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FACILITATING GENDER EQUITY IN AND AROUND THE CLASSROOM:
TEACHERS AS CHANGE AGENTS

by

Clinton Garner Kewley

A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts
Graduate Department of Sociology and Equity Studies in Education
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the
University of Toronto

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ABSTRACT

FACILITATING GENDER EQUITY IN AND AROUND THE CLASSROOM:

TEACHERS AS CHANGE AGENTS

Master of Arts 1999

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This research is an exploration of teachers' practices regarding gender equity. In semi-structured, in-depth interviews, four women elementary school teachers share their experiences around teacher-initiated gender equity work. The teachers discuss several initiatives to facilitate gender equity in and around the classroom. Here, grassroots projects and the role of teachers' associations are discussed. Also, the teachers identify barriers and limitations that prevent and/or discourage teachers from pursuing gender equity work. The limitations and barriers discussed include: low resource awareness, weak information-sharing networks, low prioritization of the Board of Education, the principal and parents, the absence of gender equity in pre-service training, and teachers' practices as reproducing gender equity. In
addition, areas for future research on facilitating gender equity in and around the classroom are discussed.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

The idea for this thesis came about from a course that I took wherein I met a couple of teachers who taught for the Toronto Board of Education. These teachers described an aggressive approach that they and their Board of Education were taking with the short-term goal of reducing gender inequity and the long-term goal of eventually eliminating gender inequity from their schools. This optimism and coordinated activity toward disassembling gender inequity seemed in stark contrast to the informal accounts of friends and relatives who taught for another school board in Southern Ontario. These teachers had rarely, if at all, mentioned anything regarding the identification of gender inequities or for that matter discussed strategies to remedy the situation. It was this seemingly glaring difference that seduced me into looking further into the circumstances surrounding the apparent "non-issue" or "low priority" stance that these teachers were taking as compared to their Toronto Board of Education counterparts.

In my research I interviewed four women elementary school teachers. I used semi-structured interviews to explore how these teachers organized their classroom practices regarding
gender in/equity. I discovered there were indeed attempts to create space where gender equity could be practiced.

In chapter 2, I discuss how I conducted the research. In chapter 3, I discuss how individual teachers did take it upon themselves to "carry the flag", sometimes into less receptive areas, and to stir up discussion on the significance of gender equity. I discovered that several initiatives and strategies had been or were being attempted, but often almost exclusively in isolated pockets lacking an effective and integrative sharing network for ideas to address gender in/equity. In addition, many barriers and limitations were identified by the teachers that prevented and/or discouraged them from attempting or contemplating an active/aggressive position toward pursuing gender equity in their classrooms and within their entire schools. Thus, the third chapter illuminates the many positive initiatives undertaken by teachers to facilitate gender equity in and around their classroom. In chapter four I discuss a theme that emerged from my conversations with the teachers around issues of implementing gender equity practices. In this latter part of the thesis the focus is on the potential limitations and barriers impeding teachers' strategies to facilitate gender equity.

As discussed later, one theme that evolved from the interviews was the relative autonomy the teachers had in
determining their classroom practices, both the content and the teaching style. Arguably, this relative autonomy enhanced the potential for the teachers to be effective change agents. It is through this theme, teacher as change agent, that I further hone my focus on the facilitating of gender equity in the classroom.

**Why Gender Equity?**

My goal here is not to interrogate the extensive literature on the merits of equity in general, for my position and starting point for this thesis is that equity should be a fundamental principle upon which our everyday lives are based. Nor is it my intent to untangle gender equity from its inextricably tied relationship to questions of class, physical ability, race, ethnicity and sexual orientation. Here I agree with Bourne, McCoy and Novogrodsky (1997) that we must look at individuals (students) not just in the context of a gendered being, but we must also acknowledge how other discourses interconnect to locate that individual.

However, working within the parameters of a thesis I shall be focussing on the issue of gender equity. This is a limitation, although I believe it is important to examine each strand of "fabric" to get a better sense of how it is woven together and perhaps to illuminate potential weaknesses in the
"weave" of discourses to then best consider how one might go about unraveling it.

The discussion below is not an attempt to provide an exhaustive account of the consequences of gender inequity. Rather, I present a brief description of the more obvious and detrimental effects on the students that gender inequity can manifest, and comment on the importance of the role of the teacher in this equation.

Sexism supports and promotes abusive and harmful views and behaviour that often do physical and psychological damage to its victims. It does violence to the sense of self-worth, life chances, goals, expectations and achievements of its victims. In short, sexism has devastating and long term consequences for females and males (The Metropolitan Toronto School Board, 1996:6).

The above quote illuminates the consequences of permitting an environment that harbours gender inequity. This passage does not state that there is a particular site where gender inequity is experienced, rather it conveys the sense that there are few places, if any, that are not susceptible to its reach. Indeed, the school, as one might expect, is not impenetrable. In fact, as a microcosm of broader social relations it must be looked at as more than an antiseptic place of academic instruction. As Claire Bonenfant (as cited in Cantin, 1991) asserts:
... the school is not just a place for cognitive learning. It is more than a series of classrooms; it is a social environment. It is where young people learn to live and where they develop their ways of being in relation to the opposite sex (49).

Granted this quote could be more inclusive by not imposing a simple binary position with regard to sex. Nevertheless, it does remind us that social relations within the school are not carried on in a vacuum. They have concrete implications for gendered social relations outside school, both during school and afterwards.

The role of the teacher seems pivotal to the above gender equity equation. As Theresa McCormick (1994) suggests, the interaction of the teacher with his/her students is crucial. The teacher sets up the type of interaction that occurs with the students and this can reinforce positive or negative expectations of appropriate or inappropriate behaviour. Further, as McCormick states, these gendered expectations "have direct bearing on the student's aspirations, self-esteem, achievement, career options, and choices later in life" (1994:26). Again, what occurs in school has far reaching and long lasting effects.

These effects are experienced by both girls and boys. A draft document by the Ontario Ministry of Education and Training (1994) shows that girls' life choices are limited
particularly regarding occupational possibilities, and boys are affected by rigid emotional constraints tied to discourses around masculinity. However, this is not to suggest that these limitations are experienced exclusively by one gender or the other but rather the point to emphasize is that gender inequity prevents both girls and boys from realizing their full potential.

Although these studies (Freeman and Boutte, 1996; Ontario Ministry of Education and Training, 1994; The Metropolitan School Board of Toronto, 1996) suggest that both boys and girls are limited by the existence of gender inequity practices, they also underscore the disproportionate effect such practices have on limiting girls' lives to a greater extent than boys. In fact, this is more than an underlying theme in other academic addresses (Bourne, McCoy and Novogrodsy, 1997; Cantin, 1991; Hannan, 1995; Sadker and Sadker, 1994; Smith, McCoy and Bourne, 1995) on gender equity where it is taken as a starting point.

This brief summary of recent studies was not intended as an exhaustive account of the consequences of gender inequity in schools. Rather it brings into focus the significance of gender inequity for boys' and girls' lives and the important position that the teacher occupies as one of the "agenda setters". My intention is not to focus on boys' and girls'

6
experiences but on the teachers' practices and how those practices work toward creating an environment that would facilitate gender equity.

Further it should be noted that I am not attempting to make broad generalizations about classroom teachers' practices. This paper reflects the voices and experiences of four elementary school teachers in Southern Ontario.

**Why Change Agents?**

I chose to use the term "change agents" to emphasize the influential role that teachers can/do play when they are teaching. Although teachers have less access to power than administrative officials regarding the setting of policies, teachers are the ones who work with the students on a daily basis and they do possess relative autonomy. In the classroom the teacher is the one who has the greatest potential to organize the environment and interactions with and between students. Decisions regarding: how to structure seating arrangements, what to hang on the walls, how to solicit answers from students, what examples to use during instruction, what films to show, what readings to recommend, how to praise students, how to discipline children, and how to respond to questions/issues arising around gender, race, sexuality and so forth, are part of a teacher's everyday classroom practices.
The potential for teachers to act as change agents is captured in Kathleen Weiler’s (1988) observation from her study of women urban high school teachers:

Teachers are actors and agents in complex social sites where social forces powerfully shape the limits of what is possible. But these teachers retain the ability to be conscious and to analyze and act within this socially defined site. In this way, they are intellectuals and act as intellectuals to critique and attempt to transform the social world they inhabit (148).

Similarly, Jane Thomas (1997) maintains, although systemic change is needed in the form of programs and policies, the work individual teachers engage in is a necessary ingredient to facilitate change. Commenting on the workshops offered to teachers in the Vancouver Inclusive Curriculum Project, she acknowledged the significance of teachers’ positions:

When all is said and done, however we believe that the Vancouver Project model has considerable potential for contributing to change in classrooms. As we see it, the power rests in the work done with and by teachers (Thomas, 1997:59).

Researchers (Best, 1983; Brophy and Good, 1970; Eyre, 1991; Fennema and Peterson, 1987; Gaskell, 1992; Sadker and Sadker, 1994; Smith, McCoy and Bourne, 1995; Thorne, 1994; and Worrall and Tsarna, 1987) have documented how gender organizes teachers’ practices in the classroom and the subsequent consequences for students. In addition, research (American Association of University Women, 1996; Weiler, 1988; and
Weiner and Arnot, 1987) describes concrete examples of teachers attempting to implement strategies to develop gender equity in the classroom. These studies demonstrate the potential for teachers to be change agents. In the next section I discuss how researchers have taken up the issue of teachers' initiatives to facilitate gender equity in the classroom.

