MAKING MEANING OF GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE: ELITE SUBJECTIVITY AND GENDER PERFORMANCE IN A CANADIAN PRIVATE SCHOOL

by

Traci Scheepstra

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Department of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education
University of Toronto

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Abstract

School-related gender-based violence is a global epidemic that affects students at all levels of public and private education. The study outlined in this dissertation started from a need to understand the scope of sexual harassment and sexism in schools to support my daughter through her experience of gender-based violence. Situated in an elite, Canadian private school, in the heart of a large urban city in Southern Ontario, this five-month study examines how “smart” Grade 7 and 8 Oak Lane Academy students make meaning of gender-based violence. I articulate what it means to “become” elite, and how smart and elite subjectivity was not the same for all students in a place committed to gender equity.

In theorizing the ethnographic experience through a feminist poststructural lens, I was able to question normative gender discourses and assumptions by observing student performances of masculinity and femininity, which revealed a deeper understanding of the cultural narratives and social practices of the school. I illustrate how “boys” received privileges that were not afforded to “girls,” reinforcing patriarchal ideologies of entitlement, superiority, and hegemonic masculinity. I also address the hidden curriculum as a mechanism for maintaining dominant gender discourses, which enforced gender inequality and set the conditions for gender-based violence to exist and persist. In particular, I highlight symbolic violence as the seed of larger systemic violence.
In the process of conducting classroom observations, interviews, and focus groups, I was able to look closely at what it means to be “a boy” and “a girl” at Oak Lane Academy, which perpetuated male privilege. Transitioning from subjectivity to relationality, I apply these meanings to demonstrate how students embodied and enacted masculinity and femininity, directly impacting how they navigated, negotiated, resisted, and redefined peer relationships and understood love. Lastly, I illustrate the implicit and explicit ways the Grade 7 and 8 students engaged in “play” through games and game-like behaviour inside and outside of the classroom. The implications of these findings offer new understandings of school policies and procedures, curriculum, pedagogy, and the curricular spaces in which students learn in order to more effectively address school-related gender-based violence.
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I also honour my father, Eugene “Gene” Cody Spencer, who passed away nine months before the completion of my degree. I know how proud he was of my commitment to studies in education. He lives in my heart forever as one of my greatest life teachers. I love you, Dad.
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CHAPTER ONE  
INTRODUCING SCHOOL RELATED GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

It was a late September evening in 2010 when I entered my thirteen-year-old daughter’s room to tuck her in for bed.¹ I could tell she was visibly upset by something she was struggling to share with me. Rachel² rarely held her tongue when it came to her feelings. My husband and I had established open lines of communication with both of our children from a young age so they could speak freely in our family. I sat down on her bed and gently coaxed her to tell me what was troubling her. After some hesitation, she revealed that she felt increasingly uncomfortable attending school because of three male students in her Grade 8 class. She proceeded to tell me how these boys had persistently sexually harassed and assaulted at least six girls in the class, including her. She described girls being pushed into lockers and being grinded on from behind, bra straps being pulled, bums being smacked, being called derogatory names like “bitch,” and being asked repeatedly for blow jobs. Earlier in the day while Rachel was at her desk eating lunch one of the boys came up beside her, unzipped his pants and said, “I’d take it out, but it’s not hard right now.” This was not how Rachel had imagined beginning her final year of elementary school as a Grade 8 student. It was a year she had long anticipated to be fun.

¹ This story is narrated to the best of my ability, but I recognize that some details may have been altered over time. Shortly after the incident I wrote out as much as I could remember from my own perspective, while asking my daughter to check my notes for accuracy. I have also referred to the many emails sent to the school during this period.
² I have used my daughter’s real name with her permission. However, all other names mentioned throughout this dissertation are pseudonyms. I will discuss the process for choosing pseudonyms in the methodology chapter.
I listened quietly as Rachel recounted her story. These were boys she had been in school with since Grade 1. These were boys she had thought of as friends, one of whom she had actually spent time with outside of school in years past. She was angry and felt violated, but did not know what to do to stop the barrage of violence. When she was through speaking, I told her it was my responsibility to contact the school Principal and Vice-Principal, which she vehemently protested. Rachel was frightened of the potential repercussions that reporting these events would have on her and the other girls. I promised Rachel that I would insist their anonymity be protected, but I could not withhold the information she had provided to me from the school. Fortunately, the email I sent to the principal that evening was answered immediately and I had an appointment the following day. However, when I arrived at the school during the lunch hour, Rachel and her female peers had already reported the violence to the Vice-Principal. They decided on their own that they had had enough of the daily abuse.

