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## Voices in the year 7 classroom: a case study tracing evolving gender identities during a poetry unit of work focused on gender consciousness

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### ABSTRACT

This case study explores how literature, in particular poetry, can be used as an educational platform within the secondary classroom to explore gender identity. A six-week unit of poetry was created as part of a broader project to enable pupils to reflect on their personal and familial experiences of gender, whilst also utilising creative writing and performance as a tool for self-expression. The all-female class were studied before, during and after the learning process to holistically evaluate their development of gender-consciousness. A key area of focus is the strengths and limitations of the use of performance poetry when developing awareness of gender identity within adolescents.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

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### KEYWORDS

Gender; poetry; pupil voice; identity

This case study explores how creative approaches to the teaching of poetry – with a focus on raising pupils’ gender consciousness – can be used to facilitate reader response, creativity and performance. A key question framing this research is: how can poetry be used as an educational platform to explore issues of gender and gender identity? Wiseman states that “poetry can incorporate the understanding that comes from being engaged in multiple contexts, cultures and identities, where both the students and teacher contribute to the curriculum and communicate their learning” (2011, p.70). This implies that poetry can be used as a platform to explore multiple identities within the classroom setting, including the focus of this study – gender. This echoes the foundational belief of this paper that an English teacher’s role is not simply to teach the set texts, but to foster pupils to become reflective readers (Cliff Hodges, 2016). As Helen Pankhurst suggests, ‘we are entering a time of shifting sands regarding perspectives on gender, biology and sexuality’ (2018: 27), so what better time to develop a pedagogy where pupils can acquire perspectives that explore and challenge gender identifications and facilitate this process to enlarge “self-consciousness”?

Although this project could have been undertaken using excerpts from novels or plays, the form of poetry was chosen for this project as it enabled us to cover a wide number of texts in a short timeframe, as well as (pragmatically) linking into the department’s medium-term planning of an introduction of poetry – this being the first time which

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the year 7 (ages 11–12) cohort had studied poetry. There is also an inherent oral aspect to spoken word poetry, which is written to be performed and listened to as a group. This creates an opportunity for community, openness and sharing within the classroom setting, something which we strived to achieve in this research project.

### Contextualising the problem

The school in which this research was undertaken is a single-sex girls' school with a co-educational sixth form in the south-east of England. At the time of research, certain teachers within the school community felt that a lack of gender balance within the curriculum might in part be reflected in pupils' creative output, where female pupils were sometimes positioning themselves as either victims or as secondary to males in their *own* writing. While the introduction of *Coraline* (Gaiman, 2013) into the year 7 curriculum was considered a step forward – at least in terms of female protagonists within novel study – there remained a latent awareness in the department that further rebalancing of the curriculum could contribute positively to increased self-awareness and greater confidence amongst pupils.

This led to a reflection of how to create a classroom suited to studying all forms of literature whilst simultaneously creating meaningful dialogue and enabling pupils to explore their gender identities. Given the plethora of gender-based poetry suitable for 11- and 12-year-olds, and poetry's being an apt medium to encourage pupil response and performance, we decided to create a six-week unit of poetry for the case study. As stated above, this tied in with the department's medium-term plan to introducing poetry in an engaging way to year 7 pupils.

### Gender and literature

We started this research through an initial exploration of gender theory, which could then be applied to the pupils' understanding of gender in the 21st century. The term "gender" emerged in the fifth century to connect sexual and character types (man/woman, masculine/feminine) (Hateley 2001). However, this polarised distinction is now being challenged. Judith Butler (2006) states that there is a clear distinction between sex and gender, defining the former as biological (sexed bodies), but the latter as something that can be culturally constructed. The notion of gender as non-binary is relevant for this research when analysing both female and male literary characters and narrators, as descriptors for both sexes can be applied to the female/male characters.

