Challenging Gender Stereotypes and Fostering a Gender Equitable Classroom:
Experiences and Perspectives of 3 Elementary and Middle School Teachers

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Abstract

This qualitative research project was conducted using a literature review and semi-structured interviews to investigate how elementary and middle school teachers challenge gender stereotypes and foster gender equitable class environments. Through the literature review, this study found that the everyday micro aggressions in the classroom and playground have a huge impact on student’s gender stereotype belief. Micro aggressions may be intentional or not, in the form of negative comments on gender ability or even smears based on one’s performance of appropriate gender role markers. Countering negative stereotypes of gender based ability or lower performance is critical to fostering a gender equitable classroom (Neuberger et al, 2012; Kurtz-Costes et al, 2014). Participating teachers reported that discussion and classroom modeling of positive and empowered gender roles are beneficial for students’ self-esteem and consequently their academic performance. Therefore, it is important that educators be conscious and mindful of how they verbalize and model gender in the classroom, be cognizant of their own preconceived notions of gender, and take their classroom dynamics and demographics into consideration when planning for lessons in order to create an anti-discriminatory and inclusive classroom.

Key Words: Anti-discrimination, Equity, Inclusive Education, Gender stereotypes, Gender performance, Gender Equitable Education
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Chapter 1: INTRODUCTION

1.0 Introduction to the Research Study

This study explores the problem of gender inequity in the classroom. Specifically, I have investigated how teachers contest gender-based stereotypes in the elementary school grades, and facilitate discussions to breakdown stereotypes which student’s may have about academic ability based on gender. Currently, research has shown that stereotypes about gender, particularly gender based performance, directly affects student’s sense of self-competence and consequently it also affects their academic performance (Neuburger, Jansen, Heil, & Quaiser-Pohl, 2012). Not only do students pick up gender cues from the home, but the classroom is also another area in which gender is constantly being performed, mirrored, and negotiated (Gray & Leith, 2004; Blaise, 2005; Lynch, 2015). From a young age, children’s gender beliefs affect their choice in toys, sports, video games, and activities (Cherney & London, 2006). Those choices in toys and activities have been found to have an affect on children’s skills in the areas of spatial sense, verbal abilities, and quantitative skills (Cherney & Dempsey, 2010). Research has shown that those skills in combination with children’s endorsement of gendered beliefs on their ability to perform skills will have an influence on their preference of school subjects and future career choices (Kurtz-Costes, Copping, Rowley, & Kinlaw, 2014).

1.1 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to learn how a sample of teachers and former school board administrators are challenging gender stereotypes in their classroom.
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Further, I was also interested in learning more about the current curriculum and what resources teachers may or may not have to support them in fostering a gender equitable learning environment for students. This study is important to the education community because research has shown that current initial teacher training, and other supports for current teachers is not enough to create a non-sexist curriculum in order to address gender stereotypes and challenge stereotyped beliefs in the classroom (Davies & Banks, 1992). There is too much pressure and not enough support for teachers currently, and a solution must be found to help teachers create a more well-rounded curriculum (Ibid). This study aimed to find out what teachers are doing well in the area of challenging gender stereotypes, and what areas still need improvement.

1.2 Research Questions

The main question guiding this study was:

- How is a small sample of 3 elementary and middle school teachers addressing and challenging gender stereotypes through their teaching?

Subsidiary questions included:

- What type of gender stereotypes do these teachers see most commonly in the classroom? How do these teachers generally respond to, address and discuss those issues to their students?

- From these teachers’ perspectives, how does gender stereotyping regarding gender-based performance affect their male and female students differently? What do these teachers do to challenge those stereotypes?
- What type of instructional approaches do these teachers take in order to challenge and negotiate children’s gendered beliefs? How is the topic introduced, implemented, and assessed for learning?

- What are some of the challenges teachers face in creating a more gender equitable class?

- What factors and resources support these teachers in this work?

1.3 Background of the Researcher

For the last two summers before I entered the Master of Teaching program at the Ontario Institute of Studies in Education, I worked at a full time at a daycare. I taught children ranging from toddlers to senior kindergarten. During my time working in the kindergarten classroom, an incident occurred that affected me deeply. A young boy in the class loved the dramatic play area, and often at the end of the school day during free-play, he could be found there playing happily with his friends in dresses and heels. This was not an issue for any of the teachers until one day his parents had come earlier than usual to pick him up. When they saw that their son was wearing heels and dresses, they were furious, and demanded that the teachers forbid him from ever playing in the dramatic play area ever again even if he demanded it. They claimed that wearing dresses was not fit for boys, and that only girls could wear dresses and play dress up. I have friends who either identify as LGBTQ or have parents who identify as being gay, as well as some friends who are gender non-conforming. This incident was incredibly memorable to me,
and played a large part in why I wanted to research more on gender stereotypes and what teachers could do to help challenge gender based stereotypes in their students. The event struck a cord with me the moment it happened, but it was only in discussions with friends and family with opposing views afterwards that I realized how prevalent discrimination based on gender was, even in my own social circle. For example, being a woman of colour myself, it is almost impossible to not notice the stereotypical way media portrays women of colour. When I watch television and other media from Asia and from the West, perhaps the greatest similarity I find is not the plot lines or dress, but rather how adherent to binary gender roles characters play in shows or act out in advertisements. Though it is not always in the forefront of my mind, when I sit back to really think about the insidious messages behind every commercial selling dish detergent or a washing product to women, it does make me cringe a bit.

I believe that the ways we speak and words we use everyday, which may be hidden innocuously, perhaps behind a well-placed claim that what was said was in jest – stereotypes about appropriate gender performance is perpetuated.

1.4 Overview

Chapter 1 of my research paper includes the introduction and purpose of the study, the study questions, as well as why I am interested in this topic and study. Next Chapter 2 contains a review of the literature in the area of gender stereotype research. Chapter 3 contains the methodology and procedure used in this study including information about the sample participants and data collection instruments. In Chapter 4 I report the research findings and discuss their significance in light of the literature.
Finally, in Chapter 5 I make recommendations for practice, and I identify areas for further study. The references and a list of appendixes follow at the end.
Chapter 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.0 Introduction

In this chapter I review literature pertaining to the area of gender production and identity, gender stereotypes, the role and influence of teachers on promoting or challenging stereotypes, the effect of gender stereotypes on student achievement, and what can teachers do to promote gender equity in the classroom. I begin by examining literature on the area of gender production and gender identity. I outline the processes of gender identity and then look at how gender is reinforced and negotiated through gendered play, and the relationship gender stereotypes have with heterosexuality. Next I review literature on gender stereotypes. I begin by looking at how students negotiate their own gender and begin to police others’ gender through role-play. I continue by examining how children’s’ beliefs about gender affect their choice of toys and activities, and how that changes what they believe their gender is limited to in order to stay within the realm of gender normativity. From there I continue on to look at how teachers’ perceptions of gender may have an affect on their students. I review studies on the effect of positive or negative stereotype reinforcement, and take a look at the limitations of current gender equity programs. Then I review literature on the effect of gender stereotype on student achievement. I begin that section with a look on how literature is used to promote gender discourse, then look at how gender stereotype endorsement effects students’ academic achievement. Finally, I then review what teachers can do to promote gender equity in the classroom, how they can combat gender stereotypes through critical discussions.
2.2 Gender Production and Identity

Gender can be thought of as a set of customs, habits and routines that are performed every day (West and Zimmerman, 1987). How one manages their interactions is based on the conception of what are normative and appropriate activities and reactions based on one’s own sex category (Ibid). In Western societies, the difference between genders is seen as unequivocally rooted in biology, women act like women because they are genetically determined to do so, and likewise for men – the divide is seen as natural (Ibid).

2.2.1 Subjectivity as a Constant Process

In a Swedish study of children’s negotiations of gender in the playground, Ronnlund (2015) discovered that gender identity is a relational process, that means it is a constant process that has to take place through interactions with others and is characterized by the tensions and contradictions between the ideas of similarities and differences of each gender (Ronnlund, 2015; Davies & Banks, 1992). Essentially, individuals are not simply born a certain way – intrinsically male or female in behavior. Rather, the identity of any individual is created through a process – which means identities can be negotiated, reinforced, and also contested (Ronnlund, 2015; Davies & Banks, 1992). Davies and Banks’ (1992) study looked at how preschool children understood the ways in which gendered identities were implicated in the dominant cultural narratives and stories that they had available to them. They found that children’s sense of their own agency was linked to their desires – their desires and wants signaled who they were, and fulfillment of those desires could be seen as the fulfillment of self
CHALLENGING GENDER STEREOTYPES AND FOSTERING GENDER EQUITY (Davies & Banks, 1992). Crucially, children will then discover how they can act out their own gender. Based on the stories told to them or experiences they have had, children will decide what kind of roles are available to their own sex and how to act out those positions. They are interpellated into the social world via the dominant discourse of gender, and therefore interpreted those discourses as their own beliefs (Davies and Banks 1992).

2.2.2 Heterosexuality and Performing Gender through Play

In the study Self Perceived Gender Typicality, Gender-Typed Attributes, and Gender Stereotype Endorsement in Elementary School Aged Children, Patterson (2012) defines stereotyping in two ways. The first, descriptive stereotyping is when the individual has knowledge of who fulfills particular roles and behaviours, which is sometimes called gender correlates (Patterson, 2012). The second is prescriptive stereotyping, which is defined as attitudes regarding who should fulfill a given role, or who should engage in certain behaviours (Patterson, 2012). Wohlwend (2012) elaborates on the endorsement and performance of gender stereotypes when exploring the gender identity intertexts in Disney Princess transmedia, and found that when children are pretending to be their favourite Disney media character, whether they choose to be a princess, villain, or superhero, each child brings out his or her understanding of established gendered expectations for the characters behaviours, traits, and actions (Wohlwend, 2012). This is consistent with theories which claim that during free play children are constantly negotiating inclusion and exclusion, using their knowledge to exercise agency (Wood, 2014). As well as to play out existent power relations but also
resist adult boundaries and rules (Wood, 2014). Further, this is linked to the dominant discourse of what it is to be conventionally feminine and masculine in society, which is locked into the discourse of heterosexual presumption, or rather the assumption that everybody will or should be heterosexual (Sweet & DesRoches, 2008; Gunn, 2011). Gunn (2011) refers to Foucault, explaining that norms lay claim to power, and that it is evident in the ways power is exercised by examining peoples’ bodies, from how people are dresses, how they speak and words used, to how people move their bodies (Gunn, 2011). This is evidenced in Cherney and London’s (2006) study Gender-linked differences in the toys, TV shows, Computer Games, and Outdoor Activities, in which they surveyed 120 students, and asked them to list their four favourite toys, physical activities, TV shows, computer or video games, and provide estimates of daily hours spent on those activities (Cherney & London, 2006). In order to get a measure of how masculine or feminine each item was, they surveyed 10 females and 10 males randomly for a blind hypothesis of 319 activities, and were scored on a 7-point Likert scale (Ibid). The survey discovered that children preferred toys that were stereotyped as being suitable for their own sex, often due to previous modeling and in order to perform their gender (Ibid).