**Research on Teacher-Initiated Gender Equity Work**

There are an abundance of studies documenting the different school experiences that students have as a consequence of their gender. Such work identifies how students' gender affects their success or lack of success in school. Similarly, literature focusing on "how to" incorporate gender equity practices into teachers' classrooms is relatively plentiful. One needs only to venture into a library at a college of education to access this material. However, comparatively less research exists focusing on teacher-initiated gender equity work. What I discuss below is not an exhaustive account of the literature, but rather a sense of the various teacher-initiated gender equity projects. The research consists primarily of accounts of individual teachers' initiatives and small group attempts to facilitate change. Large group initiatives often occur in collaboration with other researchers (Whyte, 1986) and/or at the pre-service
level (Taylor, 1985). There are more examples of strategies attempted by teachers working independently of administrative and collegial assistance.

In research conducted by the American Association of University Women (AAUW) (1996) one teacher-initiated strategy discussed takes up the importance of mentors, particularly for non-white girl students. The researchers stress the importance of "infusing gender issues into their curriculum, counseling and teaching approaches" (AAUW, 1996:55). In one school the teacher devised an assembly wherein girls reenacted scenes portraying historically significant women. This same teacher takes her role of mentor seriously, especially when it comes to issues of gender. She pushes girls to enter math and science and makes them aware of gender and race issues throughout her teaching (AAUW, 1996). Although the researchers acknowledge the importance of such individual efforts, they also note the limitations.

However, such an individualized approach often puts the burden on those who are already dedicated and overworked, and is unlikely to challenge the status quo with regard to what is taught and learned in school (AAUW, 1996:55).

The same researchers documented another example of teacher-initiated gender equity work at a different school. At this school a woman math teacher had designed her classes to accommodate the learning styles of girls. The teacher's
classroom exercises included discussions on "gender stereotyping, self-esteem, and career options" and she used multiple instructional techniques that had been identified as facilitating girls' learning, better than conventional methods, such as "cooperative learning, use of hands-on materials, and real-life problem solving" (AAUW, 1996:73). Another teacher at this school infuses her lessons with the awareness of gender issues and says that she notices the positive difference in the way the boys in her class relate to the girls. As the teacher suggests:

If you don’t teach the history of women, you’re not really teaching history. Even when I’m not teaching about famous women, I talk about things like why women used to have dowries. The boys in the classes usually start to appreciate all the work that women do in the home (AAUW, 1996:74).

Further, the problem of isolation was identified as a key obstacle to facilitating gender equity. The researchers outline the shortcoming of teacher isolation:

Teachers, too, can find themselves in deep water when they extend themselves unaided to help individual students. Without a clear mandate from the school or support from their colleagues, they can find themselves confronting difficult issues alone (AAUW, 1996:79).

Findings such as these lead researchers to assert:

In the absence of school policy and school-wide awareness of gender issues, innovative approaches to teaching and learning can simply reinforce old gender roles, and structural reforms designed to foster a sense of community can increase tension
and isolation (AAUW, 1996:79).

As the researchers suggest, most independent teacher-initiated gender equity work is limited by the small scope of the project. Rarely do the positive effects of this work reach into another school, and usually such efforts are confined to the teacher’s own classroom.

In Kathleen Weiler’s (1988) research, she too documents individual teachers’ initiatives addressing gender equity in the classroom. Using unstructured interviews and observation Weiler (1988) provides an account of the lives and work of feminist teachers. Within her account of the teachers’ practices she describes how these teachers each made identifying, addressing and challenging sexism an integral part of their instructional routine. These teachers “incorporate struggles over gender and attacks on sexism in the content of their teaching and the social relationships of the classroom”, and they make their own “political positions overt, relating personal experiences and identities” in their decision making (Weiler, 1988:135). For example, in exchanges with their students teachers would routinely challenge students’ comments for being sexist and/or racist. But in doing so, the teachers would make explicit their identity as white, middle class women. After observing one teacher’s interaction with her class, Weiler (1988) reports:
In this way she (the teacher) makes conscious the gendered discourse of the classroom. And then in the exchange, she overtly identifies her own gender with the girls in the class...she is not a neutral facilitator in the classroom, but has identified her own interests and thus intervenes in a gender conflict on the side of the girls (136).

Weiler (1988) maintains that strategies exposing gender discourse in the classroom facilitate the deconstructing of gender inequity. The feminist teachers she observed integrated such strategies into their everyday classroom practices with arguable success. She summarizes how this success is achieved:

In examining these classrooms, it is important to recognize the ways in which feminist teachers make existing social relationships problematic and make conscious sexist ideology and practices. In their teaching practice, feminist teachers challenge male hegemony and expand the limits of classroom discourse to include a discussion of the power and oppression experienced by both boys and girls in their everyday lives as gendered subjects (Weiler, 1988:144).

However, Weiler (1988) also acknowledges the limitations of teachers' influences. In the conclusions of her study she addresses the "agency versus structure" debate as it pertains to teachers attempting change. Here she manages to remain optimistic regarding the ability for individual teachers to facilitate change. Although teachers are bound by institutional/structural restraints, such as official policies and programs, there remains room to maneuver, even to the
extent of undertaking opposition initiatives like those practiced by the teachers in her study. She concludes:

In examining their lives and work, I think we can see the tension between the power of institutions, which have been created under particular historical, economic, and social conditions, and the will of individuals, who may be in opposition to those forces, and who themselves can influence the present structure of the institutions (Weiler, 1988:147).

When discussing teacher-initiated changes, Weiner and Arnot (1987) also emphasize the often isolated and temporal consequences of individually pursued strategies. They reflect upon independent teacher-initiated efforts by stating:

Most projects, initiated by individuals or groups of teachers, were small-scale, and short lived due to lack of "official" support or commitment, with consequent problems of under-financing and resourcing (Weiner and Arnot, 1987:361).

According to Weiner and Arnot (1987), teacher-initiated projects focused understandably on issues that the teachers believed were within the realm of their influence. Hence, addressing structural or administrative changes were rarely pursued by individual teachers. Rather, "the projects generally focused on the curriculum, on pupils' attitudes, on teachers' attitudes - or on some combination of the three" (Weiner and Arnot, 1987:362).

In addition, Weiner and Arnot (1987) identify teacher-initiated change projects as often being organized within the surrounding community of the school. Such projects extended
beyond the classroom and raised awareness of gender equity issues among parents and youths outside of the school. Further, Weiner and Arnot (1987) emphasize the importance of teacher communication networks to enable teachers to share ideas and resources. Such grassroots teacher contact is necessary for the facilitation of change.

In the brief discussion above I hoped to accomplish two goals. First, to provide the reader with an idea of what researchers have found via their investigations into teacher-initiated gender equity work. Here, the issues of teacher isolation, effective teacher communication networks, the lack of administrative support and the limitations of teachers' abilities to affect change were thematically present. However, these studies also convincingly argued the significance of the work initiated by teachers and, in doing so, underscored the necessity for such projects in the contribution toward innovation and reform of current inequity practices.

The second point that I want to make is the scarcity of the literature focusing on teacher-initiated gender equity work. Although literature on gender equity work is moderately plentiful, the vast amount of the work tends to focus on "how to" instructional manuals for teachers, and originates primarily from academics or collaborations with individuals in
higher learning. This is not to downplay the vital role that such research plays in heightening awareness and providing concrete strategies to combat gender inequity. But, at the same time, it is necessary to hear from those working in the classrooms to fully comprehend the complex dynamic of gender equity. Hearing teachers' hands-on experiences will provide an accurate account of what theoretical strategies work or do not work in the classroom and will offer a window into the genesis of innovations arising from the terrain where gender inequity struggles occur. Hence, it is invaluable to encourage the continuing publication of accounts of teacher-initiated gender equity work.
CHAPTER 2

CONDUCTING THE RESEARCH

Methodology

My methodological standpoint is rooted in a sociology theoretically informed by a "feminist" framework, in particular by the work of Dorothy Smith (1987). My research starting point is the "problematic" of inequalities based on gender, race, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, physical ability, and so forth. Accordingly, I believe that sociological research should contribute to the dismantling/deconstruction of such inequities. An epistemological assumption of this methodological framework is that individuals are "knowers" and thus the best way to deconstruct inequalities is to find out how things are organized/put together, through accessing these "knowers'" experiences. Thus if I wish to learn how teachers can be effective change agents in the classroom, the logical first place to begin is with teachers' experiences.

The Interviews

The method used to collect the teachers' experiences was a qualitative approach using in-depth, semi-structured interviews. This method of using semi-structured interviews is said to be one of the "principal means by which feminists have sought to achieve active involvement of their respondents
in the construction of data about their lives" (Graham, 1992:18).

I contacted the participants via an acquaintance, who was also a teacher. This acquaintance provided me with a list of several teachers to possibly contact. The teachers on the list were personal friends of hers. They had spoken with her about the importance of gender equity. However, my contact did not know whether any of the teachers had attempted to initiate changes to complement their beliefs. I phoned these individuals using the name of my contact as an introduction to our conversation and I provided a brief summary of my research focus. All agreed to participate and we set up a mutually convenient time to meet.

