The Equity Studies Classroom:
Utilizing Teacher Identity In Pedagogy

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Abstract

The introduction of Equity Studies into the Ontario secondary school curriculum was the result of the activism of the Miss G Project, based on the belief that education can combat oppression reflected in curriculum and classroom spaces. Although the activists expected that the teachers teaching Equity Studies would be critical and self-reflective, the pedagogical approaches and experiences vary among teachers. This study explored the experiences of three Ontario secondary school teachers in Equity Studies classrooms through in-depth semi-structured interviews. The findings support that some teachers are engaging in critical reflection of themselves and their practice through their understanding of their social identities and those of their students, how they position themselves in the classroom and the pedagogical and instructional approaches to the content. An analysis of the findings suggest that the courses are perceived by the teachers to be an integral part of Ontario secondary education and reportedly provide an empowering space for both students and teachers to connect their personal lives to their educational experiences.

Key Words: equity studies, equity, social justice, positionality, social science, secondary school
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# Table of Contents

Abstract.................................................................................................................................................. i

Acknowledgements ................................................................................................................................. ii

Chapter One: Introduction ....................................................................................................................... 1
  1.0 Research Context ............................................................................................................................... 1
  1.1 Research Problem ............................................................................................................................. 4
  1.2 Purpose of the Study ......................................................................................................................... 5
  1.3 Background of the Researcher ......................................................................................................... 6
  1.4 Overview of the MTRP ..................................................................................................................... 8

Chapter Two: Literature Review ............................................................................................................. 9
  2.0 Introduction ..................................................................................................................................... 9
  2.1 Teacher Positionality: How Teachers Understand their Social Identities .................................... 9
  2.2 Teachers’ Definitions and Understandings of Social Justice Education ...................................... 13
  2.3 Classroom Practices: Teachers’ Identities as Pedagogical Tools ................................................. 14
    2.3.1 Teachers’ positionality, the student-teacher relationship and classroom culture ............. 15
    2.3.2 Teachers’ positionality and pedagogical decisions ............................................................... 16
    2.3.3 Teachers’ identities as barriers in the classroom ................................................................. 19
  2.4 Teaching Strategies in the Social Science and/or Social Studies Classroom ............................. 21
  2.5 Conclusion ..................................................................................................................................... 24

Chapter Three: Research Methodology ................................................................................................. 26
  3.0 Introduction ................................................................................................................................... 26
  3.1 Research Approach & Procedures ................................................................................................. 26
  3.2 Instruments of Data Collection ...................................................................................................... 27
  3.3 Participants ..................................................................................................................................... 29
    3.3.1 Sampling criteria ....................................................................................................................... 30
    3.3.2 Sampling procedures ............................................................................................................... 31
    3.3.3 Participant bios ......................................................................................................................... 32
  3.4 Data Analysis ................................................................................................................................. 33
  3.5 Ethical Review Procedures .............................................................................................................. 34
  3.6 Methodological Limitations and Strengths ................................................................................... 36
  3.7 Conclusion ..................................................................................................................................... 38

Chapter Four: Research Findings ........................................................................................................... 40
  4.0 Introduction ................................................................................................................................... 40
  4.1 The Relevance of Equity Studies in Education .............................................................................. 42
    4.1.1 Exposure to new ideas and extending the learning beyond the classroom .................... 43
  4.2 Experiences of ‘Race’ and Racism as Motivation to Teach Equity Studies .............................. 47
  4.3 Teaching Philosophy and Self-Reflexivity in the Equity Studies Classroom .......................... 50
    4.3.1 Teacher identity and its influence on teaching philosophies and practices ............... 50
    4.3.2 Teacher as fallible student in the Equity Studies classroom ........................................... 54
  4.4 Instructional Approaches and Student Engagement in Equity Studies .................................... 56
  4.5 The Influence of Colleagues on the Experience of Teaching Equity Studies .......................... 59
  4.6 Conclusion ..................................................................................................................................... 62

Chapter Five: Conclusion ....................................................................................................................... 64
5.0 Introduction ................................................................................................................................. 64
5.1. Overview of Key Findings and their Significance ................................................................. 64
5.2 Implications ................................................................................................................................. 66
  5.2.1 Broad: The educational community ................................................................................. 66
  5.2.2 Narrow: My professional identity and practice ................................................................. 69
5.3 Recommendations .................................................................................................................... 70
5.4 Areas for Further Research ..................................................................................................... 72
5.5 Concluding Comments ............................................................................................................ 72

References ....................................................................................................................................... 74

Appendix A: Informed Consent Letter ............................................................................................. 81
Appendix B: Interview Protocol ........................................................................................................ 83
Chapter One: Introduction

1.0 Research Context

Ontario is the most populous province in Canada with a population of over 13.7 million, with more than three million self-identified “visible minorities” (Statistics Canada, 2006, 2015). The Greater Toronto Area (GTA), comprised of Durham, York, Peel and Toronto regions, is one of the most diverse, multicultural, multiracial and multiethnic regions in Canada. Almost 30% of all new immigrants to Canada arrive and settle in Toronto; over 140 different languages are spoken; and more than 200 distinct ethnic origins were identified in the 2006 census (City of Toronto). The diverse landscape of Ontario and the GTA is also reflected in the student population. The Toronto District School Board (TDSB) conducts an annual student census. In 2011-2012, the majority (71%) identified as a ‘visible minority’ (Middle Eastern, Southeast Asian, Latin American, Aboriginal, Mixed, Black, East Asian and South Asian), while the remaining 29% identified as white1 (TDSB, 2013). However, the racial diversity of teaching staff does not reflect the diversity of the student population, where only 31% of teachers identify as a racial minority (Brown, 2014), compared to that of 71% of students.

The TDSB also collects data about sexual orientation. In the same census, they found that 92% of students identified as heterosexual with the remaining 8% split evenly between LGBTQ (including Two-Spirited, intersex, asexual, and other identities) and “not sure” or “questioning” (TDSB, 2015). The school board also conducts an annual census of staff diversity, reporting in 2012 that percentages of teachers who identify as racial minorities rose by 5% from 2006, teachers with disabilities fell from 5% to 3.7% and LGBT identified teachers rose 2.2% (Brown, 2014).

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1 Although the American Psychological Association (APA) requires, “White” will be capitalized (American Psychological Association, 2010, p. 75), I will not be capitalizing based on ongoing debates about the use of uppercase “white” (Foster, 2003; Izadie, 2011; Nakagawa, 2013; Pitner, 2014; Tharps, 2014).
The ever-growing diversity of Ontario and the Greater Toronto Area calls for strategies and policies for how to best address the needs of a diverse student population.

The Ontario Ministry of Education addressed the diverse landscape of the province in its equity and inclusive education strategy, *Realizing the Promise of Diversity*, which was released in 2009. The Ministry places the strategy within a wider Canadian society that “embrace[s] multiculturalism, human rights, and diversity as fundamental values” (OME, 2009, p. 7). In this context, Ontario education is an agent of change that promotes social cohesion and supports and reflects “democratic values of fairness, equity and respect” (p. 6). The goals and guidelines of *Realizing the Promise of Diversity* are meant to be overarching and all-encompassing, aiming to promote inclusive education, but to also understand, identify, and eliminate biases, barriers and power dynamics that limit students’ growth and achievement. The strategy is based on experience and the research they conducted, that expresses that student achievement is improved when barriers are identified and removed, providing an environment where students are engaged, included, respected and reflected in their learning environment (OME, 2009). The equity and inclusive education strategy mandates that the Ministry of Education will provide support and guidance from which the school boards are to develop and implement policies and guidelines for their schools. In turn, each school will create and support a positive school climate that fosters and promotes equity, inclusive education & diversity (OME, 2009).

*Realizing the Promise of Diversity* directly cites the new Grade 11 and 12 Equity Studies courses that were first drafted in 2009, as part of the Ministry’s efforts and responsibilities toward implementing its equity and diversity strategy (OME, 2009). The Ontario Ministry of Education introduced new courses in the *Social Science and Humanities, Grades 9 to 12*

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2 The Toronto Star article cited mentioned that surveys are done annually in the Toronto District School Board. I was unable to find the actual reports on the Toronto District School Board website.
Curriculum (OME, 2013) under the umbrella of Equity Studies, which were slated to begin in September 2013. The creation of the four new courses -- Gender Studies; Equity, Diversity and Social Justice; Equity and Social Justice: From Theory to Practice; and World Cultures -- began at the University of Western Ontario\(^3\) in 2005. Undergraduate students Sheetal Rawal, Dilani Mohan, Sarah Ghabrial, Lara Shkordoff, and Laurel Mitchell began the Miss G Project for Equity in Education after their women’s and gender studies courses had provided them the tools and language to name and discuss the gendered oppression they had experienced in high school (Neigh, 2013). The Project was formed upon the belief that oppression could be combatted both in and through education and identified that there were “aspects of education like pedagogy, curriculum, [and] classroom spaces that enact oppression but can also be used to combat oppression” (Neigh, 2013).

These student-activists recognized the necessity of having a space to talk about issues of oppression, as most often this space is allotted within post-secondary, and not high school, classrooms. This need became even more pressing for these activists after the tragic ending of Rehtaeh Parson’s life. Parson, a teen girl from Nova Scotia, committed suicide after being ostracized and ridiculed by classmates when video footage of her sexual assault surfaced. The impetus of the Miss G Project was to create a gender studies course for the Ontario secondary school curriculum. The belief driving the project was that high schools would be safer spaces for students to discuss these issues if a formal course was offered. During the workshops, they conducted, both in and outside of the high school setting, the founders of the Miss G project saw “how hungry students [were] for this discourse” (Goldberg, 2013). And so, what started as a campaign for a gender studies course ended with the creation of four courses under the umbrella of Equity Studies in the Grades 9-12 Social Science and Humanities curriculum.

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\(^3\) Now Western University
The overarching aims of the Equity Studies courses are to address issues such as the social construction of identity, the nature and impact of power relations, the importance of respecting diversity and the role of personal engagement and social action (OME, 2013). Specifically, in regards to diversity, students explore gender, ‘race’, socioeconomic status, ability, ethnicity and sexuality. In the Gender Studies course, students focus on the social construction of gender, sexism and power relations, gender-based violence, gender equity in the workplace, and the impact of representations of gender in the media. Equity and Social Justice: From Theory to Practice focuses on developing an understanding of the theoretical, social and historical underpinnings of various global and local equity and social justice issues and analyzing strategies for bringing about positive social change. With a specific focus on the workplace, the Equity, Diversity and Social Justice course develops an understanding of historical and contemporary issues relating to equity, diversity and social justice. Lastly, World Cultures examines the nature of culture; how cultural identities are acquired, maintained, transformed; and theories used to analyze cultures with an emphasis on the analysis of religious and spiritual beliefs, art forms and philosophy. All of the courses require students to design and implement a social action initiative (OME, 2013). None of these courses are required to obtain an Ontario Secondary School Diploma.

1.1 Research Problem

Given the continued interconnectedness and diversity of Canadian society, changes to provincial curricula are important to equip students with the right language and tools to address these issues. As Ontario becomes increasingly diverse, so does the school and classroom. When teachers walk into their classrooms, students ‘read’ certain messages about their teachers as racialized, gendered and/or classed individuals (Dlamini, 2002; Housee, 2008; Ouyang, 2014). It is arguably important that teachers are able to name and position themselves and reflect on what
that positionality means for their teaching practice. Teachers who embark on critical reflection often find they become more aware of themselves and the ways in which who they are influences how and what they teach; this deep understanding can provide an informed foundation for tackling social injustices (Smith, 2007).

The Miss G Project activists expressed the need to have critical and reflective teachers deliver the new Equity Studies courses:

We would need teachers who were able to teach it, who had the resources behind them to teach it…you put a course like this in the hands of the wrong teacher and you might really be setting students back, creating unsafe spaces for students or only representing one particular group or talking about gender in a very singular way. (Neigh, 2013)

The OME may have equitable and inclusive education policies, but the implementation of equity practices in the classroom varies from teacher to teacher. Additionally, the teaching strategies utilized by teachers and their understanding of the impact of their social identities and locations on their pedagogy differ from teacher to teacher. Despite the existing body of research on teachers’ social identities and pedagogy, Ontario teachers’ experiences of the new Equity Studies courses have yet to be studied.

1.2 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to explore Ontario secondary school teachers’ experiences of teaching the Equity Studies courses developed for the updated 2013 Social Sciences and Humanities curriculum. I interviewed a small sample of these teachers about their instructional approaches and their perceptions of the influence of their social position on their pedagogy and classroom experience. The central question that guided this study was: What are Ontario secondary Social Sciences and Humanities teachers’ experiences of teaching Equity Studies courses? This overarching inquiry was broken down into the following sub-sections.
First, what are teachers’ reported strategies for teaching Equity Studies and their perceived outcomes? What is their pedagogy for teaching Equity Studies courses and what challenges and/or successes do they experience? Second, how do teachers perceive the effects of their social position on their instructional approaches? Lastly, what are teachers’ perceptions of the effects of their social position in the classroom? I was specifically concerned with how they perceive their identities to interact or influence their relationships with their pedagogy, their students and the learning environment?

For the purposes of this study, the influence of teachers’ social position was generally defined as the process through which teachers understand how their social positions function in the classroom and how that affects their pedagogy. Due to the small sample size, the findings in this study cannot be generalized. However, by speaking directly with teachers who are invested and committed to teaching Equity Studies, I gained further insight that will inform my own teaching practice and that of others. These insights into how teachers’ identities influence the classroom space and their teaching practice may be helpful for teachers to improve their teaching practice whether explicitly equity-focused or not, and teacher educators and educational administration as they provide opportunities for teacher candidates and in-service teachers to explore their identities and develop and improve their own equitable instructional practices.

1.3 Background of the Researcher

Through my formal educational experiences and my social position as a heterosexual, cisgender woman of colour, I have developed an interest in how others conceptualize, navigate and resolve issues of social position and privilege. I began my own serious journey into equity and social justice studies at the end of my senior year of secondary education and more in-depth while completing my Women’s and Gender Studies undergraduate degree. It was during my studies that I was confronted with aspects of my own identity and began to grapple with how
others interacted with and reacted to my identity. It was then that I became dedicated to learning and unlearning my own personal biases and understood that the process is life-long and ongoing.

