

EXPLORING THE Curriculum gap

According to the Gender and Education Association, in the 1950s and 1960s, secondary education brought the separation of boys and girls in England. This

story by MARYMICHAEL HOUGH and LINDEN O'BRIEN-WILLIAMS
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ALL GIRLS VS. COED

Before coming to teach at STA three years ago, English teacher Kate Absher taught at two area coed schools, William Chrisman High School and St. Pius X High School. She also taught at all-girl Trinity High School outside Chicago, Ill., which she says was “very similar” to the atmosphere at STA. While Absher enjoyed teaching in these four schools, she says the major differences in curriculum lay in what is approachable during class discussions.

“The major difference between curriculum, and this sounds so simplistic, is that we’re able to focus on women’s issues,” Absher said. “Here, we’re able to focus our curriculum around that and then have a bunch of people interested, not to say men or boys shouldn’t learn about those things as well.”

For Absher, approaching these “women’s issues” is made easier by books she teaches at STA. In Absher’s freshmen classes, students read a variety of books from authors including Maya Angelou’s *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Shakespeare’s *The Taming of the Shrew*, Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* and Homer’s *The Odyssey*. Additionally, freshman students select a novel to read independently and study, each girl researching a women’s issue such as campus rape, education and leadership or eating disorders.

Although Absher enjoys teaching classes with heavy focuses on women authors, she says STA does not neglect learning from male authors.

“Overall, most our curriculum is classic literature, so we do have a lot of men authors,” Absher said. “We [study] William Shakespeare, we do [Nathaniel] Hawthorne, Mark Twain, we do F. Scott Fitzgerald, Chinua Achebe... We’ve got some diverse backgrounds there.”

While Absher stresses that STA’s English classes focus on female topics “quite a bit,” previous Bishop Miege High School English teacher Tina Wendling says the topic “just didn’t” come up in Miege class discussions. However,

according to Wendling, Miege’s emphasis on the Catholic faith was often integrated into literature discussions.

“[Miege is] so heavily focused on infusing Catholic teaching and morality into what we’re teaching and literature is a good place to do that,” Wendling said. “...Honestly I felt like as a teacher, [discussing women’s issues] was not an option, [because] ‘this is what we do here.’ Maybe if I had been somewhere with more diversity, I would have, but it was just not a focus.”

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— Brie Hussey,
Bishop Miege junior,
former STA student

According to Wendling, books she taught at Miege featured far more male protagonists and authors than female. Wendling believes this to be an issue resolvable by different levels of the school staff “just being more conscientious” of the material covered.

“I think when you’re in that coed environment, your choices [are limited],” Wendling said. “Unfortunately, the majority of older literature is more male centric. In a Catholic school especially, you’re making more traditional choices of what you’re reading.”

Notre Dame de Sion High School English teacher Casey Engel also noticed the large number of male protagonists featured in her previous coed classes.

“When I taught coed, and I did so for a decade, I did have a few more books featuring male protagonists than I do now,” Engel wrote in an email. “I used to teach more books like *The Catcher in the Rye*, *Lord of the Flies*, *Fahrenheit 451* and *Frankenstein*, which I think are truly important works... but you know, no matter the audience, those books weren’t reaching students like the ones we

teach at Sion.”

STA social studies teacher Patrick Nielsen says he tries not to approach certain topics differently than he did when he taught them at Archbishop O’Hara High School. He does feel, however, that at STA, it is beneficial to use female-centered examples or show female perspectives “as much as possible.”

“I tried to talk about why we haven’t had a female President, or Vice President [at O’Hara], and the topic never seemed to go anywhere constructive,” Nielsen said. “That can be discouraging when you look for good discussions in a government class. I think for females especially, and here at St. Teresa’s ones who are so driven, talking about politics more and understanding them better can help them break down the male dominated political system we have been a part of for so long, and that will be a very good thing.”

Miege junior and former STA student Brie Hussey does not see a change in content covered, but says that class participation at her coed school is “very different” from her single sex experience.

“I don’t know if the curriculum itself is very different, but the way the students approach it is different,” Hussey said. “I think at STA people were a lot more willing to speak openly about [certain topics], but I think people at Miege are a lot more relaxed and laid back about things in general.”

