Toward a Model of Equity Practice: Equity-minded Teacher Praxis in Urban High Schools

By

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Abstract

In this research project the perceptions about equity, equity practices, and opinions about support for equity were investigated. This qualitative case study consisted of semi-structured interviews with three urban equity-minded high school teachers from the Toronto area. Particular attention was paid attention to the resources and support available to teachers in implementing equity, the practices of equity minded teachers and obstacles to these teachers. The practices of these teachers were found to fall under four overarching categories, forming a model of equity practice: Preventive, Evaluative, Active, and Reactive (P.E.A.R.). These different aspects appear to encompass the range and scope of possible equity practices. I also suggest that the reactive practices of these teachers form another type of curriculum, called the reactive curriculum whereby teachers impart implicit information to students based on how they react in the moment to an equitable issue arising in the classroom or school. Overall, participants felt that much more support and resources such as workshops need to be provided, differentiated and mandated in the realm of equity.

Keywords: Equity, critical pedagogy, secondary school, teacher practices, curriculum types, reactive curriculum
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Sincerely,

João (John)
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Background of the Study

...I am a member of an LGBT community and people act like they don't see me or they talk about me in ways that are not who I am, then I feel like I don't exist in the context of this school or district. Being rendered invisible may lead to issues of low esteem and poor academic performance for me. I'll remove myself from those who talk negatively about me. I'd rather be alone. I find that no one really understands or even wants to help. Now, I'm just lonely and often intimidated.

Lindsey et al. (2013)

The aforementioned quote is all too often a reality for many students. Whether they are experiencing oppression due to being part of the LGBTTIQQ2SA (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual, transgender, intersex, queer, questioning, 2-spirited, and asexual) community or due to another identity factor, all students have the right to an equitable classroom and school setting. As teachers, we need to do all that we can to ensure students feel safe in our classroom if we are to provide students, the future caretakers of our planet, with an education in which they can fully immerse themselves without fear of persecution or failure.

Frequently, people confuse the term ‘equity’ for ‘equality,’ or see equity as just a financial term. However, these terms are distinct from one another, as follows: equality is the quality of being equal, whereas equity is the quality of being fair, just and impartial by having regard for people’s individual differences (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009b). Additionally, equitable teachers view each student as capable and competent in learning high-level content (Dunleavy, 2013). Both of these have their merits but in the classroom, equity should be at the forefront of one’s teaching practice.
Over the decades, classrooms in Ontario, as well as worldwide, have become much more diverse. Students vary according to a large number of identity markers, mentioned in Chapter 2. Teachers will encounter all or most of these factors in students to varying degrees, and they need to be mindful of that as professionals with a duty of care. In this research project I intentionally keep the term equity broad, with regard to the identity factors previously listed. This was done to ensure that participants could speak more freely about practices that do not fit into traditional categories of classification. One way teachers should carry out the duty of care is by implementing appropriate equity practices in their classroom setting in order to better aid all students. One obstacle to equity implementation, is ensuring that teachers are prepared to meet the challenges of educating students in classrooms and schools that are becoming more diverse in nature (Florian, 2009).

The issue of implementing equity also raises the concern that teachers have not always been prepared in the same manner when it comes to equity practices. Different teachers may have various ways of practicing equity, extents of practicing equity, and some may not even practice equity or give it any thought. In my opinion, some may even get caught up in worrying about equality in such a way that their efforts lead to certain students being underserved (they receive fewer resources and attention than they require) and certain students being over-served (they receive more resources and attention than they require). If teachers were to focus on implementing and practicing equity, this issue would be greatly diminished because they would then be focusing on the fair distribution of resources and attention to their students, which is more of a ‘needs-based’ distribution method.
Phenomenon of the Study

In this study, the practices of three equity-minded teachers that help them implement, sustain, and promote an equitable environment in their schools and classrooms. Again, for the purposes of this study, equity is defined as the quality of being fair, just and impartial by having regard for people’s individual differences (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009b).

In Chapters 4 and 5, a model of equity practice under the guise of P.E.A.R. (Preventive, Evaluative, Active, and Reactive practices) is proposed. At the inception of this research, only preventive and reactive practices were expected. Preventive practices are those that teachers do to prevent equity issues from arising and to establish an equitable environment. Reactive practices are the practices that teachers employ when faced with an equity issue in the classroom. Additionally a new curriculum type, which I coined ‘reactive curriculum,’ is proposed as a result of the reactive practices that teachers exhibit in the face of equitable issues. The reactive curriculum is the collection of consequences, information, or teachings instilled upon students when and how a teacher reacts to an equity issue in the moment.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore how equity manifests itself in classrooms in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) and to examine the role of equity-minded teachers in this manifestation. Specifically, my work investigated how various equity-minded teachers actually practice and implement equity in their classrooms throughout their preventive and ‘reactive’ praxis. Here the reactive practices are defined as the ways teachers react in the face of an equitable issue in the classroom or school.
These reactive practices form what I am calling the reactive curriculum, because the way the teachers react toward equitable issues does impart some teaching to students. As a result of the research, two other practices that equity-minded teachers employ were identified in addition to the expected preventive and reactive practices: evaluative and active.

**Research Questions**

My research question is as follows: *What practices of three equity-minded teachers are crucial to equity praxis?* In this case study I interviewed three teachers from urban high schools. In an attempt to diversify the participants in this study on their equity practices, a white male, white female, and a minority female were interviewed. Since the Master of Teaching Program is two years in length with the interview process starting into the second year, the time constraint limited the diversity in participants. Given this, I chose to limit to the three mentioned above, both due to the time constraint as well as the availability of participants. Future researchers should investigate teachers with other identity markers in order to diversify more so, for example recruiting participants according to sexual orientation, age or disability. Interview questions can be found in Appendix B. As with the aforementioned definition, equity is defined as the quality of being fair, just and impartial by having regard for people’s individual differences. Concerning the reactive practices, a sub-question arises: *In what ways do equity-minded teachers react toward equitable issues in the classroom or school?* Again, these reactive practices form what I am calling the reactive curriculum.

One further sub-question is as follows:

*What obstacles do equity-minded teachers face in their equity efforts?*
I summarize my interests and reasons for exploring this particular problem in Chapter 1. In Chapter 2, I examine existing research. Chapter 3 outlines my methodology and the procedures I used. In Chapter 4, I identity the participants of the study and provide the collected data. Finally, Chapter 5 addresses and discusses the implications of this study and proposes recommendations for further research. The limitations of this study include the fact that it is looking at only a small subset of teachers. Future studies may wish to involve teachers with a wider diversity of races, sexual orientations, gender identities, and other identifying factors as there may be some interesting approaches, or heightened awareness of particular equity issues.

**Rationale of the Study**

Within the past decade, researchers have found that teachers spend more time with and focus more of their attention on male students than female students, often with negative feedback (Chen et al., 2011; Robertson, 2010; Beaman, Wheldall & Kemp, 2006; Fletcher, 2004; Holst, 2004; Watson, 2004). Even when teachers are actively trying to practice equity in the classroom with regards to male and female students, they often lack enough insight into gender construction (Lee-Thomas, Sumsion & Roberts, 2005). Teachers have also been struggling with ways to reduce barriers to student identity factors (other than gender) thus hindering them from making their teaching effective and equitable (DiMartino & Miles, 2004).

Kevin Kumashiro (2000) presented a theory of anti-oppressive education. In it he calls upon educators to use the four approaches to anti-oppressive education, namely “Education For the Other,” “Education About the Other,” “Education that Is Critical of Privileging and Othering,” and “Education that Changes Students and Society.” In this
context, “Other” refers to those groups traditionally marginalized in society. The four approaches discussed by Kumashiro and the different curriculum types all appeared (at first) to be preventive practices related to equity. Preventive practices were investigated through interviews with the participants of this study because preventive practice fosters an equitable classroom. However, through the interview process, Kumashiro’s ideas and the curriculum types fit into other aspects of the P.E.A.R. model. Teachers also need to act in an equitable reactive manner (e.g. responding to, making decisions about, and dealing with equitable issues arising in the classroom or school). In other words, what are their ‘reactive’ practices, and what informs these practices? For this reason, ‘reactive practices’ were also investigated with the research participants.

**Language of the Study**

Preventative practices are defined as those that establish an equitable environment and prevent inequitable situations from arising. This can include the teacher setting up equitable classroom guidelines, imbuing equity and social justice into curriculum, and supporting school clubs or groups that support the idea of equity (for example, a Gay-Straight Alliance or a social-justice club).

A teacher’s reactive equity practices are defined as what a teacher does or how they react when faced with an equitable issue in the classroom. These practices compose the ‘reactive curriculum’ in the sense that the teacher’s reactions and actions toward these issues will impart teaching on the students. For example, in practice this can mean a teacher reacting to one equitable issue and not another, which may give the students a sense that one is important and the other is not.
Significance of the Study

By studying the cases gathered in this study, the idea of preventive and reactive practices (as well as evaluative and active, all four of which are components of P.E.A.R.) can be investigated through effective methods of practicing equity, recognizing particular deficits in knowledge about equity, or ways to implement equity. The beneficiaries of this study include: researchers looking to further probe the question of equity in the classroom and how we can better address it, teachers looking to gain more insight into equity in the classroom, and creators of professional development workshops for teachers looking to better address equity. Professional development opportunities could also provide teachers with better tools to cope in modern diverse classrooms.

Personal Background

Early on in my elementary school years, I felt that individuals should be treated fairly and justly, and there were some wonderful teachers who emulated these values and inspired me. I first became aware of and interested in the issue of equity in my high school years upon hearing stories about or having witnessed students with disabilities often being left without much support in the schooling system. I noticed they were not being given adequate resources to succeed in their capacities to learn. It often seemed like no one was taking the time to understand their particular needs and teach to their strengths. This was something that deeply shook and disturbed me. Even outside the school setting, oftentimes I would come across stories involving people with disabilities being treated unfairly. Related to the issue of disability is the idea of using people-first language in order to address people with disabilities in an equitable manner. I first came
across this, in a concrete sense, in my Child and Adolescent Development course in the Master of Teaching program. I could not help but think this was an issue of equity because the ways in which you refer to a person can either label/stigmatize vs. humanize them. For example, referring to a student as a ‘disabled student’ or an ‘ADHD kid’ in comparison to a ‘student with a disability’ or a ‘kid with ADHD’ have very different connotations. The former two examples seemingly defines people as their disability (although often unconsciously or unintentionally) which is seen as dehumanizing, while the latter two examples first acknowledge them as people first and then identifying their particular need, deficiency or special circumstance. This is often something that goes unnoticed and unaddressed, and although teachers may mean well or unintentionally label a student, it can be hurtful to be labeled as a ‘disabled student’ as opposed to a ‘student with a disability.’ So I thought that this issue truly is one of equity because it is the unfair labeling and dehumanization of students or people, and is something that can be easily addressed by teachers, simply by being more mindful in their word choice when addressing or speaking about people with disabilities or special needs.

Over my high school years, I came across more and more national and world issues pertaining to the unfair or unjust treatment of individuals in the news, articles in newspapers and online, and a growing multitude of ways in which people could be differentiated. I recall hearing stories about students being suspended from school in the United States because of their sexual orientation and was appalled at how irrational hate and misunderstanding could be when it came to people who are identified as ‘different’ or ‘not normal’ based on things they cannot control. There were also stories of adult and
even child factory workers in developing countries working in horrific conditions and being treated inhumanely that further deepened my passion and interest in the area of equity as a social justice issue.

During my undergraduate degree at the University of Toronto, all too often I would hear particular groups of students complaining about how rich foreigners were coming in and driving up the course averages and making others look bad by being ‘no-lifes’ (someone who has no life outside of studying). I found this to be unfair judgment because they should not assume knowledge about someone else’s life (financial or other factors) and instead of judging others’ hard work ethic, they should instead look at themselves and change their work habits to get the most out of their education. I believe this brings up the issue of assuming too much about other cultures or distinguishing things about a person because it is harmful to the person and develops further barriers rather than removing barriers. These issues could easily occur in the classroom with a teacher if they choose to remain ignorant or simply assume.

As I experimented with more fields during my undergraduate degree, in the courses I took, through volunteer work and work experience, I began to see more clearly that the teaching profession was my career path. I thought that a one-year program would be too short for what I wanted, so I opted for the Master of Teaching (MT) Program at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) to gain a more enriched experience and do some research at the same time. Upon entering the MT program I began to think more intently on what I wanted to research, and as I started to feel more pressure to decide upon a research topic and question I began to jot down ideas. This proved to be a difficult task and in the end I simply stopped for a moment
and thought about what issues I am very passionate about, and equity was one them. It was one I could relate to education in a valuable manner. I began to think back to my own elementary and high school years, as well as stories I heard from friends or co-workers that had attended other schools. I reflected on how certain teachers practiced or did not practice equity in the classroom and what the more effective teachers did in their classrooms to ensure a safe and nurturing learning environment for all types of students. I wonder if certain teachers from my past simply chose to not address equity because they did not feel certain students were worth it, if they were simply ignorant or perhaps that they were unequipped with the tools to practice equity effectively with their diverse students.

All these experiences, stories, and reflections helped me to refine what my research would be. From this research, it is my hope that this data will be useful to teachers on how to practice equity in the classroom.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

Inequity Issues

Toronto certainly presents interesting challenges to educators today as one of the most multicultural cities in the world with a population of 2.79 million people, half of which were born outside of Canada (City of Toronto, 2014). When considering the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), the population is 5.5 million with more than 200 different ethnicities represented (City of Toronto, 2014), in addition to the multitude of other factors making up a person’s identity. These are factors such as socioeconomic backgrounds, age, race, ethnicity, language, culture, familial dynamics, sex, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, talents and deficiencies, religion or lack-thereof, physical characteristics (height, weight, perceived attractiveness), disabilities, and the Big Five personality traits (openness to experience, conscientiousness, extroversion/introversion scale, agreeableness and neuroticism) (Matthews, Deary & Whiteman, 2009).

In order to avoid being exhaustive in addressing all the aforementioned identity markers, I will primarily draw attention to or give examples relating to race, gender, sexual orientation and class inequity throughout the Literature Review, as these four markers are ones everyone possess and the related inequities associated with these are the most prevalent.

Racial Inequity

In the classroom, racial inequity can manifest in a number of ways such as lack of teacher support, absence of a safer space to learn due to racism, and a lack of resources or opportunities available to racial minority students.
Fighting racial inequity does not mean simply having a ‘colour-blind’ approach to the classroom, meaning not seeing colour and treating everyone the same. This sort of approach has consequences of leaving students ignorant to cultural differences and ways of life as well as paving the road for shallow conversation about our similarities (Doucet & Adair, 2013).

One of the more important ways to combat racial inequity is to celebrate racial diversity, in which differences can be appreciated and explored. In this approach, the curriculum and school has this celebration woven in everyday as part of its culture, rather than simply celebrating just a few times a year, which objectifies and separates it from so called “regular” curriculum (Doucet & Adair, 2013). Barth et al. (2013) also found that classrooms with a more balanced distribution of black and white students lead to these students having more positive interracial peer relationships.

**Gender Inequity**

As with all inequity types, it is sad to see that gender inequity is still an issue in the classroom. Oftentimes, it may be due to a teacher’s perspectives about which gender is better able to be academically successful in a course. Riegle-Crumb and Humphries (2012) found evidence for consistent bias against white females in classrooms by math teachers, in terms of believing that math was easier for white males than white females. This suggests that teachers need to recognize their own possible biases, and put these biases aside or be trained to do so in order to better serve all their students.

Additionally, teachers have been found to devote more overall interactions and negative interactions (but not more positive interactions) with male students than with female students (Jones & Dindia, 2004).
Gender inequity can be prevented in a number of ways such as gender equity sensitivity training for teachers, which enable teachers to make more sensitive decisions (Robertson, 2010) and the use of gender-neutral language to avoid emphasizing one gender over the other in classroom language.

**Sexual Orientation Inequity**

Even today, gay and lesbian students are as frequently bullied and harassed on the basis of sexual differences in Ontario as in other Western countries like the United States (Rayside, 2014; Taylor & Peter, 2011). Despite the Policy/Program Memorandum (PPM) No. 119 put in place by the Ontario Ministry of Education in 2009 and the Safe Schools Act passed by the Ontario government in 2000 (discussed more in the Policy and Law section), bullying and harassment are still issues in the education system. These laws were meant to address issues of inequity, yet many of the issues it is meant to combat are still present.