2.3 Gender Stereotypes

2.3.1 Producing, Reinforcing, and Negotiating Gender in School

Blaise (2005) conducted a six-month qualitative study of children performing gender in an urban kindergarten classroom, and the study informs us on how children
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social construct meanings of femininities and masculinities through discourses in the classroom, and how these discourses of their understandings of heterosexuality shape and regulate the gendered social order of the class (Blaise, 2005). The issue of hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity (subordination, compliance, as well as accommodating the wishes and desire of men) is raised, in which the current gendered social order is one in which men have dominance over females (Blaise, 2005). This is played out in the setting of dramatic play in the kindergarten classroom, and reinforced by students in how they dress and speak to one another (Blaise, 2005). For example, Blaise (2005) found that there were two main observable types of femininities, the ‘girly girls’ and the ‘cool girls’, both were defined by their style of dress, with girly girls wearing predominantly pink, frilly, ruffled and cute clothing. Whereas cool girls dressed in the latest fashions, often imitating the popular looks of teen stars. In order to keep their clothes and hair pretty and clean, they would often skip out on certain fun craft activities because it would be messy (Blaise, 2005). The girls and boys of the classroom would often use posing to perform their gender, for girls that would be twirling, curtsying, and sulking (Blaise, 2005). Interestingly, in data taken from Gunn’s (2011) study, a boy in the classroom who loved dressing up in dresses and skirts had his gender performance re-framed by teachers whenever he chose to wear a kilt instead, in order to adhere to normative performances of masculinity the teachers would explain that men and boys wear kilts in Scotland – thereby giving it masculine credit through another cultural context (Gunn, 2011). In a situation like this, teachers need to be educated and given guidance in how to handle the situation thoughtfully, rather than reinforcing the dominant discourse of gendered dressing upon the student (Gunn, 2011).
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2.3.2 Effects of Gender on Children’s Preferred Toys and Activities

The study of Young Children’s Classification, Stereotyping and Play Behavior for Gender Neutral and Ambiguous Toys proposes that early behaviours such as which toys a child plays with may be a precursor to later behaviours, and may influence the child’s future occupational choices (Cherney & Dempsey, 2010). This is due to the research which suggests that playing with typical masculine toys meant for boys may have an influence in the development of spatial skills, which would give an advantage to the child in certain fields such as mathematics or science (Cherney & Dempsey, 2010). Researchers posited that the observed higher gender typicality in boys, acting typically masculine and playing with toys viewed as masculine, may be due to the greater pressure to conform due to the higher status of men compared to women in certain cultures (Patterson, 2012). Of course, it must be noted that the role of parents and peers in modeling and reinforcing ideas of gender appropriate behaviours has a huge impact on the child’s formation of gendered identity due to the tendency to reinforce children’s play with sex-appropriate toys by purchasing them for their own child (Cherney & Dempsey, 2010; Davies & Banks 1992; Wohlwend, 2012). The study by Cherney and Dempsey (2010) indicated that by 2-3 years old, children have begun to form stereotypes about gender related behaviours and activities, as well as gender roles and the rigidity of their views would peak by 5-7 years old (Cherney & Dempsey, 2010).

2.3.3 Gendered Play and Gender Role Stereotyping

In a study of gender-linked differences in toys and activities by Cherney and London (2006), the study found that girls tended to be less rigidly gender-typed
compared to boys in their choice of activities and toys, they proposed this could be due to the less intense gender role pressure girls faced from their parents and society (Cherney & London, 2006). Indeed, gender role pressure could also be found in children. Often students themselves police gender within the classroom, with those deemed to be deviating from the norm punished through ridicule, name-calling, or other forms of bullying (Sweet & DesRoches, 2008; Gray & Leith, 2004). To be called a girly girl is considered by boys to be the worst insult of all (Blaise, 2005). Particularly during dramatic playtime, children would reinforce gender attitudes, such as girls telling boys they could not wear makeup because that was the domain of girls exclusively (Lynch, 2015). Yet, Duncan and Owens (2011) discovered in their study of Bullying, Social Power and Heteronormativity that conversely in order to be popular and high in the social pecking order a girl should be exactly that – “girly”, or rather pretty, fashionable, and popular with boys among other things (Duncan & Owens, 2011). Outliers who gender-bended or did not conform to normative prescribed behaviours of their genders would often be highlighted and called out by their peers for their deviance (Blaise, 2005).

Whether this was a girl taking on the pretend role of a male character during dramatic play time in order to escape restrictive forms of normative femininity (Blaise, 2005), or boys who pretended to be Disney princesses (Wohlwend, 2012), the children must negotiate their pretend gender role with their peers, and often this is still within the “heteronormative” system (McNeill, 2013). McNeill (2013) defines heteronormativity as:

A specific normative form of monogamous, marital, middle-class, normatively gendered, and in many implicit and explicit ways, white, heterosexuality – that is best described as hetero-normative. In other words, they promote a specific family form – a nuclear family made up of married heterosexual parents with children who are biologically theirs (P. 827).
Thus, despite gender bending or playing pretend roles of the opposite genders, often still end up performing stereotyped gender within the dominant discourse of Heteronormativity (Blaise, 2005; Wohlwend 2012; McNeill, 2013).

### 2.4 Role and Influence of Teachers in Promoting or Challenging Gender Stereotypes

#### 2.4.1 The Effects of Teachers’ Perceptions of Gender Differences

Gray and Leith (2004) conducted a study to find out the extent of which initial teacher training and in-service courses on gender helped teachers address gender in the classroom, as well as teachers perceptions of the gendered behaviours in the classroom, prevalence of occupational sex stereotyping, and teachers’ views on the difference in children’s attitude to work based on their gender (Gray & Leith, 2004). They discovered that teachers perceived boys to be far more able than girls and also gave boys more attention and feedback (Gray & Leith, 2004). In addition, it was discovered that low expectations from teachers to students could lower a female students sense of self-competence, when those feelings were conveyed (Gray & Leith, 2004). However, another researcher Warrington (2003) holds slightly differing views, instead of viewing boys as more able than girls, suggests that boys are falling behind girls in terms of academic achievement, particularly in the area of literacy (Warrington et al, 2003). Though Warrington’s (2003) research is rooted in England, other research suggests that the area of boys’ under-achievement has been an area of concern for educational researchers since the 1990’s (Van Houtte, 2004).

Through a qualitative study of netnography, study of social media teacher’s used, Lynch (2015) found that teachers enforce and also project their own gender stereotypes
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and prejudices about play on their students (Lynch, 2015). Data collection continued for three months from 7 publically available online message boards where kindergarten teachers posted about play based teaching (Lynch, 2015). From the data gathered, it was found that often teacher’s felt that dramatic play was mainly for girls, due to the lower participation of boys for that area (Lynch, 2015). Many teachers for the most part were not cognizant of the possibility that the lower interest may be due to fewer options for the boys to play with, as the dramatic play area was mainly filled with toys seen as highly feminine (Lynch, 2015). In addition, girls often take subordinate roles to boys when role playing as well as during group activities, which may lead to long term consequences (Gray & Leith, 2004). When teachers do not intervene or prevent those situations from happening, that may play a part in reinforcing low self-confidence in the female students (Gray & Leith, 2004). However, play is also a great place to resist gender stereotypes and boundaries, and a place where teachers can advocate for more equitable treatment – such as the case in which a teacher is trying to convince a principal to invest in a kitchen set which can be used by both boys and girls, contrary to the formers’ belief that kitchens are for girls (Lynch, 2015). Gash (1993) study on student teacher taught program to reduce stereotyped beliefs was similar to Lynch’s (2015) conclusion on the importance of discussion in order to challenge beliefs and to foster critical thinking (Lynch, 2015; Gash, 1993). Stereotypes are the ways children are expected to behave and think, and often because they feel that their peers expect them to act a certain way those stereotypes become part of the child’s identity (Gash, 1993). The teachers in the study found that techniques such as reconsidering their ideas, questioning long-held beliefs, distancing and
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role-play, as well as the use of counter-examples, all helped to reduce stereotyped beliefs among their students (Gash, 1993).

2.4.2 Limitations of Current Equity Programs

It is felt by a number of researchers that gender stereotypes have already formed before children have begun school, and those deeply entrenched beliefs that stemmed from the home may not be effected by efforts made in the classroom (Gash, 1993; Lynch, 2015; Blaise, 2005). Gunn (2011) points out that the pervasiveness of heterosexuality as the norm, using the logic of male and female dualism as the natural order of the world in order to procreate and ensure the survival of humankind, renders outliers as abnormal by default (Gunn, 2011; McNeill, 2013; Sweet & DesRoches, 2008). Therefore, equity programs that only introduce the idea of an ideal equity, by utilizing role-models and give access to non-sexist curricula will not be enough to change current gendered beliefs and stereotyped held (Davies & Banks, 1992). In order to truly create a more lasting effect, discussions must be taken up in order to allow students to see the various discourses on gender as their own issue, and begin to explore how their own desires and identity are implicated in their gendered understanding of the world (Davies & Banks; 1992). In addition teachers should also try to increase their self-awareness of their own behaviours and beliefs, particularly when they are around their students who are impressionable and may be influenced by how their teacher models gender (Lynch, 2015).
2.5 Effect of Gender Stereotypes on Student Achievement

2.5.1 Using Literature to Promote Gender discourse

According to Ashton (1983) study of the relationship between the view of stereotyped sex roles and toy choices when a child was read either a stereotyped book or non-stereotypic book (Ashton, 1983). It was found that boys and girls who were exposed to a non-stereotypic book (by being read to them as part of the study), would considerably more often choose a non-stereotypic toy and vice versa (Ashton, 1983). The study sheds light on the influence literature has on shaping and influencing children’s beliefs, and is something teachers should be aware of in order to create more gender equitable classes as well as introduce gender discussion early on in school. Barajas (2008) gathered empirical data from four classes comprised of grade 4-7 students (total of 20 female and 20 male pupils), in order to analyze how gender and gender stereotypes were discussed during book club sessions (Barajas, 2008). They found that gender is co-constructed through book talks, and that it is not enough for teachers to simply introduce non-stereotypic books in order to challenge children’s preconceived notions of sex roles and stereotypes (Barajas, 2008). Further, attempts to encourage boys to read more by splitting the reading material into books meant for boys and girls may only serve to further reinforce the stereotypical notions about what kind of literature each gender should read (Gray & Leith, 2004). Therefore, it is necessary to provide more guidance for student teachers and current teachers alike in creating curriculum that utilizes literature and discussion strategies to foster critical thinking about current gendered beliefs (Gray & Leith, 2004; Barajas, 2008; Gash, 1993).
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2.5.2 The Influence of Gender Stereotype Endorsement on Academic Achievement

Patterson’s (2012) study aimed to examine whether low self-perceived gender typicality is related with low levels of gender stereotype endorsement in elementary school aged children (Patterson, 2012). Self-perceived gender typicality is the extent in which individuals perceive themselves as being similar or dissimilar from others of the same gender (Patterson, 2012). The study found that low endorsement of gender typicality (being more of an gender outlier than conformer) is correlated with a range of positive effects including greater academic motivation, better academic performance, and higher levels of education (Patterson, 2012). This detail is congruent with research that has shown the relationship between stereotypes and performance. Specifically, research has found that gender performance is affected by stereotypes, particularly negative stereotypes about the test-takers gender (Neuburger et al, 2012). When a girl was instructed that girls usually outperform boys or that there is no difference between the genders on a mental rotation test, the girls’ performance improved and the boys deteriorated (Neuburger et al, 2012). Therefore, it is evident that a positive and negative gender stereotype does have a direct affect on students’ achievement and performance, which could be related to self-fulfilling prophecy or perhaps, increased or lowered self-esteem as a result of the stereotype (Neuburger et al, 2012). Whilst boys preference for toys such as Lego and other logic based games has been posited by researchers as part of the reason for their higher percentage of participation in fields utilizing spatial sense as a skill (Cherney & Dempsey, 2010), girls are also seen as being the benefactors of another set of skills. Specifically, children’s’ tendency to favour girls in the verbal domain may
play a part in educational and career choices of girls to choose areas such as the social sciences and humanities (Kurtz-Costes et al, 2014). It is found that belief in stereotype that girls are better than boys in the verbal domain may cause girls to downplay their own quantitative skills and instead accept that they must only be more capable in their verbal ability (Kurtz-Costes et al, 2014). Likewise, the same stereotype works both ways and may be a factor in the higher number of boys entering the STEM fields due to self-perceived lower verbal skills and higher quantitative and spatial skills (Kurtz-Costes et al, 2014).

2.6. What can teachers do to promote Gender Equity in the Classroom

2.6.1 Teachers can combat Gender Stereotypes through Discussion

One of the things I believe teachers can do to help foster a more gender equitable class is to generate more opportunities for discussing gender in an open safe way in which children feel that they are not going to be judged or ridiculed. For example, it is important that teachers do not divide students purely along gender lines (by giving boys stereotypic boy books simply to encourage reading) for fear of essentializing and reinforcing the gender lines (Gray & Leith, 2004). By endorsing stereotype “lift” (countering negative stereotypes of that genders disabilities or lower performance) it has been proven to be beneficial for students’ self-esteem and consequently their performance (Neuburger et al, 2012; Kurtz-Costes et al, 2014). Therefore, teachers should be cognizant of their own preconceived notions, and be mindful of how they verbalize and model gender in the classroom (Gray & Leith, 2004; Gunn, 2011; Lynch,
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2015). It is not enough to simply introduce non-stereotypic literature resources to the classroom (Gray & Leith, 2004). Generating thoughtful conversations that challenge and question stereotypes in a way that relates to the student’s own real-life experience is the only way to get them to think more critically and conceive gender issues as their own and not just a classroom concept (Gray & Leith, 2004; Barajas, 2008).