The sexual offenses described above took place in classrooms (during class time and at lunch), in hallways, and on the playground during school recesses. Not one adult in the school was aware of what was happening even though it was ongoing for three weeks before it was reported. The boys were immediately suspended and the police were involved, which is standard public-school policy in Ontario for illegal acts such as sexual harassment/assault.

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3 Only 6 out of 100 incidents of sexual violence are reported to the police (Ontario Coalition of Rape Crisis Centres, n.d.) because victims often feel powerless, shame, do not think they will be taken seriously, or fear retaliation for their claims (Muise, 2014; Paperny, 2015). It is very common for students to feel frightened about reporting incidents of peer violence (sexual and otherwise), which often results in incidents going unreported in schools (Falconer, Edwards, & MacKinnon, 2008; Leach, Dunne, & Salvi, 2014).

4 Repercussions from reporting incidents of sexual violence are common in schools, especially when other students weigh in on the issue. Falconer et al., (2008) describe how a female student (who was sexually assaulted) at an Ontario high school was re-victimized (sexually harassed and bullied) after students in her school heard about the first incident. In time, the student was transferred to another high school in the region while the perpetrators remained in the school.
(Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009, 2011, 2012a, 2012b, 2015a, 2016; Toronto District School Board, 2010a). One mother decided to remove her accused son from the school permanently, setting off rumours that he had been expelled. The news travelled swiftly, and by the next day all of the Grade 8 students were aware of the situation. Rachel and the other girls were called “snakes” and angry messages were posted on Facebook. It was more terrifying than Rachel could have imagined and she came home from school crying for days. Although most of the backlash was from male friends of the three boys, there were a few Grade 8 female students who questioned whether the girls should have reported the abuse or not. These were girls in other Grade 8 classes who were not subject to the abuse. Rachel was even rebuked by a close female friend for “telling” on the boys. The girl felt the boys were just playing around.5 As well, the school Principal revealed to me that some parents felt the boys were dealt with too harshly. It became evident that there was more concern for the boys’ well-being than the girls who had been victimized.

When two of the three boys returned to school after a few days away, the Vice-Principal pulled together all of the students involved in the situation. He did not ask if the girls wanted to participate in the conversation and parents were never included in the process. Rather, he requested the girls tell the boys how it felt to be sexually harassed/assaulted and he expected the boys to apologize. Rachel was chosen by the other girls to be the spokesperson for the group. This did not bode well for her in the long term. She alone became a new target of the two boys and their friends. For the majority of her Grade 8 year, they called her names, shouted rude comments at her, gave her menacing looks, excluded her

5 Excusing sexually aggressive/violent behaviour as a joke/means for humour or fun either by the perpetrator(s) or bystander(s) is not uncommon, particularly for children and youth in the context of schools (Kerbs & Jolley, 2007; Thorne, 1993). This topic will be explored in depth in Chapter Seven.
from group activities, and stole her belongings. They also continued to blame her for their friend being removed from the school by coming up to her throughout the year and asserting it was her fault their friend was gone. The boys were enraged. Together they used their strength in numbers to overpower Rachel.

Although the Principal, Vice Principal, and teachers were well aware of the increasing problem by this point, and a few whole class interventions were implemented in the winter/spring of 2011, the situation persisted. The two boys who had been suspended had sporadic check-ins with the Vice Principal, but their behaviour towards Rachel was only minimally addressed despite my numerous emails and repeated visits to the school. Instead, Rachel was recommended to see a school social worker so she could “develop resiliency skills in dealing with peer interactions.” At one point it was even suggested that perhaps she was being too sensitive. We also offered Rachel the option of attending a new school, but she felt that would send a message to the boys that they had “won.” She insisted they would not “break” her. She would not give them the pleasure. We all knew, as a family, it was a no-win situation for Rachel. As a parent, I had never felt so powerless to protect my child, nor had I ever felt so angry.

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6 This quote was recorded from the Consent for Service form written by the school Principal to our family. When any service is requested/recommended to support a student with specific learning or interpersonal needs, a consent form is filled out by the school and must be signed by the parents/guardians of the child in question. We chose not to sign the form or return it to the school, as we felt the suggestion for Rachel to see a social worker under the pretenses of developing resiliency was ridiculous. In our opinion she was already incredibly resilient in how she managed to attend school each day under such volatile circumstances. She did, however, require counseling to deal with the recurrent traumatic stress of attending school, and to talk about how it felt emotionally to be violated and silenced on a daily basis by her peers, teachers, and the school administration.

