Challenging Gender Norms: How Teachers Can Reinforce A Gender Inclusive Classroom Through Literature

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Abstract

This paper explores and answers the research question *What are the best teacher practices for using literature to create a gender inclusive classroom?* I used literature and two qualitative interviews with Toronto District School Board teachers to respond to the interview questions. One teacher is an intermediate teacher and the other is a senior teacher. Data was analyzed using a postructuralist feminist theoretical framework. The four main themes that emerged from the two interviews are best teacher practices, teacher’s perceived role, teacher challenges and future goals. This paper provides practical strategies and suggested texts teachers can utilize to create a gender inclusive classroom.

*Key words:* gender, literature, inclusion, post-structural feminism, best teacher practices.
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Dedication

This study is for all of the students who have felt unsafe and unsupported. I hope you meet a teacher who instils a sense of courage, self-worth and supports you through your learning journey to help you become a balanced and happy person. School should be a safe space to grow and explore one’s passions. I was extremely lucky to have had two teachers who made me love learning and I owe an immense amount to them.

Judy Blume - Librarians save lives: by handing the right book, at the right time, to a kid in need.

I will do everything in my power to watch out for those kids in need and guide them to balance and wellness through the use of literature because I truly believe finding the right book at the right time can save a person’s life.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION TO THE RESEARCH STUDY

1.0 Introduction

A student’s classroom can be reduced to an area of curriculum instruction or it can be a place that nurtures academic, mental and personal growth. The curriculum outlines provincial expectations, but it does not define a classroom’s climate. Teachers, as a collective group, need to recognize the immense power that they hold in their role and the impact that they undoubtedly make on each of their students’ lives. I believe that education is a tool for social change, and one important area that is in need of transformation is societal understanding and treatment of gender. I refer to gender as a social status that is based on the convincing performance of masculinity or femininity and is not dependent on one’s genitalia, but is a cultural social construction (Mitchell, 2013). Gender is not an innate sense of being, but ultimately is a repeated performance that is reinforced through societal norms and culture. Despite gender’s nature as a construct in North America, it is treated as a rigid societal standard to measure behaviour.

Through my own experience, as a student in Ontario public schools, I have witnessed how both consciously or unconsciously teachers can reinforce gender norms through their classroom practices. These classroom practices include their treatment of particular subject matters as well as classroom management strategies. Lennard J. Davis explains that “a norm, unlike that of an ideal, implies that the majority of the population must or should somehow be part of the norm” (2013, p.3) which reveals that a norm is a not just a way of being, but it is a way to control and police individuals to fit into categories. Therefore, to be a “normal boy” or “normal
“girl” one must understand and perform certain sets of behaviour. Gendered norms in the classroom can impact a student’s confidence and interest in certain subject matter, which is seen through the lack of females represented in the sciences and math in university and in the workforce. Gender norms need to be actively explored and discussed in classrooms so that the power they hold over students’ academic and emotional welfare is weakened. In order for this to happen, teachers need to first acknowledge their presence and then work to dismantle such pervading norms. Despite gender’s constructionist nature, it has material effects on students’ lives in terms of how they view themselves, and it may deter them from transgressing gendered norms in their academic future and their personal lives.

I believe that teachers need to actively resist gender norms within their classrooms or they risk becoming complicit in the power underpinning such norms. Literature can allow an individual to encounter places, situations and contexts that they may never personally experience, but from which they can still learn and personally grow. Literature can be a text in a classroom to fulfill curriculum expectations, but it can also be a tool for social awareness and growth. Literature reflects the society and context from which it was written and we can learn a lot about the past through fiction and nonfiction as well as the future through current texts. Both literature and education are extremely powerful tools for social change, and I am suggesting that teachers can use literature within their classrooms to foster a gender inclusive classroom, where gender is not denied, and also does not define classroom relationships or individuals. I believe that selecting certain types of literature can support a teacher’s goal for developing a gender inclusive classroom. Gender is not a
new concept, but with the superficial equality between men and women in North America many think that there is no longer a need for feminism. Sexism and gender norms continue to exist in North American society and still affect both men and women, making it an issue that should be discussed and challenged in classrooms. Gendered powers continue to underpin our school systems, and teachers can use literature to help students become aware of these forces and learn how to resist them.

1.1 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to explore the ways that gender norms are prevalent in Canadian classrooms and to provide strategies through the use of literature that can debunk these norms and bring about gender inclusivity. Teachers are being critiqued for having failing math and literacy rates, but in order for students to reach their academic potential, classrooms need to become an inclusive safe space. One way of bringing about inclusivity is through an acknowledgement of the role that gender plays in our classrooms and society. Teaching is not a profession removed from gender stereotypes and expectations. The link of primary teaching to child rearing and care work has created a low status in the public sphere (Myhill and Jones, 2006). Gender stereotypes affect both students and teachers, which is another reason why the education community needs to focus on making all classrooms inclusive for all students to bring about change in schools and in larger society. We need to move beyond simple equality when discussing gender. Men and women being equal under the law is not enough to make their societal position equal. Schools need to move past equality and ensure that students are treated equitably in all aspects including their gender identity.
1.2 Research Questions

The main research question of my paper is *What are effective teacher practices for using literature as a tool to create a gender inclusive classroom?* and the sub questions are *What challenges do teachers face when attempting to create a gender inclusive classroom?* and *what styles of literature (transgressive or traditional) are most effective for creating a gender inclusive classroom?* I plan to interview two teachers from the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) to gather qualitative data regarding how they use literature to foster a gender inclusive classroom. I have focused on the TDSB as that is a school board I would like to work for one day and because it is the board for an immensely multicultural city. I believe learning from two experienced teachers within the board can provide me and other teachers with valuable information. Lastly, I want to propose ways that literature can be a tool and a strategy for teachers to challenge gender norms in the classroom and promote gender inclusivity. When I discuss gender inclusivity I am referring to a societal organization where people are not prescribed or limited to certain behaviours or emotions based on their biological sex. I want to showcase how the Ontario language arts curriculum can be met through literature that reinforces gender inclusivity in terms of material and/or teacher led activities. Gender inclusivity is needed in society and I believe classrooms are powerful spaces that can promote and reinforce gender inclusivity, while destabilizing gender norms.

1.3 Background of the Researcher

I identify as a cisgender, Caucasian, Jewish, Canadian, heterosexual, woman, and student. My intersecting identities bring about certain privileges as well as areas of marginalization that can change depending on the space I am in. As a graduate student, I
am writing from a place of privilege, which I will need to be aware of throughout this process. My own multiple identities have made me realize how detrimental and superficial it is to categorize students based on one facet of their being, particularly in terms of this study, their gender.

I became increasingly interested in the concept of gender throughout my undergraduate degree at York University. Initially, I was introduced to the topic in an elective first year humanities course entitled “Concepts of Male and Female in the West.” This sparked my passion and led me to take an introductory course in women’s studies in my second year and ultimately led me to declaring gender and women’s studies as my minor in my third year. I grew up in a household of women, and women’s issues were always something that I was exposed to, but my experience as an undergraduate provided me with the vocabulary to proudly identify as a feminist.

“Feminist” has become a loaded word that means a variety of different things depending on the individual. My association with feminism is that I believe that people are made up of multiple identities and that we need to stop labeling people based on one facet of their being. I believe that all people should have the right to identify or not identify with whatever sex, religion, race, gender, or orientation they choose. Identities can be empowering, but they can also be limiting boxes that are placed on individuals and contain them. My belief is that feminism is not just for “women” against patriarchy, and I do not see feminism as one static belief. My identification as a feminist will definitely be present throughout my research and has led me to select a Post Structuralist Feminist theory for my framework. I believe that a Post Structuralist Feminist framework will allow me to unpack gender norms and oppressive practices in a way that will be useful
for creating gender inclusive classrooms. My framework will be based on my identification of feminism, which is based on destabilizing and challenging oppressive power systems globally. My background in Gender and Women’s studies has made me aware of the various types of overt and covert oppression, and I cannot stop myself from noticing their presence in my academic life at The Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE), my personal life and the broader experience as an individual living in Toronto. Due to my past experiences and beliefs, I want to ensure that I do not reinforce oppressive gender norms in my own classroom and to work towards creating a gender inclusive classroom. My goal is to increase my knowledge and provide other educators with suggestions for ways to disrupt gender norms, through literature, by including gender nonconforming material. Teachers also should be highlighting and teaching students to recognize when gender norms are present and should be providing strategies for them.

Another important area of my background is my passion for literature. I have been an avid reader since elementary school, and my love for reading and writing led me to become an English major in University. I feel that literature is such a powerful tool that can empower children and can influence the type of people they become. I believe literature is so powerful in education because it can encompass so many subjects and serve so many purposes, making the possibilities in the classroom endless. Through my love of reading I discovered that literature is another area of power relations and that fighting for your right to read can be fighting against oppressive controlling norms. I truly do believe that the right book at the right time can save a child, and I want to learn about strategies for applying that in the classroom. I will always associate my love for
reading with my third grade teacher, who also influenced me to pursue teaching, revealing what a large impact a single teacher can make on a child’s life. Unfortunately, negative experiences can leave just as big of an impact. I had a female math teacher in junior high tell my class that boys tended to always do better than girls in geometry, which happened to be my worst strand in mathematics. This unfortunately is not a unique experience and is something frequently occurring in classrooms. Myhill and Jones found that “[i]n curriculum areas, such as English, where boys’ examination success is significantly lower than that of girls, teachers’ stereotypical expectations of boys’ ability create a classroom climate where male underachievement is legitimated and condoned” reinforcing the frequent gendering of ability that occurs to the detriment of both male and female students (Myhill and Jones, 2006, p.101). Gendering ability is extremely problematic and ultimately reinforces gender norms. I do not think my teacher’s comment was intended to be negative, but rather was an attempt to make the girls feel better, but ultimately it empowers gender norms by tying gender to ability.

As a York University student, I was shocked at the incident in January 2014 when a male student at York University made a request, to his professor, to not work with female students due to religious reasons. I fully support religious accommodations, but I cannot support acts of exclusion. This recent case reveals that gender is not an issue that has gone away, but practices of exclusion continue to happen, even in progressive places such as universities. “Schools can either reproduce the dominant gender ideology of the wider society or be a potential site for developing non-traditional gender identities” (Myhill and Jones, 2006, p.100) and I plan to become a teacher who promotes the latter. I want to begin my goal of making academia more inclusive by combining my two
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Gender’s Position in Canadian Law and Policy

Equality and equity are two terms that are present within many Canadian laws and school policies, but implementing such practices is not simple, due to the inequitable social climate of a larger Canadian society and the micro organization of inequality within Canadian schools. Equality refers to treating everyone the same, whereas equity refers to treating everyone fairly, depending on individualized needs of a marginalized group. Gender and sex, much like equality and equity are used interchangeably, but their differences need to be discussed if we are going to remove discriminatory practices and beliefs from our classrooms. Sociologist and educator John Carl defines gender “as the personal traits and position in society connected with being a male or female” (2012, p. 27) and refers to sex as “the biological makeup of a male or a female” (2012, p.27). Therefore, sex and gender are different topics within themselves, but like equality and equity they are at times collapsed into one misrepresentative category.

Gender is a social construction that is not innate to one’s body, but has material effects in society. Gender discrimination is real and present in society, and more directly in our schools, but it is still lacking recognition in Canadian laws and policies. Gender is noticeably absent from the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms section 15 Equality Rights which states that “Every individual is equal before and under the law and has the right to the equal protection and equal benefit of the law without discrimination and, in particular, without discrimination based on race, national or ethnic origin, colour,
religion, sex, age or mental or physical disability” (Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, 1982). The mere fact that discrimination based on one’s gender or sexuality is absent from the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms is reflective of the inherent heteronormative organization that governs our country. I believe that the lack of recognition in our charter has material effects on the organization of Canadian classrooms because it weakens the legitimacy and the reality of these types of discrimination.