2.7 Conclusion

In my literature review, I looked at literature on gender production and identity, gender stereotypes, the role and influence of teachers on promoting or challenging stereotypes, the effect of gender stereotypes on student achievement, and what can teachers do to promote gender equity in the classroom. This review highlights the attention taken by researchers and educators in the above areas. It also stresses the concerns educators still face in challenging gender stereotypes. Particularly, there is a need for even more research on instructional methods for creating more gender equitable classes. My research is aimed at contributing data on this, as well as the challenges teachers face, and resources and experiences that support teachers in this work.
Chapter 3: Research Methodology

3.0 Introduction (Chapter Overview)

In this chapter I describe the research methodology used in this study. I began by examining the research approach and procedure, and then I proceeded to review the instruments of data collection. Next I described the participants by recounting the sampling criteria, sampling procedures, and participant bios. Moving on I explained how I came up with my findings and analyzed the data, and then I reviewed the ethical review procedures of my study. Afterwards I covered the limitations and strengths of my research, and concluded with a brief overview of the chapter and gave a preview of what is next.

3.1 Research Approach & Procedure:

This study, Challenging Gender Stereotypes and Fostering a Gender Equitable Classroom: Experiences and Perspectives of 3 Elementary and Middle School Teachers, was conducted using a qualitative research approach. The research involved a literature review, as well as conducting semi-structured interviews with a primary and junior elementary school teacher, a retired principal and Durham District School Board administrator, and a middle school math and science teacher.

The significance of qualitative research cannot be understated in this study. Qualitative research addresses questions that arise from studying human lives and the social world; it aims to illuminate the research participant’s perspectives (Fossey, 2002). Further, qualification research aims to interpret and represent the participant’s perspectives authentically through transparency of data collection and analysis - all those
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qualities are critical to conducting qualitative research (Fossey, 2002). The qualitative approach is appropriate for my study because I wanted to learn more about the current practices performed by teachers, educators, and administrators. I believe that qualitative research gives privilege to the research participant’s perspectives and therefore most aptly suits the needs of this research project (Fossey, 2002).

3.2 Instruments of Data Collection:

The main instrument of data collection in this study is the semi-structured interview protocol (see Appendix B). Semi-structured interviews provide the opportunity to look at research participants’ perspectives through their lived experiences (Creswell, 2007). My main research question aimed to find out more about what teachers are currently doing in their own practices to foster a gender equitable classroom, their experiences in challenging gender stereotypes and their perspectives on the current supports they receive, or conversely the support they do not have but would like to see implemented. In addition, I would like to know what gender biases they may have themselves, as well as what gender-based performance they have seen performed by students in the classroom. Due to the nature of the research questions, the semi-structured research method, which utilizes conversation as the primary method of investigation, is an excellent fit for this study. The semi-structured format allows the interviewer to plan and design interview questions which focus on the research questions, but also gives the interviewee the freedom to elaborate in other areas of interest that may not have been within the scope of the research questions (Creswell, 2007). The semi-structured
interview protocol essentially allows the interviewee to challenge the questions that are directed by the interviewee, which unfortunately will naturally have bias – and insert their own nuanced view of the subject or perhaps even reject the direction of the interview questions entirely, which may even allow for deeper insight on the research topic itself (Brinkmann, 2014).

3.3 Participants:

Here I have described the criteria for participant criteria, as well as the sampling procedures for participant recruitment.

3.3.1 Sampling Criteria

In this section I described the sampling criteria I created and referred to when choosing appropriate participants to conduct semi-structured interviews for this research project.

- Teachers or administrators will have a minimum of 4 years of teaching experience in order to ensure that the teachers would have a longer and more varied teaching experience to draw their classroom reflections from.
- Teachers or administrators would have taught at least 2 different grades, in order to compare the differences in gender performance in different age groups.
- Teachers or administrators teach currently, or during their practice have had a minimum of 4 years of experience, in a co-ed classroom. In order to analyze the participants experience with gender based biases and gender equity in
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mixed gender classrooms, it is necessary to have both genders in the classes taught.

- Teachers who have shown commitment, leadership and or expertise in the area of gender education. (For example, have experience leading PD in this area for colleagues, conducted graduate research on a related topic, and/or contributed to curriculum development in this area.)

3.3.2 Sampling Procedures/Recruitment

As a master’s student at the Ontario Institute of Studies in Education, I am immersed in an environment filled with teacher candidates and mentors; as such have relied on convenience sampling. I have recruited participants through acquaintances and recommendations from my fellow colleagues who are involved in gender equity programs, active in LGBTQ workshops, etc. The benefit of convenience sampling is that it enhances the connection between the target audience and the sample group (Fossey et al, 2002). The limitation of convenience sampling in other scenarios may be the small size of the sampling pool, however within the scope of this paper it will be beneficial in narrowing the pool (Fossey et al, 2002). By keeping the sample universe demographically local, instead of decontextualizing abstract claims, this research does not aim to generalize the findings but rather analyze data from educators who are active in the area of my research topic (Fossey et al, 2002).

3.3.3 Participant Bios

Melissa: At the time of the research Melissa was an elementary teacher with the Toronto District School Board, and was teaching primary drama and junior core French. She
taught grade 3 the previous year. At the time of the interview Melissa had been teaching for approximately 12 years. She had a lifelong passion for gender studies and equity, and had joined equity clubs during high school as well as pursued sociology and gender equity related courses in University, in addition to self study.

Helen: At the time of the research Helen had been in education for 31 years before retiring a few years earlier. She taught at the elementary level when she began teaching, but also had many years of experience teaching high school level French, English, and drama in the Durham District School Board. Later, Helen continued on to become a principal, and then an administrative officer also with the Durham District School Board. During her time as a principal, she had run an educational experiment with a few of her teachers on gender performance, with a particular focus on looking at the results of mixed versus single gender classes and the affect on students’ academic achievement.

Lara: At the time of the research Lara was a middle school teacher with the Toronto District School Board. She had been teaching for 13 years with the TDSB. At the time of the interview, Lara was teaching grade 7, 8, and 9 science. In addition to general science, she has had previous experience teaching high school level biology and mathematics at a different school. Though Lara did not specialize in gender studies, she had a great personal interest in gender equity and a professional interest in implementing gender and culturally relevant pedagogy.
3.4 Data Analysis:

The focus on text rather than numbers is the distinctive marker of qualitative research (Khan et al, 2007). In qualitative research, through discovery of the data, the analyst then identifies important categories of data – and within that relationships and patterns (Khan et al, 2007). Essentially, the focus of qualitative data is on meaning rather than quantifiable phenomena (Khan et al, 2007). In this study, the data analyzed were the transcripts of the interviews I have conducted. After drafting interview questions for the interview, I lead and audio recorded semi-structured interviews with three participants who fulfilled the participant criteria. Subsequently I transcribed all three interviews into separate transcript documents. Later I used an excel chart to organize the data I have collected. To do so, I printed the individual interview transcripts and highlighted important points as the first step of my analysis. I transferred the highlighted points into excel and created InVivo and descriptive codes out of the points (Saldana, C., 2008). Creswell (2007) advocates rereading the interviews and codes multiple times, so after revisiting the transcripts again I organized similar codes together. Then I looked deeper into the groups of code to find common categories, and did the same to group them together. Lastly I looked at the groups of common categories and distilled them into the main common themes.

3.5 Ethical Review Procedures:

This study follows the ethical review approval procedures for the Master of Teaching program. The participants who volunteered to be part of the study have been given pseudonyms to ensure anonymity. They have been given a consent letter (see
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Appendix A), which included the overview of the study, ethical implications, the rough estimate of the interview length, and informed them of their right to withdraw from participation and from answering any question. The participants also each had the opportunity to check the transcript before I began coding, and were given the chance to explain or retract statements before I began the data coding. All the information gathered has been stored in my password protected laptop, and the information destroyed after 5 years from the end of the study. There are no known risks to participation.

3.6 Methodological Limitations and Strengths:

Some of the key areas that limit the study design include the scope of the research, because this study is limited to interviews with teachers due to the research parameters of the Masters of Teaching research project. This means that surveys and classroom observations, which may give broader view of gender performance in the classroom, could not be conducted. However, by focusing the data collection to interviews with teachers and a former administrator, this study gave the participants a greater opportunity to express in detail their own perspectives and experiences in their practice. Also, this study has given participants a chance to reflect on why they perform pedagogically in the way that they do. The semi-structured interview protocol allowed the participant teachers to address the research questions, but also gave them ample freedom to direct the questions into areas on gender bias and gender based stereotypes in the classroom that the research questions may not have covered.
3.7 Conclusion

In this chapter I detailed the significance of qualitative research and its pertinence to this study. Then I reviewed the semi-structured interview protocol used in this research for data collection, and addressed the participant sampling criteria and recruitment. Further, I explained the method of data analysis used in this study, and explained the ethical review procedures, including participant consent. I acknowledged the limitations of the research and spoke to the strengths as well. Next in chapter four I report the research findings.
Chapter 4: FINDINGS

4.0 Introduction

In this chapter I report the research findings derived from three interviews that I conducted with one elementary teacher and one middle school teacher, and administrator. All three of the interviews were conducted during the first semester of the school year, before the winter break. I have utilized the research findings in order to answer my inquiry question on how teachers are challenging gender stereotypes and fostering gender equitable classrooms. I have organized the research findings from the interviews further into six predominant themes and subthemes. The theme are as follows; 1) Teachers are challenging gender stereotypes through their formal and informal curriculum by drawing on children’s literature and establishing classroom norms, 2) Participants felt that biases regarding gender performance begin at home, 3) Participants found that being cognizant of their own gender biases and adjusting their educational approach based on their student’s gendered identities helped to improve social, academic, individual and community growth, 4) Participants Report the Media as one of the Major Influencing Factors in Perpetuating Gender Stereotypes, 5) Participants felt that school and board wide commitment to a gender-equitable school community is crucial to creating an effective inclusive classroom environment for everyone, 6) The greatest challenge that teachers face in this work is the deeply perpetuated social construction of gender in schools and society. Importantly, many of the themes and sub-themes had interrelated messages and ideas.
4.1 Teachers are challenging gender stereotypes through their formal and informal curriculum by drawing on children’s literature and establishing classroom norms

When asked about formal curriculum that supported discussion about gender and ways in which gender could be expressed, Melissa said that she felt that the language arts curriculum and the social studies curriculum were great areas to begin. However, she stressed that challenging gender is not necessarily the only equity issue she emphasizes in her classroom. Incorporating the problematic issue of gender stereotyping into lessons on intersections of race, gender, and sexuality is important in rooting issues of equity in real life experiences. Melissa conducted an activity with her grade 5 class in which they had to cut and paste images of entertainers, athletes, and politicians from newspapers and magazines. Then they were told to paste those images onto four large posters labeled: white men, white women, men of colour, women of colour. The activity proved to be incredibly eye-opening and unlocked the opportunity for some difficult but necessary discussions about intersection of class, race, privilege and discrimination. Melissa explained her thoughts on the lesson and her student’s response:

How did they respond, well initially they were like Bromfield is racist. Then when they see it they were like this is brutal. This is awful. And it’s hard for them to digest and we really have to after doing this lesson I usually spend like, quite a lot of time debunking it. Yeah! Because it’s heavy! I don’t myself usually, I don’t even ask a lot of questions because I find the kids are asking all the questions. It’s the really powerful lesson really. Really intense. When I do it I make sure that I don’t do it at the time of year where there is a break coming up. I try and do it with enough time so that because the kids will come back to that lesson a lot and talk about it.

Melissa found that due to the heaviness of the subject area, particularly when introducing it to a junior class, to ensure there was plenty of time in the weeks following to address
questions and to give students more opportunity to take charge and break down those intersections of power, and of the concept of privilege and oppression.