7 We had serious concerns about Rachel’s emotional well-being as she was so deeply impacted by her daily experiences at school. Research indicates that gender-based violence has negative emotional and educational consequences on children and adolescence including trouble sleeping, missed school, behavioural changes, and switching schools altogether (Boyer, 2008; Chang, Hayter, & Lin, 2010; Hill & Kearl, 2011; Larkin, Rice, & Russell, 1996; Pepler, 2006).
The study outlined in this thesis started from a need to understand the scope of sexual assault/harassment and sexism in schools so that I could support my daughter. Although I already had extensive knowledge of school violence (Aronson, 2000; Gladden, 2002; Harber & Sakade, 2009), I had studied little that related directly to gender and sexuality. Through the process of gathering information on my daughter’s experience, I quickly found myself within a much larger field of research on gender-based violence. The deeper I journeyed into the research the more I found questions unanswered and problems unresolved (e.g., what was the difference between school-related versus a generalized understanding of gender-based violence? What was the meaning of “gender,” and how was “violence” defined?). I also found the lengthy process of looking for information to support my child and our family to be increasingly frustrating.

I was able to find articles on aspects of gender-based violence such as sexual harassment, rape, or homophobia, but very little research that was specific to an overview of school-related gender-based violence (what to do, where to get support, and so forth) or what was manifesting at the root of the problem. Many studies I found were focused on bullying, but failed to explore issues of gender and sexuality in educational contexts and relied on psychological rather than sociological analysis (Leach et al., 2014; Parkes, 2015). These studies also tended to categorize boy and girl behaviour based on biological and essentialist notions of gender, rather than gender as a social construct (e.g., McMaster, Connolly, Pepler, & Craig, 2002; Pepler, Craig, Connolly, Yuile, McMaster, & Jiang, 2006; Rodkin & Berger, 2008). I did manage to find a few Ontario Ministry of Education documents that touched upon the subject of school related gender-based violence, but there were inconsistencies between them, which I found to be highly problematic and confusing (Ontario Ministry of
As a doctoral candidate, I had access to volumes of literature and the research skills to discover (some of) what I was looking for, which was fortunate for my family and daughter. Yet, I often felt I was floundering in the dark as I tried to navigate this new terrain. I kept imagining many other parents with children like Rachel who might be at a loss with little to no information available to them. How would they navigate the system and how would their child fare during the process? I also thought about how powerless I had felt in my daughter’s school with the knowledge I did have. Before the incident, I was a regular face in my children’s school, as a parent volunteer and member of the parent council. I had a strong working relationship with the school Principal and many of the teachers. Yet, throughout the 2010-2011 school year, I was kept at arms-length and felt dismissed on many occasions when it came to talking about my daughter. I thought, if a privileged, highly educated, engaged, and involved parent such as myself was feeling powerless, I could not imagine what other parents (e.g., working class, racially marginalized, or English language learners) might be experiencing. This sparked a desire to refocus my doctoral work towards an investigation of school-related gender-based violence with students at the middle school grade level (Grade 7 and 8), with the goal of filling theoretical gaps in the literature and addressing the needs of the school community.

My son also contributed significantly to the orientation of this study through his stories of boyhood. He shared valuable insights on masculinity and the complex nature of gendered (specifically boy/girl and boy/boy) relationships. His candour led me down avenues of research that I might have otherwise left uncovered (e.g., gender performance, gender as
socially constructed, patriarchy). Without a doubt, being a mother of two differently gender-identified children in this age group provided a unique perspective to my work. Not only did I have my own children to observe and learn from, but also their friends who would visit our home and share stories with me. Additionally, my twenty-plus years as an arts educator working with students provided much insight into school culture. Therefore, I made the decision to design a research project that would allow me to address the various aspects of school-related gender-based violence by delving into an investigation of youth subjectivities, student relationships, and performances of gender discourses. It was my aim to come to a more conclusive understanding of what constitutes gender-based violence in schools in order to contribute to positive changes in school environments and student engagement. The results of this research have implications on school policies and procedures, curriculum, pedagogy, and the curricular spaces where students learn.