Teachers need to foster a safer space in their classrooms and schools for their gay and lesbian students or those still questioning (and other members of the LGBTQ community) in order to make their learning experiences and lives in the school community more equitable. Students from the LGBTQ community also need to see accurate portrayals of themselves in the curriculum otherwise it is another way for these students to feel invisible in their daily existence (Lindsey et al., 2013). Having these sorts of portrayals in the curriculum can help empower these students by showing them the success of members in the LGBTQ community; the lack of these portrayals lends itself to the null curriculum (which I discuss further in the Multicultural/Anti-oppressive Education and Curriculum Types section).
Lastly, in fostering safer spaces in schools and classrooms, teachers need to address the use of homophobic slurs and bullying by establishing a zero-tolerance policy. Attitudes toward homophobic slurs and any other types of slurs in schools need to be addressed and taken as seriously as racial slurs in schools. All too often teachers and students alike remain silent when hearing homophobic slurs, which promotes feelings of powerlessness within those remaining silent, but especially the targets of such behaviour (Lindsey et al., 2013).

**Socioeconomic Inequity**

A student’s class level or socioeconomic status (SES) can also be an issue of inequity in the classroom. Students of a low SES may often experience inadequate availability or access to supplies to help them succeed in school. Students of a lower SES than their peers will also have less of an expectation from their parents to succeed and move on to a Bachelor’s degree when compared to students of a middle or high SES, which causes them to have less motivation (Stull, 2013). But how is SES measured, and how is a person determined to have a ‘low’ SES? Milne and Plourde (2006) discuss a number of factors that are to be considered and measured when determining SES. These factors include “financial capital (material resources), human capital (nonmaterial resources such as education), and social capital (resources achieved through social connections)... summed up as household income, occupation and parent education” (Milne & Plourde, 2006, p. 185). They also argue that different family structures can affect SES because of income and time. Milne and Plourde (2006) give an example of a newly divorced parent having less income entering the family but also spending less time with children due to picking up extra hours at work to make up for
the financial drop. Furthermore, students are identified as having a low SES compared to their peers if they have features such as: less access to educational resources (family trips to museums, libraries, community and theatrical events), having less books in the home than high-SES homes, crowded home environment, less time spend with parents, less educational materials at home (Milne & Plourde, 2006). Additionally, “students’ SES plays a stronger role in influencing beliefs about the academic climate in a Canadian setting” compared to a teachers’ self- and collective efficacy, which is still significantly correlated with perceptions of academic climate (Klassen et al., 2008, p. 1927). Often this means that teachers perceive students of low SES as less able to academically succeed, which further perpetuates the issue of low SES students being correlated with poorer academic success.

It is also possible for teachers to be inequitable to students of lower SES (LSES) in the sense that these students are “time-poor” (Delvin et al., 2012). Students of LSES face difficulties “balancing financial pressures, family responsibilities and/or significant hours of employment with study, [meaning] that many LSES students are under greater time constraints than traditional students” (Delvin et al., 2012, p. 4). To address the time-poor factor of LSES, teachers may have to be very careful about how much they give to students to work on outside the classroom.

**Obstacles to Equity Practice**

There are a number of obstacles that can prevent or hinder a teacher’s practice or implementation of equity in the classroom. Again, this can mean addressing and preventing inequitable issues from arising due to differences in race, class, gender and sexual orientation. For the purposes of this section, I will organize the obstacles to
teachers in terms of the categories outlined and identified by Segeren and Kutsyuruba (2012), as well as my own additional categories.

**Governing Body & Administration-Teacher Obstacles**

Segeren and Kutsyuruba (2012) outline tensions identified by other researchers that present obstacles to equity education in Canada. Their study shed light federal-provincial, ministry-school board, and school boards-school tensions (Segeren & Kutsyuruba, 2012). I would like to add school administration-teacher obstacles to this section, where a teacher may face opposition, lack of support or feel forced (which may take away from their effectiveness if they feel rushed for example) to implement equity by the school administration. Teachers do not have control over these logistic- and funds-related obstacles as they are decided at governmental and school board levels.

While George Dei (2008) outlines a number of challenges that teachers face in Ontario when trying to combat racism, I believe that these obstacles also apply to other equitable issues related to gender, sexual orientation or class, to name a few. Two of the obstacles are as follows: oftentimes the administrators have to deal with large amounts of paperwork rather focusing on school community, leadership for change, and inequitable distribution of funds in the school system. The first obstacle involving the lack of leadership (focus on paperwork) certainly affects the implementation of equitable practices by teachers as well as the sense of accountability for those teachers lacking in their equitable practices.

Fund distribution also affects how well teachers can address equity in their classrooms. As Dei (2008) asked, why is it that often magnificent new public schools with state of the art resources (science labs and computers) are located in wealthy areas
and high-income neighbourhoods? To be equitable, the low-income neighbourhoods are the ones that should be receiving more and different resources because the teachers in these schools may need particular resources to address a specific student need. These resources are needed because at times the help needed is outside the teacher’s skill set, financial situation, or resources currently available in the class or school. In Ontario, the Ministry of Education uses a formula based on student enrolment, district needs, number of schools and their physical condition to allocate funds to schools boards (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008; Council of Ministers of Education Canada, 2014). School boards then determine how much to allocate to each school based on school staff, needs, and maintenance. Schools use their allocated funds according to plans set by their school board and the province, but they have choice in how to spend some funds, for example a new school music program (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008).

Similarly, Kirsten Somers (2010) presents a number of challenges facing anti-oppression teachers. In terms of time, Somers (2010) found that most of the teachers that were interviewed would like to have more time to discuss equitable issues with students more in depth. Most of the teachers were actually asked to talk about diversity and anti-oppression for a shorter period of time than they would have liked. In a similar sense, the interviewed teachers felt there was a lack of funding and money, and this lack can affect how and what decisions are made (Somers, 2010).

In addition to the three tensions (federal-provincial, ministry-school board, and school boards-school) affecting teachers, I add that teachers also face other tensions in
addition to my aforementioned tension (school administration-teacher): teacher-teacher, teacher-self, teacher-student, and teacher-parent.

**Teacher-Teacher and Teacher-Self Obstacles**

In teacher-teacher tensions, a teacher may face lack of support, adversary, or inconsistent equity practice among their colleagues. Teachers who perceive their schools as having high collegiality between teachers and supportive teachers were found to have higher motivation and willingness to participate and persist in new projects (Lam, Cheng and Choy, 2010). These new projects could include implementing more social justice or equity practices into class time, or more support for student-run clubs related to equity and social justice, for example.

Teachers may also face internal obstacles, such as the two other challenges Somers (2010) presents: emotion and how far to push learners. Somers also found that educators often had difficulty deciding on how emotionally sensitive or distant to be around their students (Somers, 2010). On one hand, being too sensitive could lead to being overly stimulated, becoming visibly upset in front of students, causing students to distance themselves from the issues, or an uncomfortable atmosphere in the classroom. On the other hand, being too emotionally distant can lead to apathy or desensitization to issues of equity in the classroom or school, and cause students to feel it is okay to be apathetic and/or oppressive. It might be best then to be emotionally responsive by which I mean dealing with equitable issues, recognizing the maturity level of students’ emotions and which aspects of equity issues students need more exposure to in order to develop into good citizens. This last point ties into how far to push learners. In other words, to what extent “should [teachers] ask learners to put themselves in vulnerable
positions and express the emotions that are so closely tied to their identity” (Somers, 2010, p. 17)?

In response to the above question posed by Somers, there is debate over what is the best course of action because some researchers believe that people should not be forced to defend their values because it can cause people to stop being open and accepting of new information (Watson, 2008; Brown, 2001). In contrast, there are researchers who think that pushing people to think outside of their comfort zones is what leads to transformative learning and understanding about other views (Kumashiro, 2001; Arai et al., 2001). Teachers must constantly grapple with the issue of whether or not to push students to defend beliefs with every class because dynamics in a classroom changes depending upon the people making up the classroom. However, equitable issues do need to be addressed in some form in the classroom, so gentle pushes may be a good course of action.

**Teacher-Student and Teacher-Parent Obstacles**

Dei (2008) also mentioned a third challenge that deals with ensuring that all students feel welcome and safe. Ensuring this welcoming and safety can be an issue for teachers because it requires knowing their students well, which becomes an issue since it can be difficult for teachers to discern what sort of information they are able to gather about their students. For example, making reference to something in class that appears innocent, but may actually make a particular student feel uncomfortable because it goes against their family values or some other part of their identity. The teacher could have found this out about the student beforehand, but sometimes asking students about
certain things can be as disconcerting as being exposed to it because they may feel as if they are being singled out, being judged or viewed as weak.

Similar to Dei’s (2008) idea about ensuring students feel welcome and safe, Somers came upon the challenge of “safer spaces” because “safe doesn’t exist ... there’s safer” as one teacher pointed out (Somers, 2010, p. 48). Inherent to the nature of a “safe space” is the idea that people entering them may actually be entering a state of anxiety and are stepping outside their safety zone because they are possibly making themselves vulnerable in the spotlight of having gone to a “safe space.” Consequently, entering these spaces can unfortunately be seen as a sign of inferiority, rather than strength and empowerment.

Parents may also pose as an obstacle to teachers if they do not agree with teacher practices and teachings on equity, or if they have doubts about the teacher’s competence. Steh and Kalin (2011) found that both teachers and parents have doubts about each other’s competence, and that a partnership should be fostered between parents and teachers to distribute expertise and control to ensure ideal education for students. While the researchers did not identify ways in which to foster the partnership between parents and teachers, it appears to be an important step toward diminishing the obstacles that teachers face in their equity practices.

**Theoretical Framework—Critical Pedagogy**

Critical pedagogy is an approach that attempts to understand and engage the economic and political realities of everyday pedagogical practice (Smith & McLaren, 2010). In other words, “Critical pedagogy is a state of becoming, a way of being in the world and with the world—a never ending process that involves struggle and pain but
also hope and joy shaped and maintained by a humanizing pedagogy” (Macedo, 2006, p. 394).

Strongly influenced by Paulo Freiré and Henry Giroux, critical pedagogy is a relationship between teaching and learning. The effect of Critical pedagogy is twofold—it allows teachers to “grow in critical consciousness to gain perspective in order to evaluate current practices, formulate new directions in the classroom, and avoid distortion when perceiving problems and preconceived notions when analyzing the problems” and allows students to “go through a process of unlearning, learning, relearning, reflection, and evaluation...[with the effect] of building character and freeing students to learn” (Ainsa, 2011, p.84). The critical consciousness is an ever changing process, involving awareness of the systems of privilege and oppression, and insight into how those systems manifest and function in a given context (Garcia et al., 2009), in this case a school setting. With these processes, teachers could help guide their students ‘unlearn’ biases and stereotypes toward typically oppressed or underrepresented groups, and shape their classroom and school culture into one of acceptance and equitable practice.

In the context of this research Critical pedagogy will be used because teachers should be aware of the privilege and oppression in their schools and classrooms. Teachers should also be more critical of the aforementioned factors as well as work towards a more equitable classroom through their practices and professional development.
Policy and Laws

In recent years, the Ontario Ministry of Education (OME) set into motion a four-year equity policy to combat and eradicate systematic bias and barriers toward marginalized students in Ontario schools, under the name of the Ontario Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009b, p. 2). Equity is defined by the Ontario Ministry of Education as, “a condition or state of fair, inclusive, and respectful treatment of all people. Equity does not mean treating people the same without regard for individual differences” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009b, p. 9). On April 22nd 2013, a memorandum came into effect to update the existing 2009 Policy/Program Memorandum (PPM) No. 119, by requiring that school boards “develop and implement an equity and inclusive education policy” (p. 3) into accordance with amendments to the Education Act on June 19th 2012 (Legislative Assembly of Ontario, 2012). It also updates No. 119 (2009) to “reflect the fact that gender identity and gender expression are dimensions of diversity under the Ontario Human Rights Code” (p. 3).

The Ministry implemented this newer policy due to evidence that some groups of students still face discriminatory barriers to their learning, to recognize further identity markers, and as a result of research that shows that “students who feel connected to teachers, to other students, and to the school itself do better academically” (p. 3). Now that those four years have passed, it is important to investigate whether there have been any noticeable changes in the way teachers address equity in their pedagogy or the manner in which they deal with equitable issues that arise in classrooms and school. Teachers who had already been practicing equity in their classrooms and schools for years would hopefully have noticed a change in other teachers’ practice. While
implementing these policies is certainly a step, it would be difficult to monitor and ensure that all school boards are implementing equity and inclusive education policies, and more importantly that their schools and teachers are observing these policies.

Gayle (2013) outlines the three major goals of the equity and inclusive education strategy as:

1. **Shared and committed leadership** by the entire educational system (i.e., Ministry, boards, and schools) to eradicate discrimination by identifying systemic biases, barriers and discrimination; (2) **Equity and inclusive education policies and practices** must support positive learning and welcoming environments where students, staff, and teachers are respected; and (3) **Accountability and transparency** will be demonstrated using clear measures or established indicators of success that is to be communicated to the public on an ongoing basis. (p. 47-48)

The issue with the accountability is that the Ministry does not provide the school boards with any standard guidelines on how to assess the degree of policy implementation in their schools (Gayle, 2013). This means that some schools may be held to a higher standard or expectation of equitable practices because it may be more important in some schools compared to others. This may be due to administrators and teachers who are more knowledgeable and adamant about their equity practices, more involved parents, a more inclusive community, or a blend of these. All the aforementioned people have a responsibility to teach students about equity and to promote equity, teachers and administration for the most part during the school day and parents at home with their children.
The lack of accountability guidelines from the Ministry also assumes that there is uniformity between schools in a given district. This seems to contradict the equity principle behind PPM No. 119, because the school level is what should be looked at, not the district school board level in order to be more equitable. However, the Ministry did state that it would monitor the implementation of equity and inclusive education policies, although this may only provide a snapshot of the actual effectiveness when there is an inspection for example. In the classroom, equity can and should be manifesting in a number of ways. At a glance, it will look fair and respectful with appropriate language use (for example no derogatory terms, the proper use of people-first and gender neutral language), and a safer space for students (regardless of race, sexual orientation, gender, or any other identity marker). The safer space would allow students to voice concerns/opinions and receive any required support from the teacher or peers. The classroom should also be a place to critically think about societal barriers to marginalized or systematically discriminated people and how we can remove those barriers and foster equity in society. An equitable classroom is also equitable in terms of its curriculum, where the teacher uses differentiated instruction, multicultural education, and integrated assessments to educate and reach all students to a high standard (DiMartino & Miles, 2004).

In terms of reducing the student achievement gap and increasing student achievement, data was collected through words, numbers and observations. The two factors mentioned, if improved, would possibly mean successful implementation of the Ministry’s equity and inclusion education strategy and PPM No. 119. Lastly, with the aforementioned goals of the equity and inclusive education strategy there is some clarity
on what is expected, but this still leaves the question of what teachers are actually doing in their classrooms to practice and promote equity?

**Multicultural/Anti-oppressive Education and Curriculum Types**

One of the ways teachers can promote and implement equity into the classroom is through the actual embedding of multicultural and anti-oppressive education into the curriculum. If this is not done, students are left with limited resources to support themselves in oppressive classroom/school setting and the results are uncertain as students can respond in a variety of ways.

Kumashiro (2000) outlines four approaches to anti-oppressive education that he encourages teachers to make use of, namely “Education For the Other,” “Education About the Other,” “Education that Is Critical of Privileging and Othering,” and “Education that Changes Students and Society.” In this context, “Other” refers to those groups traditionally marginalized in society. Students can react in a number of ways when faced with an oppressive setting. This includes ‘overcompensating’ by hyperperforming in academic, extracurricular, and social activities; accommodating enough to succeed academically but maintaining a sense of connection to their ethnic culture and community; resisting dominant societal and school values and norms; experiencing a variety of hidden injuries, such as the psychological harm of internalizing or even resisting stereotypes; and some have endured depression, turned violence onto themselves by abusing drugs, starving and scarring their bodies, even attempting or committing suicide (Kumashiro, 2000). To address these hidden injuries it is important to have these methods of education (more information on curriculum types
will be provided shortly) to diminish the chance that students have to react, and instead just allow them to learn.

In “Education For the Other,” it is suggested that schools and teachers make the entire school a safe space (as well as providing separate safe spaces for students to go to for support when facing oppression) and not only acknowledge diversity among students but also embrace it in their pedagogy. To address “Education About the Other,” Kumashiro (2000) outlines two approaches, specifically including units about the “Other” in the curriculum (women’s studies or literature by queers for example) as well as also integrating “Otherness” throughout the curriculum, as to not simply address it once or twice a year. Thirdly, by advocating critique and transformation of systematic oppression and ideologies, “Education that Is Critical of Privileging and Othering” is addressed in schools. Lastly, “Education that Changes Students and Society” is an approach that encompasses disrupting the harmfulness of particular words (such as the work done by queers to disrupt the harmfulness of the word ‘queer’), and working to stop the repetition of stereotypes.