The Canadian Charter of Rights has an interesting past that was built upon sexism and heterosexism. Although sexual orientation is still missing in the charter as a protected area, discrimination against sex was not originally included in the Charter. A group of Canadian women lawyers fought to have sex added to the Charter as a protected area against discrimination (Morton, 1987). Canadian feminists successfully lobbied the Canadian Parliament to have the Charter include women in section 15, the equality rights section (Morton, 1987). Canadian feminists have used the Charter litigation to advance their policy objectives more so than any other group (Morton, 1987). Women’s lack of inclusion in section 15 reveals the sexist basis of the Charter, which has led to the underlying homophobia and transphobia currently present in the Charter. This exemplifies that feminists hold an immense amount of power to evoke monumental change and as teachers we must recognize how we too can evoke change in our students and ensure they will not be complicit in such practices.

Ontario Human Rights Code, (OHRC) “prohibits actions that discriminate against people based on a protected ground in a protected social area” (Ontario Human Rights Code, 1990). Unlike the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedom, the OHRC designates gender identity and gender expression as protected grounds. This signifies a growing
awareness regarding gender discrimination and an understanding that it is different than sex discrimination. I believe this is representative of positive growth within Canadian society, but it is important to note that “gender identity” and “gender expression” were only added to the OHRC in 2012. This reveals that gender discrimination is still a new topic that requires more education and awareness if we are going to understand gender discrimination, and then come up with ways to combat gender inequity and discrimination.

As these policies continue to reflect, Canadian society contains inequitable gendered practices and beliefs, and our schools are infiltrated with these practices and contribute to such beliefs. My study will focus on teachers from the Toronto District School Board (TDSB), and requires an analysis of the TDSB policies regarding gender discrimination and inequity. The TDSB’s document, “TDSB Guidelines for the Accommodation of Transgender and Gender Independent/Non-Conforming Students and Staff”, includes information on types of accommodations and the reasoning behind such accommodations. The document also includes a section on curriculum integration, which states “[t]he lack of any positive acknowledgment of transgender issues or transgender history makes it difficult for transgender, gender nonconforming, or questioning young people to feel that they have a place in the world” (2011, p.8) and that to combat this “school board and school board staff are expected to challenge gender stereotypes and integrate trans positive content” (2011, p.8). This seems positive on the surface, but it represents a lack of understanding of how gender stereotypes have negative consequences on all people within society and the classroom, whether they are cisgendered, transgendered, queer or any other identification. These policies focus on how the lack of
content is negative for transgender or gender nonconforming students, but do not explain why these changes will benefit all members of society. Gender binaries serve as boxes to limit and prescribe appropriate and inappropriate behaviour. I wholeheartedly agree that our curriculum needs to include gender-nonconforming content, but I do not believe this will only benefit those who identify as trans because “it is not just gender-nonconforming children who receive these messages about “appropriate” gender identity and gender expression but all children” (Ryan, Patraw & Bednar, 2013, p.85). Inclusions of non-gender conforming representations are necessary for all students and staff members alike.

Another TDSB document directly discussing gender in the school is Policy P071 Gender-Based Violence. The objective of the policy is “[t]o establish the Board’s commitment to eliminating gender-based violence in its school” (2010, p.1). This policy reflects an increased awareness of gender as an area requiring increased attention and education. The policy defines “[g]ender-based violence [as] any aggressive action that threatens safety, causes physical, social or emotional harm and denigrates a person because of his or her gender identity, perceived gender, sexual identity, biological sex or sexual behaviour” (2010, p.1). The definition for gender-based violence is reflective of the multifaceted negative consequences that can occur because of one’s gender identity. Its recent adoption date of April 14, 2010 also reflects, similarly to the OHRC, how the recognition of gender discrimination is still new in Canadian society and therefore Canadian schools. Appendix A “Information About Gender-based Violence in Schools” explains that “[t]he consequences for victims can include depression, loss of appetite, nightmares, disturbed sleep, low self-esteem and feelings of being sad, afraid, scared, or
embarrassed” indicating that ending gender-based violence needs to be an immediate concern for educators (2011, p.5).

These government and school documents and policies reflect a documented problem of gender discrimination present in Canadian society and schools. A large part of the problem is the belief that gender stereotypes are only harmful to those who identify as transgender or gender nonconforming. Gender stereotypes limit all people and discriminate against all of those who attempt to transgress prescribed gender norms. In the next section, I am going to discuss past literature that has reviewed how gender is being discussed and treated within classrooms and how literature relates to such treatment. Gender discrimination and inequity needs to be a concern for all members of society. I will suggest that school classrooms provide an opportunity to recognize gender stereotypes and inequity through literature, so students, our leaders of tomorrow, can actively work towards stopping pervading thoughts which have lead to the need for legal protection.

2.2 Theoretical Framework: Postructuralist Feminism Framework

Defining Postructuralist Feminist Framework

I will use a Postructuralist feminist framework to analyze and examine my research data. “Poststructuralist feminism envisaged a radical deconstruction of the male/female binary and of essentializing practices that locked individuals into particular subject positions or categorizations” (Kristeva, 1981 in Davies et al., 2006, p.88). A Postructuralist feminist lens is necessary to deconstruct the norms of the binary gender system that are present within Canadian classrooms through the literature studied. A “poststructuralist analysis of the processes of subjectification opened the way for a new
kind of subject who was more open to change” (Davies et al., 2006, p.89) and that new subject is how we need to view both our educators and our students.

Poststructuralists see transformation as being possible through language (Davies Browne, Gannon, Hopkins, Mccann, & Wihlborg, 2006,), which serves as another reason why I selected a poststructuralist framework for my data specifically. Through my study I hope to highlight how written literature can spark transformation by teacher led discussions that highlight the oppressive discourse of gender norms. Davies et al. articulate this sentiment through their argument that “[a]ll subjects – including the transformed (or more correctly, the transforming) poststructuralist subject, who is capable of critically analysing the constitutive force of discourse– are always inside language” (2006, p. 90). Language is given the recognition as a driving force to transformation within a poststructuralist framework, and with the addition of feminism it combines the power that language has to transform or reinforce social constructions.

Gender Truths

Another facet of a poststructuralist feminism is the realization that a “commitment to a singular truth is a condition for domination in general and for gender domination in particular” (Biewener, 1999, p.73). During the Enlightenment period in the seventeenth and eighteenth century, scientific truth became a powerful driving force that established the two-sex model (Davies, 1997, p.10). The two-sex model is directly linked to gender because it “is one in which each sex takes its meaning in opposition to the other, any deviations are understood as aberrations, deviations from what is, and what ought to be” (Davies, 1997, p.10) which reinforces how this truth led to essentialized sex and gender norms. A poststructuralist feminist framework will destabilize these gender truths and
grapple with the complexity of deconstructing them.

*Unified Identity?*

A misconception of feminism has been that it is a political agenda arguing for equality by oppressing men. There have been further slanderous representations that equate it to man hate, but that could not be further from the actions of the majority of self-identifying feminists. Poststructuralist feminists are weary of political agendas that are built off of unity because “[u]nity appears as an effect of domination, repression, and the temporary success of particular rhetorical strategies” (Biewener, 1997, p.73). In order to be unified based on sex, gender, race or any other identity feature, an accompanying exclusionary process coexists. If we focus on making education better for male students or female students or cisgendered students or trans students we are missing out on creating an inclusive education system for all people that incorporates all identities without any limitations. Applying a poststructuralist feminist framework will ensure that the destabilization of gender norms are not to benefit “boys” or “girls” or transgendered people, but is for the benefit of all people.

2.3 Representation of Gender in Western Children’s Literature

In order for students to dismantle gender norms and stereotypes, they first need to be able to recognize them in literature and society. In the Western world gender is divided into two categories, man or woman and “is constructed through language, as two binary categories hierarchically arranged in relation to each other” (Davies, 1997, p.9). To properly perform one’s gender as a man they must portray masculinity, which has been prescribed and taught through socialization. An important place of socialization is a child’s school. Women undergo the same process of socialization where they are taught
to perform hegemonic femininity through their appearance, actions and behaviours. Blackmore discusses “how masculinity and femininity inform and are informed by the ‘gender order’, and in doing so become hegemonic in that they gain common consent by the masses” (Blackmore, 1993, p.28), which contextualizes hegemonic gender organization in the classroom. The classroom is not an area where gender is created, but it is a space where masculinity and femininity are enforced through practices and curriculum material. I am going to examine how gender and literature have been intertwined and how students interact and reproduce gender norms.

Teachers play a powerful, often undervalued and unrecognized role within each of their students’ lives. One power teachers have is the ability to select how the curriculum expectations will be met. The Ontario Language Curriculum states that the overall expectations for grade 6 students under the Reading strand are that “By the end of Grade 6, students will:

1. read and demonstrate an understanding of a variety of literary, graphic, and informational texts, using a range of strategies to construct meaning;
2. recognize a variety of text forms, text features, and stylistic elements and demonstrate understanding of how they help communicate meaning;
3. use knowledge of words and cueing systems to read fluently;
4. reflect on and identify their strengths as readers, areas for improvement, and the strategies they found most helpful before, during, and after reading.” (2006, p.111).

The expectations do not designate the specific authors or literary works that must be taught or discussed. This freedom provided to teachers to select what literary material will be learned is an enormous power. This power is not without limitations in terms of
teachers’ access to materials and funding, but nonetheless it is an opportunity to introduce students to critically think about various issues. The majority of the research I encountered, which focused on teaching students about the social construction of gender, dealt with studies that introduced primary children to feminist literature.

Baker and Davies’ article “Literacy and gender in early childhood” explores “how young children are taught to read and speak about books and stories, and how these practices may be connected both to the gender relations portrayed in books and to the social relations that obtain within everyday settings of reading and listening to stories” (1992, p.55). This is an important study because it recognized how literacy in classrooms is so strongly intertwined with gender relations. Baker and Davies argue “literacy practices that children are shown how to use, or that they adopt, derive from conventional conceptions of the gender order and help to reproduce it” (1992, p.55) which is why as educators we must become aware that as we are teaching students about literacy, we are also unconsciously teaching them about gender.

Baker and Davies draw on research conducted by Baker and Freebody (1989a), which reported the top twenty nouns in reference to living creatures that appear in a selection of 83,000 lines of literature for young children (1992). The study found that the three most frequent words are children, which occurs at a frequency of 3.5 out of 1000 words, mother which occurs at a frequency of 3.5/1000 words and father which occurs at a frequency of 3.0/1000 words (Baker & Davies, 1992). The reoccurrence of the word children is important to discuss because it is a gender-neutral term, but it is also a term that references an individual lacking defining human characteristics (Baker & Davies, 1992). When young children are learning to read they are also learning about behaviour
and what constitutes normal behaviour for children like themselves, and adults are frequently represented as a mother or a father. The fact that the word mother occurs more frequently than father reinforces the societal norm that mothers should play a larger role in their child’s life, supporting women as a naturalized caring figure. It is not surprising that the most frequently occurring word is children because the books are attempting to appeal to the target reader, which in this case is a child.

Although, the majority of books for young readers feature children protagonists, adult figures, often in the role of a parent “stand for adult culture and adult constructions of what the younger generation should do” (1992, p.57). On the surface children appear to be genderless, but through these adult characters they are still being taught about prescribed gender norms. The adult characters, most frequently as mothers and fathers, are performing heteronormative representations of opposing genders on the two-system binary. Further, their authoritative position reinforces that their heteronormative masculine and feminine actions and behaviour are the norm and should be emulated. Baker and Davies recognized through their research that “the characters and story lines in many children’s books are built around dualisms, of which the male-female dualism is one of the most central” (1992, p. 60), which reinforces the two-gendered system. The most common adult dualisms are mother and father and grandmother and grandfather, which also reinforce heteronormativity (1992). The children dualisms occur between a male and female friend or a male and female sibling (1992). Baker and Davies note that in a conversation of children’s play between a male child Peter and a female child Jane, which occurs in an early-reader book, their conversation is a “married-couple talk in the guise of “children’s” play” (cf. Davies, 1987 in Baker & Davies, 1992, p.61). Ultimately
both adult and child dualisms in these early reader books reinforce a gendered heteronormative world, which teaches children how boys and girls should behave, through both appearance and action.