Helen believed strongly in the power of literature to introduce any important topic or discussion. Using inclusive books that are anti-bias and anti-discriminatory is an excellent way to introduce gender and gender performance to a class. Helen expounded that introducing the topic of inequity with literature provides a concrete platform from which students can then expand upon with their own questions, as well as to share their own lived experiences in relation to discriminatory practices. Once the topic of gender equity is introduced, through literature and whole class discussions, Helen felt that offering the opportunity and option of open communication noticeable changed the classroom dynamic:

Making sure that they were actually into the whole gender equity and stereotypes by actually acting it out. I’ll read a portion of a book and then we close that up and talk about okay were there any examples in that portion that I just read to you that show gender stereotyping or gender equity at all? Then we just discuss it, discussing what we read.

Further, Melissa and Helen agreed that quickly addressing name-calling of any kind is critical in establishing classroom norms that promote an inclusive environment. By introducing topics on anti-discrimination early on in the school year and giving students the opportunity to discuss and get accustomed to inclusive vocabulary helps to foster a more communicative classroom dynamic because students are not afraid that they will be judged for their actions or words based on their gender.

Lara’s experience challenging gender stereotypes was a bit different from Melissa’s and Helen’s experience. She faced different challenges when trying to integrate gender equity into her classroom. Lara was a specialist teacher who taught math and
science in middle school, and admitted there were specific challenges and limitations because of the areas in which she taught. Her priority was to complete curriculum material, so gender and gender equity were not always in the forefront of her mind when teaching. Lara emphasized that it was not always possible to integrate deliberate full lessons on gender stereotypes in her teachable subject areas. Instead, Lara felt that it was best to foster gender equity through her own interactions with students, by being cognizant of the words she used and ways she described gender when teaching her math or science students. She was careful to always emphasize the ability of her male and female students, and encourage them to have confidence in their academic ability. Yet, a large problem in regards to gender stereotypes in Lara’s class was not necessarily her student’s perceptions of gender-based ability in math and science. Instead it was navigating the disruptions and calling out during lessons that Lara found most challenging. For example when a discriminatory comment is made whether in jest or not, balancing the opportunity to reprimand a student or to let a comment slide for the moment to be addressed at a later time, was a tricky issue she felt was more common with her middle school students.

4.2 Participants felt that biases regarding gender performance begin at home

During the interviews, all three participants strongly felt that they believed that their student’s gendered beliefs had already formed by the time they begin to attend any school establishment. They felt that assumptions and biases about how gender should be performed often begin at home. Essentially, the participants believed that children’s most influencing factor were their parents because they spend the most time with them and
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have the most influence on what the child is exposed to or not exposed to. Cultural and religious upbringing greatly influences perceptions of appropriate gender performance.

Lara spoke about her school’s strong Persian and Muslim demographic that influenced the student’s views on what was appropriate gender performance. She explained that due to the religious and cultural influence of the school community, conservative views on gender were the norm. Lara described an experience with a female student. That student enjoyed holding onto the washroom hall pass, but there was an incident with a boy in the class when he refused to return it. Lara elaborated:

That community, a number of them are Muslim, and a some are non Muslim, and Persians. And so in that community a number of them wear head scarves, the girls. There was an incident that happened in the third term last year. There was one girl who liked to hold onto the hall pass. Which is fine because then I know where it is, and she enjoys that role. And the vice principal is appreciating that somebody is keeping an eye on that in the classroom. One of the boys was upset because she asked for the hall pass back from him and he didn’t give it back to her and she reached out and grabbed him to take it back from him. And he said something like ‘you know I don’t care that you wear a headscarf I’m gonna hit you...’ So they didn’t get to that point but of course after that exchange happened we went to the office and met with the VP. And we discussed the situation separately, and it was interesting because it wasn’t about who was a girl and who was a boy, and who was grabbing who, she was in the wrong to control the hall pass and she crossed the line when she grabbed him, and he crossed the line when he threatened to hit her. But it was interesting because even though he made reference to wearing a headscarf we made sure that we didn’t make it about how that isn’t how men treat girls, it’s how we shouldn’t treat each other. Focus about the disrespect about grabbing the other person.

Lara emphasized the need to separate the behaviour of students from gender stereotypes. Instead of labeling behaviour based on the student’s gender, teacher’s and administrators should assess the situation based on their actions. Separating perceptions of gender norms, such as the typecast that women cannot be aggressors, is necessary to fairly manage circumstances such as the one Lara has given.
The participants emphasized the role of parents and peers in modeling and reinforcing ideas of gender appropriate behaviours. They agreed that the impact of toys and clothing purchased by parents and family plays a significant role in reinforcing gender appropriate views, this supports Cherney & Dempsey (2010) and Davies & Banks (1992) research on the role media and toys have on early development of gender based stereotypes in young children. Cherney and Dempsey’s (2010) study suggested that by the age of 2-3 years old, children have already started to shape biases about gendered behaviour and appropriate practices. During this critical time, parents generally spend the most significant time with their children, and can have the strongest influence on their children’s perceptions of gender (Ibid).

Further, the participants agreed that the school environment also played a part in forming student’s stereotypes of gender-based performance. Helen and Melissa both acknowledged that children were strongly influenced by their peers choices and opinions too. The types of games and roles they played in those games were often taken based on cues from their peers. This aligns with literature that illustrates the negative consequences of not addressing the issue of power during children’s role-play or group activities (Gray & Leith, 2004). When girls play subordinate roles throughout the dramatic play sessions, this may consequentially influence low self-esteem and confidence moving forward (Ibid). The three participants conceded that the long hours at school meant that the entire school community would play an influencing factor in forming a student’s conception of what is gender appropriate and what is not.
4.2.1 Parent and Teacher – Supportive Cooperation

All three participants strongly felt that it was important to involve parents in a communicative school-family relationship, in order to create a robust anti-bias and gender equitable curriculum and classroom for all students. The participants felt that without strong parental support, a robust gender equitable program would not be able to run. The participants agreed that working together with parents, students, teachers, and administrators was the only way to create a strong anti-bias and anti-discriminatory school community, in which students actually wanted and believed in a gender equitable environment. Helen elaborated on the role parents had on influencing children’s bias regarding gender and gender appropriate performance. She explains that it is only if the parents also cooperate with schools that the issue of discrimination based on gender, as well as perceptions of binary gender roles, can be improved and accepted by students. The interconnecting force of parents, education, society, and media all play large roles in influencing young children’s perceptions of gendered norms, Helen clarifies:

When it comes to children it has to come from the parents and if the parents are really good role models and if the school is doing what it can do as a role model as well. But I don’t think it will be as difficult but as I said it’s everywhere it’s in is in the Parliament it’s in society as a whole so it’s going to be really really difficult to change the way that people think of appropriate gendered behaviour.

Melissa’s school had a very strong parent community who were also generous donators to their school, and especially compared to the average public school in TDSB. She agreed with Helen in the impact parental involvement had in the way the school would run, in terms of monetary support and volunteer efforts. Melissa felt that a strong parent community would have some degree of sway in the type of programs and the angle in which subject matter would be taught in the school.
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When asked why it was important that parents be informed on board with the board and school based on gender equity programs, Helen shared that “Well it’s basically their children. We have them maybe for longer during the day, but you know at the end of the day it is the mom and dad who get the final say.” Participants felt that without a strong parental commitment to gender equity as well, the values of an anti-bias and anti-discriminatory environment that schools would try to instill for students of various different identities including gender, would not be viable for the long-term.

Lara talked about the ways in which teachers can present careers in non-stereotypic ways to students. For example, by advocating for the greater involvement of women in science through posters as well as promoting engineering camps at the University of Toronto to girls. Having the parent community support those inclusive endeavors helps to generate acceptance amongst the student body as well, on their abilities regardless of gender. The reinforcement of academic ability that is not based on gender supports the literature reviewed. Children will decide what kind of roles are available to themselves based on their own sex, which is influenced by the stereotypes on gender found in stories told to them and experiences they have had (Davies and Banks, 1992). Their subjectivity in society terms of gender is hailed through the dominant discourse of gender, consequentially they will accept those discourses as their own beliefs (Ibid).

4.2.2 Student’s Cultural and Religious Background

All participants felt that one of the major contributing factors which affected student's beliefs about gender stereotypes were the student's own cultural or religious
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background. Lara expressed that in the racialized community in which she works, internalized and even externalized negative views of gender often persisted in the youth. Lara made a note that she had found that the strong conservative views of the community in which she works affects the behaviours of some of her students. For example, a new male student who was a recent immigrant to Canada from had some difficulty with cooperating with girls his age. He had difficulty even talking to them. The girls in turn have picked up on this, and have made claims that he was homosexual. Navigating gender and sexuality, in particular homophobic disparagements were ongoing issues in Lara’s school community. Dealing with the issue of accepting sexual orientation that may not align with the student communities’ religious and cultural beliefs was something she had to deal with on a case-by-case basis. Melissa also shared:

   It’s the society we live in. It’s the politics that occur on a daily basis. It is entrenched in some religious beliefs but not necessarily the religion itself, but it could be the people who are part of the group.

Gender stereotypes may not be caused directly from religion or cultural affiliation, it is not necessarily the religion itself, but rather the persistent prejudice that gets passed on from person to person. This supports Patterson’s (2012) research on gender stereotype endorsement that observed higher gender typicality in boys. Researchers hypothesized that the greater pressure to conform to orthodox gender roles was likely due to the higher status of men compared to women in certain cultures, leading to boys more often performing in typically masculine ways through play and conventionally masculine behaviour (Ibid). Further, the role of parents and peers in modeling and reinforcing ideas of gender appropriate behaviours has a huge impact on the child’s formation of gendered identity (Wohlwend, 2012). Often time’s parents select clothing and toys that they
believe is gender appropriate for their child (Ibid). The curated collection of artifacts selected by parents then plays an important role in reinforcing a child’s conception of what correct gender preference and performance is for them (Ibid). Parent’s cultural and religious beliefs, which shape their own conception and understanding of gender roles, in turn affects their child’s endorsement of gender typicality.

4.3 Participants found that being cognizant of their own gender biases and adjusting their educational approach based on their student’s gendered identities helped to improve social, academic, individual and community growth

A crucial theme that was found amongst all three participants was the strong belief that their own personal and professional experiences affect the way the approach a gender equitable teaching method. The participants all acknowledged that they are not free of prejudice, whether in gender or other areas, but by being cognizant of their own views while keeping in mind the value to challenge gender stereotypes in their schools and classrooms helped keep them grounded and on track to creating an inclusive and equitable classroom for all diverse identities including but not limited to gender.

Melissa spoke frankly about her own experiences growing up in a family situation in which she had dual working parents. Having a family dynamic that placed both parents in similar roles, both earning an income and helping out with household chores, helped shape her view of what appropriate gender roles and gender performance expectations were from a young age. She spoke about her own childhood influenced her current perceptions of gender expectations:
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I think also just having it fostered from an early age from my parents. For example, of my mother being a working mother, and my mom she was the boss of the house. What my dad said was kind of an afterthought. So having those kinds of role models, those kinds of role models… They sort of peaked my interest in, or made me question, the way in which society is built.

In addition, Melissa spoke of participation in social justice clubs since her High School days, and the strong affect her own interest in social justice issues had on her, leading her to take sociology courses in University later on when she attended.

Though the other two participants did not explicitly speak to their own educational background in gender studies or anti-discriminatory education, all three participants spoke of gender equity and anti-bias workshops they had attended. Helen shared that she felt that having a board based initiative to educate teachers on how to approach equity in classrooms was critical in addressing individual student needs, but also to reflect upon teacher’s own unconscious biases that they may not recognize as prejudiced or discriminatory. Helen then spoke about some biases she noticed from her own teaching practice in terms of who she tended to select to answer questions:

I would say that when I first started teaching I was not aware of, or rather I wasn’t as cognizant of what was going on. I probably would tend to take boys to answer questions more than girls and it was only through the education that was offered by that Durham Board of Education that I started to become aware of ways to make it fair. Like, what’s going on here? Just making sure that you know you have to really reach every child in your classroom, and what the education system did to support you… Well that’s exactly what they did they provided services and provided materials for us to read. And as I said to even have people come into the classroom, teachers from school, to just make sure that what was going on in the classroom you could ask them and just say just watch me for this. So that I could check up on myself and make sure that I’m not just asking the boys or predominantly asking boys. To make sure that I am asking both the boys and the girls when it comes to answering questions.