The following different types of curriculum encompass the four approaches presented by Kumashiro (2000) (sometimes falling under multiple curriculum types): formal/taught curriculum (instruction approved by the governing bodies of educational systems), symbolic curriculum (images, icons, celebrations and other items such as bulletin boards or images or heroes and heroines used to teach students knowledge, morals and skills) and societal curriculum (knowledge, ideas and impressions about ethnicity or other identity markers portrayed by the media) (Gay, 2002).
Often what is not taught explicitly can be just as revealing about what is important or not important for students to know as it is to explicitly teach a concept. This is known as the “null curriculum” (Flinders, Noddings & Thornton, 1986). This might include gay rights movements not being covered in a class or inadequate coverage of other marginalized groups. If the teacher is not explicitly addressing these issues through the curriculum or in some other way, then the issues may appear to be unimportant or trivial to the students.

There is a fifth curriculum type, a “hidden curriculum,” the untaught lessons coming from the school culture and structure, which has a hand in “Education For the Other” (Null, 2011; Banks & Banks, 1995). For example, some gifted classes receive additional volunteers in the classroom to implement enrichment programs and individualized instruction, all which communicate an implicit message of the students in the class being ‘special.’ This is something that teachers need to be very cognizant of when setting up their classroom (Banks & Banks, 1995). For example, the clubs and sports teams available at the school and the ones that are supported, and the types of activities the school and teachers take part in (for example anti-bullying days) can be telling of certain values that are upheld by the school community.

The four approaches discussed by Kumashiro and the different curriculum types all appear to be preventive measures and will be investigated with the participants of this study. However, teachers also need tools or the ability to act in an equitable ‘reactive manner,’ by which I mean responding to, making decisions about and dealing with any equitable issues that can suddenly arise in the classroom or school.
**Teacher Equity Practices, Knowledge and Beliefs**

The way in which teachers make decisions about and react toward equitable issues in the classroom or school (reactive practices) help form what is here called ‘reactive curriculum.’ The reactive curriculum can be influenced by a number of factors such as the aforementioned policies, laws and other curriculum types, but also factors more closely tied to the individual teacher, such as the teacher’s practices, knowledge, and beliefs about equity. Again, the reactive curriculum I have identified is the teaching imparted on students based on way the teachers react toward equitable issues. This section examines research on the latter three factors.

A teacher’s equity practices (for example, imbuing equity into curriculum, interacting with staff and students, and the distribution of time and energy to students) in their day-to-day praxis can influence how they react toward an equitable issue. Sleeter (2008) suggested that dialogue with the communities in which the school is located plays an important part for teachers dealing with equity, and this is often ignored by teachers and in teacher education. Knowing more about and interacting with the community in which a school is located can give teachers valuable insight into students’ upbringings, culture and other factors. This information can be helpful in shaping how the teacher sets up an equitable classroom, implements equity into the classroom, and addresses equitable issues that arise in the classroom or school.

Teachers’ equitable practices (both preventive and reactive) are also informed by their professional and personal knowledge. Being knowledgeable about subject content and equity practices are certainly important factors. For example, one teacher in a study by Gayle (2013) suggested that in order for teachers to teach science in an
equitable manner they need to be knowledgeable about science content, but also the sociocultural backgrounds of their students. The sociocultural information helps them teach keeping in mind the various sociocultural factors. This is part of culturally relevant pedagogy, a theory developed by Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995).

Culturally relevant pedagogy is composed of three core tenets: academic achievement, cultural competence and sociopolitical consciousness (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Payne & Laughter, 2013). With the first tenet, the teacher must connect to the students in a classroom as well as pushing their students to academically, but student learning must not come at the expense of cultural identity (Payne & Laughter, 2013). In this sense, the two must complement one another. The second tenet does have some misconceptions around it. Cultural competence is not about cultural sensitivity but helping students to recognize and honor their own cultural beliefs and practices while acquiring access to the wider culture (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 36).

How can teachers achieve this cultural competence? Payne and Laughter (2013) cites two common ways teachers cultivate cultural competence in their students: the writing and retelling of student autobiographies and the use of multicultural texts.

Lastly, the third tenet, fostering sociopolitical consciousness, is helping students to make informed decisions about the lives they want to live and engaging the world and others in a critical way (Payne & Laughter, 2013). Payne and Laughter (2013) describe two difficulties that teachers experience with fostering sociopolitical consciousness: a lack of sociopolitical consciousness of their own, and incorporating sociopolitical issues into the practice of teaching feels overwhelming. These point to a need to encourage teachers to first become more comfortable with these issues through exposure by
researching and reading up on sociopolitical issues, and find ways to discuss and integrate these into their teachings.

However, Ladson-Billings (2014) welcomes a newer version of her theory called culturally sustaining pedagogy put forth by Paris (2012), a theory that builds upon culturally relevant pedagogy by considering, “global identities that are emerging in the arts, literature, music, athletics and film… [also] the shifts of identity that now move us toward a hybridity, fluidity, and complexity never before considered in schools and classrooms” (Ladson-Billings, 2014, p. 82). While this theory is focused on the postmodern realities of language and culture, Ladson-Billings (2014) also points toward culturally revitalizing pedagogy proposed by McCarty and Lee (2014), which focuses on revitalizing disappearing languages and reclaiming/restoring cultures in indigenous contexts. In a sense, these two theories should be two sides of the same coin, with a foot in the past and eyes on the future, to get students to recognize and appreciate their past as well as accept and prepare for an ever changing world. A knowledge and application of these pedagogies are certainly necessary for all teachers to imbue into their praxis, not only to better prepare students for critical engagement but also as a vehicle to more equitable teaching and classroom environments.

The study by Gayle (2013) also found that teachers working in “GTA school boards, claim that there is a lack of opportunities to engage in equity and inclusion related professional development” (p. 114-115). So it seems that there is either a lack of encouragement by school boards, a lack of interest or seeking out of the professional development opportunities provided by the boards, or there being a lack of opportunities specifically related to equity and inclusion related professional development. In a study
by Robertson (2010), it was found that through gender equity sensitivity training, teachers became more aware of their own attitudes toward gender equity in their classrooms, which allowed them to make more sensitive decisions. For example, one teacher in the study indicated that they, “now try hard to steer away from gender stereotypes in my room. I used to always ask for some ‘strong boys’ to help me move boxes or something, and now I just ask for any volunteers” (p. 45). One of the participants stated that they treat all students equally and provide equal help to all students, which the researcher states are both examples of ‘gender blindness/neutrality.’ However, in a study on gender equity, there seems to be some confusion on equity. While allowing equal opportunity for students to respond is great, the distribution of resources and accommodating students’ needs to take into account their differences for equity. Teachers need to take students’ differences into account because an equitable classroom offers “fair distribution of opportunities to learn” (Esmonde, 2009b, p. 1010). By not taking these differences into account and providing equal help to students, this can mean some students are over-served (not enough room for independence or challenge), while others are under-served (not getting enough help or guidance).

A teacher’s beliefs about equity will also have effects on their practices. Researchers have found that a teacher’s beliefs and practices are linked, and that the beliefs and visions for teaching and learning influence what occurs in the classroom (Dunleavy, 2013; Stipek, Givven, Salmon & MacGyvers, 2001). In Dunleavy’s (2013) study, the teacher was seen as an equitable mathematics teacher through her practices in the classroom. This teacher had particular visions and beliefs such as believing that all students are capable of learning math and that the problems solving skills developed in
math can be transferred into any aspect of life. These sorts of beliefs are carried out in her positioning students as competent by asking what parts they do understand (which can build self-esteem and indirectly let her know what they did not understand, rather than asking directly and possibly harming self-esteem). By positioning students as competent, teachers can be equitable in the sense that they provide all students a fair opportunity to learn, be assessed, and helped because they are not perceived as incapable.

Lastly, an important belief for equity in the classroom is the importance of understanding one’s own biases and perspectives (Prell, 2012). One teacher in this study emphasizes the importance of knowing her own biases and gaps in education, as well as being conscious of the availability of other perspectives on topics so she brings material showing those other perspectives. The understanding of one’s own biases is important one for equity because a teacher may have a bias to helping particular students in one way while unintentionally be ignoring the needs of other students in another way. A teacher may have also been showing many historical male figures in history rather than also showing what females were achieving at the time. By being aware of and understanding one’s biases, one can address them in order to make the classroom more equitable to better serve students.

**Summary**

For this research, Critical pedagogy was chosen as the theoretical framework. It is an approach to understand and engage the economic and political realities of everyday pedagogical practice with the twofold effect of allowing teachers to grow in critical consciousness as well as allowing students to go through a process of
unlearning, learning, relearning, and evaluating in order to build character, free students to learn, and to break unlearn biases.

In order for teachers to implement and practice equity in their classrooms and schools, they need to be aware of a number of things. Teachers need to recognize and address the wide range of inequities that pose as obstacles to students, ranging from racial inequities to sexual orientation inequities, taking on a number of forms such as bullying, a lack of accurate representation in the curriculum or a lack of resources to address needs (such as for students with learning disabilities). However, there are also obstacles that can hinder a teacher’s practice of equity. Whether they are obstacles as a result of governing bodies and administration, other teachers, parents, students or even from the teacher’s own difficulties with deciding how much to talk about an equity issue, these obstacles may hinder or slow down progress in even the most equitable classrooms.

In an attempt to further combat the systematic bias and barriers that marginalized students face in Ontario schools, resulting from evidence that groups of students still face discriminatory barriers to their learning, the Ontario Ministry of Education updated the existing PPM No. 119 to require school boards to implement an equity and inclusive education policy. However, a lack of guidelines from the Ministry resulting from leaving the implementation of an equity and inclusive education policy to the school boards, means that there is more freedom in the extent to which a given board implements an equity policy. Additionally, any monitoring by the Ministry will only provide a snapshot of the actual effectiveness.
Teachers can implement equity in the classroom in a number of ways. One of these ways is through embedding multicultural and anti-oppressive education into the curriculum. Kumashiro (2000) talks about the “Other” (those typically marginalized in society) and encourages teachers to make use of four approaches to anti-oppressive education: “Education for the Other,” “Education about the Other,” “Education that Is Critical of Privileging and Othering,” and “Education that Changes Students and Society.” These methods fall under a number of curriculum types that teachers should know have an effect on their students either explicitly or implicitly. These curricula are categorized as formal (in other words, approved by the Ministry), symbolic (e.g. images, icons or celebrations in the school culture), societal (knowledge about ethnicity or other identity markers portrayed by the media), null (what is not taught or covered in the curriculum), and hidden (information arising from school culture and structure).

Critical pedagogy is the selected theoretical framework. It has a twofold result that is important and closely related to a teacher’s equity practices: it allows teachers to “grow in critical consciousness to gain perspective in order to evaluate current practices, formulate new directions in the classroom, and avoid distortion when perceiving problems and preconceived notions when analyzing the problems” and allows students to, “go through a process of unlearning, learning, relearning, reflection, and evaluation…[with the effect] of building character and freeing students to learn” (Ainsa, 2011, p. 84).

Lastly, teachers’ ‘reactive practices,’ forming what I calling the ‘reactive curriculum,’ may be influenced by the policies, laws and other curriculum types, but also more closely by their own equity ‘preventive’ practices, knowledge and beliefs.
Preventive practices are practices such as getting to know more about the students and the community, and motivating all students regardless of their ability. Furthermore, preventive and reactive practices are also informed by a teacher’s professional and personal knowledge, meaning their subject knowledge related to the professional as well as knowledge formed through experience. To implement an equitable classroom a teacher must have sociocultural knowledge of their students, which makes up part of culturally sustaining pedagogy. This theory at its core is composed of three tenets—academic achievement, cultural competence and sociopolitical consciousness—but also considers “global identities that are emerging in the arts, literature, music, athletics and film…[also] the shifts of identity that now move us toward a hybridity, fluidity, and complexity never before considered in schools and classrooms” (Ladson-Billings, 2014, p. 82). Teachers who are also aware and understand their own biases can cope with these to make their classroom as equitable as possible for their students.

Despite all the aspects of equity practice and the obstacles to teachers, equity is something educators need to keep addressing and working towards into the future in order to promote the success of students and make a move toward societal change.
Chapter 3: Methodology

This project is a qualitative case study investigating how teachers practice equity in their respective schools, both in terms of their preventive practices and reactive practices. It was conducted by collecting data from current literature in the field and, more importantly, interviews with secondary school teachers. The qualitative data that was collected from these teachers reflects their current and past practices in the Greater Toronto Area. Within the time-constraint of the program, I interviewed a diverse set of teachers to discover what sorts of practices could be identified. Specifically I interviewed a white male, a white female, and a minority female from urban Toronto high school settings. The data collected was in the form of one face-to-face interview with the possibility of follow-up email, phone or in-person questions. This information was then transcribed, analyzed and coded to reveal any common themes relating to the research question and sub-questions, as well as the literature review. The data collected was analyzed through a Critical pedagogy lens.

Procedure

The primary means of data collection in this qualitative case study was in the form of semi-structured interviews (see Appendix A for sample interview questions). As outlined in Creswell (2013), the interview is, “dialogue that is conducted one-way” (p. 173). The interviews were chosen to be semi-structured in nature to allow me the opportunity to ask any clarifying questions, in addition to keeping focus on my set interview questions. I conducted three of these semi-structured interviews, one with each of the three participants I interviewed (white male, white female, and minority female teachers in this study). For the purpose of this research, all participants were
interviewed individually. The interviews were between 40 and 60 minutes in length, with the possibility of follow-up questions through a few possible forms (email, phone or in-person). Initially four participants were interviewed, but for reasons related to confidentiality, one of the participants withdrew and was thus omitted from the study. I recorded these interviews with an audio recording device and then transcribed the audio by listening to it and typing. I used smooth verbatim transcription rather than strict verbatim in order to omit words such as ‘um’ and other utterances as a courtesy to the participants and to make data clearer. Upon transcription, I read the interviews several times over for clarity and transcription errors, while listening to the audio. I then began to read the transcripts more closely to identify any themes, patterns, similarities and relevance to literature, the research question and corresponding sub-questions. These findings were then organized according to themes and sub-themes. From there, the findings are reported, examined and discussed in Chapters 4 and 5. The findings were kept confidential and under security measures on an encrypted file on a password protected computer. The transcriptions and audio will be destroyed 5 years after the completion of the research to assure confidentiality.

**Participants**

In order to conduct this research it was necessary to interview participants who have experience in addressing equity issues in their classrooms and school settings. Only four equity-minded teachers (in terms of gender and race) were interviewed given the scope and limitations of this study in terms of time, namely a white male, a white female teacher, a racial minority male and female. Again, only three of these interviews were actually used due to the withdrawal of one participant. I chose these participants in
an attempt to be somewhat diverse, keeping in mind the time constraint of the MT program. These participants were found through a snowball sampling strategy. Through talking to different people such as instructors, colleagues, co-workers and my research supervisor, I was directed toward the appropriate teacher participants and was able to set up interview times and locations after obtaining their informed consent.

Two of the teachers were interviewed at their schools in a quiet place to accommodate their schedules. One participant wished to be interviewed in a quiet location at OISE at the University of Toronto, which I accommodated. The participants and their schools were given pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality and anonymity.

As with any research, there were risks and benefits to the participants and researcher. The possible benefits to the participants included articulating their skills and reflecting which could help their own practice, knowing they helped further research in the field, and talking about equity through the interviews may spark interest in future professional development workshops or finding new ways to contribute to an equitable classroom. I benefited from the participants in that I gained further insight into equity practices and, upon completion of the research project, graduated with a Master of Teaching degree. In this study there was minimal risk but the possible risks to the participant included having unpleasant memories surfacing through the course of interview and dialogue, and the time devoted to the interview may have taken away from other responsibilities they may have had.

**Data Collection and Analysis**

Upon collection and transcription of the audio interview data, I analyzed the collected data. As stated in Creswell (2013), categorical aggregation was used, wherein
I sought “a collection of instances from the data, hoping that issue-relevant meanings will emerge” (p. 199). I began my data collection and analysis by reading and rereading the transcribed interview data with focus on emergent themes, connections to the reviewed literature, the research questions and sub-questions. I used various different methods to sort the transcribed interview data, such as using different coloured highlighter markers to underline and distinguish certain data from other data. I then made notes to myself about pieces of data as I reviewed the transcripts over and over again in order to begin sorting the data. I then analyzed the aforementioned coding, for themes that emerge and attempt to consolidate these findings for review and discussion. From there, sub-themes were then also organized. Themes and sub-themes were organized in a chart, and beside them I included examples and spots in the transcripts that I could observe the theme or sub-theme in question.

**Ethical Review Procedures**

Interview participants for this research study were given letters of informed consent prior to the interview process to review, and two copies of the letters were brought to the interview by me for the participant to sign (see Appendix B for informed consent letter). Participants read and signed these informed consent letters, and returned them to the researcher in person. Participants were offered an opportunity to have questions regarding the nature and process answered by the researcher in person, through email or telephone.

Participants were also informed that they may withdraw their voluntary participation in the research project at any time, refuse questions, and be able to change
or alter given answers at any time before the completion of the study. Any new and revised answers would have been used in place of the old one.

