calls*, Willy Russell's *Blood Brothers* and Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*.

These texts all have in common a white male writer and a white male protagonist. In many schools, their entire KS3 curriculum is solely made up of these texts. While they certainly have literary merit, the lack of diversity is troubling. What has led us to the belief that a diet of such homogeneous, patriarchal literature is still an appropriate approach to literature teaching in 2021?

3. Teaching a novel by a female author isn't enough

Half of novels taught by a female author have a male protagonist. R J Palacio's *Wonder* is a very popular example, as is Annabel Pitcher's *My Sister Lives on the Mantelpiece*. When planning a diverse curriculum and choosing female-authored texts to teach, it is vital to realise that teaching a novel or play by a female writer is not enough; we need to ensure that female protagonists are present, too.

The fact that only 18% of novels by authors of both genders feature a female narrator and/or protagonist means that pupils are rarely hearing women's voices, perspectives or experiences in our classrooms. If boys are never exposed to the inner workings of girls' minds, and encouraged to enter into their emotional lives through empathising with female characters, how can they ever learn to relate to and respect them as equals? And what effect does it have on girls to only ever hear male voices in their classrooms? Where is curriculum space provided for them to discuss, celebrate and validate their own experiences as women?

“After six months of research carried out by 60 volunteers on the English curriculum of over 1500 schools, we have been able to prove unequivocally that gender bias overwhelmingly exists within the English curriculum.”

As Marian Wright Edelman famously said, ‘you can't be what you can't see.’ Girls need to see a myriad of female lives reflected in the literature they read, and they need to see that women are capable of writing great literature. If the message we give to them is that men are the only active participants in life, and the only great writers worth reading and discussing are male, we are doing enormous damage to girls' self-esteem and self-actualisation, and limiting the scope of their ambition.

4. Women are portrayed as victims

If women aren't invisible in the texts being taught, they are often represented as victims. *Of Mice and Men*, by far the most popular text at KS3, features Curley's Wife as its sole female character. Not only does her name signify her identity as being inextricably bound

“The academic curriculum has a role in forming and reinforcing patriarchal values in children. If we don't tackle the misogyny that's embedded into the curriculum, everything else will only ever be window dressing.”

“When the majority of schools never teach a whole text by a female writer throughout the entirety of KS3 and 4, it’s clear we have a problem. Girls make up over half of our classrooms, and yet their voices – both as writers and as characters – are marginalised and excluded.”

to her husband’s, she is characterised as a whore for being flirtatious and wearing dresses and high heels, and is then blamed for her own murder at the hands of Lennie, for whom the reader’s sympathy is elicited because he ‘didn’t mean to’. While many teachers we spoke to during our research said that they used the portrayal of Curley’s wife to explore feminist readings of the text, this doesn’t negate the fact she is being presented through a patriarchal gaze. Perhaps the truly feminist way to teach this text is to not teach it at all?

Changing Your Department

When the majority of schools never teach a whole text by a female writer throughout the entirety of KS3 and 4, it’s clear we have a problem. Girls make up over half of our classrooms, and yet their voices – both as writers and as characters – are marginalised and excluded. The lack of female writers at GCSE is a widely recognised issue, but even when we do have a choice of what to teach in the younger year groups, we are still overwhelmingly choosing a diet made up of male-authored, male-voiced literature. As English teachers, we must take responsibility for these choices; at KS3, no one is forcing us to teach anything, so why are we still teaching so many white, male-authored texts?

When I was Head of Department, looking at gender balance in our curriculum, I posed a series of questions to my colleagues to help us carry out an audit of our text choices. We found it an enlightening experience, and it was a catalyst for positive change. I list the questions below for you to start a conversation with your own departments.

1. What do we teach currently? What are whole texts, and what are extracts?
2. What is the gender balance of these texts?
3. What is the gender balance of the protagonists?
4. Why are we teaching the texts we’re teaching? What makes us choose what we choose?
5. Are our choices impacted by bias? Where might these biases come from?
6. What messages – implicit or explicit – are the texts we’re teaching giving about gender? Are we happy with these messages, or are they potentially troubling?
7. Are the male authored texts we’re teaching offering something to our pupils that female authored texts can’t?
8. What would a gender-balanced curriculum look like? What might need to change to make that happen?
9. What entrenched ideas about what ‘should’ be on the curriculum do we have and where have these come from? Are these valid?
10. What do we want our pupils to gain from their literature lessons? What values do we want to communicate? What type of thinkers do we want to create? Is our current list of texts enabling this to happen?

What we found from our discussions is that many of us had continued promoting and teaching a set of texts learned from previous schools or teacher training placements, without stopping to question why they were on the curriculum in the first place, and whether a female-authored text could offer pupils the same learning opportunities and experiences.