Helen communicated that the Durham District School Board for whom she worked for 33
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Years was hugely supportive of gender equitable education, being proactive in equity issues from the beginning to the end of her career with them. They have provided her with PD opportunities, as well as anti-discriminatory literature and material to teach gender equity.

Melissa mentioned the importance of challenging views on gender performance in the area of gendered perceptions of physical strength. Whenever she needed a student to help with a physical task such as lifting, rather than asking her male students to help, she often asked female students more often instead.

The participants agreed that reflecting on their own privileges and identity on an ongoing day-to-day basis was beneficial in creating a genuine relationship with their students. Ronnlund’s (2015) study highlighted the construction of gender identity as a constant relational process that has to take place through interactions with others. The study characterized the process as one of tensions and contradictions concerning the ideas of similarities and differences between gender (Ibid). The identity of any individual is created through a process - identities can be contested, negotiated or reinforced (Davies & Banks, 1992; Ronnlund, 2015;). Student’s perceptions of fixed gender appropriate behaviour could be challenged by constantly providing them examples of non-stereotypic behaviour through literature, media, or anecdotes.

4.4 Participants Report the Media as one of the Major Influencing Factors in Perpetuating Gender Stereotypes

All three participants found the “media” to be a large influencing factor on children's’ perceptions of what is ‘appropriate gender performance’. Melissa talked to her
class about the intersection of gender and race that affects an individual’s experience with power, privilege and oppression through hands on activities and discussion. To break down the complicated issue further, she also examined the issue of shadism amongst people of colour with her students. Her activity examined the depictions of white men, white women, men of colour, and women of colour in the media. Comparing and contrasting the types of careers, social status, fame, political influence each group had was a powerful and eye opening experience for the students. Images and depictions of men and women in media campaigns, from television advertisements, newspapers, magazines, to social networks all play a role in how students view gender. The opinion they build from their media consumption then influences consciously or subconsciously what many students believe would be a viable career or personal aspiration for their future.

The three participants agreed that the way in which genders are portrayed in the media greatly affect children's perceptions of how each gender should perform their identity. Helen pointed out that masculinity and femininity are often shown in exaggerated forms in media. For example, men and women in television are often depicted as endorsing or fulfilling gender typical roles. Critically questioning why the genders are depicted in such ways is crucial to helping develop students critical thinking in regards to creating an inclusive classroom for a diverse variety of identities including genders. Further Lara explained that media is everywhere and it is unavoidable, even in the school environment. However, calling out every stereotype may not always be the best or most efficient method of challenging gender stereotypes, she said it was important to critically think and choose when and how to call out gender prejudices. Lara felt that
particularly in middle school, it was important to challenge gender stereotypes in more subtle ways. Rather than calling out each time a student made a disparaging comment, establishing classroom norms from the onset was more effective in discouraging gender intolerant and discriminatory behaviour.

4.4.1 Intersections of Identity

Melissa communicated that gender is not a stand alone identity which affects students prejudiced views. She explained that gender and power are not simply clear cut, instead intersections of identities which include but are not limited to that of ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, socio-economic standing, colour and shadism all interact to affect the position of “power” each individual has or is perceived to be able to attain. She shared an anti-bias and anti-discriminatory lesson she did with her students. During the lesson she presented the class with four large blank pieces of paper in which she posted on the wall. Each of the four sheets was labeled something different, the first was labeled White Men, then another was labeled White Women, then Men of Colour, and the last was labeled Women of Colour. She gave the students magazines and newspapers from which to cut out photos of people covered in those resources. Then the student's were asked to match and post all the pictures to their corresponding categories on the large pieces of paper posted on the wall. Afterwards, as a group they discussed what they noticed, in which areas did they find White Men or Women dominate? Further, in which areas were people of colour mostly found in? The student's formulated their own hypothesis’s and they spent a unit breaking down the problematic and often heavy topic regarding the intersections of identity and the power dynamics due to an individual's
combined identities. Melissa communicated that due to the heavy nature of this unit, she made sure to always introduce it well before any long breaks so as to give herself and students enough time to digest and discuss the topic of equity together.

Helen also spoke about the expectations she felt that society had for cis men and women and trans individuals. She explained that part of the problem is societal views that are shaped by cultural values, the expectations of which differ for females and males. Helen gave a personal example of prejudiced views on women’s roles in terms of leadership or positions of authority compared to cis men:

I think it also has something to do with our very multicultural society and some of the cultures that do not believe that woman should have certain rights and so that’s an issue as well, that’s a problem. I know for example when I was a principal at a school my vice principal happened to be at that time male. And when people would come in they immediately assumed that my vice principal was the principal and I was the vice principal when in reality of course it was the opposite.

Helen’s experience aligns with research that demonstrates that endorsement of negative gender stereotypes affects academic performance and lowers confidence (Kurtz-Costes et al, 2014). Conversely, challenging gender labels by countering negative stereotypes of that genders disabilities or lower performance would have the opposite affect (Neuburger et al, 2012; Kurtz-Costes et al, 2014). It would beneficial for students’ self-esteem and consequently their performance (Ibid).

4.4.2 Student’s Future Aspirations

Again all three participants reported that the way in which men and women are portrayed in media, such as music, books, movies, etc affect the way student’s view the viability of their potential career and personal aspirations. Helen talks about how a child’s
family directly models for and informs a child’s understanding of gender roles. For example, the child will often notice their parents working status, whether dual-income or single income etc. Further, which parent takes maternity or paternity leave may also affect perceptions of what is normal behaviour for men or women. Helen explains:

Well perhaps for some children they’re not even aware of the fact that they're stereotyping genders. You know, Mommy doesn’t stay at home after the baby is born, it’s daddy who stays at home, it doesn’t have to be a mommy. And so all of those things that people just assume because that is the way our society is structured doesn’t have to be that way. My girlfriend’s daughter just had a baby and she works from home, but her husband took a paternity leave so he could help actually look after the baby so that she could do her work at home so… That should be normal. That should be the norm, but in our society that seems to still be abnormal as opposed to the norm. But this little child when he goes off to school, he will not think that it is unusual for daddy to stay home and look after the child and not mommy to stay home.

Lara and Helen both communicated that they felt the way in which transgendered individuals are portrayed or perhaps even omitted from certain gender discussion in the media also plays a role in how students think of their own potential based on their gender identity. Lara felt that the increased social media interest in trans rights did not instantly transform to greater acceptance or discussions in schools, perhaps due to conservative values in certain school communities. Regarding discussions about family configurations, Helen shared that she felt that often time’s only hetero-normative family roles were mentioned. Speaking about non-conventional family groups in critical in introducing and teaching students anti-bias and anti-discriminatory education. However, often cases when gay families are discussed, transgendered parents may still be overlooked, Helen explains:

I think it is very important to make sure that people are aware that sometimes in the house there are two mommies or there might be two daddies or there might be
a transgendered situation and I think that people need to realize that it’s okay and there’s nothing wrong with that… And I don’t think that that’s out there yet.

A common theme within all three participants was their commitment to debunking the portrayal of gender performance by the genders in the media. Helen reported that the classic books used in many classrooms consist of gender performance portrayals that do not necessarily align with current views on gender equity. Helen elaborates on the portrayal of gender roles in families from literature often read to children:

I think it is important that you know you have stories in there, as I said before about gay families, but also about families that are transgendered so that children know that this is all normal. I mean who is to say that you don’t have a child in your classroom that has a parent who happens to be gay and so if they are not even included in any of the books then they feel that maybe they don’t fit into society. So it’s really really important that you become aware of all the children in the room, because you may be actually hurting somebody by not including something in your literature or in your resources that addresses all the students in the classroom because you do not know what’s happening at home…

Being keenly aware of who is in your classroom is critical to planning for anti-bias lessons as well as inclusion of anti-discriminatory literature. Regardless of the demographics of the class, inclusion of inclusive literature is necessary in order to foster critical thinking in children. As such, instead of completely removing stereotypic resources from the curriculum, it may be necessary to explain and call out situations or depictions in media and stories that are not equitable should they arise. Helen discusses the importance of portraying males and females both as leaders through literature and posters in the classroom:

I just think I’m for the children’s books you have to have a variety of books again
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some showing males as heroes then showing females as heroines. I think it has to be a mixture. I think there is a wealth of the material as far as literature and classroom material goes, internet resources in this area, again classroom posters. Putting up posters in the class that show both males and females in positions of importance in society so that they know they can aspire to whatever they want. To be anything whether they are male or female.

Helen and Melissa both agree that introducing stories, particularly to younger learners, where main characters are portrayed in a atypical or non-gender-stereotypical is beneficial to introducing gender performance. Anti-bias literature is an excellent way to open the topic of gender for discussion. Inclusive literature can be used to show young students that it is acceptable to be gender non-conforming. For example, books that depict a brave heroine instead of a damsel in distress help model for young girls that they can take leadership positions and not necessarily rely on their male affiliates. Melissa shared books such as *The Paper Bag Princess* (Munsch, 1980), *My Princess Boy* (Kilodavis & DeSimone, 2009), and *The Hundred Dresses* (Estes & Slobodkin, 1944).

4.5 Participants felt that school and board wide commitment to a gender-equitable school community is crucial to creating an effective inclusive classroom environment for everyone.

All the participants felt that both school and board wide participation is crucial in creating effective gender equitable school communities. Participants believed that a board supported multi-faceted program that promotes gender equitable education would be necessary in order to provide teachers with not only administrative and legal support, but also further educational help in the form of workshops and professional education sessions. Having administrative support such as school principals, vice principals, and administrative staff within schools would also smooth the communication with the parent
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community, in order to create a transparent gender equitable environment, and improve inclusivity in the classrooms. Helen shared that in her practice as a principal of an elementary school, having a superintendent that was very supportive of gender equitable education meant that school wide projects and programs focused on debunking gendered prejudice based on academic performance could be conducted more efficiently or at all. For example the experiment she conducted to divide her three grade one classrooms into a co-ed class, all girls, and all boys class could not have been completed without the superintendent’s approval and support.

4.5.1 Teachers must be Cognizant of Students’ Stereotypical Gendered Performance

Further, the participants all agreed that gender equitable education should not be a stand-alone issue or subject within the school curriculum. Integrating a thorough anti-bias and anti-discriminatory curriculum into each grade and class is fundamental in creating an inclusive environment for all students. Lara, who taught middle school Science and Math, felt that it was difficult to integrate thorough units about anti-bias or anti-discriminatory education due to the restrictions of the two subjects she taught. However, she made the point that challenging stereotypes did not have to be strictly taught as a fully formed lesson to a class. Rather, she felt that integrating a teaching approach that was reflective and reflexive of gender biases also had a lasting impact on student’s perceptions of gender performance. She further shared that she did not always purposely use the same approach for all students without considering their gender. Instead, she acknowledged that certain behaviours or preferences exist in a class such as boys were more rowdy in class and less likely to prefer language and literature related subjects, or
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that fewer girls may prefer STEM subjects. It was still necessary to be aware that certain preferences did persist despite being stereotypic. Lara felt that regardless of her own views about gender equity, stereotypical gendered behaviour exists in her current students, and being cognizant of that gendered performance helps her call it out and challenge it when needed. She respects each student’s religious and cultural values, however will only challenge issues when they infringe on another student’s freedom and security.

Helen referred to a specific example of how being more cognizant of the classroom dynamics and being mindful of gendered modeling helped improve academics. Rather than not use any gender differentiation at all, knowing that there may be some subjects which interest the boys or girls in the class may help them feel more included and attentive:

I think being a principal I know I can tell you I think it changed it for the teachers after that experiment with a grade ones. I think the teachers became very cognizant of you know, am I asking mainly the boys in the class? Am I asking girls and boys? What’s happening in the literature I am teaching them? Is it really geared towards males and females in the class or is it your more towards the females, or is it more for the boys…? So I think it just became they became much more cognizant of what was happening in this whole issue of gender issues and gender stereotypes and it made them probably much better in this area because of that whole experiment that happened, and not just in the grade one class because everybody else in the school knew what was happening and we talked about it during staff meetings. Then everybody in the school was made aware of okay so what does happen to a girl if they’re feeling intimidated by boys? What does happen if the boys are feeling that you know if this is boring I don’t like it you know what can you do to change it and so just having that kind of discussion with the staff about who they’re teaching and what they’re teaching focusing it in this area really did probably help the students in the classroom.