Baker and Davies reference Davies’ previous research (1989) with children and feminist literature, such as *The Paper Bag Princess*, which revealed that although the literature presented a counterhegemonic representation of gender, it was “insufficient to persuade some children to accept the different version of the gender order that the feminist texts offered” (1992, p.63). This is important and reveals that educators must be willing to show students how to deconstruct both hegemonic and counter hegemonic representations of gender with their students if we hope to effect how they see and treat gender in their lived experiences. Presenting students with counterhegemonic representations is simply not enough and in order to achieve the desired result, a discussion must accompany the text.

Davies previously explored the intertwined experiences of gender in young children’s lives through her research article “Lived and Imaginary Narratives and Their Place in Taking Oneself up as a Gendered” (1990). Davies explores the relationship between how preschool children understand feminist literature and how they understand their everyday lived experiences through a feminist poststructuralist framework (1990). Davies articulates that “Poststructuralist theory, with its roots in Freud, Marx, and Foucault, provides a radical framework for understanding the relation between persons and their social world and for conceptualising the processes whereby gender is taken up in a changing social world” (1990, p.321-322) which reveals that gender continues to transform and is dependent on society.
Davies questions why gender is such an important part of society and uses poststructuralist theory to develop the response that “[i]ndividuals take themselves up as persons within available discourses. There is no available discourse that is usable without locating the individual as either male or female” (1990, p.322). The connection of literature and gender are made strikingly clear with the above statement. Gender was created and continues to exist through language, making literature an ideal place to bring awareness to gender norms and their constraints.

2.4 Destabilizing Gender In Children’s Literature

One strategy to destabilize masculinity or femininity is to showcase how it is not innate, but can be applied and portrayed by males or females, therefore denaturalizing its force. Harper’s research “STUDYING MASCULINITY(IES) IN BOOKS ABOUT GIRLS” is centred on “the discursive construction of masculinity made available to male (and female) adolescent readers” and specifically examines “the nature and production of masculinity offered in young adult literature featuring female protagonists” (2007, p.509). Harper’s research is unique in that she is applying masculinity to female protagonists who are present in what are deemed to be “girls’ books” (2007, p.509). Harper reinforces her study by drawing on feminist and queer studies that have argued for a separation of sex and gender, which reinforces that masculinity can be performed by anyone, as it is in fact a performance (2007). Harper chose five young adult literary works which all have a female protagonist between the ages of 12 to 17 years old (2007). She found that the female protagonists in the five selected novels engage with alternative masculinities that “serve to challenge traditional masculinity, and all that is associated with it” (Harper, 2007, p.526). This study is noteworthy because through the recognition
that females can possess masculinity it immediately disrupts traditional notions of masculinity, which in the space of a classroom can lead to powerful discussions, questions and ultimately changes in understanding.

Taber and Woloshyn examine Canadian children’s award-winning literature to explore how ability and exceptionality is gendered in the selected literary works (2010, p.889). They contextualize the necessity of their research as being due to the “individualist, heteronormative, masculine, middle-class Eurocentric norms” that Canadian schooling policy and practice continue to be based on (Taber and & Woloshyn, 2010, p. 890). Taber and Woloshyn use a feminist critical discourse to analyze the selected literary works and argue that children’s literature is an important area to examine using such an analysis because “school books communicate not only the messages of their own texts and subtexts, but also the metatextual message that the text and subtexts have school approval” (Baker & Freebody, as discussed by Wharton 2005, 240 in Taber & Woloshyn, 2010, p. 892). As educators we must be critical and aware of what subtexts we are teaching our students. They found through their research that the novels “tend to perpetrate heteronormative gendered and ableist stereotypes with many of the primary characters breaking from these norms” (2010, p. 893). The presentation of characters breaking free from gender norms is positive, but it does not mean that it will have an effect on how a child understands and views gender. Children’s literature is proven to contain both gender and abelistic norms and transgressions, but simply having children read these books is not enough. Therefore, teachers need to “assist students in becoming aware of these messages, discussing their meanings, and deconstructing their hegemonic ideals (Zipes 2002 in Taber & Woloshyn, 2010, p.900). This study showcases the wealth
of information present in children’s literature and how children are already learning about gender even if teachers are not aware they are teaching it.

2.5 The Teacher’s Role in Addressing Gender in the Classroom

Karen R. Bailey is a primary teacher in Ontario who conducted a study that focused on kindergarten and grade one children’s beliefs and values about gender, which she both observed and discussed explicitly with her students (Bailey, 1993, p. iv). Bailey published her study in a book titled *The Girls Are the Ones With the Pointy Nails*, a reference to a comment made to her by one of her students. Bailey also recognizes the relationship between gender and language. She started her study with the basic assumption “that language and gender form a two-way street; children not only develop an understanding of gender through the language that they receive from others but, in turn, express their learned gender conceptions through the language that they produce” (1993, p.14). Bailey’s recognition of the link between language and gender played a large role in her study. The 18 participants in her study were children from three different classrooms, within one school and each class was organized with a literacy orientation (1993). Bailey used literature-response sessions “to initiate the gender-related discussions with the children and provide the primary data for observation and analysis” for the study (1993, p.18). Bailey selected four children’s literary texts based on 6 criteria, one being that “[t]he main character behaved in some way that was at odds with conventional gender roles” and she would then read to the child and initiate a gender-related discussion (1993, p.19).

Through Bailey’s research she found that the children were often faced with deciding “what they want to do and what they perceive they should do” (1993, p.72)
which was revealed during discussions about gender relationships in the classroom and
gender representations in the literature they read. The children’s wants are based on
individual desires and the ‘shoulds’ were based on how the children believed boys and
girls were expected to behave (Bailey, 1993). The children’s contradictory behaviour
provided proof that gender has material effects on the thought process and actions of
young children, from a very early age, reinforcing the need for gender to be part of the
curriculum for every child in Canadian schools, irrespective of one’s age. Bailey’s results
revealed that the children had varying conceptions of gender, with some children seeing
gender has unchangeable and others who thought that everyone should create their own

Bailey, as a teacher, urges educators to “challenge children on gender-related
issues, encouraging them to explore and critically evaluate their current understanding of
the topic” (1993, p. 82). Bailey conducted qualitative research for this study and the
participants were students in the school where she was employed (1993). She
acknowledges that other socializing factors such as a child’s peers, family and the media
can reinforce sex-defined roles, which can conflict with gender-conscious teachers
(1993), but she still suggests ways educators can create change in the classroom. Bailey
suggests “the development of critical thinking about gender-related issues and the
involvement of children as active agents in their own learning” can work as strategies to
assist children in developing an understanding of gender norms and roles (Bailey, 1993,
p. 83). Primary teachers may disregard gender education as being unnecessary for young
children, but Bailey argues that the education makes the largest impact at a young age
and questions “[w]hy wait until the child associates fixed stereotypic behaviours with
boys and girls before trying to broaden their understanding of gender roles?” (1993, p.83). The second strategy of encouraging children to be active learners “cannot be over emphasized if we hope to create classrooms which are free from potentially damaging gender bias” (Bailey, 1993, p.85). Bailey suggests that this can be done with very young children by encouraging them to talk about gender and the differences between “boys” and “girls” so they can become aware of the influence of gender (1993). Bailey believes that this will evoke critical thinking and will help children gain an understanding of the difference between behaviours determined by biological sex and social expectations (1993).

Jett-Simpson and Masland’s research article “Girls are not dodo birds! Exploring gender equity issues in the language arts classroom” provides additional qualitative research to support the notion of teaching children about gender through literature. They argue that “[t]he language arts classroom has become an important place to provide both teachers and students with opportunities to identify and explore the impact of gender discrimination” (Jett-Simpson & Masland, 1993, p.104) which they support through their study analyzing children’s oral stories. They “selected oral storytelling as a vehicle for exploring children's use of gender role stereotypes” to answer their research question “What do these stories reveal about the attributes they assign to females?” (Jett-Simpson & Masland, 1993, p.104). Jett-Simpson and Masland chose a baseball story as the prompt for the children to create their own oral-stories, with the main character being a female and focused on what the oral stories revealed about how male and female children think about girls (1993). Through the children’s oral story telling they found that “[g]irl storytellers were more likely to have the girl be more aggressive and demonstrate her
ability to play, despite derogatory comments from the boys. Boy storytellers, on the other hand, were more likely just to say she wanted to play baseball. Then, upon being rejected, she left the scene revealing that young children are very aware of prescribed gender behaviour, stereotypes and are perpetuating them” (Jett-Simpson & Masland, 1993).

They concluded their study by proposing activities that a teacher can conduct in the language arts classroom to confront gender stereotypes. These include literature-study groups that advocate equal-sharing of male and female students, an inclusion of a variety of novels that present male and female characters who are not limited by their gender and teachers’ framing questions for literature studies that “can lead students to discover gender bias (both their bias and that of the author or the story character[s]) and explore alternatives to it” (Jett-Simpson & Masland, 1993, p.107). This article connects gender and language arts in a powerful way, but there continues to be a focus on females’ position and less of a focus on gender inclusiveness for both cisgender students and gender nonconforming students. I believe this focus is representative of the study being over 20 years old, but the strategies they offer can be applied for gender inclusiveness, not just gender equality between male and female students. I strongly support the suggestion for teacher-framed questions for discussions, which highlight student bias and biases present in the specific content. I will continue to focus on this strategy in my interviews.

Benjamin and Irwin-DeVitis similarly saw a connection between gender and literature. For their study they gathered data by conducting a summer literature discussion group comprised of adolescent girls ranging from grades six to eight, using novels with female protagonists to spark a discussion with the participants (Irwin-DeVitis, 1998).
They argued, “as young girls explore and negotiate their identities as women, they must reconcile the conflict between their own individuality and the "female" role of nurturer and caretaker that society values” (1998, p.64). This reveals that gender identity is something students are developing and negotiating within our classrooms. When we as teachers encourage an explicit discussion of gender identity and highlight identities that are not hegemonic male or female identities we are empowering our students and minimizing that conflict.

Benjamin and De-Vitis like Jett-Simpson and Masland, suggest that teachers need to “[c]hoose literature that provides a variety of roles, avoids stereotypes, and promotes discussion of gender issues” and warn teachers that they cannot “assume that providing a variety of role models and avoiding sexist materials will be effective without explicit discussion of the issues” (1998, p.70). Their warning is necessary for teachers to be aware of and reflect upon with their practices. In order to promote change and challenge gender binaries, we need to actively challenge the dominant culture. This requires explicit discussion, but the effectiveness of such discussions and inclusion strategies are still to be observed. This study and several others provide strategies for teachers to utilize to challenge gender stereotypes, of females specifically, but the research on the effectiveness of such strategies is still limited. I hope to shed light on this through my interviews.

Ryan, Patraw and Bednar ‘s article “Discussing Princess Boys and Pregnant Men: Teaching About Gender Diversity and Transgender Experiences Within an Elementary School Curriculum” documents “ways that Bednar, a veteran third- and fourth-grade teacher in an urban public school, addressed and taught about gender
nonconformity and the ways in which her students responded to those lessons” (Ryan et al., 2013, p.85). They framed their study as being necessary because “no studies examine the outcomes of incorporating transgender people and gender nonconformity into an elementary school classroom or what such teaching might actually look like” (Ryan et al., 2013, p.86). This data is needed to support the incorporation of gender nonconforming material in all schools.