The researcher ensured the anonymity of participants through the use of pseudonyms, masking of personal information and a double safeguard for the data (encrypted file on a password protected computer). Data collected was only be seen and reviewed by the researcher and research supervisor; the participants also had the option to review their own interview transcription for accuracy and clarity.

**Limitations**

As indicated in Chapter 1 of this research project, there are limitations to this research due to my own biases and perspectives on equity and its practice, manifestation and appearance in classrooms and schools, as well as the degree to which it should be implemented. The researcher brings to this study feelings that often not enough is done is schools to address equity, that the proper use of people-first language is underutilized, a desire to become more educated in the area of equity practices, the act of choosing the nature of the three participants and their school setting (Catholic vs. public, elementary/middle school vs. high school). I carry many biases and preconceptions in the field of education and equity, but also coming from the viewpoint of an early immigrant and white, middle-class, heterosexual male. With this in mind, the researcher’s interpretation of the data is a limitation. It is therefore important to note that the findings presented in the research are based on an overall viewpoint from the researcher and the collected literature.

Further limitations of this study include the fact that it will only look at a small number of teachers in a limited number of diversifying factors, accounting for other
factors such as age, sexual orientation, gender identity, and SES. The research questions themselves are also a limitation as I, the researcher, formulated them.
Chapter 4: Findings

Introduction

This research project draws upon the experiences of three participants who are passionate about and conscious of equity. This research explores the components that make up the equity praxis and mindset of these equity-minded individuals. This chapter outlines the major findings and is organized into the following overarching themes and the underlying sub-themes: Preventive (accountability, setting up structure), Evaluative (critical, understanding), Active (transparency, empowerment) and Reactive (postpone, aid, and confront).

Participants are referred to in Chapters 4 and 5 according to their assigned pseudonyms, in order to maintain their anonymity. Their teacher profiles are as follows:

- Lyanna is a special education teacher and has been teaching for 14 years. She currently teaches Grade 9, 10 and 12 in special education and Grade 12 Social Science at a high-priority high school.

- Tyrion has been teaching for 6 years and currently teaches in a high-priority high school. He teaches Grade 9 Science, Grade 12 Chemistry and Grade 12 IB Chemistry.

- Arya has been teaching for 16 years and teaches in a school with mainstream students and students enrolled in a specialized science program. She currently teaches Grades 9 to 12, in the areas of English and Drama.
Preventive

Among the practices of an equity-minded high school teacher, there are some that should be preventive in nature. The following two practices, ‘accountability’ and ‘setting up structure,’ help to realize the preventive aspect of equitable education and making an equitable classroom more feasible. Participants were found to hold ‘accountability’ in high regard. Participants often spoke about holding themselves, students, and staff accountable for actions or lack thereof related to equitable behaviour, equitable support, as well as encouraging students to hold others accountable to equitable behaviour. In a similar sense, when participants spoke about setting up classroom rules, expectations, and establishing an environment where students can voice their concerns, this was identified as ‘setting up structure.’ Together, the aforementioned practices make up the preventive component of an equity-minded teacher’s praxis, and should be a part (along with the other practices outlined in this chapter) of all teachers’ praxis if they are to be successful and effective in establishing an equitable environment.

Accountability

Arya mentioned that she holds herself accountable to students and often she changes something because of students, “most of the time when I change things up it’s because a student has said something. And I said ‘Oh you’re right, we need to change that.’ ” In one instance, a student stole a hat and she still held herself accountable and acknowledged her own fault in an issue that arose:

I said you seem really angry with me, is it because I called home last night …you’re actually being kind of passive-aggressive because you want me to
know that you’re angry… I’m really sorry, I should have told you that I was calling your mom and…that’s not okay.

Arya appeared to not be afraid to admit her own faults to her students, and recognizes that students may at times be acting out in response to something she did or said intentionally or unintentionally. Part of being an equitable teacher, is ensuring that students feel safe and at ease in your classroom. By being accountable, students can recognize that you are not against them and more likely to produce and succeed in class.

Arya also appeared to hold herself accountable in a sense to her equity-minded colleagues. For example, her students had been talking about ISIS and not knowing much about it, she went home and did research. To ensure the quality of the following lesson she approached an equity-minded history colleague asking, “…what do you have for me, this is what my lesson plan is, does it work? And they’ll say no, you can’t—this doesn’t work or this doesn’t work.” By keeping oneself accountable to colleagues, it helps to ensure the quality and authenticity of equity implementation while also encouraging the teacher to become more adept in their equity practices. Working with like-minded individuals also serves as a source of motivation and inspiration for equity-minded teachers because they are then not working in isolation.

Teachers also have to hold students accountable because it is only fair to prepare them for what waits in post-secondary education and the workplace. As Arya stated:

…later on when you get professors they don’t do that…some of them you might luck out and get a great teacher but most of them just have a lot of knowledge and it’s up to you to get that knowledge out of them…You have to figure out
what’s my minds on here, what exactly are they trying to say, what’s the objective—you need to put all that together…

In this practice, Arya did not only teach her students the formal/taught curriculum, which is the instruction approved by the governing bodies of educational systems. She also helped to prevent issues from arising by letting students know and preparing them for the society in which they will “not be spoon-fed” and addressing misgivings about adult life. In a similar sense, Tyrion held his students accountable when it comes to equity, equity issues or talking about equity. For example, when students were bringing up certain facts about the court ruling of the Ferguson case\(^1\) and saying it was unfair, Tyrion challenged them to consider where the facts were coming from, other factors, media influence, and to also look at other similar cases that go unnoticed or unpublicized. Here, Tyrion aimed to instill in his students the idea that people should be accountable for what they say, and that part of that includes being aware of what is informing thoughts or opinions held, as well as other factors or considerations that should be taken into account before speaking on an issue.

When asked whether she was receiving enough support from colleagues in terms of practicing equity, Lyanna responded with:

I know who my allies are, all these groups that I’m involved in are all teachers who are so equity focused. And that I can easily have an equity dialogue with and who are committed to effecting change. So I just feel like I have a great teacher support system, I really do. And I think it’s like I found them and they have found me and I think it’s just so supportive.

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\(^1\) On August 9\(^{th}\), 2014 Michael Brown, an 18-year-old black man was fatally shot by a police officer in Ferguson, Missouri (USA) after being suspected of robbery.
With a group committed to effecting change, members likely felt more collegial and a need to uphold this commitment. Lyanna appeared happy to talk about her colleagues, so it did appear that she had good experiences in collaborating and supporting colleagues. In the last line of the quote, Lyanna eluded to a sense of give-and-take where she is not only benefiting from them but that they are also benefiting from her.

As teachers modeling equity and establishing an equitable environment, aid and advice should also be offered and not only sought. Offering this help to other equity-minded colleagues serves to not only improve the efforts of the colleague, but also serves as a moment of reaffirmation for the teacher. Reaffirming this passion and belief in equity can be a powerful tool for the longevity and extent to which to teacher goes in the future. Later, she also stated that the interactions also allowed them to bounce ideas off each other and provide encouragement.

Teachers modelling social justice and equity can often face resistance or unsupportive colleagues, so being accountable to themselves and their mental health also appears to play a key role in the longevity of promoting equity and effecting change. As Lyanna pointed out:

…make good decisions about your energy level, your heart, your investment, like how this affects other areas of your life and I think you have to choose your battles really wisely so that you can keep sustained…you put your heart and soul into it but then other things in your life suffer, and I actually don’t think that’s healthy…that’s very important for activists.

When teachers do not take care of themselves, in this case equity-minded teachers, energy levels and the strength to keep promoting equity and being equitable can begin
to suffer in terms of effectiveness and the frequency of the various equity practices. The reason for the aforementioned effects is that being equitable, sustaining and promoting an equitable environment is hard work and a constant day-to-day effort for the equity-minded teacher. Tyrion also alluded to this issue, “…some other staff will just kind of walk by and pretend they didn’t hear it [an inequity] because then it’s more work…it’s always more work.”

Keeping with being accountable to oneself, Tyrion found that no teachers were bringing interested students to the African Diaspora conference and felt that, “I’m clearly not of any African descent but I can relate as an ally, I can make sure those kids are taken care of in the school…it’s important to get involved.” Teachers should support their students as part of being equitable. That can often mean not relying on or expecting another staff member to get involved, but keeping oneself accountable and getting involved. Tyrion went on to reflect on the teachers who did not take the students, some who were of African descent, and stated that did not mean they are a bad teacher, simply that there is the opportunity for someone else to be an ally. In a related example, Tyrion spoke about being an ally during the Day of Pink and receiving some pushback from students who did not see why he cared as a heterosexual male. To him, being an ally to students and those in need of support across different identity factors is an important part of equity. Holding oneself accountable to get involved is a way to promote this when one might be inclined to ignore the issue at hand if it does not affect them, as some teachers do according to Tyrion.

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2 The International Day of Pink is a yearly Canadian event day against bullying, discrimination, homophobia, and transphobia where people wear pink in support of the initiative.
When asked about whether they think educational policy and laws are aiding or hindering their equity efforts, all three participants agreed that it is supports them. Lyanna believed that policy is great in that, “I feel like I know that even if I see a practice of a teacher that’s not right...or if I want to do something and I’m facing resistance, I know that I have policy that’s on my side.” There appears to be a connection between policy and the extent to which equity efforts are taken as well as their efficacy. Teachers who feel supported by policy appear to engage in equity implementation and more active equitable practices. Participants also mentioned that if they felt less supported by policy, they would likely feel less confident or comfortable in their equity pursuits. While this study looked at equity-minded teachers, future studies should further examine the relationship between teacher perceptions of how supportive policy is and their comfort level in equity practice. Lyanna gave an example where she held another teacher accountable because they did not want to give a student a particular accommodation, but she showed that there is legal policy and that the IEP in place is legally binding. In a similar way, when Arya is trying to introduce certain books into her English class to promote equity she will often “back it all up with policies of the board all the time” when dealing with administration, and will similarly tell students that “this is the policy.” Tyrion stated that while some parents may get upset when their child is taught or not taught about Creationism during an Evolution unit, for example, for the most part:

I think you know it [policy] has our back with things and I think that if we’re exposing students to a variety of cultures and ways of being and everything that I think it’s helpful and no one really gets you in trouble for that.
It appears that these participants find that they are able to keep others (such as parents, students, colleagues and administration) accountable more easily because of the policies in place that add a legal aspect to accountability.

When it comes to administration, Tyrion thought that sometimes teachers do not know what professional development sessions are available, especially equity workshops. He was able to find them himself through research as an equity-minded teacher, but for other teachers he thought that often equity is not focused on as much as literacy, numeracy or EQAO and that the messages can get lost:

So there is a department at TDSB, the equity department and that email goes to the superintendent and that goes to the principal, and he or she will send it out to like whoever, but maybe they don’t send it out. So it’s kind of like the message gets lost sometimes and equity is never the forefront…so I think people say ya do equity be equitable but there’s not enough stuff on it that is accessible to everyone.

To address this, there should be more of an onus at each level of administration to ensure the message is passed along to teachers, but teachers should also be further encouraged to seek professional development sources.

**Setting up Structure**

Another aspect of the preventive equity practices is setting up structure. In setting up structure, participants spoke about setting up classroom rules, expectations, and establishing an environment where students can voice their concerns. Fulfilling the aforementioned ideas, participants set the tone for an equitable classroom and conversations around equitable issues.
In response to the question, *Are there certain things you do at the start of the year or at the beginning of each day to set the tone for an equitable classroom?* all participants spoke about setting up classroom guidelines and rules. Lyanna identified that she does it in a number of different ways, depending on her class and what is appropriate for them:

It varies according to grade. So 9s and 10s it’s just doing a little brainstorm, what does respect look like…sometimes it’s about the best community you were a part of and what made that community so great and how can we replicate that in our class. Sometimes I type up what the kids come up with and it’s a little agreement that every kid signs…if it’s a Grade 12 class, I’ll talk about what do we need to do to have an academic discussion that’s fruitful and then I extrapolate from that about what’s going to be the building blocks of our class.

Lyanna’s example brought up a question of determining which strategy is appropriate for each grade level. This is discussed more in depth in the ‘knowing’ section.

Similarly, Arya stated that she has her students sign on the rules to further keep them accountable. For example, she would often get students to “sign something that they agree this is a positive space”, as a result “the kids who are in Grade 10 see that they signed last year and they might you know—so all the kids in the school have signed something in my classroom.” She reflected on the fact that she used to create the rules with her students, but from year to year the rules were more or less the same so she posted the common ones for students to sign. She mentioned that she still allows students to modify the rules: “Kids can add anything that they want to add and so there
was one change last year.” Arya went on to outline some of the current rules in her classroom:

…coming to class alert, engaged and ready to learn…supporting one another in the classroom…when someone is feeling left out that you bring them in…ask questions and ask for help…right to take me outside of the classroom [if I’m doing something unfair]…no homophobia, racism, sexism tolerated in this classroom…

In a similar way, Tyrion also outlined that he is really firm with students about the behaviours that are allowed in class and that they talk about:

…rules and that this is a little community that we need to support each other and so I think it’s important to make sure that at the beginning that that’s set up really firmly, that we’re all respectful of each other.

He mentioned rules such as not tolerating homophobia, being considerate, addressing inequity issues when they come up, and helping each other out. Setting up rules and guidelines appears to be a cornerstone of establishing the framework or an equitable classroom for these teachers. Having this structure lends itself to other equitable practices that the teacher implements because students already have an idea of how the classroom is to be equitable and thus any other equity practices employed by the teacher will be better received.

When asked, *Do you find that students bring up equity issues on their own?* Arya stated that she wishes they brought them up more. But she pointed out, “After you brought up equity they bring it up, so I find in grade 12, by the end of grade 12 they have a lot to say.” By bringing up equity first, you can establish an environment in
which students will be more likely to bring up equity issues and avoid bullying or anything else that could lead to inequity. Tyrion spoke about another approach to establishing this environment. His approach is “ensuring the kid[s] feel welcome into the class and that they don’t have to like check themselves at the door and be somebody different.” One way he has done this in his school is by “identifying with youth culture and …like I have a poster about hip-hop quotes,” which has worked in his classrooms because students feel more accepted since hip-hop is something that is a part of their teenage culture. He mentioned that as a result, he has noticed that students in turn also became more accepting and open to speaking on equity issues.

Lyanna mentioned one way that she establishes an equitable environment is with a couple of other teachers in a group called Think Tank (a black focus group in her school). It is set up so that black students can talk about issues they find concerning with the teachers. In one example, “some students felt that teacher-student relationships weren’t that great.” She felt that providing students with outlets to voice their concerns is a way to prevent issues of equity from arising or progressing further. From this particular example the relationship was improved over time and the teachers part of the Think Tank spoke to students on also being self-advocates and how they could talk to teachers.

**Evaluative**

The second cluster of practices of an equity-minded high school teacher is evaluative in nature. Evaluative in this case refers to on-going mental processes that are related to equity, identifying issues of inequity, enacting change, and seeking information. The two broad associated practices, ‘being critical’ and ‘knowing,’ help
teachers to employ the evaluative aspect of equitable education and make an equitable classroom and/or school environment more feasible either directly (e.g. attaining specific information to enact change to address an equity issue) or indirectly (e.g. equity workshops for teachers which may help them in their equitable endeavors). Responses were categorized under ‘being critical’ if the participants spoke about being critical of themselves, students, policy and administration while also encouraging students to do so as well. Additionally, other evaluative practices were sorted under ‘knowing’ when participants demonstrated knowledge of students, knowledge of students is required to address equity issues, knowledge of equity, knowledge through experience or spoke about the value of laws.

**Being Critical**

The first aspect of ‘evaluative’ practice is being critical. In this, participants were found to be critical of themselves, students, policy and administration while also encouraging students to be critical.

When asked what equity means to them, the participants eluded to being critical in part of their response. Arya believed that it is crucial that as a teacher she is “constantly learning, and re-learning and evaluating myself…and being aware of who I am teaching and being aware in what context I am teaching.” In terms of evaluating herself, she went on to say, “Being aware of my own privilege, as I get older being aware of my age…as I get older I also get more privilege.” As an English teacher, she gave an example about really analyzing about what the stories she uses are about, and if she is sending any unintended messages with her choice of story. For this reason, she stated that she tries to use different kinds of stories from different cultures. In relation to
the stories, she also worked toward getting her students to be more critical in
“recognizing the value of seeing others and a variety of others in the stories that we do,
up on the walls and the materials we have.” Tyrion stated that being equitable has a
number of pieces and that “from a teacher standpoint, the way you’re teaching, whether
it’s through your pedagogy or displaying equity or talking about equity…or you’re
being equitable in your practices.” Here, Tyrion spoke to the self-reflective and critical
nature of an equity-minded teacher, realizing that equity can take many forms and has
several factors influencing its efficacy.