**A Prevailing Epidemic**

On a daily basis, countless public and private school students are confronted with incidents of gender-based violence, which includes, but is not exclusive to, sexual harassment, sexual assault, homophobia, transphobia, emotional abuse and inappropriate sexual behaviour (Bidgood, 2015; Chase, 2008; Gilbert, Fields, Mamo, & Lesko, 2018; Leach et al., 2014; Toronto District School Board, 2010b; UNESCO, 2016a). This epidemic—prevalent in Ontario, across Canada and internationally—is particularly embedded in schools where students between 12 and 20 are negatively affected (Gladden, 2002; Harber & Sakade, 2009; Jere, 2015; McMaster et al., 2002). Although secondary schools (Grades 9–12) have high rates of gender-based violence, the problem is known to
manifest and peak in middle school (Grades 7–8) settings (Chamberlain & Houston, 1999; Falconer et al., 2008).^8

Extensive research has been conducted on various types of gendered violence indicating which students are most at risk and why, how often they are at risk, and the consequences associated with being victimized (e.g., American Association of University Women Educational Foundation, 2004; Hill & Kearl, 2011; McMaster et al., 2002; Sausa, 2005, Swanson & Anton-Erxleben, 2016; UNESCO, 2016a). Many school plans and procedures have been put in place as a result of these investigations (e.g., Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009, 2013a, 2013b, 2014; Safe Schools Action Team, 2008). Yet, despite the current awareness of this phenomenon, the Ministry of Education and private school policies to promote safety, and a range of school-specific initiatives for bullying prevention and intervention, gender-based violence continues to pervade educational settings (Chamberlain & Houston, 1999; Falconer et al., 2008; Harber & Sakade, 2009; Leach et al., 2014; Mandel & Shakeshaft, 2000; Pinheiro, 2006, UNESCO, 2016a).

During my investigation of the problem, I became increasingly aware that these contemporary measures for approaching gendered violence are ambiguous and ineffective as they fail to acknowledge root causes (e.g., heterosexism, heteronormativity, patriarchy, power relations). These strategies rarely situate education about gender and sexuality within the school curriculum or in the “lived” body where masculinities and femininities are

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^8 These findings were noted in research conducted within North America, but might differ in other school contexts around the world. However, in the report Unsafe Schools: A Literature Review of School-Related Gender-Based Violence in Developing Countries funded by United States Agency for International Development (USAID, 2008), it states that “sixty-eight percent of sexual harassment incidences happened in junior secondary school,” (in Botswana) compared to eighteen percent in senior secondary schools, and fourteen percent in primary schools. Significant research has been conducted across Africa on school-related gender-based violence, which I continue to learn about.
performed (Brown, Chesney-Lind, & Stein, 2007; Butler, 1990; Gladden, 2002; Mayo, 2004; Pascoe, 2005; West & Zimmerman, 1987). Furthermore, these so-called solutions tend to be positioned as something that is done to or for students, rather than with them. In other words, they promote top-down strategies that are adult initiated (e.g., assemblies that attempt to indoctrinate “good” behaviour), rather than student-centred grassroots approaches (e.g., inquiry-based learning and critical-thinking through the curriculum). As I reviewed these documents, it also occurred to me that at the crux of this problem lay a confusing and ill-defined understanding of what school related gender-based violence actually is. How can a problem be addressed when the issue itself is so unclear and theoretically fragmented in educational literature? As the dissertation unfolds, I will address the various ways gender-based violence is defined and understood in schools, which makes it distinct from other types of violence. The next section will begin the dialogue by discussing gender-based violence definitions and the inconsistencies that exist between them. However, before proceeding I must bring attention to the school context where the study took place.

It is imperative to note that I had every intention of conducting this study in a public-school environment, specifically within the school board where my children attended classes. I had received permission from a school principal to include his name, and the name of his school, as a potential research site on my school board application. My application went through the typical process of being vetted by an external research committee and was rejected. I approached two other public-school boards in Ontario with little success. Therefore, I had no choice but to look into other options. After significant brainstorming and support from my thesis supervisor, I was accepted to conduct my research at an elite private school. My methodology chapter details the specifics of why my applications were denied in
the public arena, how I was able to get accepted into a private school, and the implications of this on the study.