Bednar’s teaching about gender nonconformity occurred during four episodes, each one growing in complexity and each spanning multiple lessons (2013, p.90). She initiated the first discussion with her students by reading them Jacqueline Woodson’s (2001) *The Other Side*, a book that is characterized as dealing with racial tensions (Ryan et al., 2013). Bednar paused during the read aloud and posed questions to her students to have them connect the material to their own ideas and everyday experiences (Ryan et al., 2013). Bednar did not have to explicitly bring about the topic of gender, but the students automatically applied their knowledge of gender when reading the book, highlighted when a student questioned the gender of a character by asking “That’s a girl? It looks like a boy!” (Ryan et al., 2013, p.91). This observation reveals that students are already thinking about gender and see the world around them in gendered terms and we, as educators need to encourage this discussion. In the second episode Bednar began by using a short video based on a book to introduce her students to bullying specifically based on gender and gender nonconformity as part of their school initiative, and then moved towards issues of exclusion and oppression globally (Ryan et al., 2013). Students learned valuable social justice vocabulary from episode two, which they continued to utilize and refine in weeks after the learning activity (Ryan et al., 2013).
In the third episode Bednar discussed gender nonconformity in relation to gay characters, which she introduced to her students through the reading aloud of *Totally Joe* (2005) by James Howe (Ryan et al., 2013). In episodes one and three Bednar used literature to introduce her students to the material, which was well received by her students in terms of engagement in the transferring of knowledge. This qualitative data provides further evidence to support the use of literature to create gender inclusive classrooms. During the third episode, Bednar used the read aloud to aid her students in exploring the difference between sexuality and gender identity. She also simultaneously introduces them to the term transgender through personal stories of the experiences of Bednar’s friends (Ryan et al., 2013).

For the final episode Bednar helped her students gain an understanding of the similarities between gender expression and gender identity (Ryan et al., 2013). Bednar used a short video followed with a picture book entitled *My Princess Boy* by Cheryl Kilodavis to introduce the students to the story of a gender nonconforming child with supportive parents. She continued the learning experience a few days later with a read-aloud of a book about a transgender child whose parents are not supportive of her gender identity as a female entitled (2008) *10,000 Dresses* by Marcus Ewert (Ryan et al., 2013). Students showcased their learning and understanding of the difference between gender identity and expression through their use of pronouns (2013). They found that “students understood that correct pronoun use is an important way of showing respect for transgender people’s affirmed gender” (2013, p.100). This finding highlights the connection between language and gender, therefore providing further support for why a feminist post structuralist framework is helpful when discussing gender inclusivity.
Language is a powerful force and the students’ use of language supports transgender people’s self identity and works against the oppressive dominant culture. In order for students to be able to understand and then use the language they needed to have multiple learning experiences where they can ask questions and discuss misconceptions. Bednar created an inclusive environment where her students were free to think critically and expand their understanding of gender.

Bednar’s students developed a strong understanding of the difference between gender expression and gender identity through the varied learning activities and discussions (Ryan et al., 2013). Ryan et al. found that “the results of this study suggest that children are, in fact, quite ready to learn about gender diversity” and “that with carefully scaffolded lessons over time, gender diversity, like many other social issues, can be taught appropriately and effectively in elementary schools” (Ryan et al., 2013, p. 101). Bednar’s lessons and accompanying students’ responses to these activities provide valuable strategies for teaching students about gender identity and gender nonconformity, which is an area of research that is still underdeveloped.

2.6 The Future of Gender Education

As a teacher and a researcher, Bailey is aware of the gender influence that a teacher has over students. She believes that when teachers recognize “how they became ‘gendered’ persons,…teachers ought to be in a better position to analyze how gender influences the lives of their pupils” and they will then be able to understand how gendered classroom practices directly relate to and effect gender equality and equity (1993, p.89). As a teaching candidate and researcher, I need to be aware of how my own gender practices implicate me within my own life and how it will play a role in my own
classroom one day. The role in which it will play is what I have control over. Gender is not something that is going away or that we can choose not to participate in. Bailey’s work provides an excellent lens into how gender is experienced, socially enforced and taught within a primary school classroom and how gender intertwines with literature in the classroom. Bednar’s lessons provide important qualitative data of implementing direct teaching about gender identity and gender nonconformity into elementary classrooms and how students’ receive such material.

My research will attempt to help fill the void that Ryan, Petraw and Bednar began to fill with their groundbreaking study. My assumption entering the case study is that the majority of middle and high school teachers are not using literature to evoke frequent explicit discussions about gender. Through my interviews with two TDSB school teachers I want to discover if they are directly or indirectly teaching about gender in their classrooms and to discover concrete successful teaching strategies that can be shared with other educators to help create more gender inclusive classrooms.
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Keywords: teachers, literacy, literacy instruction, gender norms, inclusive

3.0 Introduction

Literacy is a subject area where teachers have freedom in terms of the types of material they choose to share with their students and how they present such concepts to fulfill curriculum requirements. Despite the openness of the language arts curriculum, gender norms continue to underpin the material chosen and often are left unpacked during classroom discussions. Gender continues to underpin our school systems, but teachers can use literature as a tool to help students become aware of these forces and learn how to resist them.-deleted this sentence and replaced it with previous sentence.

The goal of this study is to find best teacher practices for using literature to challenge gender norms and reinforce a gender inclusive classroom. In this chapter I describe my research methodology and explain how it supports my goal. First, I begin by explaining my research approach and procedures and discuss the instruments I will be using to collect my data. Next, I introduce my participant sampling and recruitment methods for gathering my qualitative data. I explain data analysis procedures and provide a review of the ethical considerations applicable to my study. I then examine my methodology, identifying its limitations and the strengths. I conclude with a short summary of important methodological decisions and my rationale behind each.

This study will consist of a literature review of previous scholarly research as well as new qualitative data gathered from two educators with exemplary relatable experience. The data gathered is intended to provide teachers, principals and other educators with the techniques to use literature as a tool for challenging gender norms and creating a gender
inclusive space for their students. This research will be beneficial for cisgender, transgender and gender nonconforming students and educators. A gender inclusive classroom will benefit all members of the classroom.

3.1 Research Approach and Procedures

The main research question I will focus on is: What are the best ways that teachers can use literature as a tool in the classroom to challenge gender norms and reinforce/create a gender inclusive classroom?

My sub-questions that will also be discussed throughout my research are:

1. What are some exemplary works of literature that help challenge gender norms?
2. Is it more effective to challenge gender norms through transgressive material or through unpacking dominant oppressive gender norms?

This research study is focused on discovering best teacher practices/strategies for using literature as a tool to challenge oppressive gender norms in order to create a gender inclusive classroom. Methodology “refers to the general logic and theoretical perspective for a research project” while methods “refers to the specific techniques you use” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p.31). My methodology will be unpacking my data and literature review through a post-structural feminist lens, while my method will be semi-structured interviews to gather qualitative data. My research paper is comprised of a collection of related scholarly literature and two qualitative semi-structured interviews with experienced teachers. The interviews will be digitally recorded on an iPhone and then transcribed. Once the data is transcribed, I will code the transcripts based on relevant themes according to my research questions.
My Chapter 2 Literature review continues to be amended and revised throughout the process of conducting this study. When new literature becomes available or an author is recommended to me I continue to expand my review. As the researcher, I continued to grow and develop through relatable teaching experiences, which can also be seen through additional literature reviewed. I, along with my research, continue to transform throughout this research process. I am very interested in dissecting my data through a feminist post-structuralist lens in order to highlight the “intersection of feminism and qualitative research, [as the] mutual influences are significant” (Bogdan and Biklen, 2007, p.19). I feel as though my theoretical framework will extend the usefulness of my data even further. Creswell argues that “[f]eminist researchers see gender as a basic organizing principle that shapes the conditions of their lives” (2013. 29) which reflects the premise for my research. I believe that the qualitative method will allow me to highlight the need for a “shifting [of] the dominant paradigms of an era to consider alternative ways of knowing or experience” (Minichiello & Kottler, 2010, p. 10) in this case recognizing the oppressive presence of gender roles in our literature in schools.

3.2 Instruments of Data Collection

My data will be collected through a semi-structured interview with each participant to collect qualitative data. It is important to distinguish that in qualitative research people who are studied are not subjects, but are participants (Minichiello & Kottler, 2010, p. 11). The discourse is important because participants refers to the people of the study being “active collaborators in the process, treated as coequals and experts about their own experiences,” (Minchiello & Kottler, 2010, p.12), not simply subjects being studied. I will collect qualitative data rather than quantitative data because I want
to learn from each teacher’s lived experience and discover his or her best teaching practices, which can be useful for other teachers to implement in their own classrooms. My participants are providing me with valuable information, and they will be treated with the utmost respect for their knowledge and lived experiences. The interviews were conducted in a location of the participants’ choosing. I chose semi-structured interviews so I had a script to keep me on track, but if new themes or interests arose I could ask additional questions. The interviews were between 40 minutes to 60 minutes and in the consent form I included the option for up to two follow up interviews by phone, email or in person in case additional questions arose. I organized my interview questions into four different sections in order to collect well-rounded data from each participant. The four sections are

1) Background information on the teacher
2) Individual’s values
3) Literature teaching practices
4) Combining literature and gender in teaching practices

I wanted to gather information about both the educator as well as their practices throughout the interview and with the four sections I feel as though they will have an opportunity to present a well rounded image of themselves. I want to learn both about their teaching practices, but also about themselves as individuals.
3.3 Participants

My goal, to uncover best teacher practices for challenging gender norms through literature required me to find research participants who had relevant experience and were passionate about dismantling oppressive gender norms that often go unacknowledged. I wanted my two participants to share the same passion, but also to come from different backgrounds or who have had different experiences in order to discover multiple best teaching strategies. I will interview experienced teachers who are currently or have recently taught, as I believe they will be able to provide the most progressive strategies that will help new teachers, such as myself. I hope to be able to adapt and utilize the strategies and knowledge gained in my own classroom one day in the near future.

3.3.1 Criteria

My participants were selected based on the following criteria:

1. They must be have at least 5 years of teaching experience and be an Ontario certified teacher.
2. They must have taught language arts and have experience incorporating elements focused on gender to students between the grades of 1 to 12.
3. They must be willing to reflect upon their practice and share their best teaching practices.
4. They must have taught for a public school board.

I created a criterion when planning my research paper in order to ensure I would choose participants who could provide me with the most relatable, current and useful data. I decided to include my first criteria because I wanted to ensure that I would be receiving data from teachers who have a multitude of experiences to draw upon and
reflect upon, while explaining their best practices. Developing the second criteria was necessary to the overlapping themes of literature, gender and education that comprise my research study. In order for the teacher to share their experiences on the three themes, they would need to have taught language arts, either as an English teacher in high school or as a primary or middle school teacher. I created a wide range of acceptable teaching grades from 1 to 12. The reason for the wide range is that I believe there is valuable data to be gathered from any grade, and I did not want to limit myself to participants who only taught a specific grade. I did exclude kindergarten because I wanted to move away from solely looking at literature in terms of picture books as many authors such as Karen Bailey (1993) and Browne Davies (1997) have already focused on that age group. I wanted to focus on the intermediate and senior grades, as there is a lack of research in that area. My two interviews provided valuable data to begin to fill that gap.

My third criterion is integral to include because in order for my study to be successful, I will need my participants to be willing to be open and share their lived experiences and knowledge. Their experiences and voices will be the backbone of my research study so it is extremely vital that my participants are willing to be open and reflect on their teaching practice. Lastly, my final criterion was created based on my own interests and future goals. I hope to be employed by a public school board in the near future and I wanted to gather data from teachers who were employed or had been employed by a public board as I believe the learning environment can influence a teacher’s practice.
3.3.2 Sampling procedures

I recruited participants who had been referred to me by other colleagues at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) and who were aware of my participant criteria and believed that these teachers could provide valuable information. As a teaching candidate at OISE, I have been immersed in a teaching culture that has provided me with a strong network for recruiting contacts. I relied on networking to select my research participants. I will continue to stress that there is no pressure to partake in the study. My procedure is “small, strategic samples not presumed to represent population” (Minichiello & Kottler, 2010, p. 13) as I cannot make generalizations to represent how all students should be taught based on the data I have gathered, but I can provide best practices that other teachers, like myself, can adopt.

3.3.3 Participant Biographies

My participants needed to be committed to inclusivity and equity, while also having substantial experience teaching English. The qualitative data I collected included each teacher’s background, beliefs and inclusive teaching strategies. The two participants both identified as male and were both employed currently or previously by the Toronto District School Board (TDSB). I did not purposely seek two teachers from the TDSB, but the fact that both teachers taught at the same board provides a connection between the two teachers and contextualizes my research with a focus on public school boards and specifically the TDSB.