If, in Fuller's words, "the key concept of 'gender identity' is understood to be the social and cultural, and not the biological [...] this impacts on how an individual views themselves, as well as their beliefs about how other people view them" (2018: 96), a poet's presentation of gender may be crucial in teaching the reader how gender can be perceived by others – indeed, this presentation could have either a positive or negative impact on adolescent readers. If "gender is fluid, negotiated and constructed across different social and cultural contexts" (Jackson and Gee 2005, 116), this process is especially prominent during adolescence, when gender roles are "continually being revised, rehearsed and represented" (Reynolds 2002, 99). It is thus the responsibility of

the teacher (and the curriculum) to offer a diversity of gendered voices. . In the context of the classroom, we thought it would be interesting to investigate whether this notion of gender fluidity aligns with pupils' perceptions as well as the views of older generations, such as teachers, parents and grandparents. We would expect, following Reynold's claims, some disparity between generations, owing to gender roles "continually being revised" (ibid). This enquiry became part of our project.

### ***Creativity in poetry teaching as a transformative pedagogy***

A keyworker for "Phase", a local mental health charity which aims to prepare young people for the complexity of teenage life and to grow their resilience and mental well-being, pointed to a lack of flexibility within the school curriculum for children to explore and develop their identities. This led us to an investigation of how to create a classroom suited to studying poetry but also simultaneously creating meaningful dialogue which could enable students to explore identity issues.

Freire points to a pedagogy where pupils' work on material presented in such a way that they can transform it and in so doing transform themselves in a continual "process of becoming" (1996: 64); where "authentic" existence occurs only when people are "engaged in inquiry and creative transformation" (ibid). Referring to Freire's work, McCallum (2012, 26) reflects that Freire makes explicit the possibilities for learning opened when pupils 'engage with their own worlds at the point where they interact with new worlds brought into the classroom. When done effectively, new knowledge and ways of seeing and being come about'.

This study's approach to teaching the project crucially aimed to encourage the pupils to strive to "become" rather than just "be". The approach was to present poetry not just as material that requires a response but as a medium with "transactional potential" with an "ability to work upon people as they, in turn, work upon it" (McCallum 2012, 27 citing Rosenblatt 1978). Lessons should provide an opportunity to respond creatively to material through dialogue, creating response poetry, reflective writing, drama, and possibly other forms. Creativity in our classroom must therefore have a focus on the pupil, as well as being a transformative and fluid process incorporating McCallum's redefinition of creativity in English. A clear method of encapsulating this would be the pupils' writing and performing their own poetry.

To develop his rationale for how creativity is linked to learning, McCallum coins the term "re-creativity" which "refers to the self-conscious manipulation of source material to bring something new into being" (2012: 54). As McCallum highlights, the limitation of this approach might be pupils' ability to access the materials to "re-create". At the very least, we needed to ensure that the material, and the way it was presented to pupils, was accessible. Since re-creativity does not require originality and learning through creativity simply requires "an engagement with the material surrounding us" (Chapman 2016, 11), we felt confident that a balanced scheme of work with the opportunity for pupils to read, create and perform their poetry, would give the best opportunity for "opening up a range of possible worlds" (McCallum 2012, 73); in this case, of raising pupils' gender consciousness.

## Materials and methods

### Research Questions

The following research questions were developed as a response to the literature:

- (1) How does the use of writing and performing poetry enhance pupils' development of gender identity?
- (2) What are the strengths and limitations of this approach to studying poetry and gender identity?

### The teaching sequence

The six-week unit of work designed for this research is detailed in [Table 1](#). There is a focus on gender and identity whilst also embedding curricula skills of analysis, performance, and re-creativity.

All lessons were focused on this investigation integrating the study of poetry according to the departmental guidelines:

- A focus on enjoyment and creativity;
- Discussion of responses and opportunity for pupils to write poetry;
- Revision of poetic devices and analysis work.