The interviews were informal and they were conducted in the homes of the teachers. Three of the interviews took place at the teacher's kitchen table and the remaining interview was held in the teacher's living room. The duration of the interviews varied with one lasting only 45 minutes while the others were 60, 65 and 75 minutes in length. The interviews were tape-recorded and then I transcribed them within a few days following the interview. There were no objections voiced over the taping of our conversations.

Prior to each interview I gave the teacher the interview guide to examine. In the first interview the participant asked
if she could have the interview guide the night before so that she could think about the questions in advance. Subsequently, when I later interviewed her she had constructed some notes which she occasionally relied upon as a way of "jogging" her memory to ensure that she did not leave anything out that she wanted to discuss. The other teachers did not make this request and each only looked at the interview guide a few minutes before the actual interview.

All of the participants were informed of my general research focus of teachers' practices in the classroom regarding the facilitation of gender equity. Also, each participant was briefed on the measures taken to ensure confidentiality within the research process, as outlined in the consent form (Appendix A). Each teacher was made aware of the voluntary nature of their participation and I asked each if they had any questions before we started the interviews, to which no inquiries were raised.

The tone of the interviews was reflective of a guided conversation, whereby a general topic of conversation was introduced and used as a starting point from which to embark. The interview guide (Appendix B) was essentially a set of probes to assist in the cultivating of conversation. I generally followed the sequence of topics as listed on the
interview guide but the wording of questions varied somewhat depending upon the particular experiences of the teacher.

Each interview began with some personal information questions about the participant's age, teacher training, educational background and employment history. Next, general questions were asked about how they organize their classroom, who determines what goes on in their classroom, and the effect of other teachers, principals and parents on the teachers' organization of the classroom. The last section of the interview guide focused on resource awareness and access to formal and informal practices regarding gender equity.

I made a deliberate attempt to include the teachers as active participants in the research process by encouraging them to feel free to ask questions at any time and/or to depart on a particular point of interest. Only two of the participants took the opportunity to ask me a question, which they asked at the end of the interview. Both teachers asked me what I intended to do after graduating from the university.

After transcribing the interviews, I looked for the emergence of common themes from the participants' experiences. These commonalities were grouped together to form the categories that I discuss below. This process ensured the preservation of the teachers as "knowers" and as such the discussion of the various strategies addressing gender
in/equity and the identification of barriers impeding such initiatives truly arise from the teachers' experiences.

The Participants

I interviewed four women elementary public school teachers, all of whom taught for the same Board of Education within two cities, each with populations of less than 100,000, in Southern Ontario. Three of the teachers were similar in age; 54, 55 and 56 years old. The last teacher was age 29. The youngest teacher had been teaching for seven years, while two of the women had taught for 35 years and the other for 33 years. Only the youngest teacher had remained with the same Board of Education for her entire teaching career. The others had each taught for three or four different Boards of Education, some bigger and some smaller than that by which they were currently employed. Two of the teachers worked at the same school.

Each teacher had instructed multiple grades over the years. Two women had taught grades one to eight, while another had taught grades one, three, seven and eight, in addition to special education classes. The remaining teacher had experience with junior kindergarten to grade three students. The education of each teacher varied. Two of the women had graduate degrees in Education. One woman had a Doctorate degree, another had a Master of Arts degree and two
teachers had Bachelor of Arts degrees. The two teachers with 35 years experience had just retired at the end of the 1997 school year. The school sizes were quite comparable and were commented on as "typical Board size" of approximately 300 to 350 kids. Two of the women had instructed the same grade for at least the past five years. In fact, one of the teachers had taught senior elementary (grades six to eight) for the past fifteen years, at the same school. None of the teachers identified their work or themselves as feminist.

Before I proceed to address the teachers' experiences, I think it is necessary to place this research in its context by addressing its limitations. This research is exploratory and I am not concerned with making generalizations about all teachers' practices regarding gender equity. Further, I am not attempting to suggest any generalizations regarding just women teachers or men teachers. In fact, that I interviewed no men teachers is more of a consequence of the list generated by my contact rather than a deliberate attempt by me to exclude the voices of men teachers. Indeed, I think that men teachers' experiences regarding gender equity issues are important. However, the research that I am casting is not wide enough to accommodate this dynamic, and I acknowledge this as a limitation. But, I believe that such limitations should not lessen the significance of the teachers' voices. I have only
interviewed four women elementary school teachers, all of whom work for the same Board of Education, in relatively small cities. The accounts that follow all originate from the lived experiences of the four teachers.
CHAPTER 3

TEACHERS AS CHANGE AGENTS - VOICES OF TEACHERS

A Space for Making Change Possible

As mentioned, a theme that evolved from my discussions with the teachers was the relative autonomy that they expressed with respect to their work in their classrooms. All of the participants claimed that they essentially controlled their classrooms. As one teacher said:

Well what you teach is mandated by the Ministry of Education and then the Programme Department in the (Board) used to break that information down into teachers' booklets. You had one for every subject area and it gave you guidelines to teach at the different grade levels. Some subject areas are very specific whereas others are much more general. You were then left the flexibility of how you wanted to teach it. We really weren't given any directives. We were pretty much on our own.(T3)

A similar account of such autonomy was expressed by another teacher:

So we've got the provincial guidelines and the Board curriculum, but within that I pretty much decide and the individual teacher pretty much decides how you are going to treat a topic, which topics, because you might not be able to get through them all, for example. So you choose the ones you're going to do.(T1)
Again, the seeming mobility to act specifically within a general framework was articulated in yet another teacher's account. This teacher emphasized:

You're given the skeleton by the Board or the Ministry but you have to put all the meat onto those bones and it's up to the teacher to make it fun and interesting because what they give you is pretty dry. You can pretty much do your own thing ... (T2)

The empowerment of the teachers via this autonomy enhances their potential to act as effective change agents to promote gender equity in the classroom. This sentiment was also expressed by Goli Rezai-Rashti during a seminar presentation when she stated that "even though you might think that the superintendent is the most important position, the teacher is the one who can make change because she/he is in front of the class" (1997:Oct.29).

The teachers I spoke with were convinced that they did have "real" autonomy in the classroom. Their voices certainly seemed to buttress this sense. However, one could argue that their autonomy is perceived rather than real, especially given the current restructuring agenda in Ontario's public school system. Under this revamping project, it has been suggested that teachers will have less autonomy in their classrooms as a result of stricter guidelines, standardized tests and report
cards (Small, 1997). The teachers I interviewed believed that there existed enough latitude within the current Ministry of Education and Training guidelines to exercise autonomy in their classrooms. Whether this “maneuvering” room will disappear in the near future, as a result of the government’s restructuring efforts, remains unknown. In fact, it could be that this gap between “official” guidelines and teachers’ actual classroom practices should not exist in theory; but according to these teachers’ experiences there seems to be at least a crevice to operate within. Subsequently, although it is questionable whether these teachers truly possess the degree of autonomy that they claim, their experiences indicate that they are acting as if they do. Hence, their “power” to act autonomously may/could be constrained theoretically but it exists in praxis within these teachers’ classrooms, and perhaps this is the most important point to emphasize.

Next I present some examples of how teachers used their autonomy to attempt to facilitate gender equity in the classroom through specific strategies that they undertook at the individual teacher level.

**Individual Practices**

At the level of individual teachers’ practices, what evolved through my conversations can be broken down into two categories. The first is the utilization of particular
teaching methods to facilitate gender equity in the classroom. The second is equally important, and it revolves around the preparatory work of determining what materials to incorporate into the classroom to supplement the textbooks and curriculum mandated by the Board of Education. These categories are outlined below.

The theme throughout this thesis is the role of the teacher as a change agent to develop gender equity in the classroom. Perhaps the greatest area of influence at the teacher's disposal is her/his pedagogical approach. Each of the teachers I spoke with recognized, to varying degrees, the importance of gender equity in the classroom and each had some sort of strategy for combating gender inequity. Some strategies were arguably better than others. For example, one teacher said that she tried to always pick the members of groups for her students to ensure a gender mix rather than groups of all boys or all girls, which she believed her students would choose if it were left up to them.

I found that you really had to make the group for them. If you told them to break off into groups of four they would instinctively get in groups of four girls or four boys, not mixed. So I would pick the groups for them so I would have a mixture of boys and girls in each group.(T3)
Another teacher reported focusing on the problem of leadership in the classroom.

I was aware of the girls being more laid back in the classroom, that the boys would tend to answer out and I made a conscious effort to rotate leadership responsibilities in everything I did. I made a conscious effort to rotate leadership responsibilities so that boys and girls, the weaker and the stronger students were each getting an opportunity to boost their self-esteem and to do as well as they could. (T1)

This teacher indicated her awareness of gender inequity and she made conscious attempts to avoid reproducing it by actively structuring her interactions with the students in her classroom in a manner that she believed could alter the girls' experiences to be more equitable with those of the boys' experiences. This practice of cultivating girls' participation in the classroom is a concrete example of a teacher attempting to make changes to facilitate gender equity in the classroom. What is evident is that all four teachers were aware of the potential for gender inequity to arise in their classrooms.