Pseudonyms will be used to address both participants throughout my research and discussion. Charlie is a high school English teacher employed by the TDSB who is currently on a one-year leave to pursue his Ph.D in holistic education. Charlie has been
teaching for nine years in the TDSB and has most recently taught grade 12 university English, Advanced Placement English and Grade 9 applied English. Charlie repeatedly stated that he is committed to “whole child education,” which is the basis for his teaching practice and methods.

Adam currently is an eighth grade teacher at a TDSB elementary school. He teaches all subject areas with the exception of French and Gym. He has been teaching for fifteen years and has always taught students in grades 6 to 8. He previously was a teacher librarian and an IB coordinator. Adam stated that he sees his “primary role here is to help them really develop some skills that I think are going to carry them forward most in life.” Adam is a visible minority because of his religious attire, and he embraces his differences with his students.

I will refer to my participants as he or his, due to the fact that they self-identify as males and refer to themselves with masculine pronouns. When we are speaking to or about people, we need to be aware of the power of our language and make a conscious effort to not gender people. If one is unsure how a person chooses to self-identify we must ask that individual how they identify, which may include an identity outside of the male or female binary, or we can refer to them in the plural through the term their or they.

3.3.4 Data Analysis

The data analysis was a complex process that ultimately required selection, where as the researcher, I focused on certain statements made by my participants and discarded or excluded other statements that I did not see as providing relevant data (Cousin, 2009, p.31). Qualitative data is at times questioned for being too subjective, but with a “reflexive and thoughtful engagement with the data gathered and of the literature read”
valuable knowledge can be gained and shared. Analyzing the interviews was a time consuming process where I needed to look for themes that were present in both interviews and which addressed my interview questions. One area that I wanted to specifically highlight was the power that language holds in a classroom to bring about inclusivity. Poststructuralists see change as being possible through language (Davies et al., 2006, p.90) so I wanted to highlight how the teachers interviewed were conscious of their language and to provide examples of how they used language to break down the gender binaries. There has been a large amount of research done that shows how gender norms can be reinforced through language, but I wanted to focus on how they can be resisted through language. Another way that I applied my poststructuralist feminist lens to my data analysis was by finding strategies that did not just benefit male or female students, but all students. There has already been a significant amount of research showing how male and female students are disadvantaged during particular situations or subjects, which cannot be denied, but I wanted to move away from discussing strategies in a gendered way. Through my poststructuralist lens I analyzed my data for a set of best practices that would benefit all students and attempted to remove the binary of gender-based strategies for equity.

I attempted to pull stories from the interviews of the participants and balance the “need to reduce the research text for intelligibility and the need to maintain its integrity” (Cousin, 2009, p.33). Ultimately the data analysis process was a balancing act of pulling out key quotes and maintaining the integrity of the entire interview. For my first cycle of coding I used in vivo codes, which “are the exact words used by participants” in order to be able to visualize which words were repeated before applying my post-structural
feminist lens to analyze why they were repeated (Creswell, 2013). In vivo codes complement my post-structural feminist lens because specific language from the participant is used for in vivo codes and post-structural feminism positions language as being very powerful. Poststructural feminism acknowledges that we “are always inside language” (Davies, B., Browne, J., Gannon, S., Hopkins, L., Mccann, H., & Wihlborg, M., 2006, p.90) which influenced my decision to use in vivo codes.

3.5 Ethical Review Procedures

Both interview participants were be given letters of informed consent before beginning the interview process. Participants would need to sign the form before partaking in the study and one copy was given to the participant and one copy was kept for the records of the study. I took every effort possible to create a comfortable, relaxed environment during the interview and provided my participants with the option to skip a question or to come back to it at a later time if they were uncomfortable.

Every effort was made to maintain the interviewees’ anonymity. All identifying features were removed and pseudonyms were created for individuals. Any individual marking features such as schools where the participants taught at or currently teach at were excluded in order to maintain the highest form of confidentiality. All transcripts were kept in a password-protected computer in a locked room to protect the interviewees’ identity and confidential information.
3.6 Methodological Limitations and Strengths

I was able to gather a wealth of information from my participants, but as with any study there were accompanying limitations. The sample size of two participants is small and more participants could have provided more data, but with qualitative data more is not always better. Two participants allowed me to conduct in-depth information about my participants and provided tangible best teacher practices for resisting gender norms that could be adopted by many educators.

Another limitation was the focus on teacher experience in using these gender-resisting strategies through the language arts curriculum, as the student experience was not explored. I think that including the student perspective on being part of a gender inclusive classroom would be an interesting research paper that I hope someone undertakes one day in the future.

3.7 Conclusion: Brief Overview and Preview of what is next

In this chapter I have described my research methodology and explained how it supports my goal. I explained my research approach and procedures and discussed the instruments I used to collect my data. Next, I introduced my participant sampling and recruitment methods for gathering my qualitative data. I explained my data analysis procedures and provided a review of the ethical considerations applicable to my study. I examined my methodology and identified its limitations and strengths. I concluded with a short summary of important methodological decisions and my rationale behind each.

In my next chapter I will begin to discuss the data I gathered from my semi-structured interviews with my two participants. I will explain my findings and themes that emerged from my data analysis.
CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

4.0 Introduction

My main research question is *What are effective teacher practices for using literature as a tool to create a gender inclusive classroom?* My sub questions are *What challenges do teachers face when attempting to create a gender inclusive classroom?* and *What styles of literature (transgressive or traditional) are most effective for creating a gender inclusive classroom?* I wanted to learn about these two teachers’ practices for creating a gender inclusive classroom as well as the pedagogical decision making process behind their practice. Both teachers provided me with a wealth of data and reflected on their practice deeply and honestly.

I applied a Postructural feminist framework to my data in order to look for the possibility of bringing about inclusive change through language. Postructural feminism “troubles the binary categories male and female, making visible the constitutive force of linguistic practices, and dismantling their apparent inevitability” (Davies & Gannon, 2005, p.312). This framework allows me to suggest that literature provides an opportunity for teachers to transform students’ understanding and thinking about gender. I focused on how we exist in language, making English an ideal subject to bring about social change and inclusivity. I will further my discussion and application of my Postructural feminist framework in Chapter 5. During the stages of data analysis of the two interviews, several themes began to emerge. I organized my findings under four themes with several sub-themes:

Best Teaching Practices for Creating a Gender Inclusive Class using Literature

- Student-centred learning
- Group discussion based
• Awareness of and addressing the invisible curriculum
• Combination of fiction and non-fiction texts
• Combination of traditional and transgressive/modern texts
• Character identification

Teacher’s Self-perceived Role
• Fostering values for the future
• Philosophy of education

Teacher Challenges
• Student resistance
• Parental influence
• Language

Future Goals
• Integrating different types of literature
• Stopping assumptions

4.1 Best Teaching Practices for Creating a Gender Inclusive Class using Literature

Both teachers that I interviewed said that they strongly believe in student-centred learning that was based on group discussions. Charlie said he currently conducts his novel studies as almost all discussion based. He contextualized this by stating that his

[F]avourite classes were the ones where like, I asked a question and started a conversation and the kids just talked on topic, respectfully listening for the whole period, and like, I could sit back and basically say … I’m getting paid for this! This is great!
Charlie’s enthusiasm for teaching and nurturing his students shone through in this moment through his excitement. The strategy of using teacher-framed questions to start a class discussion supports Jett-Simpson and Masland’s strategy to utilize teacher-framed questions for literature studies (1993). Teacher-framed questions are discussion points to assist students in discussing the literature and then gradually releasing responsibility to the students. He explained that at the beginning of his teaching career, he taught in a more traditional manner with handouts for the themes and plots, but as he has developed his practice he has moved towards a discussion based approach.

Adam drew on his read aloud last year of Gracefully Grayson by Ami Polonsky (2014) and explained that with his read aloud the follow up activities were “almost all discussion based, occasionally a journal.” The read aloud approach was used by Bednar et al., (2013) and Bailey (1993) with follow up discussions about gender. This similarity shows that the read aloud should not only be used in the primary grades, but is a strategy that should be implemented across grade levels. Adam explained that reading aloud to his class is an important part of his program. He stated that he tries to read to his class at least three to four times a week, which can seem like an unorthodox practice for an intermediate teacher. Adam clarified and explained:

*My preference is always to go with clustered learning and group instruction. There is a strong emphasis in my classroom on oral communication skills because I really think that if you can stand up in front of people and express your ideas clearly and people can understand and respect what you have to say then that will carry you forward whether that’s at a boardroom table or negotiating for a raise with your boss or asking your parents for an extension on your curfew you know any of those kinds of things so oral communication is a big focus.*

Discussion is a powerful strategy for implementing an effective language arts program that brings about inclusion. Benjamin and De-Vitis (1998) and Jett-Simpson and
Masland (1990) both suggest that an explicit discussion of gender is a necessary strategy to challenge gender binaries and help students to think critically about these issues.

Both participants were aware of the **invisible curriculum and hidden curriculum** that is explicitly intertwined with the official curriculum in schools. Charlie contextualized the school as a multifaceted place where students are educated in not only the curriculum, but also an invisible curriculum that is presented in the way that people speak to them and the physical space of the school. Charlie praised the Toronto District School Board for publishing “TDSB Guidelines for the Accommodation of Transgender and Gender Independent/Non-Conforming Students and Staff” (2011) and explained

> Documents that try to make explicit more of that invisible curriculum are very helpful because if they find their way into the hand of teachers they can generate awareness about the lived realities of the kids coming into the building and these...whether or not they end up being influential they are important.

Adam commended the publication of the same document as well, but added that it is

> A first step, but if you don't follow it up it becomes meaningless. Probably a very expensive meaningless document and then it becomes a token too. We’ve checked that box, we’ve covered it because we have this document, but if nobody ever knows that the document exists then it becomes an expensive meaningless document.

Both teachers saw the underlying positive intent behind the publication of the document, but neither one was aware of its existence, reinforcing Adam’s claim that its publication was not properly followed up with professional development. Adam’s addition that the document was expensive to produce reflects a suggestion that money could better be spent assisting teachers, rather than creating “an expensive meaningless document.” Both of these teachers are active learners, and their lack of knowledge of the existence of the document and its content suggests that many other teachers may be unaware of such documents, which lessens the likelihood of them causing the intended
outcome of change. Adam pointed out that with the current teaching climate, new teachers, with the newest strategies out of the faculty, will not likely be in a classroom, which means that the government and school boards need to run effective professional development so all teachers are aware of such documents.

Schools are one of the first sites of socialization for students. Feminist Postructuralism “focuses in particular on the specific processes whereby individuals are made into gendered subjects” (Davies & Gannon, 2005, p.312). This TDSB document shows awareness of the important role schools play in students becoming gendered subjects, and its purpose and presence needs to move beyond being an intention in order for it to have material effects on students lives.

The need for documents such as this is well document by Egale’s First National Climate Survey on Homophobia in Canadian Schools – March 2009. It was found that three-quarters of LGBTQ students felt unsafe in at least one place at school (Taylor, Peter, Schachter, Paquin, Beldom, Gross, & McMinn, 2008). Three-quarters of all participating students heard homophobic expressions every day in school (Taylor et al., 2008). Adam had an experience last year that supports the findings of Egale’s survey. Adam recounted that last year, in the fall, one boy in his class was being bullied outside of the classroom. He had specifically been called a faggot, reinforcing Egale’s statistic of students frequently hearing homophobic language. Adam dealt with it in the classroom through community circles, and he acknowledged, “that whole gender piece was a small part of the bigger issues that was going on, but still it was there.” Adam recognized that it was a serious issue and reached out to the gender based violence prevention department of the TDSB that came in and ran a number of workshops for the grade 7 and
8 students. They also included a workshop for the staff. The workshops focused on gender stereotypes and mental health. Adam recognized that features of that document were probably used during the workshop. Adam’s ability to recognize the seriousness of this situation and to seek additional resources shows his awareness of these issues and his initiative to stop such behaviour in his school.