**Table 1.** Scheme of Work for Gender Literacy project.

Week	Theme	Poetry studied	Activity focus	Homework
1	Identity	<i>Intro to Poetry</i> <i>Unfolding Bud</i> – Naoshi Koryama	Analysis/what is identity?	Mother/Grandmother questionnaires focusing on historical trends and developments of the treatment and regard of females
2 & 3	Our roots	<i>I come from</i> – written by Claire Burnett (inspired by many poems on the same title located via internet) <i>Women' Rights</i> (anonymous) <i>A Marching Song</i> – Ethel Carnie	A re-creation of <i>I come from</i> Suffragette history. Group collaborative analysis of mill-worker poetry	Simile/metaphor worksheet describing our home life/hopes for the future. Write a poem reflecting the suffragette era or a reflective piece of prose describing what you have learnt and the differences between your lives and those of past women's lives.
4 & 5	Where are we now?	SLAM performance poetry <i>I am a man</i> – Jay Hulme. (YouTube presentation) <i>Denied of Identity</i> – Samilah Naira YouTube source and transcription by Claire Burnett	Group collaborative analysis Dramatisation of poem in groups	Write a poem or reflective piece of prose reflecting how you feel about the influence of technology on your lives OR research SLAM poetry and select a poem to present to the class with your reasons for selection.
6	Resilience & our futures	<i>And Still I Rise</i> – Maya Angelou (YouTube source and written form)	Angelou's 10 keys to success (via u-tube presentation). Discussion of poem Group creative share	Write a poem or reflective piece of prose on the theme of resilience and how you will use Angelou's keys to success in your own futures.

## **Methodology**

A foundational epistemological belief for this research is that knowledge is constructed, open to interpretation from the individual learner; therefore not only the participants but also the class teacher and researcher plays a significant role in evaluating the data (Chapman: 2020). Following from this paradigm, a case study was an apt methodology, since we wished to look at a specific class, studying a singular topic and in a particular way, but with a certain degree of intimacy and detail in a contextually rich environment. The objective to trace manifestations of evolving gender identity appeared well suited to a case-study approach, as this allowed a more sustained examination throughout a teaching sequence. Care was taken not to make generalised claims and the aim was to demonstrate the strength of subjective understandings inherent in qualitative case study research (Simons 2012).

## **Ethics**

Informed consent and cooperation were sought of the school and parents and the year 7 pastoral lead. Pupils were given a brief explanation of the project, methodology and intentions regarding where the research was to be presented and that the data was purely for research purposes. It was made clear that their anonymity would be protected. At every stage, pupils provided “voluntary informed consent” (BERA, 2011, 13) and had opportunity to withdraw from the study; this ensured the pupils’ sole autonomy over their participation. In addition to this, we were mindful that we were setting out to challenge pupils’ conceptions of themselves at a fundamental level and that this placed a higher burden of responsibility on us. Where pupils expressed “extra-ordinary” vulnerabilities, the school safe-guarding officer was alerted.

## **Pupil work**

For all RQs, evidence gleaned from analysis of pupils’ work was crucial. The primary examples of this work were pupils’ poetry and reflective writing on poetry studied. This was naturalistic data that would have been generated even had research not been undertaken – therefore learning was the driving force behind the design of the work. This proved to be an authentic method to gather and monitor development of gender consciousness (RQ1) as the unit progressed and was also used as a tool for developing a class sharing culture which enabled the pupils to learn from each other and widen their own perspectives.

## **Interviews**

During the final week of the teaching sequence, small group semi-structured interviews were held in order to provide evidence for both RQs. Three interviews were conducted: two with four pupils and one with two pupils, representing one third of the class. These took place at a lunch hour in the school pastoral office. Following Gillham’s advice, pupils were selected as being representative of the class: one pupil on the autistic spectrum, one EAL pupil, one BME pupil, one PP pupil<sup>1</sup> and a range of GCSE target levels. The semi-structured style of questioning helped create a setting where the pupils did not appear to be under pressure and were able to be open and honest, without any pressure to give “correct” answers.

### **Observations**

Throughout this project, the class were taught by one teacher and observed by another, the “observing teacher” making notes regarding the specified area of focus. These observations were later shared and discussed among both of us, providing some of the most compelling evidence for the research. Through this we were able to trace evolving gender identities through a range of candid moments and class discussions when the pupils would be naturally engaging in the activities. By capturing this breadth of classroom activity, we aimed to avoid the pitfall of portraying only one pupil’s perspective.