Lyanna believed that something that is key for equity is “interlocking systems of
oppression and interlocking social identities…like class, race we know all those big
ones but ability is not often mentioned.” Additionally, Lyanna stated that she is
cognizant of the “efficacy of my actions, what’s going to be most effective. And also
the immediacy of a response that’s required.”

When asked if he feels comfortable talking about equitable issues in his
classroom, Tyrion responded with:

I’m white, middle-class, heterosexual male, so I’m kind of the poster person of
sometimes how that has a lot of privilege. So it’s sometimes harder at the
beginning when I felt a little uncomfortable like when I was doing my Masters
and my B.Ed, it was kind of like how do I enter that conversation to support
something that’s like an LGBTQ issue or an issue on race and I think by being
an ally I think that’s the strongest piece. So I think that I’ve learnt to be an ally
in any situation.
In this example, Tyrion indicated that although a particular issue might not affect him personally, it may be affecting his students, other staff, or others from the school community. For him, it is important to be an ally in these situations. It is important for teachers to become more critical about the various aspects of school life and establishing a safer space.

However, as Arya pointed out, it appears that not all teachers or administration are being equitable. When asked about administration and receiving enough support within their school to practice equity, Arya reflected that often it seems like people are doing it on a surface level:

…just do it on a ‘okay if there are some posters up and some books it looks like we’re equitable, great.’ Like I know they bring lots of people into my classroom because they think it looks more equitable than other people’s classrooms and I think that just creeps me out. Like shouldn’t we want to have a whole school that reflects this?

Her thoughts echoed the idea that equity is every teachers’ responsibility, but unfortunately, according to her that is not what is often seen. For this reason she would like policy to be “mandated and…not so superficial.” She also went on to talk about how equity looks different in different classrooms and fields, and that for example “what equity looks like in Math class shouldn’t be determined by an English teacher…should be determined by a Math team…it’s about ability…access…it’s about what’s reflected around the room.” Similarly, Lyanna showed evidence of being critical of administration. In one example, she noticed that some students with a learning disability often do not know why they got in trouble even after the teacher has told
them, due to a verbal processing issue. She then stated that this is even seen at the administrative level, “VP doesn’t realize how their learning disability impacts their ability to process the information that’s being said…also their ability to read social cues, to misinterpret social cues.”

Tyrion noted that often even something small related to school structure that the administration might not have considered could impart information to the students. He has found that often the “Spec Ed. students are kind of put in a weird wing of the school or not the nicest classes like they don’t need as much…a lot of the times the applied kids are stuck in the shitty classrooms because they’re ‘going to ruin it.’ ” This is an example of hidden curriculum outlined in Chapter 2, and this particular example is discussed further in Chapter 5. Tyrion was also mindful that sometimes with certain staff issues the administration cannot really do much “because of the union and what punishment you can give to someone.”

When asked, How do you feel about current training, workshops, professional development and resources that are available to help teachers implement equity? Tyrion thought that there are problems with how professional development is done for teachers, and that it is always the same teachers who attend the equity workshops:

There’s never the people who really need to be changing their practice…when they do a school-wide one you have like a person who’s equity superman or woman and then you’ve got the person who’s like the least equitable person…the PD is failing to reach the people that it really needs to reach.

He went on to state that oftentimes, the workshops are geared too much for a particular type of teacher (such as the ‘equity superman/superwoman’ he was referring to) and not
enough toward those teachers who could truly use basic help and guidance on how to improve their practice to be more equitable in a meaningful way. Tyrion also voiced concern about the equity workshops so that they do not come across as having an agenda towards a particular person, “how do you make someone go to this and pick something up from it and making it meaningful because [if] some people walk in and they’re feeling like they’re attacked, they’re not going to do anything.”

As mentioned in the accountability section, Tyrion also found that often the messages of professional development can get lost along the way if administration does not pass it along. Arya similarly pointed out that there is not enough being done for the “teachers who have no idea that they’re inequitable,” in terms of training and workshops. Lyanna finds that there is “less PD because I think centrally they cut down on a lot of positions of instructional leaders, so it makes sense that there’s less PD available.” Similarly, Arya stated that there is:

not enough [equity workshops] for those teachers [teachers who have no idea they’re being inequitable]…and [for some people] you have to start with the basics: ‘What does a classroom look like, who are these kids in there, when you say this how does that impact that kid over there.’

She also believed that she has found her own opportunities to learn about equity and strengthen her knowledge about it, but I find it unfortunate that at times teachers are left to find out about these opportunities themselves because then those who are not as equity-minded may not ever come across these opportunities. These participants, being critical of the current professional development situation, have formed their own groups with other equity-minded teachers and find support in one another. Arya, for example
has “colleagues who send me stuff all the time, ‘this would be great for your class,’ or ‘oh I just read this last night’ and so they influence me tremendously.”

Participants also touched on getting their students to be more critical. Arya encouraged her students to be more critical of what they read and during one particular class “they felt like Persepolis was Islamophobic in many ways because a lot of the messages that it had, which I hadn’t thought about it in that way and then when they brought it up and I wasn’t a part of the conversation I got to kind of reflect.” Certainly it is a powerful tool to have students be able to identify and point out issues of equity themselves as they will need these skills not only in the future but they are also skills that can aid the teacher in establishing an equitable classroom. Likewise, Lyanna also believed that it is important to push students to be more critical, regardless of their age:

[I] try and get my grades 9 and 10 to think critically too because I think that just because you’re younger or in an applied class doesn’t mean that you can’t think critically. But the tools and the language that I’m going to use are way different, and again I think that’s a language issue and it’s an accessibility issue, which is really important.

The participants had to help teach this critical skill to their students through discussions and dedicated skill-building sessions. Lyanna mentioned that she often does check-ins with students (talked about in more detail in the knowing section), and at times she will discuss with the students different approaches to solving or addressing their problems to get them practice at being more critical about their decision-making. Arya, for example spoke about talking to her students about how to identify when others may be feeling alone or like an outsider. In her discussion she stated to students:
‘it’s your job when someone is feeling left out that you bring them in.’ Teaching kids how to do that, so how to look for kids who are left out and what people look like when they’re left alone, ‘They take out their phone, that doesn’t mean they’re really busy…that means they need to look like they have something to do because they’re by themselves.’

Tyrion also mentioned that he will often have debriefs with his class when offensive language is used or someone says something that is littered with false data, and that they will “deconstruct what just happened there. And then they realize like oh maybe it’s not a good idea to say these things.”

**Knowing**

Knowing is the second aspect of evaluative practice common to all three participants. Here, knowing refers to participants demonstrating knowledge of students, knowledge of students is required to address equity issues, knowledge of equity, knowledge through experience, or speaking about the value of laws. Arguably, this is one of the two most important practice types (empowerment being the other) identified in this chapter because the knowledge enables teachers to act or resolve an issue they might not have otherwise.

When asked in what ways she defines equity, Lyanna phrased it beautifully, “…equity is about meeting needs to create equal outcomes and…to bridge that gap is going to look very different for different people, and different groups of people.” While equity does not mean equality, in the context of the conversation we were having Lyanna used the phrase “equal outcomes” in reference to the idea of success for all students, but acknowledges and appreciates that success looks different for each student.
Sometimes, however, the outcomes for students may need to be the same if one looks at curriculum documents provided by the ministry, but the way in which students reach these outcomes or expectations can or differ, in order to be equitable toward them. Individual Education Plans (IEPs) outline any accommodations or modifications that a student needs, but there can be other things that might be helpful to a student that is not covered in the IEP. When a teacher finds out information about students, this is valuable knowledge that can be directed toward helping students in other ways outside of what may be prescribed in an IEP. Lyanna often does check-ins in a circle with her students to gather information about how they are feeling, and she feels this is necessary to help them get “in some sort of emotionally stable spot” because “I feel like you can’t access the brain unless you access the heart. And I think you need to get the heart in a safe place in a classroom so that the brain can be free.”

Tyrion believed that gathering knowledge from “IEP, looking at their OSR, talking with guidance, community groups, [and] ensuring you know who your clientele is” can all be invaluable sources of information to help students. But he, like the other participants, also believed that students are invaluable sources of information themselves. By gathering this information he can do things such as accommodating if a couple students are having trouble seeing, or working with students to be sure his PowerPoint fonts are large enough. At one point he had a student in a wheel chair and there were not any desks available that would accommodate him, nor was this covered in the IEP. Tyrion then “had to like figure out ‘where do you get like the desks that are adjustable for wheelchairs.’ And it’s like all the work to go through it but now the kid’s happy with the desk, and he doesn’t feel left out.” Tyrion also gathered knowledge
about how “you’re not really supposed to touch the wheelchair because that’s an
extension of their body” and doing so would not be equitable because you would not get
in the personal space of an able-bodied person.

Arya stated that knowing things like “their ethnicity…their background” and
“kids abilities” are important because they influence the things she does with her
students. She mentioned that she will normally find out what vocabulary kids know so
that she is sure that students will understand most of what she is saying. In previous
years, she started placing yoga balls around the class after discovering that a couple
students found it “difficult to sit in a desk” and she also “encourage[s] them to stand at
the back of the classroom and keep notes on the ledge there.” She also recognized
that her students sometimes need to get up and stretch and she allows them to go for walks
or washroom breaks any time they want as long as they say they are going—they do not
need to ask. Arya taught applied level and academic level courses, so she believes that
she needs to know what engages her students at each of these levels:

I think more with applied students only because, I mean it should be done with
all students, but because it just works better and often those are the kids who are
the most disengaged from school and I think with any kids who are, seem to be
disengaged and finding out who are you, what’s disengaging you and what can I
do to get you engaged again. Not saying that always works but [laughter], but
trying to.

While the aforementioned examples are fantastic, they may not suit the needs of another
teacher’s students or may even be disconcerting to another teacher and their students. It
is important to keep in mind that the examples (i.e. yoga ball use or allowing walks)
serve as specific examples of how knowledge of students’ needs can turn into equitable practice, not as mandates for all teachers to employ. Keeping in line with this and with what Lyanna stated earlier about “[choosing] your battles really wisely,” teachers need to not only know what their students need but also what they need so that other areas of their lives do not suffer and to sustain a healthy amount of energy in their activism and equity efforts.

Additionally, when asked if she feels comfortable talking about equitable issues in her classroom, Arya responded with saying that experience with subject matter and equitable issues really lends itself to comfort level:

I feel really comfortable talking about [equitable issues] because I’ve done it so often, I know so many of the things that are going to come up. So when I teach the Book of Negros, we talk about the transatlantic slave trade and we talk about the legacy of slavery and I feel very comfortable with that because I have taught it before and we’ve had uncomfortable issues and I have been able to deal with them.

She pointed out that you cannot just introduce an equity issue if you do not know what is going on and what you should do is be “careful about your own biases or even biases you’re not even aware that you have” and “do a lot of research, you have to know your stuff and you have to come in and be aware of where every kid is coming from.” All of these types of knowledge factor into how deeply you can address an equity issue, if your class is ready for that level of conversation and which issues to bring up when.

Lyanna echoed what Arya said in that how deeply she approaches an issue, such as gender-based violence, depends on the age and willingness of students:
…so even if you think about how I’m approaching like the Rihanna-Chris Brown thing, how I would approach that in a grade 9 and 10 applied class would be very different than how I approach it in my grade 12 U class. So my grade 9 and 10 class it’s like probably very animated discussion and trying to explore all different points of view and my grade 12 class, the language is going to be a bit more sophisticated and it’s going to be a lot more grounded in theory and I think that’s really important.

Lyanna also stated that knowing policy is extremely beneficial and powerful to her because she knows it is on her side: “if I see a practice of a teacher that’s not right or if I see stuff that’s going on or if I want to do something and I’m facing resistance, I know that I have policy that’s on my side.”

Similarly, Tyrion spoke about issues differently with his Grade 9s compared to his Grade 12s due to “maturity issue[s] and I think some issues when you’re talking about—require a bit more maturity depending on how deep you want to go with something. Even if you’re bringing up the issues of Ferguson that’s happening in the news.” He also acknowledged “sometimes you can go too far in the conversation where people aren’t ready themselves to hear that,” so you need to know who is in your classroom and their comfort level.

Although the participants did not explicitly discuss how they determine age-appropriateness in these conversations, which dictates the depth to which they go, it is evident that they are determining how to construct an age-appropriate discussion with their particular students. When teachers are trying to determine age-appropriateness, they need to consider a number of factors. Teachers should consider factors such as
previous conversations and reactions from students, cultural sensitivity, familial factors, student interest in the conversations, and how far to push the learners out of their comfort level. As mentioned in Chapter 2, there are two different camps on this idea. On the one hand, some researchers maintain that people should not be forced to defend their beliefs because it can cause people to stop being open and accepting of new information (Watson, 2008; Brown, 2001). Others suggest that pushing people to think outside of their comfort zones is what leads to transformative learning and understanding about other views (Kumashiro, 2001; Arai et al., 2001). As teachers, there is a constant struggle with whether or not to push students to defend beliefs because of factors such as classroom makeup and students being open to dialogue. Nonetheless, equitable issues do need to be addressed in some capacity, so gentle pushes may be a good course of action in this regard.

**Active**

By analyzing the interviews there were some practices of an equity-minded teacher that are active in nature. Here, active practices refer to those that are more ongoing and consistent in nature, and more related to values the teacher holds (rather than collected knowledge). The following two practices, ‘empowerment’ and ‘transparency,’ help to realize the active aspect of equitable education and making an equitable classroom more feasible. Empowerment refers to when participants demonstrated putting power in students’ hands, having high expectations for all, or representing students in the class in various ways, to name a few ways. Transparency was identified when participants spoke about making practices transparent to parents and students,
having clear expectations, showing what inequity looks like, and being explicit in their language.

**Empowerment**

The first aspect of active practice that I identified as a common theme to all three participants was Empowerment. Again, empowerment was classified in terms of participants demonstrating putting power in students’ hands, having high expectations for all, or representing students in the class in various ways. In my opinion, this the other practice identified as being one of the most important (the other being knowing). By empowering students, teachers help them to address equity issues, become advocates and self-advocates, reduce the likelihood of bullying and discrimination by increasing their acceptance and openness, and encourage them to reach their potential.

When asked about equity issues arising in the classroom or school due to students, Tyrion stated that in his school there had been an incident that offended some of the female students, and he encouraged them to be self-advocates and speak out against it, which lead to the announcement being retracted:

> [There] was an announcement about dress code for women and how women should be dressing, and a lot of the women took that as offensive and they said we’re not teasing the boys by dressing this way. We are dressing like this because we want to empower ourselves to dress this way. So [they] brought up like issues of gender equity.

He felt that setting up his class environment in such a way that students can voice their concerns safely is important. As a result he “provide[s] a venue for students to bring
these issues up…so I think it’s also teach kids how to like fend for themselves or bring up and be—empower them to bring up these issues.”

Arya mentioned empowering her students in another, somewhat more discrete way: “making sure that I have as high expectations of those kids within the parameters of what they’re able to achieve as I do of kids in the [specialized science program] and academic stream.” By doing this, Arya hoped to instill in her students the feeling that they can achieve despite limitations and that it is effort, rather than limitations, that determines their outcome. Arya also spoke about getting her students to identify when someone is lonely and empowering her students to make a difference and include others: “how to look for kids who are left out…how you can ask someone to come into your group, if they don’t come over how you can just pull your group over and sit with them…” By doing this, she enabled students to identify issues and helping them develop the skills to address them if and when they are aware of an issue. Another part of her practice was putting power in students’ hands by allowing them to draw on their own culture and familial experiences to address issues. As previously mentioned, in a conversation on Persepolis some students felt it was Islamophobic in many ways. Knowing two students had parents from Iran, Arya sent them home with questions since the two students had expressed an interest in the topic: “both their parents had very different points of view and they talked about it kind of through their parents, they were the mouth piece for their parents and it just brought a whole other layer to that conversation.”

Parental involvement can be an issue of equity. Teachers need to be aware of student’s family composition (or lack thereof) to make critical decisions about what
they ask of their students. If Arya had simply asked one of her students to go home and gather information about their parents’ home country, the student may not be able and asking them to do so would be unfair. The student might not be able to collect this information for reasons such as not being comfortable divulging the information, having deceased biological parents, being adopted, childhood trauma, or a family composition that does not fit into the societal ‘norm’ (i.e. a nuclear family consisting of children and their biological mother and father). To empower students by using their family and cultural experiences, teachers really need to know the factors at play and know their students. Arya, in the previous example, made sure that it was alright with the two students first, and she did not assume ahead of time that they had parents (she attained the information from the two students themselves).

Lyanna mentioned that she tries to empower her students to get more involved in equity issues by helping them develop the language around it. To her, this is a crucial part of empowering them to talk about the issues: “so just giving kids a language around that [equity] is I think really important. And I think just trying early on to introduce activities that are connected to equity and social justice also kind of breathes that into the classroom.”