Another decision that teachers must make is what literature and what types of texts to include in their Language Arts program. Both of my participants included a combination of fiction and non-fiction literature. Adam frequently read aloud fiction novels and short stories to his classroom. He is currently reading his grade 8 class Things Not Seen (2002) by Andrew Clements, which Adam explained “looks at stereotypes and how we judge people and how judgment changes when we can’t see the body or we can’t see period” as the book focuses on a boy who wakes up invisible and befriends a blind person. He plans to read Gracefully Grayson, a text he read to his class last year that centers on a grade 6 boy realizing he is transgender and his journey through the school year when he tells his classmates he wants to be a girl. The first narrative that Adam read to his students was On The Sidewalk Bleeding by Evan Hunter, which he used to begin a conversation about the negative effects of stereotypes. Adam complements fiction texts and includes news articles in his program as well.

Charlie takes a similar approach and includes both fiction and non-fiction in his program. He drew on a grade 12 academic course (ENG4U) he co-created a few years ago. The central theme that ran throughout the course was the performance of gender. The course was based on canonical literature by “dead white guys” which featured A Streetcar Named Desire, Hamlet and The Great Gatsby. Those three texts were the
centerpieces, but they were complemented with theoretical, non-fiction and news articles. He explained, “that lens of gender, informed their readings of the text so powerfully, not at any point, not once did I hear, ‘why are we reading this?’” He used an article from the Star newspaper by Heather Mallick (2011) on baby Storm and a complementary article by Catherine Porter (2011). The students were given these two articles and then were left to debate them and negotiate it themselves, reinforcing his student-centred discussion based approach. The articles discussed a Toronto couple raising a child named Storm whose sex they did not reveal, allowing the child to select their own gender. Charlie explained that the lens of gender impacted how his students read the fiction texts, leading to the teacher’s decision on the types of texts to include in their program. Charlie chose all of the texts his students read.

Both Charlie and Adam included both traditional and transgressive texts. Charlie included the news article about baby Storm, a child whose parents refused to reveal their child’s gender in order to attempt to stop their child from receiving messages about gender roles. He also included the novel *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* by Stephen Chbosky, which had a gay main character. Charlie explained that his choice of this novel was because he was teaching to a classroom where many of the students held extremely homophobic attitudes. His singular intention was to “facilitate identification between the kids and the characters so that you know they could see common human, their common humanity and just see sexual orientation as just one part of this person.” He included an example when he chose literature to advance his general aim. He explained that his thought process in choosing a text was based on its ability to “facilitate …
connection, identification, reflection, harmony and so on” so he chose “books with juicy issues and things that you can really dig into.”

Adam also included a combination of texts. He stated:

*Sometimes it is very effective to give them something they are comfortable with and then to challenge that comfort ... why were none of us upset about whatever it is that is in this text or in this news article or whatever it is that we are looking at and sometimes it’s important to, you know, look at something like Gracefully Grayson which starts with something that is outside the norm for I’d assume the majority of the kids. And then to embrace that and explore it and I think they both have a good place and it’s important to have them both in the classroom because I think the key is to recognize when the norm is being dealt with and to make sure that it is dealt with critically. Essentially all that we are doing are expanding that norm, we are redefining it... we are redefining how they perceive themselves in the world around them.*

Charlie explained that he aims to facilitate his students in identifying with the characters in the texts they are reading. He drew on his own personal experience as a student where:

*Reading...characters were sort of if not imaginary friends at the very least companions for me because I was a lonely kid and so in your practice you’ll find...a lot of young teachers find this...that teaching is a journey and part of that journey involves reckoning...your own identity as a person.*

He went on to further explain that he chose books and texts and he made them about “the conversations that that [he] thought were important so reducing the distance between you a character is really important, especially in conversations where kids are challenging their beliefs.”

Adam attempts to create character identification when they break down stereotypes using texts. Specifically he focused on gang members when reading the short story Hunter’s (1956) *On the Sidewalk Bleeding*. He explained that through the material he brings into the classroom he attempts to promote equity amongst the class as they look within themselves and at the world.
4.2 Teacher’s Perceived Role

Adam and Charlie both strongly believe it is a teacher’s role and responsibility to discuss equity and social issues in the classroom. Perry (2004) argues that teachers should be magicians who transform their students’ learning to authentic thinking. Both Adam and Charlie attempt to do this in a nonjudgmental way. Adam sees that his role is:

To prepare them to be functioning people in the world and you look at the global community or even the Toronto community and the fact that there really isn’t, well there is a majority culture, but it is more or less a minority. They need to be able to recognize, and especially in this school where it’s pretty homogenous you know the vast majority of the school, I would say 60-75% of the school is white and upper-middle class and so they don’t really see a lot of diversity in their classroom experience.

Perry (2004) believes that teachers should also be warriors who equip their students with survival skills and factual information. Adam exemplifies this through his statement above. He does not see it as an optional part of his job as a teacher, but as an essential part. Both Perry (2004) and Adam subscribe to the warrior and magician metaphorical approach to teaching.

Charlie also takes his role as an educator very seriously and stated that he believes his role is to clear obstacles and to get to know the individuals in front of him. Charlie repeatedly reinforced his view that he views each student as an individual and does not generalize about them when speaking. He believes he must figure out each student’s needs, in order to grow and develop intellectually, emotionally and spiritually and attempt to educate the whole child through his holistic approach. He stated:

[T]he teacher has a responsibility to address [social issues] explicitly and implicitly because if you are actively promoting harmony and you know genuinely concerned for the wellbeing, not just the people in your class, but trying to foster values in society like not tolerance, but acceptance and I’ll come back to the use of the word love. I think that is a very important word to me.
Miller, a proponent of whole child education, argues that “[w]e see ourselves in intimate relationship with everything” (2010, p.7) which aligns with Charlie’s philosophy of education. Miller explains that “[w]hole child education requires whole teaching” which both Charlie and Adam practice through their teaching (2010, p. 9). Charlie’s use of the word love is an essential part of his practice and is deemed by Miller (2010) as being a crucial component of one’s teaching. Miller explains that “[l]ove for our work manifests itself in our enjoyment of the act of teaching” and Charlie’s commitment to his students exemplifies a certain kind of authentic, real love (2010, p.98). Charlie attempts to cultivate relationships so kids can feel that it is safe to learn and explore the world. He exhibited passion for his role as a teacher and saw it as a powerful responsibility. Bailey urged teachers to encourage their students to explore and think critically about gender even at a young age (1993). Both Charlie and Adam have continued this practice through their teaching and their understanding of the powerful role they have in their students’ lives.

Adam and Charlie each have a strong philosophy of education, which is the foundation of their teaching practice. Their foundation is not one of knowledge transmission, but is grounded in a transformative approach where the aims “include wisdom, compassion, and sense of purpose in one’s life” (Miller, 2010, p.30). Charlie’s philosophy is more about the people and less about the curriculum and is ultimately about relationships, facilitating exploration, encouraging kids to explore and inquire. Adam’s philosophy is that his role is to set them up for life and transitioning to high school. He is focused on big ideas and life skills, rather than a particular curriculum area. Adam’s teaching is about:
It’s all about sort of looking ahead to the future and making sure they have the skills that, not necessarily the content knowledge because I personally believe that if you have the skills you can always pick up the content knowledge on your own, and if you don’t have the skills even if I dump the content knowledge into your brain, it will just leak out your ears after a few weeks or months you’re not going to hold it.

4.3 Teacher Challenges

Both of my participants had an appreciation and love for their job, but they also honestly spoke about challenges they are facing. Both Charlie and Adam discussed challenges in terms of student resistance, parental backlash and language. The first challenge that Charlie faced was student resistance when studying *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* with a homophobic class. He used character identification to guide his students to seeing a character’s sexual orientation as only one part of their identification. He explained that students also have a prioritized resistance to certain texts and types of texts. He explained that almost all kids are scared of poetry and Shakespeare so he tries to excite them and intrigue them in order to explore the depth of the text through conversation and his guidance. He attempted to excite his students in order to lessen their preconceived negative feelings.

Adam also faced resistance, not by his students, but by the fear of parental backlash. When he was deciding whether or not to read his students *Gracefully Grayson*, he explained that he spent a significant amount of time deciding if he was actually going to read it or not. He was discouraged by most of the people he spoke to about it because they were worried about pushback from parents. He ultimately decided to read it to his students, as there was no sexually explicit content and used it as a springboard for conversation and reflection on a subject matter that his students lacked experience with, but that he deemed was important.
Charlie is also aware of the role of parents in his teaching decisions. He is a “huge fan” and vocal supporter of the new health and physical education curriculum (2015). He explained that it is a balance as you don’t want to remove all boundaries and “you need to respect kids who are coming from more controlled and conservative environments where their families haven’t had the opportunity to have these conversations or haven’t taken the opportunity to have these kinds of conversations.” He believes in the subject matter and the ages at which it is introduced, but believes that a large amount of the successful delivery depends on the teacher’s sensitivity and delivery of the material. He stated that some teachers could have this conversation successfully in grade 4, and there are some teachers he wouldn’t trust to have this conversation with any kids at any age out of a worry that they would not know how to lead the discussion in a way that wasn’t preachy. I followed up with Charlie over email and he clarified that in terms of preachiness he believed

“There are many things about which I think teachers should be preachy: equity, compassion, hard work, etc. That is, when it comes to the deconstruction of gender and inclusiveness, preachiness is not the worst thing. Sometimes when people suggest that teachers should never direct thinking and keep their opinions out of it that can often be a smokescreen for some pretty right wing perspectives. Getting preachy about inclusiveness and treating people with openness and a welcoming heart is most important, and something I would absolutely preach about. For me, it’s all about process: *when* is preachiness okay? I would suggest it's on an 'as needed' basis, but not used at the beginning to dictate what's acceptable to say. It's usually during or after, where some preachy intervention is needed to facilitate the larger goal of social justice.”

Both teachers are aware of the challenges they face when introducing their students to difficult subject matter, but have learned how to pick appropriate but challenging material to best suit their students. Ultimately, the material is not what leads the lesson, but what the teacher does with such material, and both of these teachers have
had successful, stimulating conversations with their students due to the way they construct the classroom and the follow-up conversations.

Another challenge that both teachers face is their language. A Postructural feminist framework is aware of how language influences our identity and subject. The Postructural feminist perspective argues that “words do not carry meaning in and of themselves, but only as they occur within particular cultural narratives” (Barrett, 2005, p.81). Our students exist in the social context of our classroom and if we only provide them with gendered roles and language they will be forced to use such language. In western culture gender is a two binary system and our language separates all people into one of two categories, male or female. As students begin to identify with the available language, they are being socialized in what it means to be a female and what it means to be a male according to gender roles and gender norms. Davies contends “we speak ourselves into existence within the terms of available discourses” (Davies, 2000a, p.55 in Barret, 2005). Our current language is not often gender inclusive and still places people on either side of the gender binary, but documents such as a the TDSB gender policy is attempting to move us towards seeing gender on a spectrum, rather than a binary. Both participants were honest in their language practices and admitted that they refer to their students in gender groupings when I asked if they referred to their students as boys and girls or ladies and gentlemen. Charlie recognized his fault and said

Unconsciously yes and worse yet I’ve used guys, you know guys for the whole class “guys” and I think the more mindful educators are of their language the better, but you know its habitual and its human, you know we divide people when we look at them.

Charlie is mindful of this practice and thinks, “it will take a lot of high quality education to undo binaries, gender binaries.” Adam uses gender groupings as well,
particularly the phrase ladies and gentlemen. He explained that he uses “I will only say ladies and gentlemen. That is one of the first things I say to them. The days of being called boys and girls are over, you are young adults and I will treat you like young adults so it’s ladies and gentlemen in this classroom for better or for worse.” He goes on to acknowledge why this can be problematic in terms of how it “may reinforce some other stereotypes about what a lady or what a gentleman is, but that gets broken down once we take a look and start into our mental health and wellness.” Adam is committed to teaching his students about stereotypes and guiding them to understanding their negative effects.

