Students’ sense of agency or self-efficacy has been linked to student achievement levels (Goodman & Eren, 2013; Johnston, 2004; Skinner, Wellborne, & Connell, 1990). Research has also established that teachers position their students as having agency in the context of the classroom, frequently by the ways that they use language (Johnston, 2004; Paulson & Theado, 2014). However, little, if any, extant research describes teacher language as it relates to agency within the middle level English Language Arts (ELA) classroom. Additionally, studies concerning agency rarely address the ways in which gender may influence the ways in which teachers position their students for agency. This case study provides educators with concrete examples of the language that middle level ELA teachers use to promote agency in their classrooms.

The researcher observed two middle level ELA teachers working in a single-gender magnet program. She conducted observations for two hours each week over the course of six weeks. After each two-hour observation block, she interviewed the teachers after to gain a deeper understanding of the teachers’ perspectives, methods, and decision-making processes. She also asked explicit questions about the ways in which teachers chose to comport themselves with students of each gender. These teachers performed their roles very differently from one another, and their classrooms reflected their approaches. Based on her observations and analysis, the researcher concluded that the ways in which these teachers embodied authority in their classroom significantly influenced their students’ opportunities to experience agency. However, the researcher did not find that the teachers believed gender to be a significant factor in the ways in which they positioned students for agency.