### **Mother/grandmother questionnaire**

As part of their preparation for this unit, and as inspiration for their poetry writing, pupils were asked to conduct their own research by asking their mothers and grandmothers to complete a questionnaire. This was in part inspired by reading Cliff Hodges (2010) who explores how encounters with other readers and different reading practices contribute to the readership of a group of 12–13-year-olds. These questionnaires were used for our data collection so that we could see how inherited reading practices, and the “stories” that have entered pupils’ lives, might have impacted their reading practices and the implications of this for their current gender awareness. As Pankhurst (2018) states:

gendered experiences begin in the family, where its hierarchy is first felt ... the family survives, and women’s identity and their sense of self continues to be moulded by the relationship therein

(Pankhurst: 2018, 113).

### **End of Unit Questionnaire**

We chose not to give pupils a questionnaire directed at gender consciousness at the outset of the research; we wanted them first to experience the poetry with their subjectively constructed response. However, an important part of this study was through questionnaire responses at the *end* of the unit. This was used to gather data on what the *pupils* felt they had learnt about gender from the unit and where they still had unanswered questions.

## **Data Presentation and Analysis**

### ***How does the use of writing and performing poetry enhance pupils’ development of gender identity?***

#### ***Ancestry and roots***

At the outset of the scheme of work (Table 1), initial discussions with the pupils were held based on their mothers’ and grandmothers’ responses to the questionnaires. This led to a realisation amongst the class that some things (in terms of gender roles and expectations) have not changed and raised the key question as to why this is the case. All pupils indicated in the end of unit questionnaires (see Table 1), that learning about their roots had helped them understand the women in their families and to value their freedoms as girls growing up in 2018:



**Bea:** It made me think about how lucky I am to do what I want like play football and not get judged for it.

**Ellie:** Having an insight into the women in my family's life really opened my eyes to what life was like.

Although the gender pay gap in did not feature in the discussion, it was evident that some pupils had had conversations at home and that home knowledge was informing their evolving consciousness. This manifested itself in their conscious reflections on the connection between injustices of the past and those still existing:

**Sophia:** I learnt that some things haven't changed like the job payments so men earn more money than women for doing the same job.

**Andrea:** It made me think about what women went through and still have to go through.

**Evie:** Sadly, there are still a few things that haven't changed and I want them to be sorted in the future.

Following our class discussion of what they had discovered about their mothers/grandmothers' lives and reading, we moved on to study a poem which the primary researcher had written herself, entitled "I come from" (see [Table 1](#)). Pupils were invited to undertake a re-creative writing activity inspired by this, synthesising information from their questionnaires with reflections on the present and hopes of the future. Running alongside the pupils' reflections was the raised awareness they had gained about gender representation in the past in comparison to the present. For example: Evie learnt the term "unconscious bias" through chatting at the kitchen table with her mother and acknowledged that there is more work to be done; Ellie had an optimistic view that several discriminatory attitudes towards LGBTQ+ people are dying out, but still expressed that there is more to be done; Bea connected emotionally with her mother and is poignantly aware that she is doing what her mother was never able to do: empowering Bea to succeed and make the most of opportunities in life.

### *Empowering the female voice*

Numerous pupils chose to reflect on their evolving gender consciousness through poetry writing (see Poem 1, typed below). Their ability to relate to the suffragette era (as detailed in the scheme of work in [Table 1](#)) was impressive and their writing evidenced an understanding of what it was to be a woman in that era and a consciousness of what it is to have a "voice":

Women are more than you think,  
We are humans too.  
We deserve all that you do,  
Because we are the suffragettes.

And we will fight for our rights.

**Poem 1:** Extract from *Suffragette* by Sophia

The study of suffragette poetry and classroom discussion on this era in women's lives could reflect what Attridge described as "an encounter with alterity" (2004, 46) – the experience of meeting something from outside one's own experience in a literary work. Creativity here comes not just from meeting something new, but from transforming it as one's own experience is transformed. The pupils were able to process information received and develop strong narrative voices which indicate significant empathy with the plight of the suffragettes. This was also extended in Evie's work (see Poem 2 below), to the plight of a daughter of a suffragette.

If I were someone different,  
 Even just for a day,  
 I would get out and about,  
 Prove to the world that women are equals to men,  
 That we deserve the vote,  
 That we can dream big  
 And achieve our dreams,  
 Show the world who we can be  
 Poets,  
 Writers,  
 More.