**Gender-Based Violence: Definitions and Inconsistencies**

There does not seem to be a universal meaning of gender-based violence because of “the diverse legal, sociological, feminist, and psychological perspectives from which the issue has been examined” (McMaster et al., 2002, p. 92). Most definitions I have come across are specific to violence against woman and girls (predominantly by men and boys), making violence towards men/boys and the LGBT community invisible. In other words, gender is viewed as a binary where harm is typically caused by one gender (boys/men) towards the other (girls/women) based on normative ideas of power. Moreover, these definitions are not specific to schools, but to a larger and overarching scope of global gender-based violence, which also includes brutalities (mostly towards women/girls) such as female genital mutilation, domestic abuse, human trafficking, and so forth. Therefore, when I was designing the research I chose to reference the Toronto District School Board’s (2010b) definition of gender-based violence, which seemed most appropriate for the purpose of this study. It is more specific to schools (although not isolated from the larger context of gender-based violence) and is not gender-biased about whom is being harmed or doing the harm. I kept this definition close at hand during my fieldwork and I also used it as a point of discussion with Grade 8 participants in their second focus group:9

*Gender-Based Violence* is any aggressive action that threatens safety, causes physical, social or emotional harm and denigrates a person because of their gender identity, perceived gender, sexual identity, biological sex or sexual behaviour. Gender-based violence operates on a societal imbalance of power and control based on social constructions of sexual identity, sexual

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9 This focus group will be described later in the analysis of Chapter Seven.
orientation, gender, perceived gender and sexual behaviour. This imbalance may manifest in multiple forms as aggressive and discriminatory behaviours and expressions of hatred. (Toronto District School Board, 2010b, p. 1)

Throughout the process of conducting this research it became increasingly clear that there must to be a differentiation between a global definition of gender-based violence and one that is school specific (regardless of context/region), otherwise it becomes too broadly inferred (e.g., violence in the home, workplace, community, online, etc. and in schools). This definition must also be accessible to all school stakeholders (students, parents, teachers, and so forth), which means it must be visible (known) and written in language that can be easily understood. Schools are distinct producers of violence, which sets them apart from other types of institutions and settings, making it critical that they be studied in isolation (Leach et al., 2014; Pinheiro, 2006; UNESCO, 2016a). Furthermore, a deeper analysis of the meaning of “gender” and “violence” (through a feminist poststructural lens) is imperative for coming to terms with gender-based violence that takes place in these various school spaces. Not only is the meaning of gender not solely about female victims and male perpetrators, but also violence is behaviourally more complex than simply being identified as overt and aggressive. I will briefly elaborate on this here, but will offer an extended discussion of discourse pertaining to gender and violence as part of the theoretical framework in Chapter Three.

This study goes beyond binary notions of gender or gender essentialism, which situates men/boys and women/girls into two distinct categories based on biological attributes

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10 It is only in recent years that “coalition governments, development organizations, civil society activists and research institutions” (UNGEI, n.d., para. 2) have joined forces to end gender-based violence in and around schools. This resulted in the Global Working Group to End School-Related Gender-Based Violence, which was established in August 2014. There are currently 30 members in the group including Plan International, UN Women, UNESCO, UNICEF, USAID, and The World Bank. It is important to note that when I started this study, the Global Working Group to End School-Related Gender-Based Violence was not formed. It is only in the past few years that the group has started to make contributions to this epidemic. The written material available even one year ago pales in comparison to what is currently published (as I write this footnote, it is in the spring of 2018). Canada still has much work to do.
and normative gendered characteristics (Grosz, 1995; West & Zimmerman, 1987). By approaching this study through a feminist poststructuralist perspective, gender is instead defined as “a language, a system of meanings and symbols, along with the rules, privileges, and punishments pertaining to their use—for power and sexuality (masculinity and femininity, strength and vulnerability, action and passivity, dominance and weakness)” (Wilchins, 2004, p. 35). This study is therefore positioned on the belief that gender is performed, that it is an act or performance that is (re)produced to represent who we are the world (Butler, 1988, 1990). This focus stems from Butler’s performative theory, which claims that gender is a socially constructed phenomenon that is produced and reproduced over and over again through a repetition of acts giving the illusion of a “gendered self” (Butler, 1988, p. 519). While there are subtle and individual ways of expressing one’s gender (what Butler calls “doing” gender), it is ultimately performed “in accord with certain sanctions and proscriptions” (Butler, 1988, p. 525) that is not completely of an individual’s doing.