There was also the practical reality that we teach what is easy, and what we have access to; it is no surprise that the most popular texts at KS3 are former GCSE texts, for which there are plenty of resources and schemes of work online, and plenty of copies in our book cupboards. There’s no denying that teaching what we’ve always taught saves us time and money. In the long run, though, it’s depriving our pupils of a rich, varied, balanced curriculum that gives everyone the opportunity to see themselves and their experiences reflected in the texts they read, as well as the opportunity to learn about, empathise with and understand those who are different from themselves.

“So many fantastic female writers are waiting for their turn in our classrooms, and so many of our pupils desperately need to hear their voices.”

And finally ...

As teachers, we are always encouraged to be reflective practitioners, and reflecting on the curriculum we teach should be a central part of this process. While time and money are always short in schools, ensuring our curriculum meets the needs of the children we teach must be our priority. If the idea of changing your curriculum feels overwhelming, remember that change doesn’t need to happen overnight; it can be gradual, and incremental, with one text being changed at a time. Redesigning the curriculum so that it reaches a proportional split of 50/50 male/female texts in the curriculum, can be a process that takes place over two or three school years. This enables change to remain manageable and achievable within department workloads and budgets, while also allowing time for further reflection, research and reading to take place.

We can’t continue to allow excuses to keep us from changing the status quo. There needs to be an urgent recognition that tackling misogyny is everyone’s responsibility in schools, and every subject’s curriculum needs to ensure that patriarchal values aren’t continuing to shape pupils’ thinking. Let’s start with English; so many fantastic female writers are waiting for their turn in our classrooms (– see the list on the next page, for instance –), and so many of our pupils desperately need to hear their voices.

Rachel Fenn

has been Head of Department at an international school in London for the past six years. She is author of *Teaching Grammar Through Literature* (Routledge 2018) and *Teaching Nineteenth Century Literature* (Routledge 2019) and is currently studying for an MA in Dramaturgy and Writing for Performance. The End Sexism in Schools website is at: <https://endsexismschools.wordpress.com>.

Rethinking the English Curriculum: A List of Books by Women Authors

Below is a list of alternative female-authored choices for each KS3 year group that I hope will be of help in enabling you to start rethinking your literature curriculum. Each text is beautifully written, emotionally and morally complex, and offers pupils the opportunity to engage with a different time and place to their own.

Year 7

Pax by Sara Pennypacker

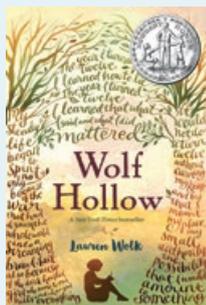
Peter is forced to abandon his beloved pet fox Pax when war breaks out in contemporary America, leading him on a journey across the country to find him again. Told in alternate chapters from Peter and Pax's perspectives, this is a moving and powerful novel.

Wolf Hollow by Lauren Wolk

Annabelle's peaceful life in rural post-war America is shattered when her school bully Betty disappears, and suspicion is placed on her friend Toby, a traumatised war veteran who lives in the woods. A deeply compassionate novel that explores the consequences of prejudice.

Chinese Cinderella by Adeline Yen Mah

This classic memoir tells of Yen Mah's troubled childhood in early twentieth century China. Simply written but powerfully told, this offers pupils the opportunity to learn about Chinese history and culture, as well as the unshakeable strength of the human spirit.



The Lie Tree by Frances Hardinge

When Faith's father is found dead, she discovers his secret lie tree; when a lie is whispered to it, fruit grows, which tells the person who eats it a hidden truth. But as Faith's lies start to spread around her small community, things begin to spiral out of control.

Year 9

A Tree Grows in Brooklyn by Betty Smith

A modern American classic, this is the tale of Francie Nolan, born to impoverished immigrants in Brooklyn at the turn of the twentieth century. Her determination and courage enable her to dream beyond her circumstances and strive for a better life.

I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings by Maya Angelou

This celebrated first volume of Maya Angelou's memoirs tells of her childhood as a poor Black girl in the segregated South. A tale of triumph over adversity, it's also a powerful introduction to the realities of racism. A remarkable read.

Frost in May by Antonia White

Nanda is nine when she is sent to a convent school; this tells of her experiences as she struggles to fit in, make friends, and find out what she really believes. A newly rediscovered twentieth century classic.

Year 8

Clap When You Land by Elizabeth Acevedo

When Camino's father dies in a plane crash, she discovers that he has been living a double life, and that she has a sister, Yahaira, exactly the same age as her. Told from the perspective of both Camino and Yahaira, this is a powerful novel, based on a true event.

Code Name Verity by Elizabeth Wein

Set during WWII, this is the story of working-class Maddie and aristocratic Queenie, one a pilot, one a spy. Told from both their perspectives, this tale of courage, betrayal, danger and the strength of true friendship is a thrilling, challenging and remarkable read.