I'm annoyed by the view that "boys are better",  
 It drives me crazy  
 But I'm scared to do anything,  
 My mother is away a lot,  
 She goes on marches  
 And would die for her cause,  
 Bravery  
 Perhaps foolishness.

**Poem 2:** Extract from *If I were someone different* by Evie

Evie has clearly taken inspiration from the study of suffragette poetry, but also from her own experiences as a female in society – perhaps the most poignant line being "I'm annoyed by the view that 'boys are better'". In its stark truthfulness, this line resonates with the views expressed by the pupils within the class and the double-standards they experience between males and females, boys and girls.

**SLAM poetry**

The introduction of SLAM performance poetry into the classroom (see [Table 1](#)) had significant impact. Two poems were chosen by two teenagers: firstly "I am a Man" by Jay Hulme (2015) talking about his struggle to relate to his own body and the conflict of his inner world which is a different gender to his outer body. The class acknowledged how one can be in fear of the actions of others and one pupil, Adrienna, questioned how free she really was: "It makes me wonder if we are really free because sometimes, I am afraid of what others will say about me and that can change the way I feel about being myself". Furthermore, Jade commented on her experience of being bullied for being fat and how "words never quite leave you"; that the bruises on the outside left her but inside "the

words still continue to scar” her. This view was shared by Helen, who said that the words still come back and hurt her. We talked about how we could replace these negative memories for more positive ones. This led to one pupil saying, “if you allow yourself to remember them then you are making yourself a victim”.

### *Personal response*

It was at this point that the potential emerged within the classroom not to learn just from the poetry but also from the responses of others. The classroom facilitated pupil-led discussion manifesting gender consciousness rather than a classroom with pupils being “taught gender”. It was an enormous privilege to be made party to these aspects of the pupils’ emerging identities; while they were never pressured to “open up”, the topics we were discussing made it more likely that they might do so, linking to McCallum’s (2012) notion of “re-creativity”.

The study of *Denied of Identity* (Naira 2013) developed trust in the classroom and enabled pupils to consider, some for the first time, the impact of their social media lifestyle on their sense of self. Poems 3.1–3.4 indicate some examples of reader responses where examples of insight came through from a range of attainment levels:

Everything has to be perfect  
 Figures made to be on point  
 Have to fit into the margin  
 because you have to look right.

Perfect in the day.  
 Perfect all through the night.  
 Fashion is everything,  
 because you have to look right.

Shaping, scraping  
 Chiselling at the naturalness  
 Why do we do this?  
 because we have to look right.

#### **Poem 3.1** Extract from *Everything has to be perfect* by Jade

As she flicks through her magazines,  
 Each edited image she sees alters her opinion of beauty.  
 She doesn’t realise just how much it has been tweaked to get it perfect.  
 The distorted image of beauty warps her mind, making her think “I’m not beautiful”.

She stares dolefully at the mirror, wishing she was taller, slimmer, blonder.  
 A voice lingers in her mind, saying  
 “You’re not beautiful!”  
 But she is, and she can’t see that through the distorted image of beauty.

**Poem 3.2** Extract from *Distorted Image of Beauty* by Helen

Why has this happened?  
 Only you know,  
 Only you can decide,  
 Only you are the warrior,  
 Not them.

**Poem 3.3** Extract from *She* by Frieda

My parents always told me that  
 When I grow up  
 I can be whatever I want to be  
 Well  
 It's a lie  
 A hideous, beautiful lie  
 A false vision which guides you through your childhood  
 A misleading idea which actually makes you feel optimistic about the future  
 Until you get there

**Poem 3.4** Extract from *The Monster* by Julie

The girls were aware of the impact of a media driven culture. Jade (3.1) acknowledges the harmful effects in her poem; for Helen (3.2), beauty is distorted, and her message is directed outwards to saying that we must not compare ourselves to falsehoods. Frieda (3.3) takes this empowered view further, and for Julie (3.4), society is a “monster” and we are the “puppets” being “starved”, “harmed” until there is nothing left and “no way to go on”. There is also evidence here, in all poems, of Fuller’s notion that poetry “impacts on how an individual views themselves” (2018:96), whether that be striving for society’s arbitrary view of beauty or growing older to realise that one’s parents are ignorant to the pressures of being a teenage girl.