Helen and Lara both communicated that they believed that differentiated instruction based on being cognizant of the student’s gender identity may help to improve
student social and academic success. They both reported that simply ignoring entrenched
gendered behaviours was not necessarily the most effective way to approach gender
equitable teaching. Instead, acknowledging certain differences that may occur, such as
boys and literacy, may help teachers address the specific needs of a group of students.
For example, Helen shared that for years during her time teaching in the Durham District
School Board, literacy levels and literary interest of boys was becoming an increasing
concern. Addressing the interests of boys by providing them with books that they liked
helped to peak their interest in literature in turn.

Lara shared that for older middle school aged boys, sometimes it was necessary to
approach them in a friendlier manner, with jokes and light-hearted banter in order to
create a stronger rapport with them. That is not to say that she felt that it was not
necessary with her female students, but that taking into consideration the specific group
she was teaching helped to create stronger classroom relationships with her classroom.
Establishing friendlier terms with her students while acknowledging their identities
helped with classroom management and in turn improved the student's overall academic
and social growth.

4.5.2 Integrating Anti-bias and Anti-discriminatory Education into all Curriculum
Subjects

Overall, all three of the participants believed that integrating an anti-bias and anti-
discriminatory teaching approach in all subject areas was beneficial in creating a gender
equitable school environment. Melissa and Helen both felt that the Language Arts
curriculum as well as the Social Arts curriculum were particularly easy areas to integrate
gender equity issues into the subject matter. The participants reported that using picture books as a tool to teach gender equity was a powerful method to introduce students to the topic of gender equity, they felt that picture books helped to integrate gender equity into other subject areas such as the Dramatic Arts and Social Studies as well. Helen and Melissa both shared that *My Princess Boy* (Kilodavis, 2009) was a great entry book on gender performance for primary and junior students, and Melissa also mentioned *The Hundred Dresses* (Estes & Slobodkin, 1944). Helen felt that integrating gender equity into the Dramatic Arts in particular had a powerful effect on students. She explained that by embodying another identity through acting helped students to better understand and live the perspective of another gender or identity. After embodying the position of another identity through drama, that experience helped students think more critically of their own position of privilege or oppression. Helen explains that the learning resonates more deeply when students act out scenarios themselves, becoming characters that belong in an alternative family group for example:

> I think one of the best ways to do it is through the actual teaching and usually it was through literature, so you’re going to get a book that deals with this whole issue and then you bring that through the book. Another strategy, because my background in drama we often would have this kind of situation in the drama so that the students could understand it at a deeper level than just hearing about it and then they’re actually becoming those people and understanding what it’s like for the dad to go off and look after the child while the mom goes off to the company and I think that is way more powerful but that is just my bias for drama.

The three participants felt that drama helped students to relate to people of different identities in order to understand gender equity on a deeper level.

*4.5.3 Depictions of Genders in Story Books*
In particular, Melissa and Helen both believed that picture books and read aloud were a great way to introduce any topic. The participants reported that by showing student’s books and resources that depicted the main characters in roles that were non-stereotypical, helped to increase the confidence of students in their own gendered identities and confidence to perform their own identity as they wanted to, even if it was not considered appropriate or stereotypical for their gender. Helen shared that “I just think that I’m for the children’s books, you have a variety of books, again showing males as the heroes then showing females as the heroines too. I think it has to be a mixture.”

The three participants agreed that the roles of the characters in stories strongly affected student’s perceptions of what was appropriate behaviour for each gender. Lara explained that being shown books or posters (for example, of women in science) that challenge gender stereotypes helps to build intrinsic motivation in students to try new things that they may not have tried before. For example, showing books like My Princess Boy (Kilodavis, 2009) to break down the prejudice and assumption that little boys must behave in a stereotypically tough “masculine” way, and not wear girl's clothing or play with girls toys. The participants felt that showing student's books, which depict many facets of behaviour performed by either gender, is important to model acceptable gender performance. Essentially, by doing so teachers want to show students that their preference for sports, clothing, music, or behaviours does not define their gender nor identity. Stories that challenge gender stereotypes such as Brave Girl: Clara and the Shirtwaist Makers' Strike of 1909 (Markel, 2013), Ballerino Nate (Bradley, 2006), and Brown Girl Dreaming (Woodson, 2014).

Further, the participants communicated that introducing a broad range of books
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which focus on not only LGBTQ issues is important when trying to challenge gender stereotypes. Providing students with a variety of anti-bias and anti-discriminatory books which include stories in which the main characters play non-gender-stereotypical roles, would serve as an excellent resource for students because the stories model gendered performance. Helen shared:

I think it is important that you know you have stories in there as I said before about gay families about families that are transgendered so that children know that this is all normal. I mean who is to say that you don’t have a child in your classroom that has a parent who happens to be gay and so if they are not even included in any of the books than they feel that maybe they don’t fit into society so it’s really really important that you become aware of all the children in the room because you may be actually hurting somebody by not including something in your literature. Or in your resource that addresses all the students in the classroom, because you do not know what’s happening at home.

By reading stories that challenge gender stereotypes, students can learn that it is acceptable to not conform to established normative gendered behaviour.

4.5.4 Teachers own Words and Actions

Melissa shared that what teachers say to students and how teachers treat students based on gender stereotypes has a direct affect on student’s perception of what is gender appropriate behaviours. She shared that some of the greatest barriers to achieving gender equity in schools and society were “sometimes the things we say without even thinking.” For example, there was an incident at her school in which she heard another teacher say to a young boy who was crying “you’re crying like a girl - stop it!” She expressed that although she and other teachers had a conversation with the teacher afterwards, the damage was already done. Melissa shared:
Greatest barriers… Sometimes the things we say without even thinking- One teacher I heard once, said to a young boy I heard crying ‘you’re crying like a girl, stop it.’ We can have a conversation with that teacher but the damage is already done. And if they’re saying that what other things are they saying? Based on her experiences, Melissa emphasized the need for teachers to be constantly cognizant and vigilant, to be aware of how their actions, words, and attitudes about gender can be picked up by students.

**4.6 The greatest challenge that teachers face in this work is the deeply perpetuated social construction of gender in schools and society**

The participants all shared that one of the greatest challenges for fostering a gender equitable classroom was society. The inequitable status of men in women in the workplace, politics and media stills persist. Helen shared her views on the imbalance of power in society:

Because they continue to persist in our population in in you know our society we have a prime minister who was asked to have a little debate about women’s issues and he completely refused to do so, however today Elizabeth May and Justin Trudeau did go and do that debate, but I mean if our own prime minister refuses to recognize the issues that women face how can we hope to have it in the schools? It’s in the society unfortunately.

Melissa supported Helen’s view that society needs to also progress in order to improve gender equity in the classroom. Melissa felt that students need to be cognizant of the inequalities that exist in order to be better-informed critical members of society. She shares why she believes we must challenge gender bias and inequity:

I think it’s important to challenge because some people don’t challenge it. Because some people don’t do anything about it, and if they don’t know… I wouldn't want to see children unequipped to face the issues related to sexism or other prejudices that are out there… I think that students gain the ability to question themselves and question the world around them so that they can make informed decisions.
This supports West and Zimmerman’s (1987) article which highlights Western societies deeply rooted perception of gender as tied to sex, and thus naturally divided due to biology. The examples brought up by Helen and Melissa further align with Blaise’s (2005) study on Producing, Reinforcing, and Negotiating Gender in School. The study found that children construct social meanings of femininities and masculinities through conversations in the classroom (Ibid). Those discourses based on their understandings of heterosexuality then form and normalize the gendered social order of the class (Ibid). From an early age children use their understanding of gendered norms to shape their normalized relationships with those around them. Therefore it is important to inform students from early on so that they have the knowledge to question and think about society and equity for themselves.

4.7 Conclusion

The participants of this research project taught at very different schools, and worked in different parts of the educational system. Importantly with consideration to their own personal perspectives, school communities, and the challenges and strengths that come with their own lived experiences, the three participants agreed upon many key aspects in terms of their own teaching or administrative practice and reflections. Some key findings were the importance of countering negative stereotypes of gender-based ability in order to foster a gender equitable class and instill more confidence and student participation. Teachers should always be mindful of their behaviour and classroom discourse. Further, the teachers should model and provide resources depicting positive and empowered gender roles that would be beneficial for students’ self-esteem.
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and consequently their academic performance. Therefore, educators should be conscious and mindful of how they verbalize and model gender in the classroom.

Most importantly teachers should be cognizant of their own preconceived notions of gender. The findings suggest that teachers words and actions whether intentional or not can influence a child’s endorsement of stereotypic behaviour or perhaps shame that they have not performed their gender “correctly”. This supports Lynch’s (2015) findings, which indicate that teachers project their own gender stereotypes about play on their students, consequently also enforcing their play with their own biases. In Lynch’s study, the lower participation of boys in dramatic play influenced teacher’s beliefs, they felt that the dramatic play was primarily for girls (Ibid). Teachers should be mindful of their own prejudice in order to ensure that they do not say things that could negatively impact a student’s confidence in their performance of their own gender.

Further, the findings from this qualitative research project confirm the findings in the literature that illustrate the importance for teachers to challenge the dominant discourse of hetero-normative behaviour through discussions in their classrooms as well as being cognizant of their own biases and behaviour (Wohlwend 2012; McNeill, 2013). When planning lessons teachers should take the classroom demographics and their own students personalities into consideration. Incorporating anti-discriminatory and anti-bias literature and resources would help to construct an inclusive classroom environment.

Teachers must be cognizant of their own experiences and values that may influence their biases and preconceptions about gender appropriate behaviour. Being mindful about the words they use and the way they communicate with students could
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challenge gender stereotypes by decreasing inequitable stereotypic comments or micro aggressions. This aligns with the literature that suggests that a child’s subjectivity is hailed into the social world through the dominant discourse of gender, they then endorse those discourses as their own beliefs (Davies and Banks 1992). Words have weight, and teachers should thoughtfully reflexively reflect on the types of discourses they facilitate, endorse, and mediate in their classrooms.

The following chapter will clarify the findings presented in this chapter, and the significance of the data will be discussed in further detail.
CHAPTER 5: Implications

5.0 Introduction to the Chapter

The purpose of this research project was to investigate and learn how a small group of teachers and educators working in Ontario helped to challenge gender stereotypes and foster a gender equitable school environment for students. The key findings from this study contribute to existing research in the area of challenging gender stereotypes in education. This inquiry project aligns with existing literature that proposes the need for teachers and schools to continuously provide messages that help reinforce the need for gender equitable practices in the classroom, and to challenge gender stereotypes whenever possible (Davies & Banks, 1992; Kurtz-Costes et al, 2014). The issue of gender disparity in society should be addressed both implicitly and subtly throughout the curriculum in order to combat the existing presumptions on gender performance that perpetuate inequity (Lynch, 2015; Blaise, 2005).

This chapter will start with an overview of the key findings concerning the data collected from the semi-structured interviews in chapter four, and the significance of the discoveries moving forward. Next, I will discuss how the educational community and researchers can utilize the findings on how teachers challenge and address gender equity in the classroom. Recommendations for teachers, administrators, school boards and other relevant groups on how to implement gender equitable strategies and create an inclusive...
learning environment for all students will also be given based on the data collected. Later in this chapter areas for further research will also be addressed.

5.1 Overview of Key Findings and Significance

5.1.1 Teaching about and for potential

Educational research on children's confidence in their own academic ability suggests that gendered beliefs regarding the stereotypical abilities of boys and girls has an affect on academic performance (Neuburger et al., 2012). The findings from the three interviews align with Neuburger’s (2012) hypothesis of the correlation between positive or negative gendered beliefs about ability, and the affect those beliefs have on students' academic performance. From my participants’ perspective, when teachers do not imply that one gender over another should be performing certain actions or are more competent in certain curriculum areas, students are more likely to try non-stereotypical activities and perform better academically.