With that said, I frequently refer to the study participants as “boys” and “girls,” which might read as an adherence to the gender binary. Despite my understanding that gender is a social construction with infinite means of expression, the research is presented rather categorically. One of the reasons for this is the way the school field site was structured. Gender played a primary role in the enrolment of students with an emphasis on gender balance in each grade. In other words, the new students, enrolled each year, were requested to identify as male or female as part of the admissions process.¹¹ This enabled a one-to-one ratio of boys to girls in the entire school with the means to generate an environment of

¹¹ There was a rigorous admissions process that students needed to adhere to attend this elite private school, which will be explained further in Chapter Two.
equality and power balance. Students were aware of this arrangement and its purpose, although gender inequality was perpetuated through the ways the students came to understand their positionality in the school. Therefore, conversations that took place in interviews and focus groups reinforced the gender differences and divide. The meaning of “boy” and “girl” was binarized through this structural decision. This also created a gateway for gender-based violence to evolve and endure.

Leach et al. (2014) suggest there are explicit and implicit forms of gendered violence, which are equally destructive and prevalent in schools that must be understood. Examples of explicit gender-based school violence includes unwanted physical contact such as groping, kissing, bra pulling and bum slapping, derogatory name calling like “bitch,” “slut,” or “fag,” and other aggressive behaviour such as beatings, sexual assault, and rape. Implicit or symbolic violence, accounts for actions that are more subtle and difficult to notice, “which are endorsed and reinforced by the everyday practices and structures that fill the school day with rules, norms and symbols that guide and regulate behaviour and legitimise discrimination against those who resist” (Leach et al., 2014, p. 7). These school practices, which are often assumed to be usual or standard routine (often part of the “hidden curriculum”), are controlled by heteronormative ideals that dictate how masculinity and femininity is construed and enacted. For example, masculinity is associated with superior and aggressive male behaviour, whereas femininity is associated with acting subservient, compliant, and making oneself desirable to boys. These norms are often so embedded in the culture of schools that they are not recognized as problematic, but as “boys being boys” or just “the way girls are”. Unfortunately, students (regardless of gender identity) who do not comply with normative gendered discourses are much more susceptible to various types of
violent acts of varying degrees (Kennedy & Hellen, 2010; Kimmel & Mahler, 2003; McCready, 2010; Rands, 2009; Sausa, 2005, UNESCO, 2016a, 2016b).

**Purpose and Research Questions**

Current educational research indicates that efforts to prevent gender-based violence must start at a young age by making direct links to the school curriculum and students’ lives (AAUW Educational Foundation, 2004; Rands, 2009; RTI International, 2015; Safe Schools Action Team, 2008), which encourage changes in “attitudes, beliefs and behaviours around gender and gender relations that produce inequality, discrimination and violence” (Leach et al., 2014, p. 4). The Safe Schools Action Team Report (2008) contends that “education about topics such as healthy relationships and sexuality, gender stereotyping, and homophobia are introduced too late in the curriculum” (p. 11). Despite revisions to the Grades 1–8 Ontario Health and Physical Education Curriculum that introduces many of these topics at a younger age than in previous years, or for the first time, (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2015b), these “healthy living” issues are sporadically taught because teachers feel constrained by time, they are ill-equipped and/or uncomfortable with the content, and/or their efforts are discouraged by parents who disagree with the curriculum (DeWitt, 2015; Spring, 2016). There is also controversy over whether these topics should be taught in schools at all, whether as part of the health/sexual education curriculum or in other subjects, which creates moral and ethical challenges for many teachers.13

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13 In 2010 former Premier of Ontario Dalton McGuinty approved a new Health and Physical Education Curriculum that included topics such as gender identity and sexual orientation, but within a few days the document was revoked (Radwanski, 2010). Contempt for the curriculum was particularly evident
Thus, the purpose of this research was to conduct an ethnography in a school context with Grade 7 and 8 students so I could observe them in the curricular spaces where they were taught subject matter and exposed to the “hidden curriculum,”¹⁴ and where students interacted socially and relationally with their peers. By observing, engaging with, and speaking to these students in their educational setting, it was my aim to investigate how they understood healthy relationships versus unhealthy ones, to determine how they made meaning of gender-based violence. In the process of doing this, I was able to observe the ways students embodied and performed gender discourses, which is significant when considering the body as a site of lived experiences. I also had many opportunities to observe teachers grapple with topics of gender and sexuality in the curriculum, and in dealing with students’ behaviour, attitudes, and beliefs in relation to these topics.