Toward the end of her answer to the question, If you have taken any action in these situations [instances of equitable issues], what were they? Lyanna mentioned that she is a mentor in a girl empowerment group at her school. Upon further probing she spoke more on this topic and gave an example indicating her role in empowering these young women. The group is made up of girls who are leaders and those who are emerging leaders, so the goal of the group is to empower women to become leaders.
Lyanna, being inspired by the FoodShare book (an organization that aims to provide affordable and accessible food), suggested to the girls that they put together a cookbook because they have many cultural recipes:

So every woman submitted a recipe and then with the recipe was a story, and the story was connected to a woman who inspired her. So it was really, really cool. So we hired a photographer, we had a graphic designer and one of our former students did the interior layout for us and so it’s just a really beautiful cookbook.

As a result of this cookbook, parents also became more involved in school activities starting with the cookbook launch with about 100 people, when normally there would be nowhere close to 100 people. By empowering the girls and helping them empower themselves, they were able to develop something be proud of and relevant to them, as well as relatable to their families. At the launch the girls had other opportunities for empowerment “…some of them did readings, some of them did spoken word, some of them sang throughout the night and they had their Oscar moment at the end where they paid tribute to a woman who inspired them.”

Both Tyrion and Arya are part of similar student clubs. Tyrion was a mentor in a Social Justice club at his school and he works with them to be better able at identifying equity issues not only in the school but in the world as well:

…they notice that around the world and their school that there’s inequitable things happening in the world in terms of pay, in terms of gender equity and anything like race…sometimes things will happen…in the school and then that either staff will get involved, but oftentimes it’s the students.
Arya supervised the Social Justice club, Gay-Straight Alliance, and Women’s Empowerment club at her school. The Social Justice Club is a club that focuses on talking about and addressing issues that are pervasive in society such as homophobia, gender-based violence, and speaking out against human rights violations. The Gay-Straight Alliance (now more often referred to as the Queer-Straight Alliance to be more inclusive) is a club where youth identifying as queer can go to talk about issues facing queer youth as well as to seek support. Youth identifying as straight are also welcome to join in support as allies to their queer colleagues and to engage in dialogue. Finally, the Women’s Empowerment club is one in which female students are empowered to be leaders in their schools and community through a number of events planned throughout the year by the members. Something that Arya realized is that much of what her students were doing in these clubs could actually be integrated into the curriculum: “So I started doing a lot of the stuff we did in the club, actually bringing them and making them part of the curriculum.” In a way, Arya’s suggestion would be more empowering because it was something students were already doing and by integrating it into the curriculum, it would seemingly validate the students’ efforts. She gave an example of her students talking about:

…domestic violence, well I just brought that into my English classroom and had the people come in and talking about images of women in the median…and then just vetted it and expanded it so it also met the needs of the boys in the classroom so we really talked about what those images did to young men.
By integrating something like this into the curriculum, it gives the opportunity to other students (who may not have otherwise had access to the club due to other commitments or barriers) to engage in the dialogue surrounding it.

Lyanna, believed that it is really important that students in her class see that their cultures and interests are represented in the classroom to celebrate it and instill pride, “…[I] hang up inspirational sayings and quotes, people of a variety of races…even just hanging up a piece of Kente cloth [a type of garment worn in South Ghana].” In a similar way, Arya makes sure that the kinds of stories used or the names used in handouts are representative of her students. Arya also thought that her students are further empowered to try harder and succeed when: “…seeing themselves represented in the classroom…at some point in the year having their work up on the walls in the classroom.” By doing this, she is not only showing students that she is proud of them, but also showing that they should be proud of themselves and continue their good work. She also checks with students ahead of time to be sure that it is okay to post their work.

Arya also went on to state that a curriculum that connects personally with students is important. She stated that by “having a curriculum that connects with them [students], [it] empowers them.” Through these connections, students are made to feel that what they have to offer is valuable to the classroom and more comfortable in sharing. Arya spoke of an example in her Grade 12 Writer’s Craft class, where she had a student named Imajija from Nigeria who always went by Jija wrote a story about “…how she changed her name. She had this realization in Grade 12 that she changed her name. She wasn’t sure how much her name was a part of her identity, what she wanted to do with that name.” By allowing her students to make those connections to
the curriculum, students are not only more interested in the curriculum and motivated to
do well, but they can also engage in thinking more about themselves and cultures in
certain ways they might not have otherwise considered.

When asked what practices he uses to promote an equitable classroom, one
practice that Tyrion talked about is how he speaks about and celebrates everyone’s
holiday to reflect the diversity in his class and in the school:

I have a little board that I put up to say like Christmas stuff but I’ll also make
sure that Diwali stuff is on or Hanukkah stuff, and the kids are like represented
in the class as well as, for example, in my class I have a wall of scientists and it
just shows scientists from the world, so it’s not just the same scientist you’re
hearing about. So it’s incorporating the kid’s background into the lesson and
bringing in their cultural capital.

In doing this he helped students feel more at ease in the class knowing that they are
welcome and accepted, enabling them to be more likely to succeed in school whereas
students belonging to dominant white culture tend to see it celebrated extensively.

**Transparency**

The second aspect of active practice that I identified common to all three
participants was the practice of transparency. Transparency was defined in terms of
participants speaking about making practices transparent to parents and students, having
clear expectations, showing what inequity looks like, and being explicit in their
language. Transparency is important for equity because to be fair to students, they
should know why certain things are being done and enforced or they are prone to
disregard the implemented rule. It is also important because it keeps language more
accessible to students that might otherwise have trouble deciphering what the teacher is getting at.

When asked about how he might react toward an equitable issue, further into his answer Tyrion spoke about being clear on his position toward issues related to equity. He believes that “it’s important to let your whole class or the whole group that heard [the problem/comment] that your position on that is that that’s not acceptable. Because then that kid feels like okay Mr. Tyrion is on my team.” In a specific example, he went on to highlight the importance of not just saying something is unacceptable, but to actually be transparent with students and talk about why something is unacceptable because students often will not just blindly follow a rule:

…kids are saying like ‘that’s gay’ or whatever, we squash it right away, we talk about why it’s not just like don’t say that, it’s why we don’t say it or ‘that’s so retarded’ or something like that I kind of nip that in the butt at the beginning to like set up that culture…

It appeared that to Tyrion simply telling students to not do something is not enough. He believed in talking about why it is that no one should not engage in certain behaviours. In doing this, students are provided with identifiers for inappropriate behaviour, making it clear when they or someone else is acting in such a manner. Solidifying Tyrion’s point on explaining rules, Arya also believed that when setting up rules you need to be explicit in not only explaining but sometimes even what it actually means (the language behind it): “…explicitly teaching them all those things because kids don’t know what that means.” Lyanna went further in that she is explicit with what she expects from her students within her classroom but also outside of the classroom: “…it keeps happening
too, you know, there’s different things like sometimes it’s a conversation piece about what’s going to be said inside my classroom and what’s going to be said outside my classroom.”

Outside of being explicit in expectations and the rules they set out, the participants were also explicit in talking about why they are doing something that relates to equity. Lyanna, for example, told her students that they are going to talk about something more deeply than how they raised it so that they can see the bigger picture:

… [We had a] big discussion in our class about Ebola…the impact of Ebola in Africa and the impact in America, they’re two very different impacts but the response has been really different. And I think that’s an equity issue…if they’re bringing up something like that, I’ll try to help them see the bigger equity issues around it because I think they bring it up and they’re kind of just afraid to get Ebola, and now they’re afraid to go to Africa.

Tyrion backed up his choices and decisions by explaining the thought process and getting students to unpack the intricacies of why something is. During one class, the class was talking about Day of Pink pushed him as to why he was supportive:

…we did the day of Pink, and they’re like ‘well you’re not gay are you?’, and I’m like well it doesn’t matter if I’m gay or not, I don’t have to tell you, ‘well I don’t think you are so, so why do you care?’, well it’s like why do people care about—like in slavery why were there people who were trying to stop slavery from happening. Well they needed help, well this group of people needs help…
By drawing parallels with other groups of historically oppressed people and not just shutting down his students’ questions, Tyrion was able to reach them and help them to understand the need to be an ally.

Arya was explicit in that she was not being afraid to draw upon educational law and board policies (similar to Lyanna in a previous example). Whenever she faced any sort of resistance from students on equity discussion or trying to be equitable (for example through using books about different cultures or religions), she made it known to students that she was also abiding by policy, often showing them the actual policy: “I back it all up with policies of the board all the time and with students I say ‘and this is the policy.’ I’ve never had to deal with parents.” I thought that it was amazing that she never had to deal with parental resistance because often students discuss the issues that arose in class with their parents. This may be because of her use and reference to policy in a way that gets students to think about it is a legal document, rather than a guideline.

When asked about if parents get involved in or influence her equity practices, she stated that “parents just aren’t as involved as they are in elementary school. But I think we could and should do better because I think that a lot of parents are kind of out of the loop.” Again, it is important to keep in mind that parental involvement can be an issue of equity because students’ family composition can vary greatly. Therefore it may not always feasible to expect involvement of a parent or guardian. In reference to Arya’s response, it might be that parents are not as involved because communication at the high school level does not seem to be as commonplace, which may lead parents to feel that they are not as valued. While acknowledging that she needs to better in reaching out to parents more outside of parent’s night, she mentioned that about once every 1-2 years
(about 10 times within her 16 year career) she “had parents come in and lecture.” Arya felt that more transparency with parents is necessary and that she was looking for more ways to integrate parents and have more ongoing conversation with them.

In his response to the question, *What challenges do you face in implementing equity in your classroom?* Tyrion mentioned that he tries to be transparent with parents in terms of realistic goals for students placed into applied level courses. Tyrion stated “…you have to tell the parents they’re never going to university because they’re in applied…and you have to explain to them like how did they get there in the first place.” He saw the system being problematic for equity because of how it is setup in terms of applied and academic, and that Grade 8 teachers have a lot of influence in a student’s future outcome, “…their Grade 8 teacher said ‘oh you’re not really great so you’re going to go into applied’ then other kids who thrive in applied and other kids shouldn’t be there.” While he acknowledged the merits to both sides (having applied and academic versus only grade levels), Tyrion raised a valid point that there is a lot of disconnect between what happens in Grade 8, and what happens and is expected in high school. Tyrion also went on to state that sometimes he will talk about the stigma associated with applied level students with parents, “…the kids are trapped and they’re told that ‘this is easier’ or kids say like ‘I’m dumb, I’m in applied’ or ‘I’m smart, I’m in academic, those applied kids are dumb’ and it’s like the equity there is a problem.” Tyrion hoped that by making parents aware of these issues, parents would become more active agents in helping their children fight these stigmas and becoming more aware of the school structure in which they need to navigate.
Reactive

In my examination of the interviews, I found that some practices of equity-minded teachers appear to be reactive in nature. Reactive practices refer to those that occur in the instances following an equitable issue arising, the initial response or gut reaction in a sense. Participants’ practices were identified as reactive when participants spoke about how they acted toward an issue that they were aware arose in their class, and when they demonstrated taking action. To help organize this theme, I organized it further into: ‘postpone,’ ‘seeking aid,’ and ‘confront.’ Responses were categorized under ‘postpone’ if the participant chose to postpone further action whether to be in a calmer state, or based on the urgency of the issue. In these cases responses were the most delayed. Responses were placed under ‘seeking aid’ if participants mentioned that they might at times seek aid in the form of school colleagues or school board members. Responses in this section occurred much sooner that in ‘postpone,’ aid from school colleagues resulting faster than from board members. Finally, responses were placed under ‘confront’ if participants spoke about acting as the issue arose or right after it occurred, this sub-theme is seen as the fastest of the three outlined. I believe that together these three sub-themes make up the Reactive practice and have a further significance. How and when a teacher reacts (e.g. action or inaction are both forms of a reaction) toward an equitable issue arising can impart teaching to students in the form of ‘reactive curriculum.’ Students may take away, for example, from a teacher’s reaction toward an equity issue that it is important to talk about. Reactive curriculum is addressed more in depth in Chapter 5.
**Postpone**

Initially, I was expecting to find that participants might at times react out of anger or some other emotion, but they all appear to be much more deliberate and recognize the problems associated with an emotional response. For example, in having an emotional response, they might say something they do not mean or believe, or possibly fuel the issue further. While Tyrion did not make specific reference to postponing a reaction, he did mention that he avoids sending students “down to the principal about it because I think it’s a learning opportunity,” demonstrating that he postpones more severe reactions to repeated cases. To him, “it’s kind of important to educate before punishing people.” I believe that by exhibiting this behaviour, Tyrion is helping to prevent repeated cases of equitable issues (he gave examples such as homophobia and use of inappropriate terms) from arising by treating students with the dignity to speak with them on a matter first, rather than making a more instant emotional response.

In response to the question, *How do you react in certain instances when an issue arises?* Arya acknowledged that though sometimes in her head she might have an emotional response, she does not act on it, “and then there are sometimes that in the moment, you have to let things go because you’re angry.” However, she stated that she does not just leave the issue and never readdresses it. To her it was important that there is a valuable discussion that comes out of an issue arising once she is “…calm and when I’ve figured out how to address it.” Thus in terms of reacting in the moment, then, she may need to postpone her response at times to effectively address it once in a calmer and more rational state of being. Sometimes the passage of time can be such a crucial
tool in the teacher’s repertoire. Actions such as allowing a situation to deescalate, or allowing students to leave the room as Arya stated “you [students] can determine when you need to leave the room” can change the environment and people in which the issue arose to be more stable.

Lyanna, in the moment will often quickly consider the efficacy of her actions and “…also the immediacy of a response,” where if it is not very urgent she may put off a response for a few days or until it re-emerges. If a teacher deems that the response does not need to be immediate, it can be because the severity of the issue was weighed against the importance of whatever else was occurring in the classroom at the time. Perhaps addressing that issue right away could have been a detriment to the students’ learning, which would have in turn been its own equity issue. Lyanna stated that she will also at times postpone her response while she “personalize[s] a kid in a sense…when they’re not just a student with you, but when you just think like how would I wanted somebody that’s connected to me treated.” She stated that by doing this, it really does change how you interact with a student because now you start to consider “…what service would I want them to have…how would I want them to be treated.” By thinking more in depth about the service required, this helps determine whether the student needs counseling, a conversation with the teacher, or something else to address the issue at hand. I believe, based on the conversations with the participants, that although at first postponing a reaction may appear to be a bad idea, it can be the best option at the time of a presenting issue if it allows for de-escalation, more rational response, or if it is simply something that can wait (such that addressing it earlier may have taken away from something else).
TOWARD A MODEL OF EQUITY PRACTICE

Seeking Aid

Again, practices are categorized under ‘seeking aid’ if participants seek aid in the form of school colleagues or school board members in response to an equitable issue. Two of participants, Lyanna and Tyrion, mentioned that another way they might react would be to seek the aid of a third party. Although Arya did not explicitly mention seeking the aid of a third party to help respond to an issue, she often sought the help of an equity-minded colleague when wanting to plan a lesson relating to equity that she is bringing to the table for discussion. She also made mention of having “colleagues who send me stuff all the time, ‘this would be great for your class or oh I just read this last night,’ ” when talking about resources she uses to address equity issues in her class or to form discussions surrounding equitable issues with her class. Additionally, Arya stated that she feels that she is very supported by her “current principal and VP, yes like they would back up my decision to choose this book or whatever because of equity.” Arya, like the other participants, recognized the value and power in seeking aid from colleagues or other educational professionals. Teachers should be open to this seeking, and while one might argue that this can become a matter of pride or vulnerability, I believe that recognizing one’s own vulnerability is key to the growth and refinement of equitable praxis.

When asked about how she might act when an equity issue arises, Lyanna mentioned immediately seeking a colleague out and coming back to address the issue. For example, she normally tries to stop a gender issue when it comes up himself but she acknowledges that at times the male students causing these issues may not respond well to her in every instance, so she immediately seeks out a male ally: “…if it’s the gender
thing, a lot of times I’ll try and stop it but if they’re [the male students] not stopping it I get another man teacher.” Lyanna appeared to be cognizant of her own role and identity playing a factor into how students can respond to her attempts at addressing an issue. This is a fantastic recognition on her behalf because it allows her to sustain and promote a more substantial conversation by introducing a colleague who can reach particular students that would not have otherwise been responsive.

Tyrion did not mention immediately approaching a colleague in order to address an equity issue arising in his class. However, in the interview he had mentioned that there are a couple of teachers who he idolizes, “…really idolize those people and you strive to want to be like them…which sometimes drives me a little harder.” It maybe be possible that he does seek aid from these teachers, and he expressed that he reaches out for aid when he needs it. Tyrion talked about how there are people who “work centrally at TDSB who are equity instructional leaders and they’re always open to like you throw a question at them.” He went on to talk about how he sometimes will use this resource to “…form a response to my principal or form a response to a colleague or a kid.” Compared to a seeking aid from a teacher in the school, using this resource may not allow for as an immediate response to address the issue that arose.