While Wendling says her English classes did not include much female participation, according to Miege senior Nick Murdock, certain organizations at Miege allow for expression of female students and other people who may feel affected by discrimination in society.

“This year is the beginning of the Women of Miege club which helps female students unite behind each other while also helping to better the women’s bathroom and create a conversation about possible sexism in our school,” Murdock said.

According to Hussey, the Women of Miege club puts up

HE READ, SHE READ | The *Dart* compares reading lists for junior AP English Language courses at STA, Rockhurst and Miego.

St. Teresa's Academy

The Scarlet Letter

Nathaniel Hawthorne

The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn

Mark Twain

The Great Gatsby

F. Scott Fitzgerald

The House of Mirth

Edith Wharton

Rockhurst High School

The Scarlet Letter

Nathaniel Hawthorne

The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn

Mark Twain

The Great Gatsby

F. Scott Fitzgerald

A Farewell to Arms

Ernest Hemingway

One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest

Ken Kesey

Bishop Miego High School

The Crucible

Arthur Miller

The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn

Mark Twain

Inherit the Wind

Jerome Lawrence, Robert Edwin Lee

alternative coverage by LINDEN O'BRIEN-WILLIAMS

inspirational questions in the bathroom, which students are allowed to answer on post-it notes. The club also makes basics like lotion available in the girls' bathrooms. Murdock says besides the Women of Miego club, other areas of Miego bring awareness to important issues.

"Campus Ministry also offers the Community 360 retreat that I've been a leader on, which addresses sexism, racism, heterosexism and many other forms of institutionalized discrimination and oppression in our society," Murdock said.

While Wendling likes that in all girls environments, teachers can "preach that gospel of female empowerment and independence," she says coed environments have benefits as well.

"I think the real world environment is a plus," Wendling said. "I think there's something to the fact, in a coed environment, on both sides, guys and girls, there's a little more social appropriateness."

Murdock also believes coed schools offer certain benefits that should not be overlooked.

"All male or all female schools might cover more specifically male or female literature and history in their courses, but I hope they also offer the same sorts of out-of-school gender or race based learning opportunities Miego does," Murdock said.

ALL GIRLS VS. ALL BOYS

According to Engel, Sion's Eng-

lish department determines their curriculum by focusing on "empathizing with others through multicultural literature" and on literature featuring female protagonists and public figures. Engel says they do focus more on "strong female characters" and though they read books with "plenty of male counterparts," the female condition is emphasized "a bit more" due to the all-female environment.

"[We read books focusing on] the suffering and hopefully triumph of the marginalized; the triumph of female strength after enduring adversity and oppression; the intricate facets of the human condition that plague us, challenge us, drive us and empower us," Engel wrote.

For STA senior Hallie Ryan, reading *A Thousand Splendid Suns* by Khaled Hosseini during her sophomore year stands out because it made her aware of the treatment of women globally. According to Ryan, although not every novel she has read at STA features a "strong female protagonist," the ones that do spark similar discussion.

"I think [reading novels with female protagonists] is important [at STA] because there's only so far you can go in an English classroom talking about what it was like for this person at this time, but I feel like if you take a little bit from every book you read and discussion you have, you carry that forward in your own life," Ryan said.

"You don't just leave it in the book, you take it with you and it makes you more independent and more willing to see changes that need to be made. I think that's one of the great things about STA, is how they prepare us for the real world and make us willing to make that change."

Rockhurst High School English teacher Mike Wickenhauser believes including female authors and protagonists in English curriculum is important, but at the high school level, teacher should choose authors "that look like the populations they teach."

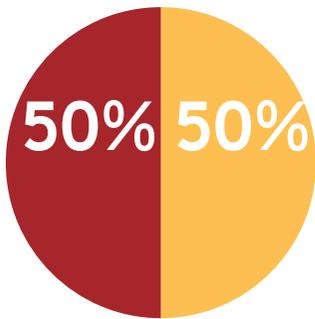
"I have found it more effective to incorporate female authors and female protagonists in our discussion of other, shorter writing pieces," Wickenhauser wrote in an email. "...The longer works require students to relate more to character in order to sustain engagement. While some students are able to do this regardless of content, others are not. As such, the longer works I teach have predominantly male characters and are by predominantly male authors."