As mentioned previously, my original design was to conduct this research in a public school in the region where my children attended school, and the initial review of the literature was specific to understanding the public-school environment. However, due to in conservative and religious groups who deemed many of the topics related to sex and sexuality inappropriate for young students (Artuso, 2010; Greenberg, 2010; Hammer & Howlett, 2010). An interim edition of the curriculum (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010b) was used by teachers in schools until 2015 when a revised version was approved of by current Premier Kathleen Wynne (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2015b). However, the release of the curriculum sparked new controversy, which prompted a number of protests by parents and community members across Ontario (Benzie, 2015; Smith, 2015). The new curriculum is currently being taught despite the controversy and protests. To add fuel to the fire, newly elected PC (Progressive Conservative Party of Canada) Leader and Premier of Ontario, Doug Ford (2018), has promised to repeal the sex education curriculum. He argues that parents were not adequately consulted regarding the revised 2015 document and that they should have the final say (Britneff, 2018; Fitzpatrick, 2018).

¹⁴ The “hidden curriculum” was first coined by Philip Jackson in his book Life in Classrooms (1968) and later expanded upon by educational scholars/curriculum theorists such as Michael Apple (1990) and Henry Giroux (1978, 1983). Essentially, the hidden curriculum is defined as what schools teach without necessarily intending to do so. This includes norms, beliefs, and ideas that students learn in the classroom and school environment that might reinforce gender inequality, racial discrimination, class differences, etc. Students learn implicit lessons about the power of conformity as a measure of achievement and success (Giroux, 1978). The hidden curriculum will be discussed further as a mechanism of maintaining the status quo (particularly pertaining to gender and the implications of violence) in Chapter Three (the theoretical framework).
circumstances that will be explained further in the methodology chapter, the study took place in an elite private school context instead. While I initially assumed this change of institutional setting would yield limited understanding of the problem (few studies exist about gender-based violence in private schools), I soon came to understand that gender-based violence does not differentiate between public and elite school spaces. In fact, I determined through my research that gender-based violence exists everywhere, even in a place where students are identified as extremely intelligent and highly committed to academic achievement, where parents are dedicated to their children’s success, and where the illusion of gender equity is maintained through policies, programs, curriculum, and gender-balanced classrooms. This is in part because schools “are all prime sites for the construction of gender identities and gender relations built on social sanctioned inequalities” (Leach et al., 2014, p. 4).

With that said, I also learned that each school culture is unique in its own right regardless of whether it is part of the public-school system or considered an independently operated institution. The particulars of how gender-based violence manifests in an individual location is determined by a number of factors such as the structure of the school, the unintended learning outcomes of the hidden curriculum, the policies and procedures in place, the beliefs and attitudes of the teaching staff and student body, and so forth. In a private school, where parents are paying significant amounts of money for their children’s education, there is also an assumption that gender-based violence does not exist and an understanding that it will not be tolerated. Therefore, the ways in which gender-based violence manifests and persists is specific to norms and conditions that are established within each location. This will be expanded on throughout the thesis, particularly in the analysis chapters.
Positioned as an embodied ethnography, this research is grounded in a feminist poststructuralist framework. This theoretical paradigm and lens was operationalized to question normative school narratives (particularly about gender and sexuality) that tend to be assumed as common-sense understandings of reality (Barrett, 2005; Davies & Banks, 1992; Renold, 2003, 2005; St. Pierre, 2000). I chose a framework that would challenge and critically theorize conceptions of knowledge, power, and truth by making the seemingly invisible, visible. In particular, a feminist poststructuralist perspective allows for “reconstitutive possibilities . . . to expose power relations and oppressions associated with gender, race, class, able-bodied-ness, and sexual orientation” (Barrett, 2005, p. 88).

Furthermore, I wanted to consider the ways discourse plays a critical role in our perceptions of the world (e.g., of people, places, things) and the ways in which meaning is made in the process (Barrett, 2005; Cairns, 2011; Gavey, 2011; Gaztambide-Fernández, 2009a; St. Pierre, 2000). By paying close attention to student encounters and their discursive practices, I was able to get a greater sense of how students made meaning of peer relationships, gender discourses, and gender-based violence. Therefore, the aim of this study is to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the meanings of gender discourses in general and gender-based violence in particular, within an elite private school context, that Grade 7 and 8 students convey through their experiences with, perceptions of, and attitudes toward, gender, sexuality, and peer relationships?

2. How are gender discourses embodied and performed by these students?
3. What are the implications for school policies and procedures, curriculum, pedagogy, and the curricular spaces in which these students learn, when understanding how they make meaning of gender-based violence?