One of the teachers was using a cooperative learning approach in her classroom that she found to be quite successful for stimulating critical thinking skills, collaborative problem solving, and gender equity. She related
an account wherein she expressed the multiple benefits of this teaching method.

I had something interesting happen that I think is a result of using this teaching style in the classroom which I think relates to gender very well. What happened was I noticed when I went to the school, my class, the boys had this game which they played that was quite physical, it was almost like a football game and there was only one girl in the class that they allowed to play with them because this girl was kind of athletic. And then by having these mixed gender groups, which had to solve problems together which gave students the opportunities to lead discussions or whatever, I found that as the year went on the class was working more cohesively as a group. And even with outside the classroom or recess type activities, by the end of the year every kid in the class was included in that game and the boys were not excluding the girls from playing with them and the girls felt comfortable with the boys. There was acceptance of different ability levels physically and that was just one of the unexpected outcomes that I really felt went along with the cooperative learning, because the class had never done this type of learning before. And I know before I got there there was not that kind of camaraderie between genders. (T1)

Although three of the teachers maintained that they were using cooperative learning in their classrooms, only one teacher seemed to be fully engaged in all of the principles of this teaching strategy. However, two other teachers reported integrating some elements of cooperative learning into their classroom practice.
The decision to use the cooperative learning method is a positive step in combating gender inequity in the classroom. Theresa McCormick (1994) maintains that cooperative learning, as compared to more traditional styles of teaching which are more competitive, helps to eliminate gender and race inequities in the classroom. The Metropolitan Toronto School Board (1996) makes a related point:

An important set of intended outcomes of the suggested learning opportunities, then, is the promotion of self-understanding, self-esteem and skills in positive relating that enable students to accept and respect others and treat them more equitably (p.7).

The interviewees' Board of Education's official policy encourages the use of cooperative learning in schools. However, the teachers I interviewed told me that this policy was not enforced or promoted actively by the administration. It was up to the individual teacher to decide.

The teachers I spoke to reported that they had considerable discretion in the selection of materials for instructional purposes. As Janice Streitmatter (1994) points out, this is a crucial and relatively straightforward feature of attempting to implement gender equity in the classroom. This selection process further emphasized the teacher as a potential change agent. An example of this can be found in the following account offered by one of the teachers:
I purposely read this story to the class, the story of Anne Frank, a female heroine, and the school was starting to get books like the Paperbag Princess and there was that kind of, a little more conscious of that even with the textbooks there were a few more textbooks with names of children like Miguel, probably a little more familiar to kids from larger centres, but there were stories also with male and female heroines, where a mother would be a single parent. These stories I found in the library books and in the reading materials. They were starting to be more representative of real life situations. I consciously made an effort to choose books, the one that comes to mind is Anne Frank, but that is why I read that particular novel. (T1)

The above passage illuminates the potential for teachers to take positive actions toward creating gender equity in their classrooms. The teacher’s autonomy in deciding what classroom materials to use and how to use them is important in the process of establishing equity in the classroom (McCormick, 1994). I should point out, however, that this same autonomy also enables the perpetuation of inequitable practices by other teachers.

**Grassroots Projects**

Here I discuss teachers' initiatives as change agents in small groups looking at gender equity. The teachers' accounts of these grassroots projects represent an extension of the otherwise isolated and independent practices of a single teacher working within the confines of his/her classroom. The teachers' voices offer further evidence of the value of
teachers as change agents, and the collective strategies that have been attempted are testament to an acknowledged, shared prioritization of the importance of gender equity.

The first small group practice that was discussed involved the work of one teacher, who eventually gained the support of a small group of interested colleagues who came "on board" to assist in the development of gender equity practices at her school. When describing the types of resources that she had access to regarding gender issues, this teacher elaborated on an account of her co-workers' efforts to intervene and heighten awareness on gender equity.

Other teachers have been examples. For example (teacher) at (school). I know that when she went there she started a math or science program, I don't know which, that was just for girls, because she found that they weren't performing to the best of their abilities in mixed classrooms in that area. And my recollection of it was that it was quite a successful project...(T1)

The above example represents a strategy that focuses on the organization of actual classroom teaching practices. Initially the idea that one teacher envisioned became a teaching practice adopted by several teachers within the same school. A reorganization in the instructional environment was attempted to facilitate gender equity. The problem with all grassroots projects described by teachers participating in this study is
their dependence on one catalyst. The lack of adequate information-sharing networks among teachers means that the continuity of even successful projects is at risk. However, I will discuss such limitations later, when I discuss the problematic of such endeavors more fully.

Another teacher provided an account of a small group of teachers at her school who took it upon themselves to "interrogate" the school's library holdings over a period of several months. She indicated that her group was looking for examples of stories and/or images in books that reproduced what the group saw as stereotyped images that could limit the imaginations of the children who read those books. As she stated:

We ourselves went through our library and removed any book, storybook that had mom sweeping the floor with an apron on or dad with a briefcase. So those books were removed and we were given the money and we went out to buy new books. (T4)

Further, this teacher indicated that the group felt so good about the project that they did not just stop at the library door. In fact the group members went around to "check out" the reading materials that were being used in classrooms throughout the school and they applied the same investigative scrutiny to these materials that they had exercised with the library books. The teacher recalled:
A lot of teachers had taken the old readers which were obsolete and cut them up for creative writing to use the pictures and that. But again it was mommy in the apron and daddy with the briefcase, so those things were brought to the teacher's attention. (T4)

Unfortunately, she could not remember how the group had come together. However, this teacher did view her group's practices as a positive action toward promoting gender equity awareness in the school.

A different sort of initiative regarding gender equity awareness was recounted by another teacher. In this example the teacher had been a vice-principal for two years in the early 1990s. At that time she belonged to a group of women administrators whose impetus for becoming a collective was the issue of gender equity within the Board of Education, and specifically at the administrative level.

I did belong to, when I was a vice-principal, I did belong to Women Administrators of (Board of Education). It was sort of a group. We applied for a grant from our Federation for our group which was to promote, provide a support network and to promote leadership among females within the Board. We had a monthly meeting, but that also died out. It was sort of an initiative taken by some women early on when there were only 19 females out of a total of 79 administrators. And as there got to be more female administrators then that died out, the support network, the meetings. (T1)

Although this turned out to be only a temporary group, it did serve to raise a collective awareness among its members of
gender inequities at the administrative level. Again, like the other small group initiatives discussed above, the longevity of these projects is perhaps disappointing. Nevertheless, these initiatives do indicate the existence of small pockets of teachers who perceive a need for such group projects and are willing to devote some of their time and energy to attempt change.

**The Role of Teachers' Associations**

I have discussed above, using the voices of the teachers, how teachers act as change agents to facilitate gender equity in the classroom and the school. Thus far these initiatives have covered individual and small group practices. Below I discuss the teachers' accounts of actions taken by larger groups of teachers, in a more formal manner, to encourage gender equity.

Three of the teachers I spoke with told me of a project carried out by the Federation of Women Teachers Association of Ontario that focused on the issue of gender equity. It is perhaps worth noting, however, that two of the teachers were quite critical of the project because it only focused on the girls. The project was organized as an event, an annual affair that focused on giving girls exposure to traditionally male-dominated occupational fields. The intention was to encourage girls to continue their studies in mathematics and science to
enable them to make these career choices a possibility later in their lives. As one teacher explained:

...they had a day which was sponsored by the Federation of Women Teachers and it was just for the girls, which was pretty sexist anyway and they would spend all kinds of money on just the girls. The girls would have guest speakers, like one time a veterinarian came in who was a women and she talked about her career. It was just to get girls interested in math and science. It was just so that girls would be exposed to different options, to know that they didn't have to go into gender specific roles.(T2)

The two teachers who spoke critically of this event did believe that it was a positive step to encourage girls into areas of mathematics and science and to give them a wider spectrum of occupational possibilities from which to select. But they were hesitant to endorse the project because they believed it to be sexist for its exclusion of boys.

The one teacher who spoke highly of the project relayed a story regarding how her school principal, a man, threatened to cancel the event unless a similar day was organized for the boys. She remembered how he said that this was "simple reverse discrimination" in his eyes and he would not allow it. That this resistance from teachers and administrators exists toward these types of interventions seems too common. Myra Novogrodsky and Andrea Alimi (1997) discuss a similar account of a project practiced in the Toronto Board of Education.
They too heard of boys and faculty voicing complaints about a girls-only conference that was designed to encourage girls to consider courses and careers in mathematics, science and computers.