The participants felt that addressing explicitly the inequity in society is crucial to creating opportunity for dialogue about gender performance and expectations with students. Discrepancies in the workforce in terms of the positions that men and women fill in specific fields are an area of especial importance. In particular, the high propensity for men to enter STEM sectors and for women to favour the social science areas (Kurtz-
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Costes et al, 2014) should be addressed in order to debunk the stereotypes that perpetuate those trends. Challenging the traditional roles in which men, women, and trans individuals are expected to play in the workforce and at home in terms of their gender performance, through anti-bias literature and class discussions would be especially useful.

5.1.2 Providing representations of gender that challenge the stereotypical norm is critical

Teachers found that providing strong female representations in school was vital to challenging traditional female and male stereotypes on what are appropriate feminine and masculine interest, conduct, and future career options. This aligns with the literature looking at how examples of males in traditionally more feminine caregiving roles helped to debunk the stereotypes of what boys should and could behave like (Wohlwend, 2012). The participants felt that representations of powerful female leads and feminine boys in literature and other references are critical to confronting entrenched gender stereotypes. In particular, the need to utilize teachable moments to address inequity in perceived notions of female and male ability is critical to helping combat the further formation of gender stereotypical views in children. For example, participants suggest that when students make derogatory comments about either gender, it is critical that teachers do not
immediately punish the instigator. Instead, taking the time to understand the underlying cause and reasoning the student had for saying the comments, and then examining the issue in a timely manner is more beneficial in the long term in order to challenge gender prejudiced opinions.

Further, curriculum preference is an area in which gender stereotypes persist. In particular, areas in which girls traditionally perform better than boys such as literature and languages, as well as conversely science and math for boys were areas in which teachers addressed in order to start debunking stereotypical views on appropriate subject areas for students to focus on. The participants felt that encouraging students to try new things by building success through increasing challenge levels slowly would help to build up students confidence and intrinsic motivation in curriculum areas they may not have favored as much in the past.

5.1.3 What is being said? Unsaid? Insinuations can hurt.

Further, teachers in the study found that the subtle unintended insinuations that teachers or peers may make through comments regarding stereotypical gendered behaviour affects students perceptions of what is proper conduct for boys or girls. The participants felt that the destructive comments teachers made, based on gender stereotypes, could negatively impact students’ perceptions of their own ability. For
example, negative comments about ability based on gender could affect student’s opinions of what is realistically possible for themselves in terms of their academic ability, future careers, and social life. This supports Kurtz-Costes’ (2014) research that has found a correlation between children's endorsement of stereotypically appropriate behaviours and their choices of subjects – which impacts their future career possibilities.

One participant emphasized her commitment to challenging prejudiced views on gender performance in the area of gendered perceptions of physical strength. Whenever she needed a student to help with a task that required heavy lifting, rather than requesting male students to volunteer their efforts, she tried to elect female students more often. Likewise, when male students acted in unmasculine or “girly” ways, the teachers agreed that rather than insinuating that their actions were inappropriate or abnormal, it was better to educate the class on how expectations of gender performance are perpetuated through society and media and why it is important to embrace diversity in everybody. This finding supports Gunn’s (2011) study in which a boy who loved dressing up in dresses and skirts had his gender performance re-framed by teachers. Rather then using that moment as a teachable moment to address gender performance, in order to follow normative performances of gender, teachers in that study said that what he wore was not a skirt, they claimed that he was wearing a kilt instead (Ibid). They gave the boy masculine credit through another cultural context by explaining that men and boys wear
kilts in Scotland (Ibid). Instead of reinforcing the dominant discourse of gender appropriate behaviour, teachers should use their own classroom practice to set an example of inclusion for students. In instances where a student may perform atypical gendered behaviour, rather than whitewashing their actions, teachers could use the opportunity to address the persistent discourse (through media, cultural values, etc) that supports the difference between what is considered acceptable behaviour for men or women.

5.2 Implications

The significant key findings from the study may be used to positively influence current educational community practices. By exploring the ramifications of the findings, teachers and researchers can use the information from the study to form recommendations moving forward in order to improve gender equity in schools. Below I will expand on the implications of the key findings on the educational community as well as for myself as a teacher and researcher.

5.2.1 Broad

The school and family community are of utmost importance when taking all the findings into consideration. The combined contribution from schools, school boards,
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children and their family is essential for the success of a program to help foster gender equity and inclusion in any educational environment. Studies have shown that most children have already formed basic presumptions about appropriate gendered performance before they have entered primary school, and this in turn affects their choices in preferred toys and games - which then plays a large role in influencing their preferences in all areas of life (Cherney & London, 2006; Cherney & Dempsey, 2010). Therefore, research and the findings both recognize the crucial role the influence of family has on forming children’s perceptions of gender norms and appropriate gender performance. The research discoveries in this project suggest that in order for the educational community to create a program with lasting and effective impact on challenging gender stereotypes, then it is important that they do so in cooperation with all parties involved in a student’s life.

Ministry of Education and School Boards:

In order to ensure that gender equitable policies are being understood and implemented in all schools, measures must be made to ensure all teachers and administrators are aware of the established policy in place. One strategy could be to communicate ministry and board wide gender equity initiatives and policies more quickly and efficiently so that all members are informed with the latest information and supported with readily available resources for support. Additionally, in order to keep every educator
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and administrator involved accountable for actually reading the information, a quiz could be used at the end of an information slideshow, and completion of the task could be tracked after finishing the test. Transparency in policies will ensure that the guidelines protect students rights based on gender. It is important to make sure every member involved in a student’s academic life adheres to standards of equity because of the effect modeling gender has on shaping a child’s bias and endorsement of gender typicality.

Endorsement of gender stereotypes may have a negative impact on a student’s perception of their own potential (Davies and Banks, 1992). This supports Davies and Banks (1992) research that theorizes that depending on the experiences they have had or stories they have heard, children will establish in their minds what kind of potential roles are available to their own sex and how they would perform them.

**Teachers:**

The findings suggest that it is critical that teachers debunk and address misunderstanding based on gender in order create an environment that fosters gender equity. When gender based assumptions based on ability or performance are made – whether by teachers or students themselves, it is important that teachers introduce the intersections of power and privilege in identity production that have permitted such assumptions that gender is natural and biologically based to persist (West and
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Zimmerman, 1987). This supports the literature findings as well, which suggests that children often use their understanding of what is socially acceptable behaviour in order to subsequently guide their own behaviour (Davies and Banks, 1992). They are hailed into the social world through the dominant discourse of gender, and consequently adopted those beliefs as their own (Ibid).

**Teacher Education:**

In regards to the challenges faced in fostering gender equity in the classroom, the participants jointly felt that societal views were one of the greatest barriers. The findings support Wohlwend’s (2012) study which illustrated how even young children in kindergarten have already adopted gender beliefs. They demonstrate their own understanding of established gendered expectations during play, showcasing their knowledge of gendered behaviour through the traits and actions of their characters (Ibid). The findings indicate that the difference in status of men between women in society – be it work, politics, or school are issues that must be introduced and demystified to students through study and inquiry. Though the three participants were well-versed and invested in social justice even before having their own classrooms, teaching programs should not presume that all teachers have the same knowledge, experience, or educational background in teaching for equity. Beginning teacher education programs must
emphasize anti-discriminatory and anti-bias education through specialized courses on the subject of equity and social justice. However, a single anti-discriminatory course should not be the only guide given in pre-service teacher education. Instead it is necessary to integrate anti-discrimination courses into every single course offered in beginner education, it should be woven into the curriculum of every course in teacher education. Resources in the form of literature, guides on how to plan equitable lessons, and more should be compiled in a concise way in order to assist beginning teachers on how to support and foster equity. The resource database should be provided and organized for every curriculum subject, and be easily accessible for all beginning teachers.

5.2.2 Narrow: Implications for me as a beginning teacher

The difference between my knowledge of the area of gender equity and anti-discriminatory education before and after conducting this two-year long research project is quite staggering. I have learned about how gender is tied to the routines each of us perform everyday (West and Zimmerman, 1987). Those routines, habits, and situational reactions are in turn informed by our understanding of what is the normative and acceptable action based on your sex (Ibid). Due to the knowledge gained from conducting this research project, I am now more confident and even more passionate to debunk the problematic issue of conceptualizing gender as naturally tied to biology and sex in
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Western societies, through my classroom teaching strategies. I want to emphasize anti-discriminatory education through literature and thoughtful mediated discussions with all my students.

The significance of the learnings from the data gathered through the literature and the semi-structured interviews has momentous implications for myself as a teacher and as a researcher in terms of how it has influenced my teaching philosophy and practice moving forward. I believe that my examination of information on challenging gender equity in elementary and middle schools, which I gathered from existing research and interviews will shape my views on gender equitable education for years to come. I have learned about important it is for a teacher to always be cognizant of their own beliefs and biases when teaching in order to not project their own stereotypes onto their students (Lynch 2015). The need to be conscientious of the small words and actions that may insinuate unfair views on gender abilities, in front of not only students but also my peers cannot be emphasized enough. It is in the small combined efforts and attention to subtle words and innuendos from the whole education community that I believe will add up to upholding a robust gender equitable school program. To do so, as a teacher I can help by providing resources on anti-discriminatory and anti-bias children's literature and media. I can also include visual representations of a variety of different identities throughout my own classroom and the school. I believe it is important to begin introducing anti-
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discriminatory and anti-bias material from earliest age possible in order to foster within students and the school community a long-lasting understanding and commitment towards social justice including gender equity.

The information from the findings does not only apply to the issue of gender equity. Instead, I believe that the findings also readily apply to all issues of social justice, and highlight the need to emphasize anti-discriminatory and anti-bias education even further than it is currently being stressed in our schools. I think that moving forward in my career in teaching, the inquiry methods gained from conducting this study for the purpose of challenging gender stereotypes and fostering gender equity in teaching, will help to improve my teaching practice. Through the two year long journey of researching and writing this qualitative study, I have realized the power of learning through an inquiry based approach. I believe that the knowledge acquired from pursuing something you are truly curious and interested in will greatly improve how much information you absorb, as well as positively impact your depth of understanding. For those reasons I will implement more inquiry based learning into my own teaching practice in order for students to have the opportunity to take control of their learning and to facilitate critical independent thinking. The process in which I utilize to inform my teaching pedagogy has been influenced by the methodical research-based technique I have learned from directing my own research investigation, and I believe that I will continue to use research
5.3 Recommendations

With consideration to the learnings gained from this research project, the entire educational community involved with students must participate together in order to create a robust gender equitable and anti-discriminatory learning environment for all. The Ministries of Education, professional associations, school boards, teachers, administrators, teacher education, should all work together in order to help cultivate gender equity and anti-bias in the classroom. In order to do so, the ministry must create more firm social justice policies that reflect the increasingly diverse student community. It is critical to create policies that protect the rights of LGBTQ and gender non-conforming students. The knowledge that gender based discrimination may occur more frequently in different cultural communities should be used in order to target gender equitable programs in areas that need the most awareness. From there the ministry of education should work in conjunction with public school boards and independent schools in order to ensure the equity policies and anti-discriminatory programs are being implemented in the classrooms. To do so, check-ins should be employed with teachers and administrators in order to maintain accountability. They could be in the form of reflections, online surveys, or perhaps school meetings. Further, several community wide
steps must be taken in order to foster a gender equitable learning environment that is academically and emotionally beneficial for all students.

**Ministry of Education**

- Ministries of education must rethink and revise their curriculum documents in order to question and reflect on their own institutional culture which may perpetuate gender inequity in schools
  - The MOE should consider how the curriculum is formulated, who is implementing it, etc. Consideration should be given to looking into the demographics of the policy makers and compare it to the communities they are serving. The policies should match, respect, and address the needs of the diverse student communities’ specific cultural, social, and academic need.
  - Privilege and power along gender lines should be addressed and reflected upon by ensuring that there is a diverse representation among the curriculum writers and ministry leaders. There should be a fair and proportionate representation of gender and race in the Ministry of Education.