Although some moments in the poems are uplifting and empowering, such as Frieda’s line “you are the warrior”, most of the poems focus on a false identity being formed through social pressures: “A false vision”, “distorted image” and Jade’s repeated refrain “because you have to look right”. The prevalence of imperative verbs within the poems conveys the pupils’ shared experience of having no choice and feeling forced to conform. Pankhurst explains this tension:

in contrast to their mothers, grandmothers, and great-grandmothers, [young women/girls] are now told that they can do anything they set their minds to. However, there has been an inflation or expectation in what counts as success [...] The pressure is on to be perfect, to exceed in all areas [...] to be ‘skinny, smart and hot.’

(Pankhurst, H., 2018, 159)

Therefore, it is crucial that we (educators, parents) listen to the voice and experiences of youth. Consequently, the study of SLAM poetry created a space within the classroom where, in Nystrand’s words, the pupils were taken “seriously, and clearly they knew it”

(1997, 2). The dramatic adaptations of *Denied of Identity* enabled the pupils to embody the feelings and metaphors of the poet and it can be argued that this, together with the classroom talk, enabled pupils to engage on a deeper level and extend their creativity whilst openly conveying their feelings.

At the end of unit questionnaire, pupils were asked for thoughts they would like to share on this part of their poetry study. They unanimously agreed that the work around *Denied of Identity* helped them understand the impact of technology on their lives and made them more determined to stand up for themselves:

**Evie:** If you don't let you be you, then you're fighting who you are and sometimes it's good to face those fights and prove your worth.

**Eloise:** It made me realise I can stay away from peer pressure.

**Jade:** It made me think that no one should tell you how to act or look and that I should just be myself.

**Natalia:** I learnt that being who I am is perfect and changing for others is bad as you are changing for them not for you.

### **What are the strengths and limitations of this approach to studying poetry and gender identity?**

#### **Limitations and subjectivity**

This study was underpinned by the full commitment of the teacher/researcher's engagement. This commitment can depend on both willingness to undertake the project as well as practicalities – is there fluidity within the curriculum to teach this unit of work? Are the pupils willing to be interviewed outside of lesson time? Are the parents/ grandparents happy with answering the ancestry questionnaire? If the study were to be replicated with a different cohort of pupils (and we believe it should be), then these are aspects to consider.

Another potential limitation is the subjectivity of the data collected and the difficulty with extrapolating claims from the data. However, as evident in our data and findings, an integral part of the study is that the data is subjective and individual to the pupils and the very nature of the study is that it will relay data which is personal and qualitative – we did not attempt to quantify this qualitative data, but instead used our expertise as educators to draw claims from it which centred primarily around *our* pupils and the links to the literature.

#### **Self-growth and realisation**

Given the involvement of the teacher/researcher, a strength of this approach to studying poetry and gender identity is its potential for transformation in not just the pupils but also the teacher. Reading the relatives' reading histories, we became acutely aware of our own histories and the reality of how our own world visions were framed in the narrow gender representations of the literature we had read. There was also the opportunity to share and connect with the pupils through Claire's writing in the "I come from" poem – a powerful chance to journey from past memories to present realities to future hopes. An exploration of experiences as an auto-ethnographic journey is beyond the reach of this review;

however, there is significant scope for future exploration here. In the words of Layne, there is a relationship between teaching (leading) and researching (learning): “If you’re going to lead you’ve got to grow” (2015: 11–12). Inherent in this revelation is also a potential limitation. The success of the project in part depended on the researchers’ total engagement and belief in the empowerment of pupils through raising their gender consciousness. It also depended on the researchers’ openness to being aware of their own unconscious biases, the limitations of their own world views and use of language. There could be a danger of reducing a text to simply a feminist interpretation rather than creating an authentic forum where gender consciousness can evolve as a byproduct of the teaching practice.

Whilst it is hard (and arguably not necessary for the aims of this study), to quantify how far the pupil gender consciousness was elevated through the six weeks of the project, it was clear that confidence to share grew in the classroom and in the last class in the scheme of work, 24 out of the 26 girls present volunteered to share their own poetry, as well as thoughts on poetry they had found through researching the internet. It could therefore be concluded that poetry is a powerful medium to explore ideas surrounding gender and identity, which is further supported by the power of performance.