In my undergraduate courses, many professors explicitly stated their positionality or social positioning at the beginning of the course and continued to engage in the course content from that position. Those who named and positioned themselves used their social location to orient themselves in relation to the material we studied and encouraged their students to do the same. I believe this work can be and should be done in the secondary school context. I am incredibly passionate about the opportunities to bring these issues into the classroom and to work with students to unpack topics and issues related to equity and social justice. It is my hope that I will be able to infuse the work of Equity Studies educators and the wisdom they shared with me into my everyday teaching practice. Although at this stage in my teaching career I am working toward History and English qualifications, I intend to pursue further professional development in Social Sciences and Humanities.

My long-term career goals include teaching the Equity Studies course, and the passion, humility and vulnerability the participants in this study shared, has influenced my understanding of Equity Studies. Equity Studies is not just a set of courses and content, but an approach to education and teaching that can and is able to be infused in every subject at every grade with every student. However, the questions that I continue to grapple with revolve around how best to be an equity-educator, what strategies can I utilize to minimize the effects of a predominately Eurocentric education system and what teaching practices will best serve the underserved student populations I may be fortunate to build relationships with?

These questions inspire me to continue to seek answers as not only a teacher, but a teacher-researcher committed to developing and improving best practices for teaching. From my
position as a teacher-researcher with an inquiry mindset, I look toward how I might continue to see the efforts of equity educators come to life in their classrooms and school environments. How might we engage both teachers and students in equity work in authentic and effective ways? How can we continue to teach from positions that are uniquely our own with regard to, not in spite of, our biases? Moving forward as a teacher-researcher, I wish to continue searching for ways in which teachers can be empowered by their social positions and work within their positions to create truly liberating educational experiences for their students.

1.4 Overview of the MTRP

To investigate the influence of social position on pedagogy in Equity Studies, I conducted a qualitative research study using purposeful sampling to interview three teachers in the Greater Toronto Area about their experiences in Equity Studies courses. Specifically, I focused on their instructional approaches, and their social position and its effects on their pedagogy and the classroom environment. In Chapter Two, I review the literature in areas of specific teaching strategies for equity-related content, teachers’ understanding of their social positioning, and the impact of that position on their pedagogy. Next, in Chapter Three, I discuss the research design, outlining my methodological approach. In Chapter Four, I report my research findings and discuss their impact given the existing research literature, and Chapter Five explores the implications of the research findings on my teaching practice and for the educational research community more broadly. Finally, I identify questions brought forth by the research findings and areas for future research.
Chapter Two: Literature Review

2.0 Introduction

In this chapter, I review literature pertaining to teachers’ reported strategies for teaching equity-related material, teachers’ positionality, and teachers’ reported practice of utilizing their social position as pedagogy. The review of the literature begins with teachers’ positionality and how they understand themselves as located within a particular cultural, social and political context. Next, I review how teachers define and understand social justice education. Then, I review literature on teachers’ classroom practice and the use of their social identities as pedagogical tools. Finally, I explore literature on teachers’ reported instructional strategies for social science/social studies classrooms.

It is important to note that the literature reviewed draws upon a variety of geographical contexts, as studies done primarily in Canada or the Greater Toronto Area specifically, are few and far between. The use of literature from the United States, Australia, South Africa and the United Kingdom was intentional as each location has a history of British colonization, institutional and systemic racism, and multiculturalism that is distinct and yet compatible. Additionally, literature on the secondary school context is not abundant. Therefore, studies from the higher education and middle school context are also included despite the secondary school focus of this research study.

2.1 Teacher Positionality: How Teachers Understand their Social Identities

Newman (2010) describes our identity or sense of self as socially constructed, unable to be separated from the people, events and social circumstances in our environment. We make sense of who we are through our interactions with other individuals, communities and society (Brayboy, Castagno & Maughan, 2007). Our identity does not rest purely on membership in just one social group, but our membership in various racial, ethnic, gendered, classed, ability-based,
and sexual identity groups. These characteristics or social group identities, although not an exhaustive list, locate us in specific contexts and affect how we think and act, and the ways other think about, act toward and react to us in turn (Newman, 2010).

Daniel (2009) posits that there is a difference between simply naming our identity groups and the act of positioning ourselves. While naming is the act of stating the locations we occupy, positioning “deals with the understanding of the material and social consequences or rewards that accompany the particular location or space that one occupies” (Daniel, 2009, p. 69). From this understanding, positionality is an acknowledgement of our social group identities as racialized, gendered, classed etc. individuals and understanding that these identities interact with one another and situate our knowledge in a particular context (Alcoff, 1991; Haraway, 1988). To “self-position” is not simply to name our identity markers or ‘race’, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class or (dis)ability, but to engage in an analysis of how we are implicated in power structures as a result of bearing these markers (Daniel, 2009).

In research studies on the influence of life experiences on white teacher candidates’ understandings of ‘race’ and their responses to learning about power, privilege and difference, some white participants hesitated to describe or define themselves as white (Picower, 2009; Solomon, Portelli, Daniel & Campbell, 2005). When confronted with multicultural education and culturally relevant pedagogy, some white teacher candidates have reacted negatively (Picower, 2009), while others express that they simply have never thought about their race in relation to their teaching (Francis and le Roux, 2011) or been asked to do so in their teacher education program (Harlow, 2003). In their study of South African white female pre-service teachers and their perceptions of themselves as agents of change, Francis and le Roux (2011) found that the pre-service white female teachers had not thought explicitly about their whiteness as an influence.
on how they understood themselves as teachers or agents of change. The teachers interviewed did not feel that their whiteness played a role in how they taught nor did they “take [their] skin colour seriously” (Francis & le Roux, 2011, p. 305). Some white teacher candidates tended to dismiss and/or did not believe that they had privileges associated with being a white person (Picower, 2009; Solomon et al., 2005). They expressed their belief that racism is a personal problem in which individuals perpetuate racist acts, attitudes and/or language and did not understand racism to also be systemic and institutional (Martell, 2017; Martin & Van Guten, 2002; Picower, 2009; Solomon et al., 2005).

In a case study of preservice elementary teachers learning about teaching race in social studies, Martell (2017) found that some teachers believed their role was to “teach against individual prejudice, rather than teaching about racial inequity” (p. 81). Other white teacher candidates were more explicit about their role as teacher to work against systemic and institutional racial inequity and focused on showing their students how larger social forces and policies cause and maintain oppression (Martell, 2017). The teachers in Martell’s study addressed ‘race’ in their classrooms either by avoiding the topic, diminishing its importance or fully embracing its presence in the classroom.

Allard and Santoro (2006) investigated how teacher candidates understand their own ethnic and socioeconomic identities and the ways they make sense of students who have different identities than themselves. When asked to describe their ethnic and class locations, some of the teacher candidates of colour interviewed by Allard and Santoro (2006) did not hesitate to name their racial identities, while many of the white teacher candidates struggled with this unfamiliar task. In terms of their socioeconomic status, some teacher candidates in Allard and Santoro’s (2006) study recognized how their class status might differ from their students. They reported
understanding their own physical mobility (i.e. being able to leave the inner-city schools in which they work for their homes in middle-class suburbia), while positioning their students as trapped without choice in the locations they inhabit. Some teachers still exhibited moral judgment on their students’ socioeconomic locations (Allard & Santoro, 2006).

The struggle to name and understand their racial and social identities is not confined to pre-service teachers. Lipsey (2013) conducted a qualitative case study on teacher identities with four female in-service teachers, two white women and two Black women. One of the white participants who had childhood experiences living in poverty struggled to move beyond an individualist understanding of oppression to a systemic one and could not understand that when students “say that she cannot understand their struggles, they’re not seeing her from an individual perspective, but rather, view her as a representation of Whiteness and all of the beneficial properties that are associated with it” (Lipsey, 2013, p. 128). The other white teacher, however, assessed the ways in which her early experiences with ‘race’ influenced her teaching in an urban school and actively and honestly examined her own ideologies and beliefs and their effects on her teaching and interactions with students (Lipsey, 2013).

Some of the veteran teachers in Kelly, Brandes and Orlowski’s (2004) study assumed that all students and teachers are situated and that the social identity of the teacher affected the way they present content in their courses. All of their participants reported that they believed neutrality to be impossible (Kelly et al., 2004). Some teachers identified the need to confront their own social locations and identities as part of the process of doing social justice education (Kelly et al., 2004, p. 52). One of the teachers interviewed by Kelly et al. (2004) called this process “personal work” and expressed their belief that it is necessary for teachers who do not share the same social identities as the topics or issues they bring into the classroom to educate
themselves and unpack their own assumptions, biases and experiences. The teachers in the studies reviewed in this section varied in their understanding and acknowledgement of their social identities, whether they were pre- or in-service teachers. However, some did actively recognize and name their positionality and made explicit connections to their teaching practice.

2.2 Teachers’ Definitions and Understandings of Social Justice Education

Francis and le Roux (2011) found that the white female pre-service teachers in their study all believed themselves to be agents of social change and positioned the school as responsible for bringing about that change. However, despite a South African national push for teachers to be socially just, Francis and le Roux (2011) reported that the pre-service teachers in their study “had little knowledge of the concept [of social justice] and vaguely connected it with issues of equality” (p. 309). On the other hand, Kelly, Brandes and Orlowski (2004) explored how veteran high school social studies and English teachers understood social justice and how they translated that understanding into their classroom practice. They found that some of the participants “put more emphasis on valuing diversity for its own sake, on affirming students as individuals and on changing people’s unjust beliefs and behaviour,” while others assumed that “the undemocratic and unequal economic sphere of society must also change” (Kelly et al., 2004, p. 42).

The majority of their participants reported that democracy was an integral part of teaching for social justice (Kelly et al., 2004). However, most emphasized social equality and respect for the individual within the classroom and broader school community. Only a few highlighted the unequal power dynamic between students and adults and between dominant and marginalized racial identities as a key component of social justice education (Kelly et al., 2004). The researchers also found that some teachers correlated social justice with critical thinking (asking thought-provoking questions and making reasoned judgments), while others emphasized
critiquing ideology (how dominant ideology, specifically mass media, shapes and influences thought) (Kelly et al., 2004).

Alternatively, some teachers have described their understanding of social justice education as involving both critical thinking and ideology critique. Agarwal (2011) conducted a multi-case study of beginning elementary school teachers and their perceptions and practices of social justice social studies curricula. Her report focused on one female teacher of colour who “dedicated herself to teaching students to use their voice to question the injustices they see in this world” and wanted to equip her students with the tools and curiosity to ask questions and work toward social change (Agarwal, 2011, p. 57). Social justice education was defined by the teacher as both curricular (asking questions and critical thinking) and empowering (challenging the status quo and working toward change). The participant also highlighted the tensions she felt existed between social justice ideals and translating those into classroom practice. Agarwal (2011) found that although some teachers reported commitment to empowering students to find and use their own voice for change, the teachers still found it difficult to integrate social justice into mandated curricula.

2.3 Classroom Practices: Teachers’ Identities as Pedagogical Tools

The notion that objectivity (or the idea that knowledge can be removed from its social context) is simply “situated knowledge” derives from an understanding that positionality places an individual’s knowledge about themselves, others and the world around them within a particular context (Haraway, 1988). This conceptualization of objectivity recognizes the limited locations we embody, and the knowledge we create and understand are situated within those racial, gender sexuality, ability and class locations. Each of us has a particular location from which we can speak that influences both the truth and meaning of what we say (Alcoff, 1991). In other words, our identities and positionality can impact what we can know and how we can come
to know it. It is from these locations that the speaker’s audience either accepts or dismisses the speaker’s authority.

Regardless of what a teacher’s specific social location or group identification may be, teachers can strive to become aware of their standpoint or viewpoint from which they see, learn and come to know others. This is especially important, as teachers are perceived as authority figures in the classroom by the nature of their position as educators. An understanding of how knowledge is constructed from multiple positions is “essential to understanding how to create equitable and culturally responsive pedagogical strategies (Martin & Van Guten, 2002, p. 46).

The following literature explores how teachers use their identities as pedagogical tools in their classrooms. The first subsection focuses on how teachers develop and nurture student-teacher relationships and establish classroom culture. The next subsection presents literature on how teachers’ positionalities influence the pedagogical decisions they make. This section ends with an exploration of how teachers’ identities present pedagogical advantages and barriers in their teaching practice.

2.3.1 Teachers’ positionality, the student-teacher relationship and classroom culture

In building reciprocal or dialogical relationships with students, many teachers reportedly wonder if they can truly hide their values or whether their exposure to their students will result in ‘leakage’, where they reveal their social identities and locations implicitly in the classroom (Dagenais, Beynon & Mathias, 2008; Kelly & Brandes, 2011). Some educators seek to embrace this tension by actively naming their identities and using their positionality to foster relationships with students individually and with their class as a whole (Dagenais et al., 2008). When reflecting on their teaching practice, some educators explained that the first step to making connections with members of the community was sharing their own personal identity narratives (Dagenais et al., 2008; Ouyang, 2014). They drew upon their own stories and experiences to
engage students in their classrooms, which allowed for the teacher’s position to be “demystified,” opening space to go beyond the traditional student-teacher relationship (Dagenais, et al., 2008). In interviews with teachers about their attempts to build equitable classroom culture, some teachers felt that their embodiment as second-language learners, immigrants, racialized and/or disabled persons opened up space to express empathy and care to their students (Benyon & Dossa, 2003; Dagenais, et al., 2008; Melvin, 2010). This ethic of care could be attributed to some teachers’ sense of being different than the racial, ethnic, linguistic, sexual or gender ‘majority’ and their understanding of their identities as multiple and layered (Melvin, 2010).

Other teachers in studies about LGBTQ teachers’ identities and their experiences as educators have found that expressing their sexual orientation and/or gender identity or even just being aware of their identity, intensified their ability to be compassionate and opened up possibilities for student-teacher relationships (Jackson, 2006; McCarthy, 2003; Melvin, 2010). They felt that their gender expression/identity and sexual orientation made them more sensitive to classroom dynamics and more intentional about creating zero-tolerance environments where students felt safe to be themselves (McCarthy, 2006; Melvin, 2010). “I think that gives me a better set of eyes and a bigger heart,” was how one teacher described the impact of being different from the ‘norm’ on her classroom experiences (Melvin, 2010, p. 123). In deciding to reveal details about themselves – whether through explicit revelations or implicit stances – the teachers in the above studies took the risk to express their humanness and vulnerability with their students.

2.3.2 Teachers’ positionality and pedagogical decisions

Noordhoff and Kleinfeld (1993) argue that teachers whose social identities differ from those of their students cannot use a shared identity as a foundation for determining what specific
curricular content is taught, interpret student behaviour and classroom situations, or make other pedagogical decisions. This is particularly salient for white, middle-class teachers in multicultural and multiracial classrooms who are advised to be careful not to fall back on assumptions about their students to guide their teaching practice (Noordhoff & Kleinfeld, 1993). However, some teachers of colour have challenged the idea that by the nature of their ‘race’ they a) can automatically connect with students of colour, b) are informed about ‘race’ and/or c) must make that one aspect of themselves central to the teacher identity (Hopson, 2013).