Similarly, Judith Whyte (1986) found that men teachers participating in the Girls Into Science and Technology project did so reluctantly. In the study she found that many of the science and craft teachers believed in "natural" sex differences. This belief justified the men's resistance to gender equity initiatives because they believed that inequality would "naturally" occur between girls and boys. Hence, attempts to focus on cultivating girls' abilities in science and technology was not seen as an efficient use of resources. According to these teachers it would have been better to spend the time honing the boys' "natural" talents than try to develop girls' skills in "unnatural" subjects. In addition, other researchers (Acker, 1994; Joyce, 1987; Kelly et al., 1985; Pratt et al., 1984; and Pratt, 1985) have argued that teachers' reluctance to engage in activities designed to address gender inequities is not an isolated phenomenon. Rather, as Sandra Acker (1994) states, there tends to be a perception regarding gender in/equity:

...that there is support for equal opportunities in principle, but that teachers are disinclined to believe schools actually favour boys and are wary
The hesitation to implement intervention strategies could be rooted in discourses of equality, which emphasize individualism and make claims of meritocracy, while masking the structures that reproduce inequality (for a classic discussion on this see Davis and Moore, 1945). Likewise, gender discourses focusing on physical/biological differences may organize the way in which teachers view gender inequality, as something inevitable that transcends the scope of the school’s influence. Therefore, once the issue is discursively defined as a non-school issue, it falls outside the boundaries of common-sense to consider addressing it within the school. The success of this process is perhaps manifested in the teachers’ resistance to embrace actual practices that may facilitate gender equity.

Treating the genders differently is something that is seen as necessary by some to foster equality between boy and girl students. For example, Jane Martin (1981) argues that equality does not necessarily mean the same treatment for girls and boys. Similarly, Linda Eyre (1991) suggests that treating students the same neglects to recognize diversity, which in turn may obscure equality. In addition, Mary O’Brien (1990) asserts that strategies which are solely based on
“equality of opportunity” without acknowledging “equality of condition” are “fundamentally patriarchal in theory and in practice” (12). Further, Janice Streitmatter maintains, one of the components in the framework to bring about gender equity "is to enhance opportunities for the at-risk group, sometimes to the point of extending an unequal and greater amount of resources toward that group rather than equalizing the resources between girls and boys"(1994:9).

Perhaps until the time when non-sexist curriculum and teachers’ practices become common place in schools, strategies that seek simplistic redistribution of resources to address gender inequities will remain susceptible to accusations of “reverse” discrimination. But in the interim, projects like Girls Into Science and Technology are arguably a positive step to promoting gender equity by stimulating the girls' thinking toward a wider spectrum of career choices and by providing concrete role models for the girls to perhaps aspire toward.

The only other contribution that was identified by one of the teachers regarding large group activities focusing on gender equity, was that of professional publications produced by the Federation of Women Teachers Association of Ontario. The teacher who raised the issue could not recall specific details regarding a particular article in the Federation's publication but she did mention that on a few occasions she
remembered reading articles in their newsletter. However, she did add her concern that with the amalgamation of the women's and men's teachers' federations the Federation of Women Teachers Association of Ontario publication might not continue and thus sponsored activities could be in jeopardy as well. This was the only teacher who mentioned the potential detrimental effects of the amalgamation of the two federations. At the time of writing this thesis the fate of the publication remains uncertain.

The teachers I talked to did not have much to say about the significance of professional associations in promoting gender equity in schools. Although it is arguably disappointing that greater formal activity is not occurring, there is perhaps some solace in knowing that there are some initiatives, albeit few, that are being pursued and promoted by teachers in this Board of Education to facilitate gender equity.

**Summary of Teachers' Practices to Facilitate Gender Equity**

As I stated in the introduction, my initial curiosity to explore teachers' practices to facilitate gender equity arose from what I had informally been told by teachers from the Toronto Board of Education and by teachers from the Board of Education examined in this research. The disparity in the two accounts led me to the "knee-jerk" conclusion that when
compared to the aggressive and coordinated response by teachers in the Toronto Board of Education the impression I formed of teachers in this other Board of Education was one that was less than flattering with respect to initiatives to counter gender inequity. However, once I began my investigation, I found that these teachers were attempting to make change around gender equity.

These attempts to make change took various forms. There were accounts of individual strategies that the teachers used within their classrooms to facilitate change. Such individual strategies involved using a particular teaching method like cooperative learning to help foster a classroom environment where gender equity could be practiced. The teachers spoke of concrete instructional methods designed and consciously used to cultivate girls' participation in the classroom. The teachers' individual efforts were also crucial in the accumulation and construction of supplementary instructional materials which were used by the children.

The teachers I interviewed described small groups of teachers working within their schools in a coordinated and collective manner. These initiatives took up the issue of gender equity in a number of ways. There were grassroots experiences of teachers attempting to implement courses of study specifically structured to address a perceived inequity
in teaching girls in mathematics and science. This particular strategy was heralded by several people within the Board of Education of these participating teachers. Another small group project was designed and carried out to eliminate sexist material from a school's library and this practice was even extended by the group to include investigating the books in all of the classrooms of the school. Another small group initiative was established by women elementary vice-principals to heighten awareness throughout the Board of Education that gender equity was an important issue at the administrative level.

Efforts to attempt change were made at a more formal level by associations of teachers at the provincial level. The Federation of Women Teachers Association of Ontario had established an annual conference designed to encourage girls to continue their studies in mathematics, science and computers. The Federation provided role-models/mentors for girls to address the inequity in scholastic and occupational participation of girls and boys in particular fields of study and employment. The Federation of Women Teachers Association of Ontario also published a newsletter wherein they could take up the issue of gender equity and reach their members with articles to assist them in developing strategies to combat inequities and/or to heighten awareness.
Thus, at multiple levels these teachers were able to provide positive accounts of teachers attempting to make change regarding gender equity. This is not to suggest that everything is being done that should/could be, nor is it to say that schools and curricula are changing. But contrary to my initial perception that little, if anything, was being attempted, the teachers whom I spoke with did emphasize a certain level of general awareness regarding the issue and they provided concrete examples of initiatives that they had attempted or witnessed.

As a result of my conversations with these teachers several concerns arose. I learned that many initiatives were being attempted by the teachers to facilitate gender equity, but the teachers' accounts underscored a series of limitations and barriers that could prevent the effective integration of gender equity practices into everyday teaching discourse. These limitations and barriers, as identified by the teachers, included: the lack of an effective information sharing network, low resource awareness, low priority of the Board of Education regarding gender equity, an absence of professional development work on the issue, the power dynamic of principals and parents, the absence of gender equity within pre-service training, and the reproduction of gender equity through the ill-informed and/or unintentional practices of a teacher. In
the next chapter, I provide an account of the barriers and limitations encountered and perceived by the teachers in their attempts to address gender in/equity.
CHAPTER 4

LIMITATIONS AND BARRIERS

As my conversations developed with the teachers I found that there was an emergence of a theme of genuine, concerted grassroots efforts to act as change agents in facilitating gender equity. However, there was also a presence of the underlying theme of barriers and limitations that confronted teachers' attempts to facilitate changes involving gender equity. This chapter focuses on the limitations and barriers encountered by teachers.

Low Resource Awareness

When I was first preparing to research the topic of gender equity in schools I went to two different university libraries that housed education-focused materials. Again, based on my informal conversations with some acquaintances who were teachers, I anticipated that the amount of literature on gender inequity would be commensurate with the low level of attention that these teachers suggested their Board of Education was giving to the issue. To the contrary, I was somewhat overwhelmed by the amount of literature that had been produced on the topic of gender inequity in schools, especially in the last ten years. There were theoretical discussions, concrete teaching strategies and annotated bibliographies published on the subject of facilitating gender
equity in schools. Yet, the informal discussions I had with friends, who were teachers, and even the interviews I had conducted with teachers would not have led me to this conclusion. In fact, the teachers I interviewed had a low level of resource awareness.

When asked about what resources she had access to regarding gender issues, one teacher responded:

Oh god (laughter). Well, there's professional reading that you would have and it certainly has been in the limelight the last number of years. I just know on professional development days we've had keynote speakers that have spoken on the topic. You know the fact that, trying to make it an equal sharing rather than always thinking boys for sports, for math, and science and girls for other areas, but trying to share things around. I would say basically that's the only resources that I'm aware of. (T3)

Another teacher expressed a similar position regarding resource awareness, stating that:

Really I don't have any. They do have a family and life skills program which is carried on in the grade seven and eight classes. Family Studies it's called and though I don't know the specific program I think that it does talk about different kinds of families and so on. I also know that we have the school nurse come in and talk to the kids starting in grade four about, well they're sex classes right. But other than that I don't know of anything that's specifically set out in the curriculum along gender lines. (T1)
This theme of low resource awareness was present in all of the conversations that I had with the teachers. At best they came up with only marginally related descriptions of projects which they attempted to link to gender in/equity, but even these accounts were vague.

The low level of resource awareness is not an isolated phenomenon. Another researcher commented on the large amount of resource materials produced on gender in/equity that seemed to lay dormant or at least under-used by educators:

First we have produced vast numbers of prints, and audio-visual materials for educators on gender equity. A member of my staff and I recently produced a bibliography, for example, that contains a full fifty-two pages on gender equity materials only in mathematics, science and technology and only developed since 1980 (Sanders and Rocco, 1994). While many of the materials are excellent and of great value to the educators who use them, I think that it is fair to say they are not by and large widely used (Sanders, 1996: 214).

Others (Hargreaves, 1984; and McNamara, 1976) have further documented this apparent gap between theory and practice, suggesting that scholarly publications/resources are rarely used by teachers.

One possible explanation for this lack of awareness and hence an under-utilization of available resources could be the consequence of a poor/weak information sharing network among teachers. This topic is discussed below in the next sub-
section, but before that address I would like to comment further on the issue of low resource awareness, with respect to a latent consequence. I am referring to the framing of gender in/equity as a "low priority" or a "non-issue" among educators.