**Confront**

Some of the practices participants spoke about fell under the ‘confront’ category if they were acting as the issue arose or right after it occurred. In comparison to the aforementioned two sub-themes, this sub-theme is seen as the fastest of the three. Most of the reactive practices talked about by the participants were confronting in nature.
Arya spoke about immediately addressing any sort of discriminatory language that is used because ignoring these is not an option for her. For example:

…like if someone calls someone a ‘fag’ or…usually it’s fag, I haven’t heard anything else, like I used to hear Paki or something. That’s an immediate—that’s an ‘okay there are lots of other students around, you are here and you have to address this’

Even if a student is not using homophobic language directed at someone, Arya will still address it immediately because it still carries the message and students can be affected by it: “…says something like, ‘That’s so gay—Oh sorry Ms.’ and in the moment you’ll say ‘You know you shouldn’t say that because of this and this.’ but you don’t leave it there.” She went on to talk about how after these instances she will sometimes move into a discussion “…at first and then a lot of learning from that discussion…makes its way as a permanent place in the curriculum.”

Tyrion was another proponent of discussion. When facing an arising issue in the classroom, he will encourage and start conversation around the issue rather than shutting it down, “I notice a lot of teachers kind of sweep that away and as kids are talking about race or equity…they try and separate themselves.” It seems that to some teachers, taking action is seen as more work or risky, so they decide to not address issues. Part of what influenced his decision to address something right away is if “…it was said in front of the whole class that I think I needs to be addressed in front of the whole class…like the whole class could have been victimized by that statement.” By doing this, anyone who might have been impacted will feel and know that the teacher is caring, and this is something the Tyrion hold to be true. Tyrion mentioned that one time
in his class a “student said ‘some kid called me the n word and I don’t think that’s really fair,’ okay well let’s talk about that.”

Tyrion stated that he often witnesses equity issues arising related to the aforementioned example, and sometimes students may even use words that they do not know the meaning of which end up being derogatory words that would cultivate an unsafe classroom environment. Part of a ‘safer’ classroom, is that students feel safe from persecution, so students who use this language are taking away from that security. This is why Tyrion believed it is important to act. In another discussion example, a more involved discussion ensued:

…other day kids were talking about calling someone like a wetback… And the kid who is Spanish says ya that’s what you call Spanish people, you call them like ‘beaners’…Woah woah, so it comes out kind of like a learning moment where you’re like ‘okay let’s debrief that’ and we’ll deconstruct what just happened there. And then they realize like oh maybe it’s not a good idea to say these things, and I’m like maybe not. And it’s like ‘wouldn’t that be the same as if you called a black person the n word,’ and I’m like well ya…And they’re like ‘oh I get it, I shouldn’t say it,’ and I’m like yes.

It seems that oftentimes students are unaware of what actually constitutes as offensive to a particular culture. Therefore, a discussion can be invaluable when it comes to getting students to recognize the danger in language, and that there are parallels in offensive language between on race or another which may make it easier to understand that certain words are offensive. While sometimes conversations surrounding equitable issues can lead to people feeling uncomfortable because of the vulnerabilities of a given
person, conversation can also lead to “...a next level in trust. So when you have that issue and kids come to you and they’re like this is someone I can trust.”

Lyanna was also one who believed in the power of using discussion to address an arising equity issue. She believed that by confronting the issue in the moment, she is not just trying to stop the problem but also “…trying to educate the person about it and I’m trying to make sure that they’re not defensive.” This echoed what Tyrion stated about vulnerabilities because often if people are defensive which can result from their vulnerabilities, they will be unwilling to engage in productive discourse and be open to new ways of thinking. In especially bad situations, Lyanna often brought the discussion to “the history of a word.” By doing this, she helped her students unpack how these words came to prominence, the stereotypes they may reflect, and why the word is considered offensive.

In part of his response to the question, *How might you react in the moment towards an equitable issue?* Tyrion responded that sometimes it involves using a resource to connect with students. Although students may not always respond to the reasoning from a teacher, if they can connect to a resource being used it may resonate more with them. For example, Tyrion had his class watch a video about the ‘R word’ in response to a student saying ‘retard’: “…and Johnny Knoxville was doing a public service announcement about using that word…and then the kids can relate because they’re like ‘I love Jackass’ and they’re like ‘Oh Johnny Knoxville’s saying you shouldn’t say it so maybe I shouldn’t say it.’” Tyrion also touched upon something that can often be a reality for teachers: having to physically get involved: “[students] have
been like, ‘Oh you’re a faggot, you’re gay,’ and like yelling at another kid and I’ve had to get in between them by touching them but like calm down the situation.”

Teachers should be taking into account various factors such as severity of the issue and efficacy of an immediate response when deciding how quickly to react to an issue (postponing, seeking aid, or confronting). What might work with one equity issue might not work with another. Even in subsequent repetitions of an equity issue, the method employed in a previous occurrence may not be the most suited for the current rendition of the issue. Teachers, once again need to be aware of any factors (e.g. classroom composition, age, or cultural differences to name a few) that might impact the manifestation of the equity issue, and by extension, the reaction and swiftness of the reaction.

**Summary**

The participants of this study described a number practices they use to implement, sustain, and promote equity within their classrooms and school community. These practices were classified as Preventive, Evaluative, Active, and Reactive. Each of these practices was found to manifest in a number of ways (e.g. accountability and setting up structure as two aspects of preventive practice). It is important to note that the four practices outlined in this research may not and should not be limited to the sub-categories (accountability, setting up structure, being critical, knowing, transparency, empowerment, postpone, seeking aid, and confront), there may be more sub-categories within these four overarching practices. In Chapter 5, I propose that the four overarching practices, used by three equity-minded teachers in this research study, be integrated into an overall model of equity practice called P.E.A.R. (Preventive,
Evaluative, Active, and Reactive). I propose this model of equity practice in light of the passion, inspiration, and exemplary practice exuded by the three participants as a model that all teachers should adopt and apply. The four overarching practices should not be seen as completely independent of one another. Instead, they are practices that work hand-in-hand, that can and should influence one another (e.g. the evaluative practice can influence preventive practice–a teacher might be engaging in evaluative practice which would in turn influence or inform what preventive practices to employ). Additionally, I propose that the category of ‘reactive’ practices imparts meaning and teaching to students (whether intentional or unintentional) as an additional form of curriculum that I call the ‘reactive curriculum.’
Chapter 5: Discussion

Introduction

This research project examines the question: What practices of three equity-minded teachers are crucial to equity practice? The data collected from the experiences of Lyanna, Tyrion, and Arya has helped in developing a model for the types of equity practices teachers can and should have in their repertoire. Their experiences and also provided valuable insight into answering the sub-questions: In what ways do equity-minded teachers react toward equitable issues in the classroom or school? and What obstacles do equity-minded teachers face in their equity efforts?

In Chapter 4, I presented and analyzed the findings that presented as equity practices: Preventive practices, Evaluative practices, Active practices, and Reactive practices. Additionally, the reactive practices were identified as contributing to a ‘reactive curriculum,’ a new type of curriculum in which students receive information or teaching from how, when and what a teacher reacts to. This chapter will address how the findings answered the research questions, how they related to the literature, implications and next steps for researchers, as well as what I have learned from the research experience. The discussion has been organized as follows: P.E.A.R.—Establishing a Model of Equity Practice, Reactive Curriculum—A New Curriculum Type?, Obstacles to Equity-minded Teachers, Implications and Future Directions, and Conclusion. It is my hope that other teachers and researchers find this research to be both informative and inspiring, as I did.
P.E.A.R.—Establishing a Model of Equity Practice

The equity practices identified as a result of this research are as follows: Preventive (accountability, and setting up structure), Evaluative (being critical, and knowing), Active (empowerment, and transparency), and Reactive (postpone, seeking aid, and confront). I have put these four overarching practices together, forming the P.E.A.R. model of equity practice. Based upon the experiences and practices of my equity-minded participants, I believe that this model of equity practice encompasses the various ways practices that work toward equity can manifest. Based on the successes, shortcomings, and room for improvements discussed by the participants, I propose the aforementioned model in the following way. Each of the four aspects and their respective constituents (e.g. accountability, confront), should be put into practice as an interconnected and dependent system, contingent on the use of each part. For example, one’s preventive practices may at times be informed by their evaluative practices.

Relating the model to the Critical pedagogy lens, where Critical pedagogy is a “state of becoming, a way of being in the world and with the world—a never ending process that involves struggle and pain but also hope and joy shaped and maintained by a humanizing pedagogy” (Macedo, 2006, p. 394). P.E.A.R. aims to realize this “humanizing pedagogy” in its various capacities. The model would seemingly encourage teachers to become more aware of their practices, the systems in which they operate, and encouraging growth in students and others. The outcome of the use of the P.E.A.R. model would be more equitable environment for students and reflexive teachers. This is reminiscent of the effects of Critical pedagogy, in that Critical pedagogy allows teachers to:
grow in critical consciousness to gain perspective in order to evaluate current practices, formulate new directions in the classroom, and avoid distortion when perceiving problems and preconceived notions when analyzing the problems…

[allows students to] go through a process of unlearning, learning, relearning, reflection, and evaluation …[with the effect] of building character and freeing students to learn (Ainsa, 2011, p. 84).

The practices in the P.E.A.R. model should be and become part of all teachers’ praxis, if we are to build inclusive and equitable schools and classrooms now and into the future. I encourage future researchers to study ways in which to get teachers to adopt this model (or a similarly proposed one) in order to work toward this goal for our educational system and students.

Earlier, I stated that I find ‘knowing’ and ‘empowerment’ (falling within the P.E.A.R. model) to be the most important equity practices for enacting change and fostering equitable outcomes for all students and establishing a safer classrooms. Much of the knowledge that can be collected by teachers can be used to determine what would be best for their particular students, and this knowledge can be gather from a number of sources such as IEPs, OSRs, other teachers, parents, and students themselves. As Sleeter (2008) suggests, knowing more about the community in which a school is located can give teachers valuable into students’ upbringings, culture and other factors. As stated in Chapter 2, Gayle (2013) also echoed this idea, where he stated that in order for teachers to teach science (but this could also be said for other subject areas) in an equitable manner they need to be knowledgeable about science content but also the sociocultural backgrounds of their students (professional and personal knowledge).
Going in hand with knowing is empowerment. By empowering students to be agents of change, allies and advocates, the focus has shifted from mainly the teacher trying to establish an equitable environment, to involving students more in this process, which can be a difficult and arduous process alone. Tyrion had alluded to this idea of promoting and sustaining an equitable environment as hard work in Chapter 4 when stating “it’s [equity] always more work,” but that for him it is something he needs to do. 

These two practices (knowing and empowerment) also align quite well with culturally sustaining pedagogy and culturally revitalizing pedagogy. As outlined in Chapter 2, Ladson-Billings (2014) welcomes these two theories as needed extensions and updates to her theory culturally relevant pedagogy. While the former of the two proposed theories focuses more upon the future, the latter focuses upon the past. By collecting knowledge and engaging in empowerment, a teacher can get students to recognize and appreciate their past, as well as accepting and preparing students for what is to come in an ever changing world, which is also equitable to them. The knowledge gathered could be crucial in determining how the teacher needs to reach their students, the skills they need to develop, and what needs to be done to be equitable towards the students. Again, by empowering students they can become powerful partners for teachers in establishing and maintaining an equitable environment by fighting against injustices such as racism and homophobia. One example tying into the empowerment, but also culturally sustaining pedagogy (the update to culturally relevant pedagogy with focus on the future), is seen when Lyanna was speaking on empowering female students through the development of a cultural cookbook:
So every woman submitted a recipe and then with the recipe was a story, and the story was connected to a woman who inspired her. So it was really, really cool.

So we hired a photographer, we had a graphic designer and one of our former students did the interior layout for us and so it’s just a really beautiful cookbook. This simple example demonstrates getting students more invested in school by making them feel that their opinions, experiences, and cultures are valuable and worth remembering, by empowering them to take ownership.

‘Reactive Curriculum’—A New Curriculum Type?

The sub-question *In what ways do teachers react toward equitable issues in the classroom or school?* was also examined. Making up the reactive practices of equity-minded teachers are postpone, seeking aid, and confronting, in order of slowest to fastest reactive practices. Most of the reactive practices talked about the participants were confronting in nature. Recall that the reactive practices classified as ‘confronting’ in nature are seen to be the swiftest of the three (postpone, seeking aid, and confronting), and are the cases in which the participants addressed, dealt with, or tackled an equity issue in the moment as it came up. The other two reactive practices (postpone, and seeking aid) involve more of a time delay, in order to seek out additional help, resources, or to ensure a more coherent response (e.g. to make the response less of an emotional one and more educational). The fact that most of the reactive practices discussed by the participant were confronting in nature may be indicative of a couple underlining causes. The first cause can be an urgency to deal with the situation. It may be that in most situations where an equitable issue is arising, an immediate response or action is warranted and necessary. Tyrion, Arya, and Lyanna all spoke about cases
where they dealt with issues immediately. Arya in Chapter 4 mentions an example
where she confronts homophobia instantly, “[…] like if someone calls someone a
‘fag’…That’s an immediate—that’s an ‘okay there are lots of other students around,
you are here and you have to address this.’ ” The second cause may be comfort level. If
a teacher is more comfortable in talking about equitable issues, as the participants are,
then they may be more likely to actually address them in the moment. The higher
abundance of confronting examples or the relative speeds of these reactive practices do
not indicate however that postponing or aiding are less useful or less appropriate by any
means. Rather, their respective uses are all very situational, and depend on various
factors such as classroom composition, available time, audience size, and the severity of
the issues.

Before outlining how these reactive practices also form a curriculum type I call
the ‘reactive curriculum,’ I will briefly outline again some of the other curriculum types
that have been discussed at length in literature. There are a number of curriculum types,
which include formal/taught curriculum, symbolic curriculum, societal curriculum, null
curriculum, and hidden curriculum, discussed in Chapter 2 (Gay, 2002; Flinders et al.,
1986; Null, 2011). While examples from each of these curricula were hinted at in some
way by the participants, my aim is not to be exhaustive in my pre-amble to outlining the
‘reactive curriculum.’ As such, I will mention two brief examples. The first is an
example of hidden curriculum, the untaught lessons coming from the school culture and
structure (e.g. the types of clubs and teams supports by staff at a school imparts a
message to students). Arya, as an English teacher, spoke about looking at what the
stories she uses are about, and if the choice of story is sending any unintentional
message to her students. To address this, Arya states that she tries to use different kinds of stories from different cultures.

Second, is a brief example outlining both hidden and null curriculum at Tyrion’s school (null curriculum is what not covered or talked about in school, e.g. lack of coverage on marginalized groups): “Spec Ed. students are kind of put in a weird wing of the school or not the nicest classes like they don’t need as much…a lot of the times the applied kids are stuck in the shitty classrooms because they’re ‘going to ruin it,’ ” Tyrion noted that often something small related to school structure can impart a message to students. In this example, that message might be along the lines of some students deserving better resources because they are seen as able to achieve more academically, and all too often the struggles of these marginalized students go unspoken.

How a teacher reacts toward an equitable issue is influenced by factors such as the other equity practices they use on a daily basis, as well as their professional and personal knowledge as previously mentioned. However, I believe that teachers’ reactive practices also influence students in another, indirect way aside from addressing an equitable issue and perhaps reprimanding a student. With this in mind, I propose an additional curriculum type known as the ‘reactive curriculum.’ I consider the collection of a teacher’s reactive practices to form the reactive curriculum because these practices transmit a message to students. The degree to which a teacher reacts toward an equity issue, and when they react can all affect how a student perceives an equity issue. This can be in terms of how important it is, how valid any opinions they hold over it are, how much the student should care, and how much the teacher cares about the issue (whether
or not the issue personally affects the student). Similar to untaught lessons from the school culture and structure outlined in hidden curriculum, with reactive curriculum it is the untaught lessons resulting from a teacher’s reactions.

Before outlining some examples where reactive curriculum is manifest, it is important to note that student responses and how teachers think their students feel about their reactions were not investigated. I invite future researchers to investigate reactive curriculum more in depth. For example, one might examine student opinions and thoughts about equity issues and how they may be changing as a result of a teacher’s reaction in the face of an equity issue. Arya stated how she will postpone a response or action if she feels emotional, “sometimes that in that moment, you have to let things go because you’re angry...” but that she will address it in the way she deems appropriate once she is “calm and when I’ve figured out how to address it.”