Despite wanting to remain neutral voices in their classrooms, some teachers, when asked to reflect on their pedagogical decisions in regards to the content they select and teach in their classrooms, reported that their positioning was made known in their classrooms through the particular aspects of course materials they chose to focus on (Glazier, 2005; Kelly et al., 2004). The teachers in these studies acknowledged that they bring what is important to them into their classrooms, making the maintenance of a neutral stance in class discussions difficult as their pedagogical decisions implicitly aligned with their political ideologies (Glazier, 2005; Kelly et al., 2004). In a variety of studies about teachers’ perceptions of their identities on their teaching practice, some teachers’ willingness to be vulnerable and open with students about their experiences with sexuality, language, gender, ‘race’ and (dis)ability allowed for teachers’ identities to become resources for establishing equitable and inclusive pedagogies (Beynon and Dossa, 2003; Jackson, 2006; McCarthy, 2003). In particular, teachers in Dagenais et al.’s 2008 study of how teachers use their own and their students’ identities as resources to develop inclusive and equitable classrooms, positioned themselves as people to be trusted and created the space for students to share themselves and their personal (hi)stories in the classroom.
Described as “teachable moments,” Melvin (2010) found that teachers insert their stories as a way to teach through experience, demonstrating their ability to understand and connect with students with similar experiences. Similarly, teachers interviewed by Beynon and Dossa (2003) about their equitable classroom practices, reported that they felt the presence of their multiple identities was beneficial for students as they became more aware of diverse perspectives. Glazier (2005) found that as teachers investigated their own practice and classroom experiences, they became more cognizant of their own social identity markers and their effects on student learning. She reported that teachers in her study recognized that students may feel a sense of alienation from their inability to relate or find themselves reflected in the course material (Glazier, 2005).

In terms of how teachers use their teacher and social identity in the classroom, Katz (2014) conducted interviews with nine Canadian high school teachers about their experiences with critical pedagogy despite their lack of formal training or prior experience with critical pedagogy. Katz defines critical pedagogy as education “rooted in what students know based on their daily lives” (p. 2). She continues, “a critical education begins with students exploring their concrete reality, sharing those experiences and linking themselves to their socio-political context” (p. 2). The study focused on how critical pedagogy can be applied to students from privileged backgrounds. The study found that although teachers expressed their belief that relating course content to students’ experiences was important, some teachers limited the areas in which students could contribute by positioning themselves as the sole source of knowledge in the classroom (Katz, 2014). Some teachers explicitly shared their experiences with students and encouraged their students to share as well, emphasizing that communicating with their students on the basis of their humanity was integral to classroom learning (Katz, 2014).
Others did not encourage their students to share their personal experiences as not to disrupt the power and authority of the teacher, but did express being aware of their students’ personal experiences and teaching to those issues (Katz, 2014). One teacher in particular did not value the knowledge her students brought into the classroom, but positioned herself as the expert who needs to correct students’ incorrect beliefs (Katz, 2014). The ways in which teachers use their positionality in the classroom is incredibly varied as they have differing beliefs about the necessity and effectiveness of bringing their identity and those of their students into the classroom space. However, many of the teachers in the studies reviewed above found that recognizing and naming their social identity markers broadened the possibilities of their pedagogy.

2.3.3 Teachers’ identities as barriers in the classroom

There are powerful ways in which teachers’ social identities can influence the relationships they have with students and the ways they build classroom community. However, there are moments of tension where teachers’ identities become barriers to establishing those relationships. Through interviews with Black undergraduate students enrolled in courses that investigated ‘race’, some of the students expressed the distrust they had for the power and privilege their white teachers had, and both overtly and covertly challenged the teacher’s right to teach them about ‘race’ (Housee, 2008). The students wanted their teachers to have cultural and racial empathy, conflating pedagogy and academic expertise with their teachers’ racial identity (Housee, 2008). In other words, it was “not the colour of the lecturer’s skin but the politics of their pedagogy” (Housee, 2008, p. 420). The objection to white teachers by Black students could be based on the students’ belief that white teachers cannot bring their lived experiences into classrooms (Harlow, 2003; Housee, 2008).
On the other hand, through an investigation into her own teaching practice and experiences, Dlamini (2002) found white students openly challenged what they believed to be biased teachings on behalf of a teacher of colour in courses that examine difference and power relations. While Black university instructors in white-dominated classrooms reported challenges to their intellectual authority and had their knowledge questioned directly and indirectly by white students, this was not the experience of white educators (Harlow, 2003). Black teachers believed their white counterparts were perceived by students to be smarter, less biased, and more credible (Harlow, 2003). Similarly, although Black teachers believed that their ‘race’ gave them legitimacy when teaching about racial issues, students still challenged the instructor’s authority based on their belief that Black teachers were motivated by their anger at white people (Dlamini, 2002).

The interactions of our social group memberships, histories, and experiences directly relate to our beliefs and ideas about the world around us, others and ourselves. As Lipsey (2013) poignantly states,

Birthed from our identities, emerge our ideologies. Ideologies permeate our homes, schools, churches, social circles, and other institutions on a continuous basis. When these identities are not critically examined, they have the ability to mask themselves under the guise of neutrality, fact, and truth. (p. 204)

Indeed, there is power in ideology. Ideologies can be used to destroy, to marginalize, oppress and harm, but at the same time can be used to heal, to uplift and to revolutionize. As identity and ideology have a symbiotic relationship, the literature suggests that teachers must be aware of how their ideologies are constructed and how they are used in their teaching practice. Identities and their ensuing ideologies can be sources of pain and of power in the classroom (Lipsey,
As teachers become more aware of their positioning and its effects, they can open spaces that allow for deeper connections with students and impactful pedagogical decisions.

2.4 Teaching Strategies in the Social Science and/or Social Studies Classroom

The literature reviewed in the following section focuses on a variety of instructional methods and approaches to teaching social science/social studies in elementary, middle, secondary and post-secondary school contexts. The intention here is to explore how teachers identify and exemplify an understanding that social sciences/social studies involves particular and intentional teaching strategies. Literature on how teachers specifically teach equity-related concepts (e.g. ‘race’, power, difference) take the primary focus whenever possible.

When teaching about concepts like ‘race’, some social science and social studies teachers have reported valuing students’ voices as testimony, and have recognized the difficulty in talking about racism, taking care to be intentional about providing safer spaces for discussion (Flynn, 2012; Ouyang, 2014). In her study of English and social studies middle school classes taught by two white male teachers, Flynn (2009) used classroom observations and formal interviews with the teachers to examine how they built community and engaged their students in discussions of ‘race’. She observed that the teachers began the year by “building a constructive, collaborative classroom community,” allowing the teachers to lay the foundation for delving into equity-related topics “that are too often silenced in school” (Flynn, 2009, p. 68). The teachers built that constructive, collaborative community through sharing circles and providing time to mentally prepare students for the work they would be doing (Flynn, 2009).

To facilitate class discussions, the teachers used sharing circles for academic topics as well as more general check-ins (Flynn, 2009). To ensure that sharing circles are productive,

For the purpose of this review, equity-related concepts include ‘race’, racism and white privilege, gender, sexuality, class, oppression and power as included in the Ontario Social Science and Humanities Studies curriculum.
some teachers explained or had students develop together a list of behaviours, such as focusing on the speaker and active listening, and then modelled those expected behaviours for their students (Flynn, 2009; Ouyang, 2014). Flynn (2009) observed that the teachers modelled the behaviours of the sharing circle by sharing their own personal narratives. This extended into regular class discussion time, where Flynn observed the teachers intentionally display self-reflection and acknowledge their own struggles with the issues brought forth in class (Flynn, 2009). When dealing with disengaged students, Flynn’s (2009) participants practiced “calling them into” discussions rather than “calling them out” by emphasizing the impact of silence on the classroom community, instead of focusing on the potential impact on the student’s academic achievement.

Hess (2002) used classroom observation and interviews to examine how secondary school teachers teach controversial public issues such as freedom of speech and press, and gun control in their social studies classes. The teachers in the study encouraged active student participation, and empowered students to find and use their voice and to think critically (Hess, 2002). She found that teachers used seminars to engage students in discussion, enhance critical thinking and generate new ideas (Hess, 2002). Similar to Flynn (2009), some of the teachers in the study outlined specific behaviours (listen, be inclusive, open-minded and respectful) for classroom discussions (Hess, 2002).

Mindful of the emotional and mental work involved in talking about ‘race’, power, and privilege, Flynn’s teacher participants were intentional about providing time for students to unwind, take a moment for themselves and transition into the topics before starting the class. In doing so, Flynn (2009) observed that students were more likely to be more open-minded and ready to engage with the sensitive topics introduced. Similarly, the use of surveys – before
beginning the course and subsequent discussions – as formative assessment of existing
knowledge has been reported by social studies teachers to provide an opportunity to engage
students’ prior thoughts on ‘race’, gender, difference, power and privilege (Ouyang, 2014).

Scaffolding the curriculum allows teachers to make intentional choices about how to
gradually introduce topics discussed in class (Flynn, 2009; Welton, Harris, La Londe & Moyer,
2015). For example, students first defined culture through personal reflection, then moved onto
cultural collision and conflict, and ended with cultural resolution (Flynn, 2009) or began their
study of identity at the school-level or societal level, and had students make connections to their
own personal identities (Welton et al., 2015). By providing the opportunity for students to be
reflective about their own identities first, before delving into power and privilege later in the
curriculum, Flynn (2009) found that the teachers engaged students in topics of ‘race’ and culture
in a personal way. Students of colour were able to name ‘race’ as an important aspect of their
identities, while white students were challenged to confront the notion that they were ‘nothing’
or just ‘American’ and recognize their own identity markers (Flynn, 2009).

In a high school course on social justice, students demonstrated increased engagement
when they practiced applying key vocabulary to their personal lives before “exploring macro
implications” (Welton et al., 2015 p. 559). The researchers found that developing a common
language about social justice concepts facilitated learning later in the semester (Welton, et al.,
2015). The teacher in the study used a multitude of scholarly articles and books, popular culture
and social media sites (Jezebel, Buzzfeed), news articles (Time, Huffington Post) and videos
(TedTalks, NPR, PBS) to present a variety of perspectives (Welton et al., 2015, p. 559).
Additionally, the teachers highlighted in the Flynn (2009) and Welton et al. (2015) studies,
utilized personal essays and journaling for personal reflection as a way to connect social justice with their students’ lived experiences and identities.

The strategies reviewed in this section focused on how some teachers employ class discussions, mental preparation, sharing their own personal narratives and encouraging students to do the same, personal reflections through written assignments and a diversity of resources to supplement their students’ understanding and engagement. There is a considerable gap in the literature about teachers’ specific instructional strategies for specific course content (i.e. ‘race’, privilege, power etc.) in social studies/social science classrooms.

2.5 Conclusion

In this literature review I explored research on how teachers come to know themselves and their social identities, and their understanding of the effects of those identities on their relationships with students and their pedagogy, and teaching strategies for equity-related content. The literature reviewed is an amalgamation of studies conducted with in-service and teacher candidates, both in and outside of Canada and with students from all levels of education (middle, secondary and postsecondary). In the literature reviewed, both teacher candidates and in-service teachers struggled with naming and acknowledging their racial identities as white people and understanding the implications of that identity in their teaching practice.

Teachers define and understand social justice in education in a variety of ways. Most salient are those who focused on personal responsibility, equality, tolerance and respect, and those who embraced challenging mainstream ideologies and working toward equity. Teachers in a variety of studies about their social identities and pedagogical practice reported how they disclosed their identities in the classroom (intentionally and not) and the advantages and disadvantages of that disclosure. In regards to their pedagogy, some teachers questioned the ability to be neutral and acknowledged the influence of their identity on their teaching practice.
Finally, researchers have reported how teachers use a variety of teaching strategies to facilitate learning in social studies/social science classrooms in regards to controversial, social justice and equity-related concepts.

Overall, this review points to the need for further research on Canadian secondary social science and social studies teachers’ social positioning and equity-related classroom practice, but more specifically on Ontario teachers of Equity Studies courses, given that these courses are unique across Canada. In light of this, the purpose of my research was to learn how Ontario Equity Studies teachers understand the impacts of their social identity and position on their instructional approaches and experiences in the classroom. To study this, I conducted a qualitative study that uses semi-structured interviews. The next section, Chapter Three, explores my methodological approach and research design.
Chapter Three: Research Methodology

3.0 Introduction

In this chapter, I outline the methodological decisions and rationale for those decisions as it pertains to my research methodology. I begin by reviewing the general approach, procedures, and data collection instruments. I will then elaborate on participant sampling and recruitment procedures, explain the data analysis procedures and review the ethical considerations of my study. Next, I explore both the methodological limitations and strengths inherent in the research methodology. Finally, I conclude with a brief summary of my methodological decisions and the rationale for these decisions given the research purpose and questions.

3.1 Research Approach & Procedures

This research study was conducted using a qualitative research approach, which consisted of a review of relevant literature related to the research questions and in-depth semi-structured interviews with three teachers. Qualitative research is primarily concerned with understanding human experiences and reflections about those experiences through in-depth responses to questions (Jackson II, Drummond & Camara, 2007; Ormston, Spencer, Barnard, & Snape, 2013). The social sciences often employ qualitative research because it allows researchers to “privilege the subjective description of conscious every-day [sic] mundane experiences from the perspective of those living them” in order to understand the different ways humans perceive the world and grapple with their lived realities (Jackson II et al., 2007, p. 23). The data collected from qualitative research maintains and respects the complexities, nuances and uniqueness of each participant and the themes that emerge (Ormston et al., 2013). An important characteristic of qualitative research is that researchers often take a reflexive approach, wherein the role and perspective of the researcher is acknowledged and embraced (Ormston et al., 2013).
I conducted contextual research, in which the researcher is concerned with identifying and exploring what exists in the social world, and how participants experience a social phenomenon in their own words (Ritchie & Ormston, 2013). This form of research offers researchers an opportunity to unpack specific issues and explore how participants understand them (Ritchie & Ormston, 2013). I explored how teachers experience teaching Equity Studies courses and delved into the successes and challenges that reportedly arise from their experiences. I was particularly interested in the complexity of social position as it relates to Equity Studies courses, and therefore, participants needed time to reflect on the subject and facilitated questioning is best suited to elicit rich and reflexive responses (Ritchie & Ormston, 2013). In order to explore identity and how an individual conceptualizes and understands their identity in relation to their work I was not interested in numerical data. Therefore, conducting qualitative interviews produced rich data about teachers’ lived experiences that would not be as nuanced in a quantitative study.