The theme of "low priority" and "non-issue" regarding gender in/equity is a recurring theme throughout the interviews, and I would argue it has ramifications for Board of Education positions and individual teachers' practices around gender equity. Later I discuss how this "low priority" position taken by the administrators of the Board of Education manifests itself in courses of in/action. However, here I focus on how the framing of gender in/equity as a "non-issue" informs teachers' practices. For example, when asked about access to resources about gender issues, one teacher replied:

Really for primary I don't, I can't think of any resource that I have. Like the only, in the primary you don't really have a lot of gender issues. (T2)

This teacher's comment regarding gender issues as a "non-issue" in primary grades is significant because it illuminates how easily a fertile environment may be established to permit the reproduction of gender inequality. If gender inequality is not identified as a problem and prioritized by the Ministry of Education and Training, colleges of education and boards of
education then why should one expect it to receive a high degree of scrutiny from teachers? The teachers who challenge practices and policies that facilitate gender inequality must do so on their own, likely in the absence of administrative support, and often lacking the cooperation of their colleagues. Read in this context, the above teacher’s words seem to follow a rational path to an otherwise obvious conclusion.

A further consequence of accepting a "low priority" or "non-issue" position is that it permits an environment with ever-changing boundaries of acceptable behaviour, depending upon whether a teacher prioritizes gender equity as a goal. One teacher related an account of her bus duty experiences, wherein she felt overwhelmed by the verbal abuse that the boys were using against the girls.

I've been appalled at the comments that I've heard while doing bus duty for example. The way the boys refer to the girls, calling them bitch, in casual conversation between two boys. 'You know something or other about the bitch.' And just very casual conversation you know, not even in anger. It was just like everyday language to them, it just came tripping off their tongues. It was just so easy for them to talk like that, so natural. (T1)

This extreme form of gender inequity practices by the students was appalling to this teacher, but she indicated that she felt somewhat helpless because other teachers seemed to condone
this behaviour by not taking action to change it. This phenomenon of verbal abuse of girls by boys is not exclusive to these teachers' accounts. Other researchers (Coulter, 1993; and Smith, McCoy, and Bourne, 1995) have found similar incidences of boys using verbal put downs and insults against girls in the classrooms, hallways, and playgrounds of schools. The failure of all teachers to prioritize the issue of gender equity magnifies the Board of Education’s already “laissez-faire” attitude toward gender equity and allows for the possibility of this abuse to occur. Next I discuss the significance of a weak information sharing network among teachers and I outline how this limits the facilitation of gender equity practices.

**Weak Information Networks**

As I mentioned above, it may be that teachers' low level of resource material awareness on gender in/equity is in part due to the lack of an extensive and effective information sharing network among teachers. From my conversations with teachers, I found that there was a genuine desire to assist other teachers if they asked for help. However, I did not find an overwhelming number of examples of teachers actually asking other teachers for assistance. Simply, there did not seem to be an abundance of examples of information sharing between
teachers. For example, when asked if she had access to the work of other teachers, one woman replied:

Sometimes people would question you about something after it was finished. The final product of a project I would display and other teachers would see something up and they would come in and ask you about it. You know, ask if they could get a copy because they would try a similar thing in their room. So there was some sharing of information like that. They'd ask 'where did you get that idea from?' And that's about the only sharing at the junior level. (T3)

The above teacher's experiences regarding information sharing between teachers were minimal and there were no accounts offered by any of the teachers regarding the sharing of information on the topic of gender in/equity. What little occurred in the way of resource sharing constituted, as one teacher described, the sharing of thermometers and geometry sets for science projects but nothing on gender.

As a consequence of this weak information network, grassroots projects that were started by individual teachers or at a particular school by a group of teachers were more or less confined to that school, and most often if the individual who inspired the initiative left the school, the project seemed to die with that teacher's departure. In one teacher's account she describes the effect a colleague's relocation had on a project. The teacher in this example had started a
program in mathematics and science to stimulate the girls' performance in the subject area.

... it was quite a successful project but when she moved to another school and became principal the experiment just died. (T1)

Without an adequate information sharing network among teachers these grassroots projects rarely crept out of the isolated pockets from which they originated. Another account reinforced the limitation of grassroots work in the absence of an effective information sharing network and institutional/administrative support.

At one point there used to be an ideas booklet made up and passed around throughout the Board. But again these ideas seemed to come and go. I think this was more of an informal arrangement. (T1)

This limitation in the facilitation of gender equity was also identified by Jo Sanders (1996), who cited underdeveloped or non-existent networks of information sharing as a key obstacle in the struggle for gender equity.

Most developers, scattered at universities, non-profit organizations, education agencies and schools nation-wide, have no organized distribution channel... It is therefore unlikely that a typical educator is aware of the available resources (Sanders, 1996: 214-215).

Sandra Acker (1994) also identified weak information sharing networks as an obstacle confronting teachers attempting to make changes.
Channels for dissemination from one school to another are not well developed, so that ideas emanating from one teacher or school may never find their way to others with similar needs (Acker, 1994: 95).

Hence, according to the experiences of the teachers, the absence of an information sharing network is a formidable barrier to be remedied in order to facilitate gender equity practices. The situation is further exacerbated by the lack of institutional support for such equity initiatives. This is especially significant because of the agenda setting power that administrators wield in comparison to teachers. Next I examine the problematic of the low priority placed on gender in/equity by the Board of Education.

Low Prioritization of Board on Gender Equity

It is difficult to suggest if the low prioritization of gender equity by the Board of Education is the main cause for a low level of teachers' awareness of gender equity or whether the low level of teachers' awareness contributes to the Board's absence of prioritizing gender equity. However, what the teachers' experiences revealed was a failure of their Board of Education to place gender equity high on the agenda. In a university seminar presentation by Goli Rezai-Rashti (Oct. 29, 1997) she maintained that teachers were the best individuals to work in the school system if one wanted to attempt change in gender equity. But a limitation to this
strategy was that teachers were difficult to access because the Board would not allow teachers to attend workshops on school time. The Board's failure to prioritize gender equity was a major limitation to the facilitation of gender equity in the school or classroom. In this section I discuss how the Board of Education's low priority position is manifested in specific barriers for the facilitation of gender equity such as an absence in professional development work and systemic sexism.

A common theme in my conversations with the teachers was the lack of activity by the Board of Education in professional development work on gender in/equity. The level and extent of in-service instruction on gender equity could be used as a way of indicating how important the Board perceives an issue. If this is the case, this particular Board of Education places little importance on gender equity.

The teachers said that the amount of professional development work in all areas had diminished greatly over the past five years. One teacher commented:

We haven't had professional development days since 1993 and that was where we'd all go. Now sometimes we have an in-service at our own school by the principal or maybe a guest speaker but it's nothing like the old professional development days where there would be a guest speaker and then four or five mini sessions and they were really helpful. (T3)
Even when there was greater professional development activity in the past, none of the women I interviewed could recall ever having an in-service session on gender equity in the classroom or school. The teachers remembered sessions on planning and organizing lessons, hands-on mathematics and classroom management strategies. One teacher did recall one workshop wherein the issue of gender equity was raised, but this did not focus on gender equity in the classroom.

What would be offered by our Board, and I don't think there were too many, would be more gender equity at the teacher level rather than the student level. Pay and leadership, but not so much classroom practices. I don't remember that at all. (T1)

The teachers indicated that recently when in-service sessions were held they focussed on issues other than gender equity. In my conversation with one teacher she outlined how professional development days in the past might have taken up topics like gender equity, but that did not occur anymore.

With professional development days five or six years ago, we had our own workshops on those different things. Right now our workshops are on legally where do we stand as a teacher because there are so many lawsuits out there. (T4)

Another teacher explained how the new report card had been the focus of recent in-service meetings and she expected this to be the primary focus in the forthcoming year. The reduction of professional development days and the focus on administrative
topics put gender issues "on the back burner". The absence of gender equity from professional development work is not exclusive to this Board of Education. In Jo Sander's (1996) research on teachers and gender equity she also found that workshops on gender equity were rare.

Again, it is difficult to say whether the Board's low priority of gender equity results in systemic sexism, or whether systemic sexism produces the Board's low prioritization of the issue. But even in the absence of attempting to claim a causal relationship, it seems sufficient to suggest that they reinforce each other. Regardless, systemic sexism was identified by these teachers and it did act as a barrier to the initiatives that were intended to produce change in gender in/equity. One teacher spoke of what she viewed as a problem:

As far as gender issues I think that there's a real problem. I think it's still a patriarchal old boys' set-up at the administrative level. Even now it might be getting a little better, but it's still like that and I think that as long as you have that kind of attitude with people who are in charge filtering down through the ranks, it's just not going to be an important enough issue, or maybe a non-issue with them. I don't even know if they consider it. (T1)

An example of how administrative sexism acted as a barrier to implementing gender equity initiatives was relayed by one of the teachers. As discussed above, her Board of
Education had allowed the Federation of Women Teachers Association of Ontario to host a career day for girls to explore "non-traditional" occupation possibilities. But the principal at her school threatened to cancel the program if a special program was not created for boys. Three of the women I interviewed spoke of much resistance to this project, to the extent that the Board of Education cancelled the conference. I would argue that systemic sexism assisted in the creation of a potentially hostile environment to gender equity initiatives, such that little was encouraged or attempted. As one teacher expressed:

I am not sure a whole lot has been done within our Board on issues relating to gender. I don't think there has really been a whole lot done in a really positive way. They haven't had the career day in the last few years. (T3)

The significance of the Board of Education and its administrators giving a low priority to gender equity is that they send a message to teachers and other change agents that initiatives designed to facilitate gender equity are not welcomed. This is immediately problematic because it discourages teachers from attempting change and secondly it undermines the need for a coordinated approach of all school personnel to effectively address gender in/equity. While the teacher has the potential to facilitate change, as I have indicated above, "others in the school such as counselors,
administrators, psychologists, and librarians play important roles in making the total school environment equitable" (McComick, 1994: 122). The administrators at the Board of Education must prioritize gender equity to ensure success of teachers' efforts. Next I take up another theme that developed from the interviews, the need to have the principal and parents "on-side" in order to attempt change.