**School Boards**

- School boards and schools should promote collaboration amongst staff in their
own schools as well as neighboring schools in order create school board and school wide initiatives which address gender equity within an anti-discrimination and anti-bias framework. For example, schools in the same area could pair up to work together during special board wide events such as anti-bullying week. Two classes in the same grade can communicate by sharing activities through Skype, or other communication apps, during important school board wide events such as the Anti-Discrimination and Bullying awareness week in the TDSB.

● School boards and schools should provide ongoing professional development opportunities for teachers in areas of gender equity as well as all anti-discriminatory areas including LGBTQ issues. Issues such as inclusive strategies for ELL students, anti-discrimination and bullying prevention of trans and gender non-conforming students could also be addressed through Professional Development sessions. A representative or two from each school could attend such events, after completing the sessions they can hold a short 20-30 minute sharing session with their colleagues during school meetings.

● School boards can consistently hold communicative forums in which the school, teachers, and parents can discuss the ongoing needs of the students with their families support in regards to general equity issues in the school
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Pre-service Teachers

● Providing thorough anti-discriminatory education programs in all pre-service training courses
  ○ systematic investigation of the theoretical framework behind gender equitable education should be a mandatory component of all pre-service teacher training programs

● The hiring practices of pre-service training programs should be equitable – which would mean that a certain quota in teacher education programs are reserved for male and female teacher candidates (including trans and gender non-conforming teachers) aiming hopefully for equal numbers should applicants fulfill academic and other requirements for the programs. The admissions committees would need to also consider candidates based on other diversity criteria such as race, academic background, experience, etc

● Teacher candidates should be given specific strategies through workshops and courses in order to combat gender stereotypes and gender inequity in order to integrate their learning into their own classrooms
  ○ The findings suggest that teachers need to learn about equity through the lens of an anti-discriminatory framework by studying the hegemonic systems that affect an individual and groups position of power and
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privilege.

○ Strategies for teachers include learning to be cognizant of their own biases and prejudices when working with students directly as well as when writing lessons based on curriculum.

○ Courses which introduce anti-discriminatory and anti-bias literature should be introduced to pre-service teachers in order to support their understanding of how to introduce equitable teaching to a classroom, and support teachers to address the needs of each diverse classroom community

Teachers

● Teachers should always critically reflect on their own teaching practices with consideration to their own identities and lived experiences which may impact their teaching pedagogy in respects to their approach to gender equity

● Teachers should actively listen to and learn about their students and consider their students’ individual diverse backgrounds and identities in order to gauge and augment their teaching practice to best suit the needs of their class

● Teachers should put forth effort to eliminate prejudice and stereotypes regarding gender performance and abilities through such avenues such as lessons which explicitly address society including the prevalence of inequity and the conditions
that perpetuate the current status quo. Teachers should also support students through the inclusion of pertinent and varied anti-discriminatory media, literature narratives, perspectives, history and culture that represent the diverse classroom and school wide community, and gradually integrate such understandings to the global scale.

- Teachers should try their best to approach issues of gender and societal unfairness in meaningful ways to help facilitate discussion on those topics in order to empower and build confidence in their students in critical ways. Based on the findings from this qualitative research study, one meaningful strategy could be to open the discussion of societal unfairness through the four poster activity. Four posters are posted on the wall labeled each white men, white women, men of colour, and women of colour – afterwards students post pictures of people cut out directly from current Canadian magazines or newspapers in order to see how often and in what ways each group is represented. Discussion and further activities could follow. This lesson is extremely powerful, and can help students think of the intersections of identity through power and privilege not only for themselves but also the classroom community and their own social community beyond the school.
5.4 Areas for Further Research

The research findings in chapter 4 suggest that teachers believe that children often already have endorsed many gender stereotypes by the time they enter school. They have noticed that there is a general tendency for girls to lean towards preferring languages and social studies courses compared to boys. Likewise the participants have noted that more boys enter STEM related fields. Given the frequency of those observations, some questions raised for further inquiry include the correlation between children's interests, in particular the toys and games in which they regularly engage in and the affect those activities have on their cognitive, fine motor, emotional, social and physical development. While researchers like Cherney & Dempsey (2010) have found a link between the development of spatial and social skills and the type of play children most often engage in, further research into the long term and short term neurological and psychological effects could benefit from more in depth research. By finding our if there is indeed a direct correlation between the development of spatial and social skills based on the type of play children are engaged in, educators and parents alike can tailor their teaching and parenting to help facilitate a more well-rounded learning to address developing those skills.

In the findings, the participants noted that the parents and family played a substantial role in reinforcing gender appropriate views by choosing and deciding which
toys and clothing their children could use. Cherney & Dempsey (2010) and Davies &
Banks (1992) research both highlight the large role media and toys have on early
development of gender based stereotypes in young children. Given the extent that
participants identified parents as a key factor in developing their children’s views of
gender stereotypes, it is important that research look further into how teachers are
working in collaboration with parents to foster anti-discriminatory education.

Further, the findings highlight the need for teachers to be cognizant of their own
preconceived notions of gender. The research suggest that teachers words and actions,
both intentional and not, can both influence a child’s endorsement of stereotypic
behaviour and thus cause the child to feel shame if they have not performed their gender
“correctly”. Lynch’s (2015) findings indicate that teachers project their own gender
stereotypes about play on their students. As a result, teachers enforce their own biases on
children during play (Ibid). Further quantitative and qualitative studies should be
conducted in order better understand both the short and long term impact exposure to
constant gender biased teaching has on a students emotional, social, and academic
development.
5.5 Concluding Comments

This qualitative research study was conducted in order to learn about how a small sample of teachers and former school board administrators are challenging gender stereotypes in their classroom. Further, to learn more about the current curriculum and what resources teachers may or may not have to support them in fostering a gender equitable learning environment for students was also on the major goals of this project.

The most fundamental area of research was to learn how a small sample of elementary and middle school teachers addressed and challenged gender stereotypes through their teaching. The research shows that teachers challenged gender stereotypes through their formal and informal curriculum. They did so by infusing and implementing anti-discriminatory children’s literature into their curriculum, and also established classroom norms along the framework of inclusion. Students also learned to empathize with and embody different identities through their discussions as well as through enacting different characters in drama. The participants further challenged gender stereotypes by being cognizant of their own biases and pre-conceived notions of gender appropriate behaviour in order to teach and model for equity in their own classrooms. The key findings in this project support the findings in the research literature of Wohlwend (2012) McNeill (2013) that highlight the importance for teachers to challenge the dominant discourse of hetero-normative behaviour through classroom discourse, as well as the positive potential of being cognizant of their own biases which affects how they conduct themselves in a classroom setting.

Further, another key area of research was to learn more about how current initial teacher training, and other supports for current teachers could be improved upon.
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Literature in chapter 2 suggested that there was inefficient support for both initial teacher training programs and teachers in classrooms (Davies & Banks, 1992). The literature recommended creating a non-sexist curriculum in order to challenge gender stereotypes and foster gender equitable beliefs in the classroom (Ibid). This was addressed in the key findings in chapter 4, the participants of this studies’ opinions aligned with the literature. They felt that there for the Ministry of Education to work in conjunction with school boards, independent school, the community, parents, teachers and students by creating firm social justice policies that would reflect the progressively diverse student community in Canada. The findings highlight the need to create equity policies that protect the rights of students based on race, gender, sexual orientation, etc. In order to do so, the Ministry of Education should work together with public school boards and independent schools in order to create initiatives to raise awareness for gender inequity, and to ensure that anti-discriminatory programs are being executed in the classrooms.

The key findings in this research project highlight the improvements made continuously by educators and researchers in the area of gender equity in education. The commitment that the participants showcased in the realm of fostering gender equity and inclusion in the classroom represents great promise in continuing positive steps to further challenge gender stereotypes through education.
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References


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Appendix A: Letter of Consent for Interview

Date: ___________________

Dear ___________________,

I am a graduate student at OISE, University of Toronto, and am currently enrolled as a Master of Teaching candidate. I am studying the experiences and perspectives of elementary school teacher on how they challenge traditional gender norms in the classroom for the purposes of investigating an educational topic as a major assignment for our program. I think that your knowledge and experience will provide insights into this topic.

I am writing a report on this study as a requirement of the Master of Teaching Program. My course instructor who is providing support for the process this year is Dr. Angela MacDonald-Vemic. The purpose of this requirement is to allow us to become familiar with a variety of ways to do research. My data collection consists of a 45-60 minute interview that will be audio-recorded. I would be grateful if you would allow me to interview you at a place and time convenient to you.

The contents of this interview will be used for my assignment, which will include a final paper, as well as informal presentations to my classmates and/or potentially at a conference or publication. I will not use your name or anything else that might identify you in my written work, oral presentations, or publications. This information remains confidential. The only people who will have access to my assignment work will be my research supervisor and my course instructor. 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 audio 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, and I will share with you a copy of my notes to ensure accuracy.

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,

Researcher name: Yuen Wah Ng (Nikki)
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Phone number, email: __________, ______________

Instructor’s Name: Dr. Angela MacDonald-Vemic

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 Yuen Wah Ng (name of researcher) and agree to participate in an interview for the purposes described. I agree to have the interview audio-recorded.

Signature: ____________________________

Name (printed): _______________________

Date: ____________________________
Appendix B: Interview Questions

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview. The aim of the research is to learn how teachers challenge traditional gender norms in the classroom. The interview should last approximately 45-60 minutes. I will ask you questions concerning your background information, teacher practices, influencing factors, and next steps. I want to remind you of your right to choose not to answer any question… Do you have any questions before we begin?

Section 1: Background Information

1. What grades and subject areas do you teach? Which have you taught previously?
2. For how many years have you been teaching?
3. Where do you teach? Can you tell me more about the school you currently work in? (size, demographics, program priorities etc.)
4. As you know, I am interested in learning how teachers foster gender equity in their classrooms and challenge gender stereotypes. Can you begin by telling me how you came to be interested in, and committed to, this topic? What personal, professional, and/or educational experiences informed your interest and commitment to this topic?

Section 2: Beliefs/Values (Why?)

5. What does gender equity mean to you?
6. What are some of the common gender stereotypes that you see reproduced in schools and classrooms? How do you see them reproduced in schools?

7. Why do you think these stereotypes continue to persist in schools?

8. What do you believe are some of the greatest barriers to achieving gender equity in schools and society?

9. Why do you believe it is important to foster gender equity in the classroom?

10. Why do you believe it is important to challenge traditional gender norms and stereotypes through your teaching? What do you believe students gain from addressing and discussing issues of gender equity, or bringing up gender stereotypes?

Section 3: The Teacher Practices (What/How)

11. How do you introduce issues of gender and gender equity in your class? What steps do you take to familiarize your students with the topic?

12. Where in the curriculum do you locate this work? What subject areas do you see as conducive and appropriate for addressing the topics of gender equity and gender stereotypes?

13. What range of instructional approaches and strategies do you enact when teaching about gender equity and stereotypes?

14. More specifically, can you give me an example of a lesson that you have taught focused on gender equity and/or challenging gender stereotypes?

   ● What grade were you teaching?
   ● What curriculum were you focused on (subject, strand, outcomes)
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- What were your learning goals for the lesson?
- What opportunities for learning did you create? What did students do during the lesson?
- How did your students respond? What outcomes of learning did you observe?

15. To what extent have you noticed that students’ behavior has changed since being introduced to gender issues and gender stereotypes? Has this changed the dynamics of the classroom?

16. What resources do you use to support you in this work? Can you share with me some of your favourite children’s books, internet resources, curriculum materials, classroom posters, play materials etc.)

Section 4: Influencing Factors (Who?)

17. What challenges have you encountered teaching about gender equity and stereotypes in the elementary classroom? How did you respond to these challenges? How might the education system further support you in meeting these challenges?

18. What kind of support or feedback have you received from people outside of the classroom?

19. How about the media, do you think that currently media is influencing the general opinion about gender stereotypes in a positive or negative way?
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20. What factors support you in this work? (e.g. school climate, colleagues committed to social justice, administrator who prioritized equity, access to resources etc.)

Section 5: Next Steps (What next)

21. What advice, if any, do you have for beginning teachers who are committed to fostering gender equitable classrooms and challenging traditional gender stereotypes through their teaching?

Thank you for your time and participation.