3.2 Instruments of Data Collection

The purpose of interviews is to explore actions to better understand them within specific settings and to discover – within the limitations of a study – the reasons that motivate people’s actions or feelings (McDowell, 2010). Interviews are a method of inquiry that uses storytelling to reveal how human beings reflect on and understand what it means to be human, in relation to a given phenomenon (Seidman, 2013). The aim is not necessarily to test a hypothesis, but to understand the lived experiences of others and the ways they make meaning from those experiences. Interviews move beyond “seeing human subjects as simply manipulable and data as somehow external to individuals” and toward seeing knowledge as something “generated between humans, often through conversations” (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007, p. 349). This research study hinges on the belief that participants will generate knowledge about teacher
practices and the influence of social positioning. Given that my research study is explicitly about teachers’ perceptions and their lived experiences, it was important that I conducted interviews.

Interviews may be structured, semi-structured or unstructured depending on the purposes of the interview and may be conducted one-on-one or in groups (Cohen et al., 2007; Jackson II et al., 2007). Group interviews usually follow a semi-structured format, where fewer questions are asked as individuals engage in conversation with one another (Morehouse, 2012). This research study was not concerned with how teachers collectively make meaning or the social interactions that emerge among colleagues, but with individual experiences. Thus, for the purposes of this study, one-on-one semi-structured interviews were utilized to allow for a systematic collection of data and streamlined organization for data analysis (Cohen et al., 2007).

The interview protocol used for this study primarily consisted of open-ended questions that were derived from the research questions. Open-ended questions are flexible, permit the interviewer to go more in-depth if necessary, test the extent of the participant’s knowledge, and establish rapport (Cohen et al., 2007), while creating the space for participants to reconstruct their experience and to build upon and explore their responses (Seidman, 2013). Each interview was approximately 60-75 minutes long and was only conducted once (i.e., participants did not return for a follow-up interview) as stipulated by the Master of Teaching Research Paper (MTRP) guidelines. The interview protocol was organized into sections based on the research objectives and contained both direct and indirect questions as well as prompts. Indirect questions invite the interviewer to make inferences about participants’ opinions instead of directly asking them, which may provide more direct, uninhibited responses (Cohen et al., 2007). Prompts facilitate clarification and elaboration, enabling researchers to probe for depth, comprehensiveness and honesty (Cohen et al., 2007).
The protocol included an opening script in which participants were informed of the nature of the study and its goals, the interview questions, and ended with the opportunity for participants to ask any follow-up questions. I organized the interview questions (Appendix B) into five sections: teacher background; teaching strategies and their perceived outcomes; social identity and positionality and pedagogical decisions; social identity and social position and its perceived effects on the classroom environment and the teacher-student relationship; and recommendations. Below are examples of the interview questions:

- What motivated you to teach Equity Studies courses?
- Walk me through an example of a unit you implemented in your classroom.
- How would you describe your social identity?
- How do you know when students are engaged/disengaged/comfortable/uncomfortable when you are teaching Equity Studies?

Interviewing participants allowed me to better understand their actions and rationales for those actions in the setting of the Equity Studies classroom. This study explicitly focused on teachers’ reported strategies for teaching Equity Studies courses, their perception of the effects of their social position on their instructional strategies and their perception of the effect of their social position on the classroom setting. Therefore, semi-structured interviews were the most appropriate instrument of data collection to use for this project.

3.3 Participants

The sampling strategy is an important aspect of the overall research design because it affects the usefulness of the collected data, the possible type of analysis and the ability to draw wider inferences (Ritchie, Lewis, Elam, Tennant, & Rahim, 2013). Sampling strategies detail the key characteristics or criteria that participants must possess. In many qualitative studies, participants are selected because of their shared features that allow for a deep and detailed
exploration of a research topic (Ritchie et al., 2013). In this section, I review the sampling criteria and my procedure and introduce participants in short biographies.

3.3.1 Sampling criteria

The participants I selected met the following four criteria:

1. 2+ years of secondary teaching experience
2. Ontario College of Teachers (OCT) certified
3. Have previously or currently teach an Equity Studies course in a public secular school
4. Teach in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA)

I chose not to limit my participants’ requirements beyond those listed above because of the nature of my study. Participants did not need to be from a particular racial or cultural background, nor did they need to identify with any particular gender or sexual orientation. What mattered most is how they were able to discuss these aspects of their identity in relation to their teaching practice. Participants had at least two years of teaching experience for the practical reason that the Equity Studies courses have only been taught since the updated Social Sciences and Humanities curriculum document was realized in September 2013 (OME, 2013). The geographical criterion was pertinent because, as discussed in Chapter One, the Greater Toronto Area is a vast, multicultural region. Examining how teachers navigate the variety of students’ gender, class and/or ethno-racial identities that coexist in the classroom reflects the diverse landscape of Ontario.

Although I was not particular about whether participants taught in a public or private/independent school, I did not pursue interviews with participants from Catholic school boards. Typically, the only two Equity Studies courses taught in Catholic schools in the GTA are Equity, Diversity & Social Justice (HSE3E) and Equity and Social Justice: From Theory to Practice (HSE4M) and are taught from a Roman Catholic lens. This is not to say that I did not
anticipate that religion may be an identity marker presented by participants and explored in their interviews, but the theological foundations mandated by Catholic school boards adds a layer of complexity that was not feasible to analyze given the time constraints of this research study.

3.3.2 Sampling procedures

Morehouse (2012) identified purposive sampling as the preferred method for qualitative research. In this sampling method, the participants are selected in a systematic way using determined characteristics necessary to further understanding of a particular inquiry (Morehouse, 2012). Purposive sampling has two aims: first, to ensure that key characteristics relevant to the study are included; and second, to ensure diversity so that the impact of those characteristics may be explored (Ritchie et al., 2013). The participants in this study shared the “phenomenon” of teaching Equity Studies but are diverse in their educational backgrounds, years of teaching experience and their socio-cultural identities. An extension of purposive sampling is snowballing, in which participants within the study refer or recommend others that share the necessary characteristics or qualities (Morehouse, 2012). Similarly, convenience sampling draws upon the ease of access to participants that meet the sampling criteria (Ritchie et al., 2013).

For this study, I employed a combination of purposive, convenient and snowball sampling for participant recruitment. The sampling procedure was purposive by virtue of the fact that there are particular criteria I needed participants to meet in order to gather meaningful data in response to my research questions. Due to the nature of the Master of Teaching (MT) program, I utilized existing networks of educators to suggest participants for this study. From there, one of my participants was able to recommend a colleague. The final participant was found through a friend who had a contact at the participant’s school and was able to connect with them about participating in this study.
3.3.3 Participant bios

As noted in the sampling criteria, all of the participants are Ontario College of Teachers certified and teach in public schools in the Greater Toronto Area. Additionally, their teaching experiences well exceeded the minimum of two years. Mwalimu has been teaching for twelve years, but spent almost thirty years in private industry selling complex robotic systems. He has taught extensively in the history department before teaching the Equity and Social Justice: From Theory to Practice course. When his interview was conducted, Mwalimu had only taught the course once. Mwalimu identifies as a Black South African man.

Raven completed a Bachelor of Arts in Environmental Studies and Geography, a Bachelor of Education, with a specialization in social justice education and a Master of Education. Raven worked in alternative education for regional municipalities and correctional facilities before starting at her current and only school board. She has taught for thirteen years. Although she is only qualified to teach history and geography, she has taught the Equity and Social Justice: From Theory to Practice since the curriculum was implemented in 2013. Raven identifies as a white, heterosexual woman and mother.

Storm is a trained intermediate/senior teacher qualified to teach Spanish and Social Sciences. She has a Master of Arts in Spanish Language and Literature and a PhD in curriculum studies. Storm is an instructional lead for the department of equity and inclusive schools at her school board and a sessional faculty member in a teacher education program. She has been teaching for eleven years, and has taught the Equity and Social Justice: From Theory to Practice and Gender Studies since 2013. Storm identifies as a Latina woman, second-generation Ecuadorian, mother, and heterosexual.
3.4 Data Analysis

Through data analysis, researchers organize and explain the data and make sense of patterns, themes and categories that emerge (Cohen et al., 2007). The data that is collected through qualitative data collections methods tends to be quite rich in detail despite the use of smaller samples. Therefore, researchers must make decisions about whether data will be presented by themes that emerge from individual accounts or whether particular analytical issues will be applied to individual accounts (Cohen et al., 2007). Organizing data analysis by people or issue are examples of how researchers may present their data (Cohen et al., 2007). Using individuals to organize data involves presenting the responses singularly, which allows for the researcher to maintain a coherent fluidity of the participant’s responses (Cohen et al., 2007). Alternatively, researchers may organize data based on predetermined themes, which raises concerns about contextualization, the integrity of individuals’ responses and the possibility of missing other relevant information (Cohen et al., 2007).

Data analysis in most qualitative interview studies involves transcribing, coding, and deriving “units of meaning” or themes from the data (Morehouse, 2012, p. 86). The interviews I conducted were transcribed verbatim, as capturing words and actions as a part of meaning making is the goal of qualitative research (Morehouse, 2012). I then organized the data by my research questions. This allowed me to bring together relevant data, while ensuring the cohesiveness and coherence of the participants’ responses (Cohen et al., 2007). The data provided a collective answer to the research questions outlined in Chapter One. Most importantly, organizing and presenting data this way facilitated the exploration of patterns, relationships and comparisons across participants’ experiences (Cohen et al., 2007). Thus, my data analysis procedures began with transcribing interviews, and ascribing codes to interview responses, which allowed me to derive themes that were applied to the emergent data.
3.5 Ethical Review Procedures

Considerations of ethics in research are imperative for ensuring that the researcher and their process is honest, trustworthy and valid (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). Ethical principles that should be taken into account when conducting research include, but are not limited to, doing good and avoiding harm, rights to privacy and confidentiality, autonomy, beneficence, justice (Orb, Eisenhauer, & Wynaden, 2001), informed consent, rapport and friendship, intrusiveness, inappropriate behaviour, data interpretation (Lichtman, 2010). As qualitative research involves people, researchers are required to be aware of any ethical issues that may arise from exploring and describing people’s lived experiences.

Quantitative research methods such as experiments evoke serious considerations of the physical risk present for participants (both human and not), while qualitative research methods tend to be thought of as without risk. Although qualitative methods do not involve the same risks as some quantitative methods, there are still risks that should be considered by the researcher and minimized when possible (Seidman, 2013). A level of intimacy may develop between researcher and participant, as participants divulge personal details. Participants may feel vulnerable as they share of themselves, and may experience emotional distress as a result (Seidman, 2013). The nature of the interview questions in this research study asked participants to identify and explain their social identities and positions, a process which may have been uncomfortable or triggered recollections of trauma associated with those identities. Ethical issues are also inherent in the data interpretation process, and researchers should avoid misstating and/or misinterpreting participants’ responses as it may result in constructing conclusions that are not supported by data (Lichtman, 2010). One way of minimizing these effects is through informed consent.

Informed consent describes the nature of the research project, potential risks and how participating in the study will contribute to the overall goals of the study (Hesse-Biber & Leavy,
Participants have a right to know what they are participating in, how they will participate, and for how long and to what end their participation will be used (Seidman, 2013). The rights of the participant are also clearly outlined in the consent form, so that if participants were to feel too vulnerable or uncomfortable with the questions they are able to withdraw their participation at any time (Seidman, 2013). Participants are then able to conduct their own cost-benefit analysis and make an informed decision about their participation in the research study.

Safeguarding the privacy, anonymity and confidentiality of the research participants is of the utmost importance. Therefore, all participants were given a pseudonym, either provided by the participant. This practice is in line with the belief that participants have the right to expect that their privacy will be guaranteed (Lichtman, 2010). Additionally, participants were asked to sign a consent letter (see Appendix A) giving their consent to the audio-recorded interview. The consent letter detailed the purpose of the study, the ethical implications and possible risks and the expectations of participation. Participants held the sole right to withdraw from the research study at any point in the process. All of the audio-recordings were stored on my password protected laptop and/or cellular phone, and will be destroyed after a period of five years.

Interviewing as a form of exploitation has been a serious historical issue (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011; Lichtman, 2010; Seidman, 2013,). The aim of this study is to share the insights from teachers about their teaching practice with the wider educational community to benefit teacher education programs, curriculum development, ongoing professional development and the development of my own teaching practice. However, it is important that the emphasis was placed on the inherent value of teacher experiences in and of themselves and the potential for the
interviews conducted to allow for participants to reflect more deeply on, and celebrate the successes of their teaching practice.

3.6 Methodological Limitations and Strengths

The MT program has predetermined the sample size for this research study and as such I did not interview more than three teachers. This further limited the ability to generalize findings in this study. Although interviews are often used in conjunction with other instruments of data collection, such as focus groups/group interviews, case studies, and/or ethnography (Jackson II et al., 2007), the ethical parameters for the MTRP only allow for interviews. These interviews were to only be conducted with teachers. Both classroom observations, and interviews with students and teachers would constitute an ethnographic research approach.

Ethnography allows researchers to observe social interactions in any given environment to understand people’s view and actions (Reeves, Kuper, & Hodges, 2008). Immersing myself in the classroom would have generated a deeper understanding of how a teacher’s instructional approach plays out in that setting. Observing the Equity Studies classroom in conjunction with interviews would have allowed me to compare and contrast a teacher’s understanding of their classroom practice and that practice in reality. Further coupled with student interviews, I would have been able to understand how receptive students are to their teacher’s instructional approach and social identity.

Triangulating the data gathered by both observations and interviews would have allowed for a richer understanding of behaviour and perception as actions often contrast with actual behaviour (Reeves et al., 2008). Through this method, the subtleties of human behaviour often emerge. Ethnography also allows for researchers to “identify, explore and link social phenomenon which, on the surface have little connection with each other” (Reeves et al., 2008, p. 514). Engaging in ethnography would have provided additional data that could have allowed
for the subtleties of social position in the classroom environment, as well as any other phenomenon that may emerge through observation, to be studied in more detail.