Thinking about students, there are a number of things that they might gather from a postponed reaction (i.e. the reactive curriculum). Firstly, students might not even know that the issue will be addressed if the teacher does not say something along the lines of “This is an important issue, but this is not an appropriate time to discuss it. We will have to pick it up later.” Students who do not hear something along these lines might consciously or unconsciously reframe their opinion on the issue, or perhaps feel unsafe in the classroom/school if it is an issue that personally affects them or someone they know (e.g. a gay student or a student who is close to a gay person being in the presence of homophobic remarks). Students who do hear the aforementioned line, may conclude that the issue is important, but not important enough to the teacher or as a standalone issue to warrant discussion or action in the moment.
Looking at an example Lyanna provided, she had mentioned that while she normally attempts to stop a gender issue when it comes up, but acknowledges that oftentimes male students at her school may not respond well to female teachers so “[…] if they’re [the male students] not stopping it I get another man teacher.” Lyanna has collected knowledge about her male students in her particular school setting and made a decision to address the equity issue in the most efficacious outcome she could. In this case, that involved a decision to get a male teacher involved. While Lyanna and the male teacher were able to sort out the issue, there are other possible outcomes associated with her reaction (falling under the seeking aid sub-category of reactive).

Again, this is what I am referring to as the reactive curriculum, the knowledge that is instilled upon students due to a teacher’s reaction toward an equity issue. Is she reinforcing and perpetuating the fact that the male students will only listen to a male teacher? Is she showing that she is unable to handle the issue? Is she indicating that she is uninterested in the issue at hand by getting a colleague to deal with it? These are just a few of the possible effects on students that this example of reactive curriculum has. Regardless of the decision that the teacher makes when faced with an equity issue, there will be always consequence (positive or negative; big or small) on the students. However, teachers can evaluate (one aspect of P.E.A.R.) the outcomes and use this information to inform future preventive, active, and reactive equity practices.

Thus far, the sub-categories ‘postpone’ and ‘seeking aid’ have been looked at in terms of their influence on the reactive curriculum. To provide a glimpse of how the reactive curriculum manifests due to the ‘confront’ sub-category of reactive practices, the following example has been taken from Tyrion’s experiences. Tyrion is a proponent
of using discussions in the moment of an equity issue arising (his ‘confronting’
reaction), as seen in the example below (also in Chapter 4):

[...] other day kids were talking about calling someone like a wetback… And
the kid who is Spanish says ya that’s what you call Spanish people, you call
them like ‘beaners’[...] Woah woah, so it comes out kind of like a learning
moment where you’re like ‘okay let’s debrief that’ and we’ll deconstruct what
just happened there. And then they realize like oh maybe it’s not a good idea to
say these things, and I’m like maybe not. And it’s like ‘wouldn’t that be the
same as if you called a black person the n word,’ and I’m like well ya [...] And
they’re like ‘oh I get it, I shouldn’t say it,’ and I’m like yes.

In this example the students appear to gather that using such racial slurs are
inappropriate but also that the teacher cares about the issue at hand, some of the reactive
curriculum arising from this situation. The effects of this reaction (taking the time to
have a discussion about the issue that arose) may have changed students’ opinions about
particular words by having them associated with examples that are more widely known
as taboo (such as the ‘n’ word). Conversely, one can imagine a case where the teacher
chose not to address the same equity issue in any capacity. The students would certainly
be getting a much different message from the teacher’s inaction or apathy. The students
might be led to believe that the language they were using is okay by societal standards,
their teacher is indifferent to racism, they should speak without thinking about
repercussions, or any number of other teachings associated with the choice to not
confront the issue on the part of the teacher.
Whether leading to positive or negative influences on students, a teacher’s action or inaction in the moment imparts a teaching to students and I encourage teachers to consider this in their reflections. No matter how a teacher reacts in the moment, there will be a message of some sort instilled upon the students.

**Obstacles to Equity-minded Teachers**

The participants of this study mentioned a few challenges to their equity implementation efforts. Tyrion, for example, states that the dynamics of the applied and academic streams within schools poses a big problem for equity. As mentioned in Chapter 4, he outlines that there is a lot of disconnect between what happens in Grade 8, and what is expected in high school and that the Grade 8 teachers have a lot of influence over the high school career of the student, “…their Grade 8 teacher said ‘oh you’re not really great so you’re going to go into applied’ then other kids who thrive in applied and other kids shouldn’t be there.” He also rightly touches upon the stigma associated with the applied level students, and that this promotes inequity because of the teasing and misconceptions that can occur. This could be an example of teacher-teacher obstacles identified in Chapter 2, wherein teachers may face a lack of support, adversary, or inconsistent equity practice among their colleagues. In this case, it is the Grade 8 teachers who have a lot of influence over the academic future of a student, and there is room within this influence for inequitable decisions about the students’ trajectories to be made.

Arya finds that one obstacle to her equity efforts are a lack of resources available for kids, especially in terms of access to technology. She finds that “kids who have a printer and a good Internet setup and a good computer at home can do so much
more than kids who don’t in terms of making their stuff look good.” She also believes that there should be more funding and money put aside for technology, “well we’re in the digital age…but if you ever look at schools they’re so poorly set up,” but also for the applied stream students, “I feel like they don’t get what they need…should be more field trips…applied is more hands on then that costs more money and there should be more money to make sure that they are successful in their stream.” In order to equitable towards students with particular needs (such as those with learning disabilities) to ensure a successful outcome for them (however that might look), it can often cost additional funds. But, as Arya mentioned, the need can also come about from differences at home (e.g. a well off student with plenty of resources at home to support their academics vs. an impoverished student with little or no resources at home). These students also need to be better supported by the educational system in order to diminish barriers to their success. Regardless of the supports they may need, all students are deserving of experiencing and achieving academic success in whatever capacity that may be for them. As teachers, we can do all we can to support our students, but to be as efficient as possible the correct funding needs to be in place through support by the public and government. The students of today are our future, so to support them directly benefits not only students, but also our future as a society. These obstacles to teachers’ equity practice are governing body and administration-teacher obstacles in nature. This data supports the findings of Dei (2008) and Somers (2010) that teachers feel that there is a lack of funding and money, and that the lack affects how and what decisions are made.
Another issue that was more common across the participants was the idea of a lack of professional development, and often a lack of appropriate professional development. The participants all found an issue with the way professional development is done in supporting teachers in their equity endeavours and educating teachers about equity. Again, Lyanna finds that there is “less PD because I think centrally they cut down on a lot of positions of instructional leaders, so it makes sense that there’s less PD available.” Echoing this observation, Arya points out that there is:

not enough [equity workshops] for those teachers [teachers who have no idea they’re being inequitable]…and [for some people] you have to start with the basics: ‘What does a classroom look like, who are these kids in there, when you say this how does that impact that kid over there.’

Additionally, Arya points out that she has often to seek her own opportunities to learn about equity and strengthen her knowledge about it. While I find this extremely commendable, I also find it unfortunate that teachers are left to find out about these opportunities in education about equity themselves. This only exacerbates the issue of those who are not as equity-minded not receiving these opportunities to improve their practice to make schools more equitable. Tyrion also took issue with professional development sessions, especially equity workshops, because they often go unannounced or not promoted and that often equity is not focused on as much as literacy, numeracy, or EQAO. As previously mentioned, Tyrion also raised the issue of there being problems with how professional development is set up. He mentioned that the workshops are geared more toward equity-minded teachers and not enough toward
those teachers who could truly use basic help (i.e. what Arya also stated) and guidance on how to become more equitable and how to identify inequities.

The discussions generated with participants around the lack of professional development support the findings of Gayle (2013). Gayle reports that teachers working in school boards from the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) are experiencing a lack of opportunities to engage in equity and inclusion related professional development (p. 114-115). It appears there is either a lack of encouragement by school boards, a lack of interest or seeking out of the professional development opportunities provided by the boards, or there being a lack of equity and inclusion workshops. However, based on my findings and those of Gayle (2013), there is likely just a simple lack of the appropriate workshops and encouragement/mandate to attend.

Although participants did not explicitly mention this obstacle, it is nonetheless something equity-minded teachers need to grapple with. This obstacle is determining age-appropriateness in these conversations, which dictates the depth to which they go. Teachers need to consider a number of factors when determining age-appropriateness. These include factors such as previous conversations and reactions from students, cultural sensitivity, familial factors, student interest in the conversations, and how far to push the learners out of their comfort level. These obstacles tend to be teacher-parent and teacher-student, but also teacher-self. My research points to this underlying obstacle, and supports the findings of Somers (2010), Watson (2008), Kumashiro (2001) and others that indicate that teachers often must ask themselves how far to push their students. While Watson (2008) and Brown (2001) hold that people should not be forced to defend beliefs because it can prevent openness, Kumashiro (2001) and Arai et
al. (2001) hold that pushing people outside of their comfort zones leads to understanding other views. These are two very important things for equity-minded teachers to consider when determining age-appropriateness and the depth to which they bring to discussions with their students surrounding equity issues.

**Implications and Future Directions**

**Implications**

We teachers need to be agents of support in an evolving educational system that is often limited in its funding, opportunities and guidance in terms of equity. Teachers have the ability to do some amazing things in the realm of equity for their students, and those equity-minded teachers in the field are doing a fantastic job of promoting and sustaining equity. I believe that if more teachers were to adopt the practices of these outstanding individuals seen in the P.E.A.R. model of equity practice, that teachers, students, and one day society as a whole would become more tolerant, equitable, and supportive. All too often in the field equity-minded teachers feel isolated because they might often be the only one in their school truly caring about this work. Being accountable to colleagues who are also equity-minded helps to keep the dialogue open and keeping each other motivated in their equitable pursuits. I suggest that teachers who are feeling this isolation to find a colleague (even at another school, or on a teacher forum) who can support you and be supported by you.

While teachers can do all that they can to make schools more equitable and establish safer spaces, equity practice will never reach its full potential without proper funding, support, and involvement by provincial and federal government, the ministry of education, and members of society. There should be an increase in closely monitored
funding (to ensure it is being spent appropriately) to the educational system to support teachers in their implementation of equity, to support students in various aspects (mental, physical, academic, and nutritional to name a few) to ensure equitable outcomes, and the ensure the safety of all students, especially those who are often marginalized.

Additionally, in terms of support from administration, something needs to be done to address the overwhelming amount of paperwork. If administrators devote much of their time and focus to paperwork, ensuring that the policies and laws to combat inequitable education put forth by the Ministry of Education are being adequately addressed is difficult. Monitoring that the policies and laws are being addressed becomes a logistical and time management issue, rather than a more involved presence by the administration, and severely impedes the movement toward having equitable schools across Ontario.

Future Directions

This research is not without its limitations. Firstly, my own biases influenced how I collected, organized, interpreted, and presented my data. Additionally, a small subset of equity-minded teachers was studied. Future researchers should include more diversified teachers. This could include seeking out teachers from other races, sexual orientations, gender identities, and other identity factors. It is also limited in the sense that student responses and opinions were not investigated, which could shed more light on some of the data collected. This research took participants from urban public high school settings, adding another dimension to the limitations. Future researchers should investigate teachers from rural areas, Catholic and other religious school boards, as well
as elementary and middle schools. It is possible that teachers at schools with a mix of the aforementioned suggestions may employ different equity practices, or different equity practices that still fall within the P.E.A.R. model of equity practice.

With my proposed model of equity practice—P.E.A.R.—future researchers should look at effectiveness of getting teachers who are trying to become more equitable to adopt the model, and monitor its effectiveness but it does appear promising because there are people already demonstrating the various aspects of this model.

I outlined what I believe to be a new type of curriculum, the reactive curriculum, which has to do with the implicit messages students receive from a teacher’s reactive practices. Future researchers should investigate the ways in which students are affected by this reactive curriculum by collecting student responses.

Researchers may also be keen, as I am, to uncover ways to get more teachers, administrators and officials in the ministry of education and various governments more invested, aware, and passionate about equity issues and improving their response and practice.

**Conclusion**

Over the course of this research study, I uncovered the musings and practices of three equity-minded teachers from urban high schools in the Greater Toronto Area. I am thankful to know that there are teachers such as these out in the field, but also alarmed at the number of teachers who are not invested in equity and improving their practice. These participants serve as exemplar advocates for equity, and their practices that were laid out in this research reflect that. While there is still much to be done within the realm of equity, I am hopeful that as equity-minded teachers and newer generations of
teachers armed with knowledge about injustice and inequities within the educational system, will keep fighting for equitable and safe learning environments for their students, and that more will join the movement.

As a researcher, I would now be inclined to include a few other questions for the participants, as well as modify a few others. Given a longer amount of time for the research, I think that both the research and I could have benefited from additional research methods such as observation. I also learned and witnessed how my own biases can influence how research is done, starting with the research questions posed and the literature collected.

As a teacher, I learned a number of things about equity practice from my participants. I learned a lot about the amount of decision making that goes into making equitable decisions and dealing with equity issues, the various factors that can affect how a teacher makes their decisions (e.g. classroom composition, time, severity of the issue). I also learned a great deal about the current obstacles, but also the supports available, to equity-minded teachers. I plan on finding my own opportunities for growth and learning if none are provided, and becoming a part of a group of other equity-minded teachers to constantly challenge myself to learn and be an equitable practitioner.

As educators, we need to ensure that our students are being treated equitably and have a safe learning environment to allow them to succeed in their learning and other endeavours. Lyanna rightly put it, “you can’t access the brain unless you access the heart. And I think you need to get the heart in a safe place in the classroom so that the brain can be free.”
References


Appendix A: Consent Letter for Interviewees

Date: ______________________

Dear ______________________,

This is a letter inviting you to participate in a research project regarding equity practices in the classroom. My name is Joao Silva and I am a Master of Teaching student at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto (OISE/UT). As a part of my major research project, I will be exploring how it is teachers address equity in their classrooms.

Your involvement in this study would include participating in an audio-recorded interview of up to 60 minutes that will take place at a time convenient for you. This interview will include questions pertaining to your equity practices and views about equity. The audio recordings will be transcribed and the data then analyzed. There is also the possibility of some follow-up questions either in person, email, or by telephone. Your responses will be kept confidential and your identity and any identifying factors will remain anonymous, as pseudonyms will be used in any written report or presentation of the findings. During the course of this research, only my research supervisor and I will have access to this data, which will be stored in a secure location and all data will be destroyed after completion and acceptance of the research project.

Please be assured that your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You may refuse to answer any question at any time during the interview, to retract a response, to stop the interview at any time or withdraw from the study at any time for any reason. There is minimal risk associated with this study. Risks may include unpleasant memories surfacing through the course of interview about equity in the classroom, and the brief time commitment. Benefits include articulating your practices and reflecting which could help in your own practice, knowing you helped further research in the field, and talking about equity through the interviews may spark interest in future professional development workshops.

The information gained from this study will help increase our knowledge regarding equity practices and views in the classroom. You may request to review your particular transcription for clarity and accuracy of your responses. Please feel free to contact my faculty supervisor, Dr. Patrick Finnessy or myself should you have any questions or require further information.

If you agree to be interviewed, please sign the attached form and return it to Joao Silva, either in person or by email. Please retain a copy of this letter for your records. Thank you very much for your assistance.

Sincerely,
Consent to Participate

[ ] I wish to participate in this OISE/UT project as outlined above.

Participant’s Printed Name:

____________________________________________________________

Participant’s Signature:

____________________ Date: ______________________
Appendix B: Research Questions

Interview Questions:

1. How many years have you been teaching?

2. What grade(s) do you teach in your current school?

3. How would you describe the culture is like at your school?

4. In what ways would you define “equity”?

5. For the purposes of this study, equity is defined as the quality of being fair, just and impartial by having regard for people’s individual differences. Keeping this definition in mind:
   i. Which practices/routines, whether verbal/linguistic, spatial, physical or emotional, do you feel are part of or should be part of an equitable classroom?
   ii. How do you think you promote a fair and equitable classroom and/or curriculum? Could you please provide examples?

6. Are there certain things you start doing at the beginning of the school year and/or each day to set the tone for an equitable classroom? What might those be?

7. Do you feel comfortable talking about equitable issues in your classroom? Why or why not?

8. What sorts of issues related to equity have you seen arise in your classroom or school due to students?
   i. If you have taken any action (physical, verbal, etc.) in these sorts of situations, what were they?
ii. What informs your decision making in these sorts of situations?

iii. Do students bring up equity issues on their own? If so, how do you respond to these instances?

9. What sorts of issues related to equity have you seen arise in your classroom or school either due to resources and administration?

i. If you have taken any action (physical, verbal, etc.) in these sorts of situations, what were they?

ii. What informs your decision making in these sorts of situations?

10. Are there any equity practices you have that you only use or resort to with particular classes or types of students? If yes, what are these?

11. How do you feel about the current opportunities (training, workshops, and professional development) and resources available to help teachers implement equity into the curriculum and classroom?

12. Do you feel that you receive enough support, in terms of practicing equity?

13. Do your colleagues or administration influence your equity practices or decision-making on equitable issues in any way? If so, in what ways?

14. If at all, how do parents get involved or influence your equity practices? In what ways do you feel parents can and should be involved in terms of equity?

15. In what ways, if any, does educational policy and/or law aid or hinder your equitable practice efforts?

16. What challenges do you face in implementing equity in your classroom?