The Principal and Parents

The need to have the principal and parents as allies was another area of concern expressed by the teachers. One teacher explained the importance of the principal's support in negotiating the parent-teacher power dynamic:

Parents usually complain to the principal not the teacher, and the principal doesn't want to make waves. So usually you have to give into the principal's and parents' demands if you want to survive at a school, or it can be hell in some communities, especially when the principal lets the parents dictate how the school will be run, and the principal won't stand up to the parents in defense of a teacher. (T1)

Each teacher expressed similar sentiment regarding the importance of having the support of the principal to gain the support of the parents. Other researchers on gender equity (Botrie and Wenger, 1992; Cantin, 1991; Coulter, 1993; Holmes, 1997; and Rezai-Rashti, 1997) have come to a similar conclusion, that there is a need not just for teachers to
attempt change but also that principals and parents must be "on side" for a coordinated effort.

An example of the principal and parents acting as a barrier to the facilitation of gender equity in the classroom was offered by one teacher. The teacher was discussing the problems she was having trying to gain support for using a cooperative learning strategy in her classroom that she maintained promoted gender equity practices:

> And it didn't make sense to me that if something was good at one level and you were being praised for it then why he (principal) couldn't generalize this to the larger building except that he would have to be giving up some of that authority. This was what our Board was trying to promote, the parents complained about it and even though our Board was trying to promote it, I was discouraged from doing it by the principal. (T1)

In this case, when the parents discovered that this teacher was organizing her classroom practices in a different way from the other teachers at the school, the parents phoned the principal to protest the deviation from expected practices. One parent stated that she did not want her child exposed to some “new-fangled” teaching method. This protest resulted in the principal pressuring the teacher to use more conventional methods in her classroom. Although she persevered throughout the remainder of the year utilizing cooperative learning, she
believed that the lack of administrative support made her more susceptible to criticism from parents.

The teachers often referred to the parents in a way that emphasized an adversarial relationship. The parents were discussed as a dynamic that had to be "managed" by the teacher, rather than as allies in tackling an issue like gender equity. In fact, no teacher identified parents as playing a key role in any of the grassroots projects. Perhaps this antagonistic perception was accentuated by the general resistance outside the educational system toward gender equity initiatives. For example, the Federal government's lengthy hesitation to implement pay equity for its employees and the many publicized debates around sexist hiring practices of police forces and fire stations offer evidence of the inhospitable climate that exists for such initiatives. Thus, the teachers may have anticipated that gender equity proposals in the classroom would be met with similar "distrust", thereby organizing their relations with parents in an adversarial manner, as a barrier to overcome.

Having the principal "on side" to "deal" with the parents is beneficial to teachers attempting change, but the necessity for the principal's support is also important in the role of in-service leader. One teacher outlined how significant the role of the principal can be in setting the agenda at in-
service meetings. Because the format of in-service delivery had changed from a centralized session to individual school sessions, the principal took on a greater role for in-service workshop presentations. Hence, if a principal valued gender equity she/he would likely deliver a workshop on the subject.

At the in-services sometimes they'll have been away at a course or a workshop and they'll just bring the information back with them. (T2)

Another way that the principal can act as a barrier to gender equity initiatives is by simply threatening to cancel the project. I have already mentioned the example of a principal wielding his authority to dismantle the career day for girls event. These overt acts of discouragement by principals and parents, around an issue that they disagreed with such as gender equity, can present a formidable barrier to teachers hoping to attempt/accomplish change in gender equity practices. The next section of limitations and barriers to teachers' facilitation of gender equity focuses on the absence of gender equity at the pre-service level.

The Absence of Gender Equity in Pre-Service Training

All of the teachers expressed an absence of gender equity issues within their pre-service courses.

I took Adult Education, Special Education, Science in the Classroom, and two more. I can't think of anything where we looked at gender equity. (T3)
Another teacher who had gone through pre-service courses in the 1960s stated that her training did not incorporate the issue of gender equity:

Not in the 1960s, I'm sorry. I know that I did a project while working on my Doctoral studies. I did a project about gender equity as it related to math. (T1)

Although this teacher could provide one account of a course focusing on gender equity, it was not at the pre-service level and interestingly it was only at an advanced level of education that she first came into contact with the topic. The youngest teacher, who was also the most recent to go through pre-service training, could not remember any courses covering gender issues. This teacher did recall a vague memory of a lesson on fairy tales but she was unsure with the details:

To tell you the honest truth I don't remember. In the language arts course there was a whole thing on fairy tales. There was one about Red Riding Hood I think and it was all switched over so that she was not a helpless girl in the forest. We did a little bit on fairy tales. I'm sure we talked about it in the classroom too. (T2)

The above teacher thought that she had some minimal coverage of gender equity in her pre-service training but she was quite unclear when it came to recalling any specific information. Thus, it is evident that for these teachers, gender equity had not been an issue that had been explored in much, if any,
detail. In fact, for three of the teachers, their experiences revealed a total absence of gender issues from pre-service training. Paula Bourne's preliminary research findings suggested that this situation had not improved at the Colleges of Education across Canada in 1997. In a seminar address (Sept.17,1997) she stated that there was a general lack of attention to gender equity issues in the Colleges of Education. This lack of attention at the pre-service level regarding gender equity could certainly be perceived as a limitation to the facilitation of gender equity initiatives because the issue would not have been emphasized or introduced to new teachers entering the ranks. Next, I discuss how the teacher may unintentionally reproduce gender inequity in the classroom.

**Teachers' Practices as Reproducing Gender Inequity**

The teacher has the potential to be an effective change agent to facilitate gender equity in the classroom. However, it is also possible that the teacher's own practices may act as a barrier and/or limitation to achieving gender equity. Other researchers (The Metropolitan Toronto School Board, 1996; Marshall and Reinhartz, 1997; McCormick, 1994; and Streitmatter, 1994) have documented how teachers can often unintentionally reproduce gender inequity in their classroom. Ironically, even teachers whose goal it is to eliminate gender
inequity in the classroom, may be encouraging contrary practices.

This unintentional reproduction of gender inequity appeared present in some of the teachers' accounts. Sometimes, even when interventionist actions are taken to combat gender inequity, the opposite to the desired result can emerge from those "well intentioned" efforts. One example of good intentions that went awry was offered by a teacher:

At (our school) they got on to eating disorders for all the girls in grades seven and eight. And I couldn't understand why just the girls because there are boys with eating disorders too and to me it was sending the wrong message.(T3)

The "well intentioned" efforts of heightening awareness to health issues in her view had the effect of reproducing dominant gender discourses, which would have merely further entrenched inequity. Another teacher described a strategy to promote gender equity that also seemed to reproduce dominant discourses of gender rather than challenge these discourses that facilitated gender inequity. Her strategy focused on getting the boys involved in the Arts:

They have to be encouraged rather than discouraged. Trick them into having a band and you might get more boys into a band where they could uhm...have them accompany the (choir) and get out the crashy things like the drums and the cymbals, the things that they really like and then have them in the group like that and work them into the singing part.(T2)
This teacher offers a strategy but in doing so she is reproducing the dominant discourses of masculinity and femininity. The assumption that boys are attracted to loud, "crashy" things and the expectation that girls will enjoy singing is not critically examined. Relying on such discourses will not facilitate positive changes in gender equity.

Another barrier or limitation to implementing gender equity was described by the teachers as often unavoidable. This limitation arose when a teacher filled in for another teacher to instruct her/his class. Three of the teachers discussed the limitations of this practice. One teacher recalled when she first started teaching seven years ago, that her primary role was to fill in for "prep" times. This meant following the instructions that were left by the teacher. The expectation was that the teacher "filling in" would use the method that the class was familiar with, as practiced by their regular teacher. Another teacher, who taught music on a rotary basis, was shocked by how many classes she went into where the boys and girls were segregated in their seating arrangements.