The addition of classroom observations and student interviews would also have required a much larger time frame than was allotted for the MTRP, but would have added richness and complexity to the study of Equity Studies in Ontario secondary schools. However, I purposely structured my study to focus not on what is actually happening in the classroom, but teachers’ understandings of their classroom and instructional experiences. As Seidman (2013) eloquently states, “the adequacy of a research method depends on the purpose of the research and the questions asked” (p. 11). As such, it was not necessary for me to conduct observations or interview students to collect the appropriate data to answer my research questions. My research questions hinged on teacher experiences alone, as I was interested in the way teachers make meaning of their experience in education.

There is value in giving voice to teachers’ experiences and perceptions of their experiences and that is the focus of my study. Interviews place an individual’s story at the heart of the research study because those stories are worthy of being told (Seidman, 2013). Similarly, qualitative interviews may provide “catharsis, self-acknowledgment, sense of purpose, self-awareness, empowerment, healing and providing a voice for the disenfranchised” (Orb et al., 2001). I did not expect that the participants would absolutely experience these benefits, but the knowledge of these potential benefits was a helpful reminder to re-centre the voices and experiences of the participants.

As previously stated, interviews provide an in-depth study into a particular object, but run the risk of interviewer bias and subjectivity, require more time, are subject to interviewee fatigue which may affect the interview, and may result in unexpected responses (Cohen et al., 2007, p.
The use of interviews allowed for depth and detailed understanding instead of focusing on breadth, the way that large-scale quantitative studies do (McDowell, 2010). Perceptions of experiences are subject to change as social experience is fluid and constant (Jackson II et al., 2007). Indeed, the ways in which my perception of experience may have influenced the data collected is a significant drawback to the qualitative research method (Cohen et al., 2007; Lichtman, 2010; McDowell, 2010). The small sample size did not allow for the information gathered to be generalized to a population (Jackson II et al., 2007), in this case the population of Equity Studies teachers and teachers in Ontario more generally. Therefore, it was not my intention, nor was it possible, for the insights gained through interviews with participants to generate generalizable findings.

3.7 Conclusion

In this chapter, I reviewed the qualitative research approach that provided the foundation for this research study. One of the key instruments of data collection, interviews was used to explore and understand teachers’ lived experiences and perceptions. Thus, I used semi-structured interview protocol with teachers to collect data on their experiences teaching Equity Studies, and their perception of the influence of their social position on both their relationships with students and their instructional approach. Next, I outlined my sampling strategy, which included the sampling criteria, the procedures followed, and participant bios.

The data analysis approach detailed involved transcribing interviews verbatim, and developing themes or units of meaning from the interviews. The ethical review explored the confidentiality and informed consent procedures, and considered my attempts to minimize any harm to participants. Finally, I described the limitations and strengths of my methodology. I highlighted the ability for interviews to elicit deeper understandings of experience and perception.
for both the researcher and participants, while noting the inability for this study to provide generalizations to the greater public. In the next chapter, I report my research findings.
Chapter Four: Research Findings

4.0 Introduction

In 2013, the Ontario Ministry of Education released a revised Social Science and Humanities curriculum for secondary schools. In this update, Equity Studies courses were introduced as a result of the activism of three University of Western gender studies undergraduate students (The Miss G Project). Secondary school students are now able to select Gender Studies, Equity and Social Justice and World Cultures courses as electives in their educational journey. The courses are meant to supplement a gap in both the province’s equity policy and the existing course content. The courses introduce students to concepts of oppression, power, social constructions of gender, and other equity and social justice issues that exist locally, nationally and internationally. The Miss G Project emphasized the necessity for reflective and critically engaged teachers to deliver the courses to ensure that students were learning about personal, political and social issues in safer classroom spaces.

With that issue in mind, this research study sought to understand Ontario secondary Social Science and Humanities teachers’ experiences of teaching Equity Studies courses. If the goals and success of the courses is heavily influenced by the teachers selected to teach them, then how are teachers engaging in the critical reflexivity that is perceived as necessary? How do teachers understand their social identities and that of their students as they engage in issues related to personal identity and politics? What instructional strategies do they use to promote student learning and enhance student engagement? These questions guided this research study and the literature reviewed in Chapter Two.

The literature review focused on how teachers understand their social identities, their definitions and understandings of social justice education; their classroom practices in relation to how they might use their identities as pedagogical tools; the teacher’s positionality and its effects
on student-teacher relationships, classroom culture, and pedagogical decisions; how their identities might be barriers in the classroom; and concluded with a review of teaching strategies for social science and social studies courses. The literature drew upon multiple geographical contexts and levels of education as the research on these topics is sparse in the Canadian secondary school domain.

To study teachers’ experiences of teaching Equity Studies courses, a qualitative research approach was taken. Through semi-structured in-depth interviews, teachers were able to delve deeper into their experiences and reveal nuances about their teaching practice that a survey would not allow. The study was restricted to interviewing teachers and did not include classroom observations which limits the scope to teachers’ reports on their experiences. The teachers selected were Ontario College of Teachers certified, had taught secondary school for over two years, and currently or previously taught an Equity Studies course in a public, secular school in the Greater Toronto Area. The participants interviewed were Mwalimu, a South African black man; Raven, a white, middle-class woman with a Master of Education in social justice education; and Storm, a Latina instructional lead for equity and inclusive schools at her school board and a sessional faculty member in a teacher education program in conjunction with teaching an Equity Studies course.

In this chapter, I present findings from the analysis of the data collected during the research interview process. I consistently referred to my central research question throughout the data analysis: what are Ontario secondary Social Science and Humanities teachers’ experiences of teaching Equity Studies courses? The following five themes emerged from the data analysis: 1) the relevance of Equity Studies in education; 2) experiences of ‘race’ and racism as motivation to teach Equity Studies; 3) teaching philosophy and self-reflexivity in the Equity
Studies classroom; 4) instructional approaches and student engagement in Equity Studies; and 5) the influence of colleagues on the experience of teaching Equity Studies. Some themes have sub-themes to further demonstrate the nuances of teaching Equity Studies. After presenting the data, I discuss its relevance and significance in connection with existing literature explored in the literature review in Chapter Two. Finally, I will conclude with a summary of the key findings and their relationship to research before transitioning into the final chapter.

4.1 The Relevance of Equity Studies in Education

The participants considered Equity Studies to be relevant and dynamic spaces for students to challenge their assumptions, learn new concepts and find their own voice. Educators believe Equity Studies to be relevant and relatable to real-world issues that are currently and consistently present in students’ everyday lives. Equity Studies was described by Mwalimu as “relevant,” “everyday,” and “21st-century,” and an emphasis was placed on how the topics covered in the course are ones that are already “out there in the open,” and need to be explored, analyzed and thought about by students. Storm also sees Equity Studies as a space for students to express their opinions and ideas and navigate various perspectives. She explained, “[the class is] the space for them to speak their mind … How do we address these issues or not address, or speak to different points of view?” Perceiving the courses as a space for students to express themselves and engage in a variety of perspectives allows for the courses to be more student-centered; and therefore, more relevant to students own understanding of the world around them.

The educators believe that Equity Studies is connected to students’ own experiences with oppression and injustice; thus, they seek to engage students with their lived experiences. In doing so, the teachers perceive that the course will empower students to find their own voice as they explore and uncover how their lives are connected to wider societal institutions. Raven described her school community as consisting of students who live below the poverty line, with little
access to extra-curricular opportunities or intensive community supports, and face systemic discrimination. She is particularly interested in engaging with those lived experiences, using the anger and frustration students expressed in her classroom:

If they’re having experiences that I don’t have because of the body I’m in, how do I then make their arguments stronger? … I saw these Equity courses as a way to create the space to allow these students to understand the theory and the practice, so that they could make their voices heard.

For Raven, Equity Studies is a way to “better their language” so that students can name their social identity markers and explain why aspects of their experiences are fair/unfair and just/unjust. She believes that making sense of how they live in the world through an Equity Studies course allows students to use their anger as fuel to counter and challenge the issues they face. Including students’ experiences as the basis of and for classroom learning demonstrates Raven’s willingness to relinquish some control over the classroom space, as teachers cannot account for what is said and not said (Katz, 2014). Additionally, Raven’s understanding of Equity Studies is reflective of how some teachers in Agarwal (2011) defined social justice as both curricular content and empowering students to find their own voice and work toward making societal change. Not only do these educators see Equity Studies as relevant and necessary, they also believe them to be empowering for students. They understand part of their role as Equity Studies teachers is to provide students with content and ideas that facilitate this empowerment.

4.1.1 Exposure to new ideas and extending the learning beyond the classroom

Teaching Equity Studies reportedly allows teachers to introduce new ideas and people to students with the hope that the learning extends beyond the course. The courses are perceived as an avenue through which to challenge student thinking and broaden their perspectives. Storm
reported that despite the discomfort associated with discussion topics with which she has experience, such as sexual violence and sexism, she felt that it was a “necessary thing” that “needs to be talked about.” She explained that “because without that information or without those kinds of discussions, then people’s attitudes would remain static.” Through teaching Equity Studies, Storm believes that students’ attitudes around socio-political issues like sexual violence not only can change but should. Storm is able to introduce new ideas into the classroom with the intention of transformation through learning.

The Equity Studies courses are also perceived as a way to showcase personalities beyond mainstream figures like Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King and Gandhi, and toward lesser known figures such as Viola Desmond, Barbara Jordan and Shirley Chisholm. Mwalimu was particularly concerned that the ideas and people students are exposed to “are sometimes manipulated or controlled by a very influential group.” He expressed that given his South African apartheid-era schooling and childhood experiences, he felt it was a privilege to share these new ideas with students. Mwalimu’s own social location as a child of apartheid influenced how and why he approached new ideas in his classroom.

In regards to how students engage with the course content and ideas outside of the classroom, Mwalimu believes that the course would have accomplished something if students left with a new critical thinking skill or information analysis strategy. He wanted his course to be an opportunity for students to challenge their own assumptions. He explained that many of his students came into the course with very particular and rigid ideas about ‘race,’ which he called “dangerous misconceptions.” The labelling of student assumptions as ‘dangerous’ underscores his belief that some of the ideas that students come into the classroom with are oppressive and harmful, and without place in an equitable and socially just society. The Equity and Social
Justice course reportedly offers a chance for Mwalimu to disrupt those dangerous misconceptions and help students move toward a more nuanced understanding of ‘race.’ Similarly, Storm recalled a discussion in her class about sexual violence and the case of a celebrity and her abusive producer. Some of her students believed that the musician should still have to work with her abuser because of the contract she had signed. Storm explained how the “sexist, misogynist point of view was very difficult for [her]” due to her own experiences of sexual violence. Despite her own discomfort, Storm believes that it is not the space for her to “air out [her] issues” but for students to learn and challenge their beliefs and assumptions.

The Equity Studies educators believe that students may not immediately see the long-term learning when they engage in equity and social justice issues, but still carry that learning with them beyond the course. Although they emphasized the importance of learning and talking about social justice and equity in their own classroom spaces, they reported that students move to other classrooms and spaces where those issues may not be important. Students may learn the concepts in class, but Raven questioned “how does this relate to what happens in their home communities? What happens in their family situations?” She reflected that “I also have to recognize there are moments when I set them up for failure.” For Raven, failure was characterized by a student’s potential inability to address injustice outside of a safe classroom space.

In their study of veteran teachers concerned with teaching for social justice, Kelly, Brandes and Orlowski (2003), they found that some of the teachers in their study were committed to developing their students’ critical thinking skills, while others focused more on critiquing dominant ideologies. Similarly, to Mwalimu’s concern about students being unduly influenced by mainstream media, the teachers in Kelly, et al., (2003) stressed that critiquing

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5 See pop musician Kesha and her legal battle with music produce Dr. Luke
dominant ideologies expressed by mass media helps counteract the influences and shapes students’ thoughts and ideas about social justice (Kelly, Brandes, & Orlowski, 2003).

The participants thought that Equity Studies provides a space for students to rethink and relern ideas that may be dangerous and harmful, and work toward a more productive and progressive way of engaging with the world around them. Contrary to Katz (2014) who found the teachers in her study to be unprepared to encourage students to challenge and transform the status quo and use education as a tool for social justice, the Equity Studies teachers in this study embraced the opportunity to help students critically engage with their experiences and empower and encourage students to use critical thinking skills and knowledge to challenge, disrupt, dismantle and confront inequality and injustice (Kelly et al., 2003). By engaging in students lived experiences, the Equity Studies educators allow students to find their own unique voice through which to speak about those experiences.

The educators in this study believe that Equity Studies empowers students to challenge their own assumptions and the assumptions of others. The teachers reported actively engaging with students’ experiences in order to critically engage with their ideas and in turn ask students to critically engage with their own ideas and “incorporate what they are being taught into their understanding of the world (Katz, 2014, p. 10). They report that exposing students to new ideas and people can broaden a student’s understanding of the content and challenge the notion that only a few “big names” have contributed to equity and social justice activism. The educators also expressed hope that the learning would extend beyond the Equity Studies classroom and into other spaces students occupy in their day-to-day lives. These reported outcomes all contribute to how the teachers perceive Equity Studies to be relevant in their students’ overall education. This
understanding of the courses as a necessary component of education is directly connected to the teachers own experiences of equity and injustice.

4.2 Experiences of ‘Race’ and Racism as Motivation to Teach Equity Studies

The participants identified that experiences of ‘race’ and racism in their childhoods, and in their interactions with students and colleagues as professional teachers have influenced and motivated their Equity Studies practice. The experiences profoundly impacted their understanding of themselves as individuals and teachers, and how they decided to approach Equity Studies. Raven and Mwalimu in particular spoke of moments in their childhoods that sparked an awareness of and interest in social justice and equity issues, while Storm’s experience as a novice teacher solidified her commitment to equity-minded teaching.

Mwalimu was born in South Africa and attended school under apartheid. He described his educational experience:

The school I attended as a child was structured under a rigid racial segregated system …

It was based on racism … it was based on lies, and based on a very brutal system that looked as human beings, not as thinkers but as people that could be used and abused.

His experiences in formal schooling influenced how he approaches his teaching and why he is interested in teaching about and for social justice. “That’s always been the driving force in terms of how I connect with students, with young people, with colleagues,” he said. “That’s kind of my energy source in terms of how I teach [and] what I’m interested in.” He went on to express his ongoing interest in social justice and his pride in the fact that he “grew up with an interest in who [Muhammad Ali, Lincoln Alexander, Salvador Yendi, and Maya Angelou] are and what they meant.” His pride in his past experiences and interests are made explicit in his classroom as he bringing those very people, their ideas and contributions into his course content.
When she moved to Northern Alberta in Grade One, Raven’s best friend was a First Nations young girl. She described the experience of being friends with her:

It was the first time in my life where I noticed … that people are treated differently, because people treated her differently than they treated me … as a six-year-old, it was apparent to me that, ‘Why are you treating her this way and me this way just because of her skin tone?