He stated that

One of the first things we do is deconstruct gender. What does it mean to do this or that like a boy or as a girl? Or like a man or like a woman? What are some of the good parts about the stereotype and what are some bad parts? ... Regardless of the good or the bad and early in our conversation about stereotypes is the idea that there is no such thing as a good one.

Both teachers were honest in their responses and reflected on the reason why they utilize such language. Adam did not see it as being problematic and did not mention an intention to move towards more gender inclusive language. Adam’s commitment to referring to his students in specifically adult gendered terms reveals the limitations with our current language in terms of gender. Charlie saw his usage of gendered language as a fault and expressed guilt in using such terms. Adam and Charlie’s strong philosophy of education and complex English program allowed for both teachers to be proactive when dealing with students’ resistance, parental backlash and the limits of language. Each teacher was aware of their challenges and actively took steps to reduce such struggles without compromising their teaching practice or intention.
4.4 Future Goals

I was thoroughly impressed by the reflective, in-depth and rich answers both of my participants provided me with throughout the interview. Part of being a teacher is continuing to grow and develop one’s practice. Both participants spoke about their current practice and their future goals. A goal that Charlie had was to incorporate different types of literature on his syllabus. He explained that although he has tried to include texts by female authors and other minorities, he would like to incorporate longer works, not just non-fiction texts by female authors, people of colour and people from other minority groups. He wants to continue to mix up the syllabus and help students recognize themselves in the curriculum. Adam wants to continue reading and studying challenging material that can be solved on the surface, but requires his students to think critically about challenging issues. He wants to expand the norm and redefine what a norm is in terms of societal expectations of normalcy. Adam also saw himself as operating in a countercultural manner at times making his students aware and helping them to filter equitable and inequitable language and practices. He sees this as his duty to his students to reinforce these values both inside school and in their life outside of school, revealing an underlying holistic approach to his practice.

Lastly, Charlie explained that in the future he wants to include different voices so a variety of students can identify with them, but he also cautions that as teachers we should never assume that kids are going to identify with a voice. He said it is good to change up the syllabus, but not to assume that anyone is going to welcome or accept a piece because it is being written by a woman. He cautioned that “its really important not to assume, that kids are going to identify with a voice,” but he repeatedly stated that he
saw each of his students as being an individual who was not limited by their identity markers.

4.5 Conclusion

Charlie and Adam shared with me in detail their best teaching practices for creating a gender inclusive classroom, their perceived role as a teacher, challenges they have faced as a teacher and their future goals for the classroom. Both teachers have provided valuable information for new teachers and current teachers to use to improve and further develop their practice. These two teachers are exemplars of passionate, reflective teachers who see their position as being both an opportunity, but also a powerful responsibility. They take their role seriously and their philosophy of education serves as a constant foundation for their practice.

Charlie explained that “I became a teacher so I could work with young people, get them excited about the world you know and try to share my love of literature, my love of learning and my love of life.” Charlie’s succinct but moving answer to the question why he became a teacher reflects that who a person is, is as important as what they are teaching. In my following and final chapter, I explain how these findings align with my literature review and my theoretical Postructural Feminist framework. I will use the data from the study to discuss implications for the broad educational community and I will make recommendations for teachers, principals, librarians and school boards in terms of how to best use these results to foster gender inclusive classrooms.
CHAPTER 5: Implications

5.0 Introduction to the Chapter

My main research question is *What are effective teacher practices for using literature as a tool to create a gender inclusive classroom?* My sub questions are *What challenges do teachers face when attempting to create a gender inclusive classroom?* and *What styles of literature (transgressive or traditional) are most effective for creating a gender inclusive classroom?* The results of the research study have led me to make suggestions for the educational research community to adopt as well as ideas and practices that I can implement and utilize within my own teaching practice. I will then move towards discussing the implications of my research for the larger educational community and then for my own practice. I will make recommendations to other members of the educational community and lastly, I will suggest areas where further research is still needed.

5.1 Overview of key findings and their significance (short summary of chapter 4)

In chapter 4 I organized my findings according to my four themes, which are Best Teaching Practices for Creating a Gender Inclusive Class using Literature, Teacher’s Perceived Role, Teacher Challenges and Future Goals. Both teachers, that I interviewed, used a student-centered approach that incorporated a discussion-based strategy when studying literature. I found that each teacher had a strong philosophy of education grounded in a holistic understanding of teaching that guided his pedagogical decision-making and instruction. Each teacher recognized the immense power and responsibility that underpinned their role as a teacher. They understood that their role was not knowledge transmission, but rather was to use literature and instruction to cause
transformation in the way their students think and approach the world outside of the classroom.

5.2 Implications

This two-year research process has provided me with the opportunity to learn from current research and exemplary teachers who have expanded my own teaching strategies, knowledge and pedagogy. It has been found that there still needs to be more explicit strategies implemented to create gender inclusive classrooms because there are still students in Canadian classrooms continue who feel unsafe and excluded (Taylor et al. 2011). The two participants revealed that being an inclusive educator is possible, but it needs to be made a necessity by the teacher and interwoven through every lesson and their teaching intentions. Teachers cannot ignore discrimination or inequity issues, because if our students do not feel included they will not be successful academically, which can negatively affect them in their future.

My intention with this study was to find out how teachers are challenging gender norms and subverting such ideas and practices through literature. My participants’ best practices included student-centred learning, group discussion based teaching, awareness of and addressing the invisible curriculum, combination of fiction and non-fiction texts, combination of traditional and transgressive/modern texts and stressing character identification. Bednar modelled similar practices in her own primary classroom (2013). Bednar (2013) also used a student-centred learning model that was largely based on group discussion and the purposeful selection of literature to draw out character identification and important issues. She also used a combination of fiction and non-fiction texts similarly to Charlie, but rather than choosing non-fiction written texts she
had guest speakers come to her class and share their coming out stories with her students. Both Bednar (2013) and my participant Adam use the read-aloud approach revealing that a primary practice can make a strong impact in an intermediate classroom and I would argue, even a senior classroom for specific pieces. The recent nature of Ryan, Patraw and Bednar’s work (2013) reveals that challenging gender norms and heteronormativity is becoming a larger research area and is being validated as an area of concern. Bednar was able to witness her students’ learning and found that the students were able to grasp a strong understanding of gender expression and gender identity (2013). This provides support that Charlie and Adam’s practices are positively impacting their students. The fact that these children were primary students suggests that intermediate and senior students are definitely capable and ready for these conversations. It may be teachers who are still struggling to lead these discussions.

Many teachers sympathize with LGBTQ issues and believe in equality yet they do not teach LGBT or non-normative gender representations of literature (Thein, 2013). The most prevalent reasons that teachers provided for not including LGBT literature were that it was not appropriate, as it was not part of their job, the fear that others would not approve, the students were immature (which should reinforce why we must expose students to these issues), feel their careers could be threatened, worry that it may cause more harm than good, that it is unfair to students and parents who are anti-gay and lastly, teachers feel that they lack the ability and preparedness to adequately address these sensitive issues (Thein, 2013). Charlie and Adam are in the same position as these teachers, but the difference is that they not only see it as part of their job, but as a necessary and extremely important aspect of their job. This corresponds to my first
research sub question, which is *What challenges do teachers face when attempting to create a gender inclusive classroom?* Other teachers and friends warned Adam not to include *Gracefully Grayson* (2014), but he believed that his duty was to his students, not to other’s beliefs. I hope that educators can learn from Charlie and Adam and begin to implement their practices. Charlie and Adam’s teaching covers grades 8 to 12 revealing that there are multiple ways to create and foster a gender inclusive classroom for all age groups, not just through the use of picture books for primary students.

Davies’ et al. (1989) research that focused on children and feminist literature, such as *The Paper Bag Princess*, found that counterhegemonic representations of gender were “insufficient to persuade some children to accept the different version of the gender order that the feminist texts offered” (Davies et al.1992, p.63) which is echoed by both participants. This corresponds to my second and final sub question *What styles of literature (transgressive or traditional) are most effective for creating a gender inclusive classroom?* Charlie and Adam both agreed that the selected text is not the most important feature of a deconstruction of gender. Charlie and Adam explained that their syllabus is combined of both traditional and transgressive literature. Charlie stated that he chose texts to “facilitate … connection, identification, reflection, harmony and so on” rather than choosing a text based on it being traditional or transgressive. This is an important point because it does not mean that teachers must change their whole language arts program to be gender inclusive. Any text can create a discussion about gender, but the teacher must steer the conversation there more directly if it is not a text that explicitly focuses on gender. Teachers do not need to rework their whole program, but rather come up with thought provoking questions to allow students to voice their opinions and
question their own beliefs. One of his favourite texts to teach is Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, emphasizing that a text does not need to be transgressive or directly focus on gender, but rather the teacher can facilitate and guide students to recognize the performance of gender. Adam also echoed Benjamin and De-Vitis (1998) argument that including countercultural representations will not be effective without an explicit discussion of the issues. Adam recognizes this and uses Hunter’s short story (1956) *On the Sidewalk Bleeding* to begin to make his students aware of stereotypes, but the discussion does not end with reading the literature. The literature serves as a springboard to guide student centred learning that is both meaningful and purposeful.

### 5.2.1 Broad: The Educational Research Community

The research I have accumulated through my literature review and the two qualitative interviews offer many opportunities for various members of the broader educational community. I will discuss how my research can be used to impact teaching of the revised Ontario Health and Physical Education curriculum (2015) in terms of the health component, particular school boards policies, principals, teachers and librarians. The educational community is comprised of multiple sources that overlap and can support one another. As teachers we must utilize a variety of resources to educate our students to the best of our ability.

The Ontario Health and Physical Education curriculum (2015) now includes a discussion and understanding of how gender can impose barriers on our experience in society. Gender identity and sexual orientation are first specifically referenced in the curriculum expectations in grade 8. Teachers can create cross-curricular links using
literature to bring about these issues and helping students to gather a thorough understanding of gender and the material effect it plays in their life.

    The best practices I gathered can also be utilized by school boards to develop policies that are practical for current teachers to implement in their classroom, adopting practices from both Charlie and Adam. Adam revealed that when he read his students *Gracefully Grayson* (2015) it was focused on gender, and sexual orientation was completely removed. There continues to be a lack of understanding of the difference between sexual orientation and gender. When we discuss gender with our students there is not a link to sexual orientation unless we explicitly make that connection. We must not only help our students understand the difference between their sex, gender and orientation, but their parents may be unaware as well. One’s gender identity is an individual understanding of where and if they fit on the gender spectrum (Gender Spectrum, 2015). This information is necessary for cisgendered and transgendered students, as it is an important part of our personal development during adolescence. If school boards create explicit documents advising teachers on these issues, strategies to teach such topics and resources, our teachers will be better equipped and our students will be better informed.

    Principals can arrange professional development for their teachers based on my research. Adam explained that he arranged for a workshop for his students and other teachers on Gender and Violence due to a bullying issue in his classroom. Principals should use this information, that students do not feel safe in their schools, and arrange workshops for them on issues that they are interested in and arrange workshops for teachers to better prepare them to support their students. Teachers must be lifelong
learners and professional development is one way that they can continue to learn and develop their practice. It has been noted that teachers feel unprepared to teach these issues solely from their teacher education programs (Thein, 2013) and principal arranged professional development could help support teachers with these issues.

The strategies and examples of literature gathered during my research and from my participants can be adopted and adapted by other teachers depending on their intentions and grade level. I think that it is vital to continue these discussions and lead these inclusive conversations with junior and intermediate students. It may be more difficult having these conversations with older students rather than primary students, but they can have a lasting impact on junior, intermediate and senior students.