When I did music I would go into other teachers' classrooms and I was always amazed at the way children were situated in the classroom. Still people had them in straight rows or all the girls seated together and all the boys, you know like that.(T3)
Another teacher, who used cooperative learning in her classroom, spoke of similar experiences where it seemed unlikely to facilitate change because of the limited room to maneuver in another teacher's domain:

If I went into another teacher's class I would alter my methods if I got a teacher's class who wasn't used to cooperative learning. You can't just throw a group of kids together and expect them to get along and to learn anything, it takes lots of planning. And other teachers aren't used to that kind of teaching, they want their kids silent. (T1)

An additional way that teachers' practices can act as barriers and/or limitations to facilitate gender equity in the classroom is the inability to view gender equity as a "high priority" issue. Above, I discussed the consequences of the Board of Education not prioritizing gender equity but there are similar consequences if a teacher fails to acknowledge the importance of gender equity.

While not all teachers practice in gender-biased ways, many do. They do so not because they set out to differentiate among their students based on gender but because they do not acknowledge gender equity as an issue in the classroom. ...these teachers tend to perpetuate the problem (Streitmatter, 1994:2).

The lack of acknowledging gender equity as an important focus in the classroom was apparent in the account of one teacher's experience:
...with (teaching) little kids gender isn't a big issue. They'll work together no problem. I think it's when they get older, when they're exposed to more (tv) or media where girls do this and boys do this, then it gets to be a problem. (T2)

The above teacher did not see her grade two students as being within gender discourses and she located any problems that they might encounter, outside of her classroom and in the future. The inability to see students as gendered beings can lead to a situation like the above, where the issue of gender equity is framed as insignificant or significant only for others. Such a position, where gender equity is deemed as non-applicable, is problematic because it does not suggest a need to change the status quo. If no problem is identified then there is no need for a subsequent strategy to attempt change.

The absence of prioritizing gender equity was manifested into a state of low activity or inaction around the issue for two of the teachers. Both teachers told me of the somewhat elaborate practices that they had employed regarding the formation of children's groups and the selection of team leaders but there was a lack of including the dynamic of gender into these classroom practices. One teacher spoke of how she went to great efforts to vary the selection of team leaders but there was no incorporation of a mechanism to
ensure equity among genders. When she described how she chose team leaders she commented:

Sometimes you do go with the obvious leaders, the outgoing, popular ones. There are other times when you can draw on the talents that other children have. They might not be an outgoing person but they have beautiful handwriting and you need someone to record the answers of the children, so you make them the leader. You have to look around to see what there is. But sometimes you just have to go with the obvious kids. (T3)

Nowhere in the conversation did the issue of gender enter into her selection strategy for choosing a team leader. Hence, although the teacher does have the ability to be an effective change agent in the facilitation of gender equity in the classroom, that same teacher also has the potential to inhibit this process, if circumstances as those discussed above are allowed to remain unchallenged/unchanged.

However, this is not to suggest that the teacher is simply the problem regarding why gender equity in the classroom has yet to be achieved. As I have already outlined, the innovative attempts to facilitate change originate primarily from teachers. Rather, as discussed, teachers play a key role in deciding classroom practices because they are on the "frontline". But they are only one group of actors in a large cast that includes players with greater policy and program influence, such as the Ministry of Education and
Training, colleges of education, and Boards of Education. The teachers should be held accountable for how they organize their classroom practices, but at the same time one needs to acknowledge that they operate within a particular set of circumstances that may limit their influence. The access to power imbalance between administrators and teachers, and the framing of gender equity as a marginal or non-issue via professional teaching discourses are perhaps two of the primary ways that teachers' effectiveness to facilitate change may be neutralized.

**Summary of Limitations and Barriers**

When teachers become aware of the nature and cost of sex bias in schools, they can make an important difference in the lives of their students. Teachers can reduce sexism or even make it obsolete. They can make sex equity a reality for children in our schools (Sadker, Sadker and Long, 1993:125-126).

The ability to realize the potential of the teacher as an effective change agent to facilitate gender equity in the classroom, as illuminated in the above quote, is contingent upon the identification and disassembling of multiple barriers and limitations that await/confront the teacher.

Within this chapter, I argued that teachers must negotiate a series of often overlapping limitations and barriers to become effective change agents in gender equity. These barriers and limitations included: low gender equity
resource awareness, weak information networks among educators, the Board of Education's inability to prioritize gender equity, the actions of principals and parents, the absence of a gender equity focus in pre-service training, and teachers' own practices that unintentionally reproduced gender inequity. As mentioned, there was an element of interconnectedness with some of the barriers and limitations confronting teachers' attempts to facilitate change.

It was not my intention to suggest concrete strategies for change, but rather my research goal was to document the types of limitations and barriers facing attempts to facilitate gender equity work in the classroom. Certainly there is a need for research that would generate actual strategies to implement and teachers will have to be a central and essential component in that research process.
CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS

Contrary to my initial perception that no activity was occurring within this Board of Education regarding gender equity initiatives, I found many examples of teacher-initiated gender equity work. These strategies to facilitate gender equity in and around the classroom involved individual and coordinated efforts. However, such initiatives were not always embraced by fellow staff members, principals and/or parents of the students. Indeed, according to the teachers, often attempts to facilitate gender equity encountered barriers. These barriers, although formidable, are by no means impenetrable, as evident by the accounts of "successful" teachers' initiatives regarding the implementation of gender equity practices.

In keeping with this "positive" tone, I would like to emphasize an important characteristic that seemed to be present under the surface of each interview. All of them spoke of colleagues in a relatively positive manner. For the most part they spoke of accomplishments of other teachers in a way that reminded me of how a parent might boast of her/his child's triumphs. This sense of collective purpose was articulated by one of the teachers as follows:

Everybody is usually willing to help. People
like to think that they know more, that they can help you, so people are always eager to tell you what they know. People are generally really eager to help you. (T2)

Perhaps there is a little "professional" rivalry being expressed in the above passage but it does emphasize the need to capitalize on teachers' eagerness to help one another. This sentiment could be built into a concrete network of sharing strategies to inform teachers regarding gender equity teaching practices. If teachers use their potential to be change agents then change in gender in/equity is a possible outcome. Although this grassroots approach may be perceived as too slow, it is a way in which change can be initiated in circumstances where formal Board of Education policies lag. As Jo Sanders relates:

...a snail's pace may be the only possible pace at which one can achieve real change in gender equity, and trying to reach a lot of people quickly means that we reach them more superficially and less profoundly (1996:227).

**Possible Future Research Foci**

What I would like to offer below are some suggestions of possible research directions that could be pursued that would complement my research effort.

There are four main areas of research that I believe would be good starting points or points of continued attention
as a result of my exploration into these teachers' experiences. First, I think it would be interesting to explore the gender of the teacher: how is this relevant when looking at teachers as change agents? I mention this because, of the teachers with whom I spoke, all initiatives around gender equity were attempted by women teachers. I think that this would be an informative investigation.

Second, I think the gender of the principal would be another area worthy of study: how does the principal's gender affect the dynamic to facilitate change in gender equity? This topic was raised by Goli Rezai-Rashti (1997) and she asserted that it seemed as though women principals were much more willing to work for gender equity changes. Certainly, further research in this area would be beneficial.

Next, I believe that research on pre-service training, as is currently being conducted by Paula Bourne, regarding the absence of a gender foci in course offerings at colleges of education, would be another point of departure. There does not appear to be much research in this area, so it would definitely be encouraging to see further research activity focusing on a site that has such potential to be used to stimulate change agents.

Finally, there is a need to conduct further research that takes up the intersection of gender, race, ethnicity, class,
sexual orientation, and physical ability, as Smith, McCoy and Bourne (1995) have advocated. The broad scope of such a project is necessary, and it would be in the interest of good scholarship to expand the focus to incorporate the dynamics of these intersecting discourses.

By no means am I suggesting that the above foci are the only possible points of departure for research in the area of gender equity in the classroom. Rather these foci have evolved as significant to me primarily as a result of my conversations with teachers who have attempted to address the issue.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A

Consent form

To whom it may concern,

I have agreed to participate in an interview study of elementary school teachers' practices in the classroom regarding gender equity. The research is being conducted by Clinton Kewley. I have agreed to have this interview tape-recorded and at any time I may stop the interview or refuse to answer a specific question. Further, I may choose to withdraw from the research at any time.

I understand that my participation in this study will be confidential. Only the researcher will see the transcript of this interview and the transcript will be kept in a locked file at the conclusion of the research. The tape-recording of the interview will be erased after it has been transcribed. Any names of people and/or places will be changed to ensure my identity will not be discernable by anyone reading the paper.

Name (printed)______________________________

Signature ________________________________
APPENDIX B

Interview Guide

A) Personal information

- age?
- how long teaching?
- what undergraduate background?
- where trained as teacher?
- where teaching now? / what grade? / size of school?
- what grades have you taught?
- what Boards of Education have you taught for?

B) Classroom practices

- tell me about how you organize your classroom / what do you do in the classroom? (ie. how activities are organized, how students interact with you) classroom management / team leaders / reading materials

- who determines what goes on in your classroom?

- how do other teachers affect what you do in your classroom?

- how does the principal affect what you do in your classroom?
- how do parents affect what you do in your classroom?

C) Resources and support

- what resources do you have access to regarding gender issues in the classroom? professional development activities?

- did you take any courses in pre-service/college of education that took up the issue of gender in the classroom?

- have you attended any courses/workshops through your Board of Education that have taken up the issue of gender in the classroom?

- do you have access to work that has been done by other teachers elsewhere? (through professional networks or through existing literature)

- do you have a support network that you access for ideas?