As Raven explained, “that was really foundational … it was the first time where I realized my whiteness.” This realization of whiteness has carried through into Raven’s pedagogical practice when she has students interrogate and investigate her social identity markers and how they may influence the course. Details on this pedagogical practice are outlined in the section on instructional approaches to Equity Studies.

The teachers also expressed how interactions with students and colleagues in their professional careers as educators influenced their interest and motivation for teaching Equity Studies. When asked explicitly about his motivations for teaching Equity Studies, Mwalimu replied, “a passion for working with … students who are at risk, students who are marginalized in this building unfortunately by some of the adults…” Raven in turn is “drawn to Equity Studies courses because of the injustice that [she] see[s] [her] students facing in the world.” She understands how, because of her own identities, she holds privileges that others, specifically racialized others, do not have. She perceives her identity and those of her students as motivation to engage with that tension reportedly present in Equity Studies courses. Lastly, Storm responded to this question by sharing her experience with unsupportive administration and an at-risk Latino student. As a new teacher, she struggled to navigate what she called the “political landscape of administration.” Storm and another colleague were interested in helping their Latino student
because although they saw potential in their classes, they were concerned about his engagement in other classes. Storm describes how she asked her administration for suggestions on how to help the student succeed. The response was “Well, he’s not going to graduate anyway.” The support the student required was dismissed based on an assumption about the students’ identity. For Storm that moment solidified her belief that equity in education is necessary, and that students should be exposed to Equity Studies in their educational journey.

Raven, and Mwalimu’s prior experiences with ‘race’ influenced both their desire to teach Equity Studies and the way they approached the course. In a qualitative study conducted by Lipsey (2013), one of the teachers interviewed expressed how her early experiences with ‘race’ influenced how she taught in her urban school. She was intentional, as was Raven and Mwalimu, about honestly examining her own ideologies and beliefs based on her own racial identity and experience with ‘race’, and how that affected her interactions with students and her teaching practice. Storm’s experience with her administration echoes the tensions that existed for the social justice educator in Agarwal’s 2011 case study. The teacher expressed a disconnect between her social justice ideals and how they played out in her school and classroom experience. Despite believing in the necessity of social justice, both Storm and Agarwal’s teacher struggled to see that vision manifested in all areas of school life.

The participants are concerned with improving the educational experience of their students based on their own enlightening experiences of racial injustice in their personal and professional lives. The poignant and troubling experiences they described demonstrate that they are not alone in trying to translate their experiences and beliefs about social justice into the classroom and school community. This sense of awareness of who they are, and what they have
experienced and the influence of those factors on their desire for teaching demonstrates a self-
reflexivity that reportedly contributes to their overall teaching philosophy and practices.

4.3 Teaching Philosophy and Self-Reflexivity in the Equity Studies Classroom

Equity Studies educators understand Equity Studies as both a discipline and an approach
to teaching. They recognized the flexibility and fluidity of their teaching philosophies, and the
influence of their own identities on their philosophies and practices, demonstrating a sense of
reflexivity that influenced how they engaged with course content and the students in their
classrooms. They were unconcerned with making mistakes and were open to learning along with
their students. The teachers did not express a need or desire to be the expert in the classroom, but
made a point of identifying themselves as learners.

4.3.1 Teacher identity and its influence on teaching philosophies and practices

Their teaching philosophy was often directly connected to their awareness of their own
identities and those of their students. This awareness translated into how they used their identities
in their teaching practice to establish a comfortable learning environment for students. Storm
emphasized the importance of getting to know who students are, what they want, and need, and
using that to drive learning. Mwalimu was particularly concerned with understanding students as
human beings with developing mindsets who are all capable of learning. Mwalimu emphasized
the importance of seeing the human being and not just the student. He seeks to understand
students as people whose ideas and thoughts are still developing, while being cognizant that
students do not learn in the same ways.

Raven also advocated for this treatment of students when she explained her desire to
engage students in a way that brings their whole selves into learning. Raven’s philosophy of
education includes her social locators, not only bringing students whole selves into the
classroom, but her whole self as well. She stated, “my philosophy of education is: I have four
degrees, I’m educated and I’m middle class, and I’m white and I own a car. I also know how to navigate these systems that are in place to keep certain people oppressed … I’m very aware of this.” Explicitly naming her social location demonstrates Raven’s commitment to her awareness of her privileges and how they interact with her understanding of herself in relation to her students. When describing their teaching philosophies, the teachers also expressed how those philosophies are explicitly present in their teaching practice.

Each teacher expressed the necessity of establishing an open, safe, democratic space for students to engage with Equity Studies content. The way Raven described her teaching philosophy demonstrated a shift toward practical manifestations of that philosophy:

Knowledge is not power. It’s what we actually do with knowledge, and how you actually engage with that knowledge. If I think of education as a mode of emancipation, and sit along kind of what [Paulo] Freire talks about, in that there’s this way in which we need to approach teaching, and be teachers, as well as learners, to democratize the space, to shift the power dynamics that happen in the classroom to allow learning to happen.

Her teaching philosophy is deeply connected to her understanding of building classroom culture and community as a democratic space that shifts power dynamics to allow for deeper learning. She summarized her philosophy as such: “[m]y philosophy is about bringing whole selves; it’s about teaching as a relational act. It’s about a struggle of being similar.” She is particularly invested in engaging students in a way that allows them to bring their whole selves into learning: teaching them what they do not know, and how their lived experiences are connected to wider local and global politics. Engaging with the ways in which her students and herself are similar, Raven is able to use that relationship in her teaching practice in a meaningful way.
Mwalimu spoke about explaining his personal background and experiences with apartheid to his students to dispel confusion and assumptions students might make of him: “students look at me, they want to figure out, “Where is this guy from? He has a bit of an accent.’ So, I have to explain why I am, what my upbringing was, what’s my vision, what drives me so to speak.” His educational background is not something that would be automatically known to students, but is disclosed because of his realization that students are trying to “figure him out.” In doing so, Mwalimu translates his drive for teaching into a meaningful practice of engaging students with his social location. Similarly, Raven uses her social location as an introduction to the course and invites students to explicitly interrogate the implications of her social location in the classroom space and on the learning experience. She asks students: “[w]hat is it like for you to learn these issues of social justice and equity from a woman who’s white? I’m giving you this article knowing who I am. What does that say about who I am and what I value?” Although her teaching philosophy involves the “struggle of being similar,” she does not shy away from the ways in which she is different from her students. Naming and then explicitly using their social locations became the foundation of Mwalimu and Raven’s teaching practices. Storm, however, did not state in her interview whether she explicitly names her identities in the classroom. She demonstrated an awareness of who she is (“I identify as Latina, second generation Ecuadorian, mother, heterosexual, LGBTQ++ ally”), but did not talk about how that is made known in the classroom itself.

Mwalimu expressed that this was not something he saw as optional (i.e., “I have to explain”), whereas Raven has the option to ignore her whiteness in the classroom, and not ask students to think about who she is and how that influences her teaching. There is an underlying belief, as demonstrated through Raven and Mwalimu’s actions, that students should be
concerned with and encouraged to investigate their teacher’s identity in relation to the subject matter. The veteran teachers teaching for social justice interviewed in Kelly et al. (2004) believed that full objectivity in the classroom was potentially not possible, nor necessary. Raven and Mwalimu rejected the idea that neutrality was possible in their classrooms (Kelly, et al., 2004), and instead focused on the idea that engaging in the multiplicity of experiences in the classroom is a way to communicate with students on the basis of their humanity, a key component of classroom learning (Katz, 2014). Having her students interrogate her identity in relation to the content speaks explicitly to the in-service teachers who assumed that the social identity of the teacher influences how courses are presented (Kelly, et al., 2004). In allowing her identity and those of her students to be known in the classroom space, Raven seeks to teach through similarities to connect with and understand her students, similarly to Melvin’s 2010 study of LGBTQ teachers’ experiences of disclosure in the classroom. Those teachers inserted their stories to connect with students who may have similar experiences and demonstrate an understanding of those experiences (Melvin 2010). In that study, the teachers took risks to express their humanity and be vulnerable with their students when they decided to reveal details about their identities, in much the same way as Mwalimu and Raven have done.

Engaging with difference in teaching practices is significant for Raven as she connects that with establishing safe classroom spaces. She expressed concern about colour-blind teachers who emphasize only seeing students and not the ‘race’ of those students: “I think that’s the worst thing to say in a classroom, because no, we all come with our own privileges and we need to acknowledge that to make sure we engage in that, and challenge it, and dismantle it within our classroom spaces.” For Raven, democratizing classroom spaces involves teachers challenging and dismantling their own privileges and the oppressive ideologies connected to those privileges.
The teachers in Kelly et al., 2004’s research study also highlighted the unequal power dynamic that exists between students and teachers and between dominant and marginalized racial identities. Like Raven, they were concerned with how educators engage with their students and acknowledge the power and inequity inherent in most classroom spaces (Kelly, et al., 2004).

### 4.3.2 Teacher as fallible student in the Equity Studies classroom

The participants reported how teaching the Equity and Social Justice course provides them with continuous learning. Each identified that their knowledge and understanding of some topics in the course are stronger than others. Mwalimu explained, “my knowledge and understanding was a little bit stronger on some topics than others, so I saw the course as a learning piece for me.” He did not perceive himself as having all of the answers, but saw the course as a way to further his own learning. Mwalimu described his teaching philosophy as a work in progress, explicitly stating, “I don’t have all the answers.” Storm similarly believes that “as equity people we have to understand: number one, we are not perfect; number two, we don’t understand everything there is to know about equity because I got schooled with some of [her students’] projects.” This demonstrates an awareness and willingness to be a student while in the role of a teacher, and to not assume to be an omniscient educator. Instead of being threatened by their lack of knowledge, the teachers expressed humility, flexibility and a willingness to learn.

Raven explicitly invites students to confront her about what she does not understand. When asked about students challenging her teaching in the classroom, she explained, “I will get often, ‘You don’t understand because you’re white.’ But I don’t see that as a challenge. I see that as ‘You’re right! I will never [understand].’ I can empathize. I can support. But I won’t understand because I can’t live that.” The concern is not placed on students challenging her authority in the classroom as a white woman teaching about ‘race,’ instead she fully embraces her identity and positionality, making a point to stand in solidarity with her students. Despite
having a multitude of life experiences and educational qualifications, these teachers did not shy away from admitting their shortcomings, unlike other teachers who they have interacted with.

Storm strongly believes that teachers committed to equity work need to be self-reflexive and demonstrate a willingness to admit how and where their teaching practices might be harmful:

I think it’s really important that even the people who are in equity work, that every so often we really take a step back and think about who we are, and how what we might be doing that we think is equity might actually be oppressing people. I could be teaching this course, but the way that I talk about it, or the way that I practice it, might actually serve to oppress people. So, really being critically self-reflexive is important. We have to be careful that we’re not oppressing in the name of equity.

For Storm, it is not just non-Equity Studies teachers who must practice self-reflexivity, but all teachers invested in equitable education practices. The vision here is that teachers will engage more readily in their own social locations and recognize how that affects students and the learning environment.

The literature reviewed in Chapter Two did not focus on teachers’ understandings of themselves as learners alongside their students. However, some of the studies did find that some pre- and in-service teachers were less likely to engage with their identities in an open-minded fashion. One teacher in Katz’s (2014) study of teachers’ experiences with critical pedagogy, did not encourage active sharing on behalf of students as to not disrupt her authority in the classroom. Instead, she saw herself as being in an expert position to correct what she deemed incorrect beliefs. Mwalimu expressed a similar ethos when discussing the necessity of Equity Studies courses (to challenge their misconceptions), but did not take the stance that he was the only expert in the room capable of disrupting those misconceptions.
Storm, Raven and Mwalimu expressed the necessity of understanding who they are in relation to their students, but to varying degrees. Explicitly revealing aspects of their identity that they believed to be pertinent to the course and student learning, Mwalimu and Raven demonstrated risk-taking and vulnerability. In contrast, Storm did not reveal in her interview whether she actively positions herself in the classroom, but did position herself as a student in her classroom. Similarly, to Mwalimu and Raven, Storm was not concerned with relinquishing expert status. Instead, they all emphasized how important it is to be open minded, willing to learn and understanding of the fact that social justice/equity work is a continuous learning process. They used their various instructional approaches to help students grasp the content and to engage them in learning, but did not believe that they held all of the answers.

4.4 Instructional Approaches and Student Engagement in Equity Studies

The following theme highlights these teachers’ reported instructional approaches to teaching Equity Studies. The teachers used a variety of instructional approaches in their classrooms and handled student engagement in different ways. The teachers also described using films, YouTube clips, TedTalks, social media, school board resources (specifically Storm and Mwalimu), and students’ own experiences, personal lives and interests as resources for their Equity Studies courses. The participants emphasized the necessity of making the classroom student-centered in order to capture and maintain student engagement.

At first, Mwalimu approached his course through traditional teaching methods: “My fault with presenting the course … was the typical university lecture, it was the PowerPoint presentation of the information, and very little or minimal amount [sic] of students doing activities.” Similarly, Storm tried to approach her course in a traditional pedagogical way: “I had a syllabus, I had all the readings and the days down pat. Didn’t work.” Instead, they changed
their instructional approaches after their first year of teaching the Equity and Social Justice course. Storm said,

it’s important to get to know who [students] are, what they’re about, what they want, what they need, and then let it drive [the course] … otherwise, if it’s just you coming down hard: ‘Okay, you’re going to copy down all these overheads and PowerPoints’ they’re really not going to give a shit.

They realized that lectures, PowerPoint presentations and strictly adhering to the syllabus or reading schedule did not work to keep students engaged or focused. Instead, they restructured their courses with student-led discussions as the priority. Student discussions dominated classroom time, with collaborative activities and mind maps as key instructional tools. Storm explained that “[w]e don’t teach. We throw the question we throw the topic and the students are the ones who take more of the speaking space and time.” Allowing students to take up the speaking space provides them with an opportunity to be open and to really express what they think.

The teachers also reportedly utilize their students’ identities and interests to provide meaningful entry points into the course content. The teachers choose to place the focus on who the students are, what they want and need, and using those understandings to structure the course. Storm utilized a Facebook page for her Equity Studies course as a way to communicate with students. She had them get into the habit of posting equity-related issues and then took them up in class. This way, students were at the forefront of deciding what was to be discussed, and Storm’s role was to facilitate the conversation and to provide additional content.