At one point, we listened to a SLAM performance called “When I was 13” (Voth: 2016). When the teacher froze the video image of the female poet, one pupil spontaneously said, “she’s pretty”, another said “I like her highlights”. Responses then poured out from other pupils saying, “no she’s kind”; “she looks independent”; “she looks like she can do anything”; “she doesn’t care what people think”. Most of these retorts exhibited a shift in objectification of the female poet as a static being to one that was a “doing” being. Could the pupils have moved from objectification of the female as simply “being” towards a female as an empowered “doer”? However, one might choose to interpret these recordings, it was nonetheless a poignant moment where we believed the pupils were starting to challenge received ways of speaking. In the words of Mellin McCracken and Appleby: “When we realise we may have been using the words of another without reflection, we’re more apt to change our ways for the sake of equity, which is, ideally what democracy should encourage” (1992: 34).

We would argue that one of the more significant strengths of this approach to studying poetry and gender identity was the way all the girls, irrespective of ability or background, were able to engage with their pasts and with the present. The mother-grandmother questionnaire activity enrolled and engaged the pupils as co-researchers, alongside the teacher. This process brought their home lives into the classroom, engaged three generations (sometimes four when grandmothers referred to their own mothering) into the gender discussion and the dialogue within the classroom extended back to their home lives. Pupils, parents, grandparents, teacher and researcher came together and shared in the learning process. For Shola, this brought her to her roots in the U.S. where she skype-interviewed her Great Aunt in Atlanta and new knowledge of her relatives’ involvement in the civil rights movement under Martin Luther King. She expressed a conscious connection with her maternal roots: “I feel like I’m at a gate and my mum is at the gate with me and as I grow older the gate opens a little bit more and I get to see a bit more of the world and now I can see that there are other women in the family at the gate with me”. Helen watched her mother cry as she read the suffragette poem she had written. Usha, on the other hand, gained the realisation that only academic success will matter, that she is not

heard by her mother when she says she is struggling with school. Her response embodies the clash between aspiration, expectation and reality: “They tell me I can do anything but when I can’t I feel betrayed but when I say that I can’t do something they don’t hear me and that makes me feel stressed”.

### *The benefits of poetry*

Pupils were asked in interview and the end of unit questionnaire if they felt they would have learnt as much about themselves and their gender identity through studying one female character in a novel. 29 out of 31 pupils felt that poetry was more effective:

**Frieda:** Poetry is very deep and gets you deep down

**Sophia:** It was good to hear some things because I know it’s not just me [...] Poetry helps [poets] do that.

**Kelly:** Poetry is a way of showing it without just saying ‘this is wrong’. It gives you your own twist and I think poetry is so POWERFUL. I can express myself more if I write poetry.

**Paris:** [Poetry] feels like a safe way to explore how you feel.

**Ellie:** I believe that female main characters are becoming increasingly common because they think that’s the way to empower young girls but it’s overdone and doesn’t have any impact on me. However, poetry is more deep, I guess? It allows you to explore yourself in depth? It has made me realise I’m passionate about subjects that I didn’t know I was.

**Usha:** I think it’s easier to learn about individuality and gender identity through poetry [...] and you can think further since the whole meaning isn’t on the page.

**Shelly:** Poetry tells you what comes from the heart where most times the female character in a novel isn’t real and is imaginary.

Pupils were also asked how it was for them to perform the poetry and they expressed the view that it helped reinforce and internalise the message:

**Shola:** Acting it out made it more real and I loved the last line of Denied of Identity where she makes an active choice to be who she wants to be. Acting it out again and again really helped me remember that line!

**Eloise:** I felt angry when performing it because the words are so powerful and it made me feel cross that the poem even had to be written at all. There’s always that niggling feeling that says, ‘I am not good enough’ but the last line makes you cross that you even think it.

**Eleanor:** It made me feel the struggle was really inside me by acting it out. I found myself remembering all the times I wished I could be something different. I’m happy but sometimes my thoughts take me in this direction.