Lastly, this information can be extremely useful for librarians when they are deciding what books to order for their school's library. The texts suggested by my two participants as well as the additional list of suggested texts would be useful for schools to purchase to ensure this information is widely available for students and for teachers to read. Overall, I have shown how this research can be applied and utilized by many members of the educational community in terms of cross-curricular links to the new Health and Physical Education curriculum (2015), school boards, principals, teachers and librarians. If one teacher or principal utilizes this information it can make an immense difference as to how their students feel in their school and the student's self-esteem at a very tumultuous age.
5.2.2 Narrow: Your Professional Identity and Practice

When I selected the topic I combined my two interests of literature and gender and women’s studies, which were my major and minor in university. I still saw myself as a student and academic, rather than a teacher. Throughout my research journey I have begun to develop my identity as a teacher and have developed my professional identity and practice. I have realized how important it is to my teaching philosophy to create a gender inclusive classroom. It can seem like a daunting task when having to cover several curriculum expectations, but with the broadness of the language arts curriculum it is most definitely possible.

Charlie and Adam have provided wonderful literary resources and teacher practices to create an inclusive classroom. Charlie explained, “teaching is a journey and part of that journey involves reckoning…your own identity as a person” which requires teachers to be aware of their own gender story. Throughout this process I became aware of how I recognize that my gender affords me certain privileges and disadvantages depending on the situation (www.tolerance.org/gender-spectrum). I am aware of gender norms and although I am critical of gender norms our students may not be critically aware so I believe I will guide my students on what gender norms are and how they limit all people regardless of whether they identify as a male or female.

One important realization, in my own understanding of feminism was during my third year of my undergraduate studies in a course called “Discerning Masculinities.” My professor Dr. Noble said that the word patriarchy is false and should not be used. I had repeatedly heard patriarchy in gender studies classrooms and this was the first time that it had been challenged. He explained patriarchy does not reflect which men had power over
which women because not all men and not all women had or have equal power in terms of the multiple facets of society. This has led me to develop an intersectional understanding of feminism as well as my own identity. My gender is an integral part of my being and experience, but my identity is not limited to my gender identity. It is combined of multiple pieces with varying degrees of unfixed power. I will help my students become aware of their various identities and become proud of those various nuances that comprise their individuality as a whole. I intend to ensure that my practices are student-centred and feature a large amount of discussion to encourage students to voice their opinions and their needs to make sure that the whole child is being educated.

As a teacher with a feminist based teaching philosophy it has impacted how I approach these issues as well as how I have analyzed my data. I am aware of my own biases and I will consciously try to not make assumptions about my students' in terms of their identities. I believe that my feminist poststructuralist feminist framework was useful and a unique tool that added an additional layer to my data analysis in chapter 4. The focus on discourse is extremely important for teachers to recognize because we must be aware of how we refer to our students, the pronouns we utilize and what language we allow and model in our classrooms.

Davies contends we “are always inside language” (Davies, B., Browne, J., Gannon, S., Hopkins, L., Mccann, H., & Wihlborg, M., 2006, p.90) which is why I used multiple quotes from the participants. Their specific wording was integral to the context and their essences as educators and I wanted to maintain the authenticity of their ideas. A specific example was when I quoted Charlie explaining why he became a teacher. I used his exact wording “I became a teacher so I could work with young people, get them
excited about the world you know and try to share my love of literature, my love of
learning and my love of life” because I believe it is a quote that reveals a lot about him as
a teacher and as an individual. His repeated use of the word love was important to his
message and his reason for becoming a teacher. Both educators were aware of their
language and selected texts where they could integrate the themes as well as the literary
texts. The poststructuralist feminist framework emphasized the importance of discourse
and how we must be conscious of how we speak to our students. Charlie, a language arts
teacher was very conscious of the gendered terms he used to speak to his students and
understood the impact they may have on his students. His awareness proved that being a
teacher requires constant change, reflection and adaption. These exemplary inclusive
teachers continue to grow revealing that we can always improve our practice even after
years of teaching. As a pre-service teacher I will utilize these best teaching practices and
literary resources.

5.3 Recommendations

I intended that my information be helpful, current and adoptable by current
teachers. I do not expect every teacher to be as committed as my participants or as
myself, but hopefully some of the texts or strategies influence how teachers approach
these sensitive, but essential topics. I think that a wide range of teachers can utilize Adam
and Charlie’s strategies and adapt them in terms of their students' readiness, interest and
specific needs. Teachers can also gradually introduce these topics as they become more
aware and comfortable. Teachers must take it upon themselves to ensure they are
educated and up to date with current issues and resources.
5.4 Areas for further research

My study focused on best teacher practices and their pedagogical decision-making for creating a gender inclusive classroom and did not take into account whether this influenced students’ beliefs and attitudes. In the future it would be extremely beneficial to interview a range of intermediate and senior students before and after being exposed to such practices to see if there were any long lasting effects. I believe that conducting qualitative interviews with students would provide useful data on the effectiveness of students’ beliefs through the use of these best teacher practices. Gender inclusiveness is an essential school and societal issue that must continue to be developed and studied. The student perspective would be valuable information for teachers and researchers to possess and use to adapt their practice to best suit the needs of their students.

5.5 Concluding Comments

Both teachers showed an immense amount of respect for their role as the teacher and I hope that I can one day become an educator like them. As a feminist educator my philosophy of education is exemplified by Cagan’s sentiment that “a world committed to feminist values would not be lacking in differences - but it would be a world where war and violence and domination were not the tools for resolving those differences” (Cagan, 2008, p. 252-253). I recognize that there will always be disputes among people and within my own school, but I will not allow differences and disputes to make any student or staff member feel unsafe or unsupported. As teachers we must recognize the power we hold in the classroom and ensure that we do not use it to dominate or suppress any student or group of students. I will bring my feminist values into the classroom and armed with the resources and strategies I have learned throughout my research I will utilize those values in my pedagogical decision-making. As teachers we must work
together and understand how it is our collective responsibility (hooks, 1994) to be inclusive educators. As an inclusive educator we must support all of our students in developing into complete emotional, spiritual, physical and mentally healthy productive members of society who are critically conscious and aware of oppressive practices so they can subvert them.
Appendix A

Interview Questions

Background Information on the Teacher

1. What grade(s) and subject(s) did you most recently teach? When was that?
2. How many years have you been teaching?
3. Why did you become a teacher?

Individual’s Values and Beliefs

4. How do you view your role as a teacher?
5. Can you describe what an inclusive classroom looks like to you?
6. Do you believe it is an educator’s role to discuss (explicitly or implicitly) equity issues such as race, LGBTQ issues and gender in the classroom?
7. The TDSB’s published a document in 2011 called “TDSB Guidelines for the Accommodation of Transgender and Gender Independent/Non-Conforming Students and Staff” which included a section on curriculum integration as well as the expectation that staff are to challenge gender stereotypes and include trans positive content. Do you believe this was a necessary document for the TDSB to publish?
8. Has this document impacted your teaching at all?
9. Do you believe that your students enter the classroom being critical of gender norms or do they tend to reinforce them?
10. Do you refer to students in terms of gender groupings (boys and girls, ladies and gentlemen)?
11. If so, can you explain why you refer to them in such a way? If not, given that this is a common practice in many schools, do you refrain from this intentionally and if so why?
12. The implementation of the new Health and Physical Education curriculum has introduced additional material on human development. This includes introducing gender identity and sexual orientation to students beginning in grade 8. Do you feel as though this is an appropriate age to start the discussion of identity with students?
Combining Literature and Gender in Teaching Practices

13. How do you select literature for your students to read?
14. Can you tell me a novel or another form of literature that you used with your students that challenged gender norms or included trans positive content?
15. Did you explain your reasoning for choosing the text to your students, why or why not?
16. Can you tell me activities that accompanied the text (discussions, written)?
17. How did your students react to the text?
18. Did you notice a change in your students’ attitudes or behaviours towards gender norms or LGBTQ experiences?
19. Will you use this literature again with your students, why or why not?
20. Can you tell me a novel or another form of literature that you read to or with your students that reinforced gender norms?
21. Did you follow up the material with a disruption of gender norms, why or why not?
22. For the purpose of making your students aware of the oppressive nature of gender norms, do you think it is more effective to include literature that reinforces gender norms, which you then unpack or material that clearly disrupts gender norms through its content?

Next Steps

23. What are your future goals for creating a gender inclusive classroom?
24. What advice can you give to new teachers for incorporating literature that promotes a gender inclusive classroom?
25. Can you provide some recommendations of literature that new teachers could use to help create a gender inclusive classroom?
Appendix B

Consent Letter

Date: Monday September 28, 2015

Dear _______________

My name is Amanda Hedmann and I am a student in the Master of Teaching program at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) at the University of Toronto. A component of this degree program involves conducting a small-scale qualitative research study. My research will focus on discovering best teacher practices for using literature to create a gender inclusive classroom. I think that your knowledge and experience will provide valuable insights into this topic.

My data collection consists of a 30-60 minute semi-structured interview that will be recorded on an iPhone using a digital voice recorder. If it is necessary, I would like to be able to contact you by phone or email up to a maximum of (3) times for follow up questions or clarification. I would be grateful if you would allow me to interview you at a place and time convenient to you. I can conduct the interview at your workplace, in a public place, or anywhere else that you might prefer.

The contents of this interview will be used for my assignment, which will include a final paper, as well as an informal presentation to my classmates and/or potentially at a conference or publication. You will be assigned a pseudonym to maintain your anonymity and I will not use your name or any other content that might identify you in my written work, oral presentations, or publications. The interview data will be stored on my password-protected computer and the only person who will have access to the research data will be my course instructor Dr. Peter Yee Han Joong. You are free to change your mind at any time, and to withdraw even after you have consented to participate. You may decline to answer any specific questions. I will destroy the voice recording after the paper has been presented and/or published which may take up to five years after the data has been collected. There are no known risks or benefits to you for assisting in the project.

Please sign the attached form, if you agree to be interviewed. The second copy is for your records. Thank you very much for your help.

Sincerely,

Amanda Hedmann
Phone Number: Email:
Course Instructor’s Name:
Phone number: Email:

Researcher name: Amanda Hedmann
Phone number: Email:

Course Instructor’s Name:
Phone number: Email:

Consent Form

I acknowledge that the topic of this interview has been explained to me and that any
questions that I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I can
withdraw at any time without penalty. I have read the letter provided to me by Amanda
Hedmann and agree to participate in an interview for the purposes described.

Signature: ________________________________________

Name (printed): ________________________________

Date: ______________________________
Appendix C

List of Suggested Texts by my Participants

(1956) On The Sidewalk Bleeding by Evan Hunter

(2002) Things Not Seen by Andrew Clements

(2014) Gracefully Grayson by Ami Polonsky

(1999) The Perks of Being a Wallflower by Stephen Chbosky

(1603) Hamlet by William Shakespeare

(1947) A Streetcar Named Desire by Tennessee Williams

(1925) The Great Gatsby by F. Scott Fitzgerald

(1994) The Stolen Party by Liliana Heker

(2009) My Princess Boy by Cheryl Kilodavis

(2006) Bucket Filler series by Carla McCloud

Texts for Elementary Students about Gender Diversity suggested on genderspectrum.org


Marisol McDonald Doesn’t Match: Marisol McDonald no combina. Brown Ph.D. Monica, & Palacios, Sara. CBP. 2013


My Princess Boy (A mom's story about a young boy who loves to dress up.) Kilodavis, Cheryl. KD Talent LLC. 2010.


Pink is Just a Color and So is Blue. Bhatia, Niki. CreateSpace Independent Publishing. 2012.


*When Kayla was Kyle.* Frabikant, Amy. Avid Readers Publishing. 2013.


**Texts for Teens about Gender Diversity suggested on genderspectrum.org**


*Gracefully Grayson.* Polonsky, Ami. Disney Hyperion (November 4, 2014)


*The Gender Quest Workbook: A Guide for Teens and Young Adults Exploring Gender Identity.* Testa, Rylan Jay; Coolhart, Deborah; Peta, Jayme. Instant Help; 1 edition (December 1, 2015)
The differing length of the two lists reveals that there is a lack of texts about gender diversity for older readers in the intermediate and senior grades. Both of my participants shared rich texts that they studied and deconstructed with their students. I believe that the multiple texts listed above are a strong way teachers can start to engage students in conversation about gender diversity and gender norms, but ultimately the teacher is responsible for leading the discussion about gender.
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