Raven chose to teach her course using students’ interests and identities. At the beginning and prior to delving into course content, Raven has students investigate their own identities as
she believed that students need to know themselves before engaging in issues of social justice. One activity she used was the identity iceberg, where students illustrated their visible social locators above the surface of the water, and their more hidden or nuanced identity markers below the surface. This activity was used as a launching pad or entry point into future lessons. Having the language to be able to talk about identity, they then delved into issues of migrant labour. She clarified why she felt the lesson was so successful:

They bought into it because five students in the class knew what it was like to have parents move for work. So, because they had this identity they could then communicate that to the other students. They could talk about it from their experience. They could then have students relate to it, and then explore it.

Raven explicitly used her students’ identities to help them understand course concepts and to make learning meaningful and immediate. This connection to students’ lived experiences is the foundation through which Raven basis her instructional approaches.

The use of class discussions is a common practice in social science/social studies classrooms, and Raven, Storm and Mwalimu’s classrooms were no different. However, they did not express how they ensured that discussions were productive or provide any guidelines they use to facilitate discussions as the teachers in Flynn (2009) did in their middle school social studies/English classroom, or specific behaviours as the teachers in Hess (2002) did in their seminars on controversial public issues. In terms of scaffolding the content, the only teacher who expressed making intentional choices about how to introduce topics was Raven. Similarly, to the teachers in the studies conducted by Flynn (2009) and Welton, Harris, La Londe and Moyer (2015), Raven had students practice being reflective about their own identities, before delving into broader issues of embodiment, identity and power.
As demonstrated by the teachers in Flynn (2009) and Welton et al. (2015), Raven, Storm and Mwalimu all used a multitude of resources to enhance student learning and engagement, such as popular culture and social media, videos and films. Raven, Storm and Mwalimu did not discuss specific instructional strategies for specific course concepts. The teachers perceived that the nature of the Equity Studies courses required them to go beyond teacher-centered activities and toward an approach that centres students’ experiences and voices. The teachers sought ways to invite students into the content using students’ own experiences. They also emphasized the necessity of diverse resources and student-centered instructional approaches to supporting their learning and encouraging students to engage with one another.

4.5 The Influence of Colleagues on the Experience of Teaching Equity Studies

Teaching Equity Studies reportedly presented challenges that were more political in nature: the placement of the courses in curriculum, and the selection of teachers. However, the educators all expressed the necessity for finding supportive administration and colleagues to help them alleviate these challenges. Experiences with colleagues ranged from administrative support when introducing the courses, to team and co-teaching, collegial backlash, and the selection of teachers best suited for Equity Studies courses. Both Raven and Storm spoke of positive experiences with their own administration as they sought to introduce the Equity and Social Justice course in their schools. Their principals were dedicated to bringing the courses into their schools right from the start. The administrative support received by Raven and Storm is in direct contrast to the active manipulation and hostility of administration that some social justice-minded educators experienced in Kelly, Brandes and Orlowski’s 2004 study. Neither Raven nor Storm faced administration outright blocking their attempts to introduce the courses, nor did they have administrators deliberate create scheduling conflicts to lower class enrolment (Kelly, Brandes & Orlowski, 2004).
Despite having been a faculty member at her school for the past 14 years, Raven remembers the tense atmosphere that developed when colleagues lost sections of their own courses to make room for her Equity and Social Justice course. Raven also questioned the rationale for assigning teachers to Equity Studies courses. She recalled a conversation with a new teacher, who admitted to having no prior experience or knowledge of equity and social justice and ended up teaching the Equity and Social Justice course as a Long Term Occasional teacher. Raven wondered how that teacher’s course was taught in comparison to her own. She described her own course as one of “action and challenge” and questioned how the LTO teacher would be engaging in the course content with the affluent, predominately white population of her school.

When facilitating a professional development session, Storm was confronted by white Equity and Social Justice teachers who were defensive when presented with activities around ‘race’. Storm described their reactions: “‘[h]ow dare you think about doing these kinds of activities? We are not going to talk about race. Equity is only about gender’.” Those reactions, however, fail to take into account that there is a Gender Studies course that focuses primarily on gender, whereas the Equity and Social Justice course allows for a more nuanced, in-depth discussion of ‘race.’ This reported complete dismissal of race by white Equity Studies teachers is quite similar to the findings of Francis and le Roux (2011), Picower (2009) and Solomon, Portelli, Daniel and Campbell (2005) in their studies of teacher candidates. They found that white teacher candidates were more likely to react negatively to issues of ‘race’ in the classroom and were less likely to engage with topics of ‘race’ or ethnicity in their classrooms (Francis & le Roux, 2011; Picower, 2009; Solomon et al., 2005).

Lastly, the teachers were particularly concerned with finding like-minded educators to collaborate with to develop Equity Studies courses. In Raven’s school, the Social Science and
Humanities department is linked with the Physical Education department where it is difficult to “find your kin,” as she explained. Instead, as opposed to being partnered with Canadian and Global Studies, she is working within a department that “[doesn’t] necessarily see it.” To counter this, the participants expressed the necessity of finding colleagues to collaborate with, whether they were fellow teachers at the school, or from other school boards. During the first year, the course was run at his school, Mwalimu and one of his colleagues each taught one section of Equity and Social Justice: From Theory to Practice. Mwalimu discussed how he collaborated with his colleague: “[the teacher] who taught the course with me last semester, we had a great rapport.”

He stressed the importance of having a shared point or “community of shared resources” to help deliver the course. Together, him and his colleague were able to bring together resources from other school boards and their own personal experiences to develop a “road map” in which to follow for teaching the course. Similarly, Storm emphasized how lucky she felt to be able to team teach the course, as it allowed her to “draw from different places” and share in a feeling of community and collaboration. Storm emphasized the importance of collaboration for equity-minded educators: “…a lot of people in equity, I find, they feel like they’re alone. But if you know who to work with, connect with, more things are possible.” The possibilities for innovation and transformative learning experiences are heightened with collaboration and colleague support. Additionally, the support received from fellow teachers was perceived to provide teachers with a sense of community that allowed teachers to feel less isolated in their work.

The teachers’ experiences with white and/or oppressive colleagues is consistent with the literature on white teachers and their comfort and knowledge about ‘race.’ These experiences demonstrate the need for further professional development for teachers teaching Equity Studies.
The disheartening interactions with colleagues, underscores how important it is to find a community within equity work. Raven, Storm and Mwalimu have all had differing experiences with administration and colleagues while teaching Equity Studies courses. Their experiences demonstrate the necessity for supportive administration and a community of equity-minded colleagues from which to draw emotional and pedagogical support.

4.6 Conclusion

The purpose of this research study was to understand teachers’ experiences of teaching Equity Studies courses in Ontario secondary schools. The findings reported in this chapter highlight the diversity of that experience and underscore how Equity Studies teachers are demonstrating critical reflection in their practice. The teachers were united about the importance of Equity Studies, demonstrated a sense of reflexivity and desired for their courses to be impactful, empowering and positive experiences. This study and its corresponding findings contribute to the literature on how teachers understand their social identities and social justice education more broadly, how they intentionally use those identities as part of their pedagogy and the various ways they enhance and promote student engagement and learning in social science/social studies classrooms. These courses are unique in Ontario and provide an important perspective on how teachers and students engage with equity and social justice at a time when the province, in both education and elsewhere, is looking to make equitable changes.

The participants all emphasized the necessity of Equity Studies courses in education as a relevant and empowering discipline that introduced students to new ideas and had long-lasting effects. The participants had profound experiences of ‘race’ and racism in their childhoods, with administration, and in the school community that influenced and motivated their Equity Studies teaching practice. The self-awareness demonstrated through their reflection on past experiences with injustice was further showcased in their understanding of their teaching philosophy, which
they understood as flexible and student-centered. They were not concerned with maintaining “expert” status in the classroom and fully embraced opportunities to learn. Lastly, the teachers identified a variety of challenges and supports to and for their teaching of Equity Studies. The participants focused on the unwillingness of other teachers’ to engage with issues of ‘race’ and stressed the importance of finding likeminded educators to deliver the courses and to collaborate with, not only as an educator, but as an individual concerned with equity and social justice.

The next, and final chapter, discusses the implications of this study on the broader educational community, and my own teaching practice and professional identity more specifically, as extrapolated from the research findings. From these implications, recommendations for school administration, teachers, teacher education programs and policymakers are provided. The chapter concludes with identified areas for further research and final comments about the research study.
Chapter Five: Conclusion

5.0 Introduction

In this chapter, I begin by presenting an overview of the key findings from this study and their significance to educational research. Then, I discuss the implications of this study on the broader educational community and reflect on the implications on my own professional identity and practice. Next, I provide recommendations for teachers, teacher education programs, schools, administrators and policymakers based on the implications presented. Finally, I explore areas for future research on Equity Studies in Ontario secondary schools.

5.1. Overview of Key Findings and their Significance

This research study explored the experiences of Equity Studies educators in Ontario secondary schools. Specifically, the study focused on teachers’ instructional strategies, and the perceived effects of their social identity on their teaching practice and classroom environment. Through semi-structured interviews, the following five themes emerged: 1) the relevance of Equity Studies in education; 2) the influence of experiences of ‘race’ and racism on motivations to teach Equity Studies; 3) teaching philosophy and self-reflexivity in the Equity Studies classroom; 4) instructional approaches and student engagement in Equity Studies; and 5) the influence of colleagues on the experience of teaching Equity Studies.

The participants reported the Equity Studies as both a relevant and empowering subject in education. They believed the courses are connected to students’ lived experiences and are a way to help students find and strengthen their own voice. The educators envisioned the course as an opportunity to introduce students to new ideas and people and to challenge the dominance of mainstream social justice figures. Although they all felt that the course content and skills remained with students long after the course was over, they acknowledge their inability to
measure how successful students are in engaging with the course content outside of the classroom.

The factors influencing the participants to teach Equity Studies courses were varied within their similarities. They had profound experiences of ‘race’ and racism in their childhoods that impacted their understanding of equity and social justice. Their experiences with administration, the school community and in their classroom spaces further motivated them to pursue equity in their teaching. The self-reflexivity demonstrated through their reflection on past experiences with injustice was further showcased in their understanding of their teaching philosophy. None of the participants described their teaching philosophy as fully formed and rigid. Instead, they described their philosophies as student-focused works-in-progress. There was a deep awareness of their own social locations and privilege and a core belief that education was empowering and liberating. Additionally, the teachers emphasized the importance of being students in the classroom too. They were willing to learn from their students and were unconcerned about making mistakes in the classroom.

The participants believed that establishing an equitable classroom culture in which their identities and the identities of their students were made known and embraced was an important part of their teaching philosophy and practice. Although the teachers did not go into complete detail about their teaching strategies, they all expressed that their classroom spaces were student-centered and worked best when traditional delivery methods were avoided. The student-centered approach allowed them to use students’ identities and experiences as entry points in order for students to grasp the content in meaningful ways.

Lastly, the teachers identified their colleagues as a primary challenge and support in their Equity Studies teaching practice. The participants questioned the unwillingness of some teachers
to engage in issues of ‘race’ in their Equity Studies classes, and were concerned about the quality of equity education provided by those colleagues. Finally, they stressed the importance of making connections with other equity-minded educators to draw inspiration from, to work collaboratively with, and to alleviate the potential for isolation within their field.

The research on Ontario educators who teach the Equity Studies curriculum is virtually nonexistent. This study sought to fill that gap. This research study suggests that Equity Studies educators in Ontario have particular concerns about equity in education and its impact on their students’ lifelong engagement in social justice. They actively take the risk to engage with their own identities and that of their students because they believe in the benefits of making identity known and visible in the classroom. In conducting this research, this study provided space for educator’s voices and allowed them to share their experiences and teaching practice with the broader educational community.

5.2 Implications

These sections explore the implications of the educators’ experiences of teaching Equity Studies courses. First, I share the broad implications for the educational community, focusing on students and their families, teachers and teacher education programs, and administrators. Second, I reflect on my own professional identity as an equity-minded pre-service teacher and the influence of that identity on my future practice as an educator.

5.2.1 Broad: The educational community

The educators placed an emphasis on the relevance and necessity of Equity Studies in the secondary school curriculum, focusing on its real-life applications and 21st-century nature. Throughout the interviews, the educators highlighted how the courses challenge students’ assumptions and provided examples of moments when students applied the learning gained from the Equity Studies course to conversations with family and friends. These beliefs about Equity
Studies suggests that there may be inherent value to taking these courses and that the benefits are readily observable. The teachers also shared experiences of witnessing or becoming aware of moments of marginalization some of their students’ experience. They connected their students’ lived experiences with the course content, hoping to empower students to better understand their experiences and vocalize them in productive ways. The Equity Studies courses may provide the only outlet for students to discuss the real connections between personal experiences and academic and political course content.

Each of the Equity Studies educators mentioned explicitly disclosing their social identities in their classrooms. They wanted students to understand their perspectives and to think critically about how those perspectives influence their learning. The teachers did not conceptualize their teaching philosophies as rigid, but spoke about their ever-changing teaching philosophies. The constant self-reflexivity demonstrated by the teachers about their teaching philosophy suggests that Equity Studies teachers conceptualize their teaching philosophies as developing. Equity Studies teachers may be more willing to demonstrate flexibility in their teaching, rather than control. The direct connection the teachers made between their social identities and their interest in teaching the Equity Studies course suggests that other teachers may be as deeply connected to the Equity Studies content as their students and wish to engage in the curriculum in personal ways.

The courses were implemented in the teachers’ schools through their own activism, suggesting that the onus is on teachers to fight for the courses to be included in their schools. The leadership demonstrated by the teachers implies a commitment to teaching the courses and a belief that the courses are worthwhile. However, for those teachers, the introduction of the Equity Studies courses in their schools was not always without drawbacks. The tension between
the Equity Studies educators and their colleagues suggests that there are politics around introducing the courses as Equity Studies teachers may be perceived as “stirring the pot” by asking for increased resources or “taking away” another teacher’s teaching sections. Equity Studies teachers may feel isolated from their colleagues by deciding to advocate for equity-minded initiatives, such as the Equity Studies courses. Experiences with school administration when implementing the Equity Studies courses in their schools suggest that support from administrators is crucial to helping Equity Studies educators feel supported and acknowledged for their work. This support from administrators may help offset some of the hostility Equity Studies teachers may experience from their colleagues. The Equity Studies teachers emphasized the importance of collegial support. Co-teaching, and “finding your kin” were highlighted as beneficial and necessary to delivering the courses. Equity Studies teachers may benefit from collaborating with other like-minded educators to help curb collegial isolation and deliver more consistent and impactful curriculum.