This reflects Winnicott’s view that role play can “offer a critical engagement with texts, challenging [pupils] to formulate responses beyond the remit of the norms expected of them when not in role” (Winnicott 1971, 65). This study was limited (although justifiably so) in the fact that it focused only on girls. Thinking about how this approach to gender literacy might be applied also to boys in the classroom, pupils were asked whether they

felt that life is hard for boys now. They acknowledged that the struggle for gender equality applies to both girls and boys (one pupil commented “I think boys have the right to cry, but they still can’t.”) Therefore, there is arguably a need to re-create this experience of gender literacy work in boys’ and mixed schools and scope for further research approaches in this area.

### *Inspiring future change*

At the beginning of the unit, pupils indicated how moved they were by the hopes and dreams their relatives had for their futures. At that time, the teacher asked for a hands-up on what they felt about their futures. Only eight pupils felt confident; they felt that life was too competitive and did not know how they would do what they wanted to do. At the end of the unit, the teacher asked for a hands-up on how they felt about their futures after having explored our poetry unit. 20 out of the 30 pupils indicated that they felt more confident than they did before they started. Whether they were more gender conscious or not, this approach to studying poetry had empowered them to feel that they had more possibilities for their futures; not because they were being told that they could do something but because they felt they could now choose for themselves. The fact that this inspired them to write poetry and feel comfortable with this practice speaks to the iterative relationship between the two. The study of poetry is at once a mirror and a window on their present and future.

### *Concluding remarks*

“One is not born, but rather becomes a woman” – (Simone De Beauvoir, 1949) (*translated in 2009 by Borde & Malovany-Chevallier, p.330*)

The process of writing this article has been both a privilege and an adventure which has coincided with a time of considerable movement in gender politics. For every one of the pupils who initially expressed an awareness of prejudice, fear and their own vulnerability, an alternative voice emerged that expressed a counter-narrative of curiosity, solidarity and strength to be an individual despite overwhelming pressure from peers and social media. The medium of poetry, in its capacity for breadth of viewpoints, for dramatisation and multi-modal exploration, has shown itself to be an inspiring vessel through which to journey.

de Beauvoir’s (1949) words resonate this experience of a six-week journey of “becoming”; not just for the class, but for ourselves also. We would agree with Butler that, if de Beauvoir is right, “it follows that *woman* itself is a term in process, a becoming, a constructing that cannot rightfully be said to originate or to end” (2006, 45). Perhaps the inevitable end point then is for gender not to exist as a “foundational illusion [. . .] of identity” at all; but simply as part of the journey to a high state of “self-consciousness” (ibid.). In the words of Peterson and Lach:

we have an obligation and the power, through the educational process, to employ children’s literature in a way that demonstrates to every child the world of our dreams and visions, a world which challenges all children and maximizes their potential to grow up fully human and fully alive.

(Bender Peterson & Lach, 1990, 193)



This study, albeit in microcosm, demonstrates the creative potential for developing a space for the exploration of gender identity through the study of poetry, where voices can emerge; voices previously unheard internally by the individual themselves or externally by others. This can create an empowerment culture in the school itself; in the school in which this research was undertaken, we now have a creative writing blog called “[name of school] Voices” and an active “FemSoc” stemming directly from this project.

Great things happen when you ask children to think and share; when one child says something extraordinary, one could say it is a “flash in a pan” but when the whole class is engaged and relating, then that can be consciousness-raising for all those present. On that note, we leave you with the words of Ellie: “I didn’t learn anything new but I realised what I did know that I hadn’t been aware of before” and Rachel who said, “I didn’t realise I could choose who I could become”.

## Note

1. English as an Additional language; Black and minority ethnic; Pupil Premium meaning from a lower-income household.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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**Louise Chapman Hazell** completed a BA in English literature and philosophy at the University of Bristol before undertaking a PGCE in secondary English and a Master of Education degree, both at the University of Cambridge, where she was granted a master’s prize for her thesis. Louise has seven years’ practitioner experience as a secondary English teacher: four years in the UK state sector and three years at a British international school in north China. Currently, Louise is undertaking a Doctorate of Education at the University of Bristol and plans to focus her research on learners’ experiences of the Key Stage Three English curriculum.

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