Wickenhauser writes that Rockhurst specifically is guided by its "five benchmark values" of being open to growth, intellectually competent, committed to justice, loving, religious and becoming "men for others," which is reflected in class discussions.

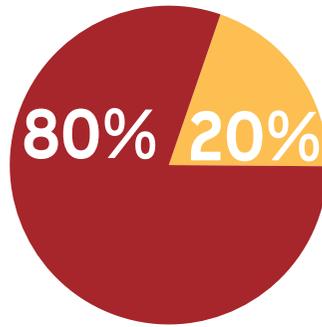
"When we discuss a character's actions and motivations or any

PERCENT OF MALE VERSUS FEMALE PROTAGONISTS IN JUNIOR AP ENGLISH LANGUAGE READING LISTS AT STA, ROCKHURST AND MIEGE.

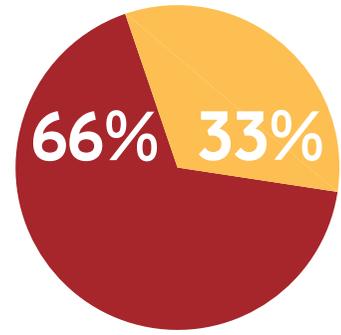
alternative coverage by MARY HILLIARD



St. Teresa's Academy



Rockhurst High School



Bishop Miege High School

topic in general related to the texts we read, students are challenged to relate what we read to themselves and their lives," Wickenhauser wrote. "When they do so, they are also challenged to assess the characters and/or topics on moral grounds."

Rockhurst High School junior Ryan Chandler agrees that Rockhurst's values guide discussions. He also finds that the all male environment changes the tone of different lessons and class discussions.

"I think going to a single sex school allows us to feel more comfortable when it comes to talking about life themes that pop up in books," Chandler said. "...One theme that is more relevant in our literature because we go to an all guys school is brotherhood and comradery."

STA principal of academic affairs Barb McCormick believes, like Rockhurst, the topics important to discuss at STA include the charisms of the sisters and the mission of this school.

"If you're taking a science course, you're going to look at ethical issues; if you're in a theology course you might look at the injustices of society," McCormick said. "So, you're going to see these themes woven in and how women might have played a role in history or play a role in tomorrow's world in making changes to those situations."

Ryan believes because history

"has been male dominated," English is the class she feels highlights women in history and different time periods. While she acknowledges the relevance of all girl schools empowering women and all boy schools empowering men, Ryan believes a balance should be struck.

"I feel like there's only so much we can do at an all girls school to prepare the girls here for gender equality," Ryan said. "But we also have to take into account young men at Rockhurst need to be prepared for that too. You can't just have young women coming out of STA ready to take on the world; Rockhurst needs to accept that and incorporate that into their lives, too. I feel like if Rockhurst boys can see that and they've accepted that and a way to do that is through literature, then that's the best way to start making this happen."

Although Engel feels her audience makes it easier to discuss female specific topics, she agrees that a balance is important.

"I feel we talk comfortably about anything, and the girls tell me they feel the same," Engel wrote. "Personally, I feel a bit less hindered at a single-gender school... I do watch for conversations painting men in an unfair light, though. Sometimes we get too hard on men because of historical factors; we have to look at issues from all sorts of perspectives, which can become biased and clouded in a school of

empowered women."

According to McCormick, curriculum can also mean what STA is delivering in the way of content, or the courses offered. When establishing content, STA looks at courses required and what courses offered that females are "more likely to take an interest in or look at professional opportunities in."

"When you're talking about teaching young women in courses, you need to think about what adolescent women desire, how they learn, how their brain works and what's the best fit for them in a learning environment," McCormick said. "That's what we make more of our modifications in: towards being a teacher that instructionally is looking at what young women need in order to strive and thrive and be successful in a classroom."

While Wickenhauser believes focusing on male authors and male characters is beneficial for Rockhurst students and understands all girls schools focusing on female authors and female characters, he says issues addressed at different schools should not depend on whether they are all female, all male or coed.

"A school grounded in values focuses on those values, which are not context specific," Wickenhauser wrote. "As such, the topics related to the values are important to discuss in an all male, all female, or co-ed school." ★