Similarly, teacher-participants had doubts about the qualifications and self-reflexivity of other Equity Studies teachers and their impact on the courses themselves. Some of the teachers the Equity Studies educators came into contact with had little to no experience with social justice or were unwilling to confront their own racial identities and how to integrate the topic of ‘race’ into the Equity Studies curriculum. Specifically, the backlash one of the Equity Studies teacher-participants faced during a professional development session with other Equity Studies educators implies that the content of Equity Studies courses shifts drastically depending on the teacher’s comfort and self-reflexivity levels. Between the inexperienced teachers and the ones who dismiss ‘race’ as important to the course, and the purposes and goals of Equity Studies courses not clearly defined by the curriculum, may result in inconsistent course delivery. Lastly, the teachers
expressed concern about the course level of the Equity Studies courses. The mixed or M-level designation and the negative response the teachers observed by parents, students, and fellow colleagues suggests that courses are not being taken seriously and could be perceived as important if given the university (U) course level.

5.2.2 Narrow: My professional identity and practice

The time spent with the Equity Studies educators in their interviews has invigorated my passion for teaching. Although I am most interested in teaching an Equity Studies course, these interviews reminded me of how I can practice my core personal and political beliefs as a general teaching philosophy. I was reminded that equity education does not exist solely within Equity Studies courses, but should be prevalent in all aspects of education. Prior to speaking with the educators, I strongly believed in the importance of social justice education as a personal and political endeavor. As a pre-service teacher, I entered my teacher education program looking for ways to teach in socially just ways, but I had yet to have an impactful experience until these interviews. The educators’ dedication to being open and honest about their identities to their students and intentionally reflecting on how those identities influence their teaching practice and student relationships solidified my belief about how teachers should engage with students in their classrooms.

I was heartened to hear the teachers discuss education as liberating and political and as an experience that can either challenge the status quo or maintain it. The self-reflexivity demonstrated by the educators challenged me to think deeply about how my own pedagogy may challenge or contribute to the oppression and marginalization of my students. The experiences the teachers shared with me emphasized my understanding that explicitly naming identity in the classroom is a worthwhile practice. My understanding of the teacher’s role in the Equity Studies classroom is directly connected to how I conceptualize the purpose of schooling in general.
Recognizing and engaging with students’ humanity, purposefully teaching to the whole student, seeking to develop their ability to advocate for themselves, and nurturing their capacity to enact change in their communities will be an integral part of my teaching philosophy moving forward.

Most importantly, the Equity Studies educators highlighted the importance of collaboration in equity education. They reminded me that teachers do not have to “go it alone” and can, and should, seek out support from administrators and colleagues whenever possible. The mere existence of the Equity Studies teachers interviewed is evidence that there are teachers who are willing and able to be teacher leaders and advocate for what is best for their students. In my own teaching practice, I want to intentionally seek out other like-minded colleagues and help cultivate a supportive community in which teachers work together, share their best practices and use their collective power to make change.

5.3 Recommendations

The following are recommendations for schools, teachers and administration that emerge from an analysis of the implications inherent in the research findings. At the school level, principals should be open to helping teachers implement Equity Studies courses. Supporting teachers as they seek to introduce these courses would be beneficial to developing teachers’ capacity for leadership in their schools. The public support and encouragement would assist teachers who face colleagues who may be hostile to their efforts to implement Equity Studies courses. Doing so would help nurture a staff community in which teachers are supportive of each other’s leadership and curricular endeavours. Other staff, such as guidance counselors, should also be willing to speak with students during course selection about Equity Studies course options. This would require guidance counsellors to be aware of the purposes and goals of the course in order to be best relay those to students.
When administrators, teachers and other staff are on board with Equity Studies, the presence of those courses within school culture is strengthened and students are more likely to believe the courses to be worthwhile. Additionally, all of the Equity Studies educators interviewed mentioned their dissatisfaction with the course-level of the Equity Studies courses. None of the courses are at the university (U) level, but are mixed (M; college and university combined). If, by implementing the Equity Studies curriculum in the first place, one can assume the Ministry of Education believes the courses to be important, a revision to the course level should be considered. Changing the course level to a university-level may elevate the courses (and, therefore, their content) from what could be considered “fluff” to a more rigorous academic standard.

Additionally, administrators should be more mindful about the teachers they select to teach Equity Studies courses. Delegating the courses to teachers without any experience in social justice content (and who fully and openly admit to that lack of experience) weakens the quality of the courses. This is not to say that teachers cannot learn, but administrators and teachers in positions of responsibility (namely department heads) should provide the appropriate resources and time for potential Equity Studies teachers to attend professional development sessions. The unwillingness for teachers to engage in a critical analysis of their own ‘race’ and ‘race’ in general means that teachers should be provided with professional development sessions that allow the space for teachers to navigate the implications of that social identity marker on their teaching practice. Developing professional development that is non-confrontational to assist teachers in learning about ‘race’ is crucial. However, teachers should also be willing to engage in self-reflexivity in order to provide the best learning experience for their Equity Studies students.
5.4 Areas for Further Research

This research study sought to begin a conversation about teachers’ experience of teaching Equity Studies courses in Ontario because of the uniqueness of the courses. There is yet to be a comprehensive study of Equity Studies courses in Ontario since they were implemented in 2013. Due to the highly personal nature of the courses in their discussion of identity and socio-political ideologies, the ways in which teachers engage their students in the content is an important area of study. Moving forward, further research on the reported explicit challenges and benefits of bringing student and teacher identity into the classroom is needed. Although this study began to explore some of those advantages and disadvantages, there is depth lacking in this research project. A better understanding of student and teacher identity would be beneficial for pre- and in-service teachers and teacher education programs in order to help teachers navigate the ever-changing political landscape of education. This research study only focused on teacher experiences, but a study on students’ experiences of being in the Equity Studies classroom is imperative. In order to truly understand the impact of Equity Studies and to assess the benefits of the courses, research should be conducted on how students understand and engage with the courses. Finally, as this study specifically did not focus on Catholic school teachers due to the complexities that arise from the infusion of Roman Catholic pedagogy into social justice education, research on this particular religious context could be the next step in fully understanding the impact of the Equity Studies courses in Ontario schools.

5.5 Concluding Comments

The research findings from this study reveal the significance of exploring teacher experiences of teaching Equity Studies courses. The fact that the courses are unique in Canada provides an interesting avenue through which to explore the innovations within education in Ontario specifically, and Canada more broadly. The fact is that teachers do not enter classrooms
as unmarked bodies without nuanced identities. To dismiss or ignore the ways in which identity is embedded in teaching practice is to ignore opportunities to better teaching practice. Research studies that explore teacher identity, especially in connection to personally-charged content like Equity Studies is crucial to improving pedagogy and curriculum itself.

The opportunity for educators to discuss their practice is an important part of developing teacher practice for both pre- and in-service teachers. As a teacher candidate dedicated to and concerned about the positioning of social justice in education, this research study allowed me to explore my own beliefs about equity and social justice education. I began this study rooted in my belief that education is the conduit through which change, small or large, can be made and that students can be empowered to make those changes with the right educational experience. Equity Studies courses are a distinct way to merge personal experience with academia, allowing students and teachers alike to feel a visceral connection to education.
References


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Appendix A: Informed Consent Letter

Date: ______________________________
Dear ______________________________,

My name is Krystal Valentine and I am a student in the Master of Teaching (MT) program at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto (OISE/UT). A component of this degree program involves conducting a small-scale qualitative research study. My research will focus on teachers’ experiences of teaching Equity Studies in Ontario secondary schools, their instructional strategies and the perceived influence of their social identity and position in the classroom. I think that your knowledge and experience will provide insights into this topic.

I hope to learn how teachers perceive the influence of their social identity and how they manage their identities in the classroom within the context of Equity Studies. The overarching goal is to share the insights from your teaching experience and practice with the wider educational community to benefit teacher education programs broadly, and curriculum development, ongoing professional development and the development of my own teaching practice in the Equity Studies discipline specifically.

Your participation in this research will involve one roughly 60-75 minute interview, which will be transcribed and audio-recorded. The contents of this interview will be used for my research project, which will include a final paper and informal presentations to my classmates. I may also present my research findings via conference presentations and/or through publication. You will be assigned a pseudonym to maintain your anonymity and I will not use your name or any other content that might identify you in my written work, oral presentations, or publications. This information will remain confidential. Any information that identifies your school or students will also be excluded.

The interview data will be stored on my password-protected computer and the only person who will have access to the research data will be my course instructor. You are free to change your mind about your participation at any time, and to withdraw even after you have consented to participate. You may also choose to decline to answer any specific question during the interview. Participants will be asked to share their social identities, including but not limited to, their racial, cultural, linguistic, religious, gender and sexual orientation, which may elicit emotional responses and cause participants to feel vulnerable. There are no other known risks to participation and transcripts will be shared to ensure accuracy. I will destroy the audio recording after the paper has been presented and/or published, which may take up to a maximum of five years after the data has been collected.

Please sign this consent form, if you agree to be interviewed. The second copy is for your records. I am very grateful for your participation.
Sincerely,
Krystal Valentine

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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 from this research study at any time without penalty.
I have read the letter provided to me by Krystal Valentine 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 Protocol

Thank you for participating in my research study.

My name is Krystal Valentine and I am a student in the Master of Teaching program at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto. I am currently working toward certification in the Intermediate/Senior stream with History and English teaching subjects. I hope to eventually teach Equity Studies in the Social Science and Humanities discipline. I completed my Bachelor of Arts in Women’s and Gender Studies and History. My Women’s and Gender Studies background specifically influenced my interest in Equity Studies and social identity and positionality (how we position ourselves in the world around us).

The purpose of this research study is to explore teachers’ experiences of teaching Equity Studies courses in Ontario secondary schools. The interview today will be 60-75 minutes in length and comprised of approximately 26 questions. The questions are divided into five sections beginning with your educational and professional background, followed by specific questions about your teaching practice, social identity and position and its influence on your teaching practice and the classroom community and will end with any recommendations you have for teachers.

At this point, I would like to remind you that your participation is voluntary and that you have the right to withdraw your participation at any time. Do you have any questions before we begin?

*Provide consent form to be signed or collect pre-signed forms*

To begin, may you please state your name for the recording?

Section 1: Background Information

1. Can you describe your educational background?
2. How long have you been teaching?
   a. How long have you been teaching Equity Studies courses?
3. What motivated you to become an educator?
   a. What motivated you to teach Equity Studies courses?
4. What Equity Studies courses have you taught or currently teach?
   a. Which other Social Science & Humanities courses have you taught or do you currently teach?

Section 2: Educational Practice:

Teaching Philosophy & Influences

1. How would you describe your teaching philosophy?
   a. Where does Equity Studies fit within that philosophy?
2. How do you understand the role of Equity Studies in a student’s secondary education?
3. Can you tell me about any experiences (including formal education, pre-educational and non-traditional) that may have sparked your desire to teach Equity Studies? (K-12 schooling, university, community involvement etc.)?
   a. How about experiences that informed your approach to teaching Equity Studies?

Teaching Strategies & Experiences Teaching Equity Studies
4. Can you walk me through a lesson you liked or felt was particularly successful?
   i. PROMPTS: content & topics, learning objectives/goals, activities, assessment
   b. How did you prepare or design the lesson?
      i. PROMPTS: Resources, class community/background, colleague support (co-planning)
5. Can you walk me through a lesson that you felt was not particularly successful?
   a. What made it so?
      i. PROMPTS: teacher preparedness, student readiness, content knowledge, student response...
6. To what extent do (or did) you account for your students’ backgrounds and identities in your teaching of Equity Studies?
   a. PROMPTS: Planning the unit, selecting topics and materials...

Section 3: Teacher Positionality & Pedagogical Decisions
1. How would you describe your social identity?
   a. PROMPTS: race, sexuality, gender, class, education, ability, faith, nationality...
2. Do you find that there are topics that you feel more comfortable teaching than others?
   a. Why might that be so?
   b. Are there aspects of your identity that make it easier/more comfortable to address those topics?
3. Have you felt any personal hesitation when teaching particular content or topics? Which?
   a. Why might that be so?
   b. Are there aspects of your identity that make it difficult to address those topics?
4. How do you approach and address sensitive or controversial topics when teaching Equity Studies courses?

Section 4: Classroom Practices: Teacher-Student Relationship, Student Responses and Classroom Culture
1. You previously stated that you have taught or currently teach [insert course]. Could you describe the community of students in that course?
   a. Can you describe some of the common reactions of these students when they are learning Equity Studies content and/or concepts?
      i. What do you believe are some of the reasons for these reactions?
2. How do you know when students are engaged/disengaged/comfortable/uncomfortable when you are teaching Equity Studies?
   a. How do you address students’ discomfort?
3. Have you ever discussed your own identity and experiences of privilege and/or oppression with your students?
i. If yes,
   1. What prompted you to disclose your identity and experiences?
   2. Why did you feel that was important to do?
   3. How did students respond to your disclosure?
ii. If no, would you mind explaining your reasoning?
b. To what extent would you say you utilize aspects of your identity (explicitly or implicitly) to build community in the classroom?

4. From your experience teaching Equity Studies, have you noticed a difference in how students who share one or more aspects of your identity, versus those who do not, respond to your teaching?
   a. Why do think there is a difference?
   b. Is there a moment like this that stands out to you?
      i. If yes, what made you notice this difference?
      ii. Did you respond to that difference? How so?

5. Could you describe a time when you responded to a student who openly challenged something you were teaching?
   a. PROMPTS: the content of the lesson, emotions (of you and the student), reactions from the class
   b. What was the outcome of that approach?
   c. Would you describe your approach as successful?
   d. Why do you think that particular student challenged your teaching?
      i. PROMPTS: similarities or differences with teacher identity

Section 5: Closing & Recommendations
1. What do you love about teaching these courses [or the specific course]?
2. What do you feel is challenging about teaching Equity Studies courses [or the specific course]?
   a. Resources
   b. Comfort (their own and students)
   c. Student buy-in/engagement
   d. Curriculum (broadness or narrowness)
3. Have you sought any additional training or education on the issues in the course(s)?
   a. If yes: Did you feel that it alleviated any concerns or challenges and how so?
   b. If no: Would you like to?
4. What advice do you have for teachers who are new to teaching Equity Studies courses?
5. Do you have any final thoughts?

Thank you for your time and thoughtful responses.