Despite acknowledging that gender-based violence exists everywhere, I was still hard-pressed to believe that I would come to any understanding of the problem when faced with (what I deemed) a lack of visible violence in the hallways or classrooms of Oak Lane Academy. It took time for me to realize this limited thinking was preventing me from recognizing the violence that was operating and being maintained in the school space. Violence that is often unrecognized, dismissed, and/or normalized. Part of the problem is that a significant amount of research on widespread school violence (e.g., shootings, vandalism, racism, physical assault) and types of gender-based violence (e.g., sexual harassment, inappropriate touch, homophobic aggression, cyber-bullying) describe behaviour that is predominantly conspicuous, hostile, and even terrifying (Aronson, 2000; Cullen, 2009; L. Davies, 2004; Dunne & Leach, 2007; Gladden, 2002; McMaster et al., 2002; Mills, 2001). School violence is also reported at the micro-level of peer interactions, which shows up regularly in literature as relational, verbal, and social bullying (Malette, 2017; PREVnet, n.d.). However, the macro and micro lens of violence is something we can typically see and identify, which is what I was specifically looking for. Much less is written about (and understood) regarding symbolic violence in schools, as an assault on students within the educational structures that support it, which must be considered as a critical aspect of the issue (Goldstein, 2005; Herr & Anderson, 2003; Scott, 2012).

As a word, violence only has meaning once it is uttered in a cultural narrative and experienced in social processes (Barrett, 2005; St. Pierre, 2000). Therefore, it can be taken up
subtly or aggressively depending on the discursive practice regulating the situation or circumstance. Herr and Anderson (2003) argue that while violence is at the forefront of education and schooling, symbolic violence remains undertheorized and virtually invisible despite it being highly active in the every day processes and practices of school life. They state that understanding symbolic violence will “help explain how violence is generated symbolically within schools, reproducing larger systems of structural violence” (Herr & Anderson, 2003, p. 415). Furthermore, Herr and Anderson (2003) insist that school violence and social inequality are connected and that current educational policies to address these issues are flawed. One of the problems is that with limited theorizing of violence, policies are prevented from addressing the real issues at stake (Herr & Anderson, 2003). I have already addressed some of my concerns around flawed policies and current bullying initiatives that fail to keep schools safe, but I will take this topic up further in relation to violence in the conclusion of this thesis.

The problem with only viewing violence as aggressive, is that it makes the implicit and subtle aspects of gender-based violence undetectable, which is, as I intend to demonstrate throughout the thesis, where conditions for overt violence are created in the first place. Through the study, I became increasingly aware that gender-based violence does not begin where it is visible, any more than a seed can be seen cracking open in the dark soil beneath the surface of the earth. By the time violence is visible, the conditions have already been created, nourished, and nurtured, to grow and manifest. We often don’t see gender-based violence until it is a major problem because we don’t recognize it as such. In order to sufficiently answer the research questions, it was critical that I pierce the surface of gender and violence to their roots, to consider the ways they are shaped and constructed by power
and discourse. It was important that I consider the veins of heteronormativity and patriarchy that are embedded in the culture of schools, which prescribe how masculinity and femininity is construed and enacted. Only then would I be able to consider the implications of my findings on the operations of the school.

**Chapter Introductions**

This thesis consists of eight chapters. Following this introduction, I will present the academic institution where I was given permission to conduct my research. Chapter Two invites you to step through the front doors of Oak Lane Academy into a highly competitive, elite private school space, where being smart is a critical aspect of identifying with elite status and maintaining a sense of belonging at the school. This will serve to introduce the history and culture of the school, what it means to “become” elite, and how elite education is defined differently from public and other private schools. I will introduce a number of the young study participants who walked the hallways and sat in the classrooms of Oak Lane Academy, to describe their assimilation into the school in Grade 7. I will begin the process of articulating how being smart (and competitive) was not the same for all students (those identified as boys versus girls) in a place that was committed to gender equality. Performances of masculinity and femininity spoke volumes about the cultural narratives and social practices of the school that supported the students’ process of subjectivity and formation of elite identifications. This chapter will foreshadow gender and social hierarchies established at Oak Lane Academy that will be addressed in further detail later in the thesis. While the students talked about their new school with adoration, particularly in comparison to their previous schools, they had yet to realize its imperfections, patriarchal values, and
evident gender inequality that set the conditions for a particular gender-based violence to manifest.

Chapter Three will illustrate the theoretical framework by making reference to the first two chapters, while also building support for the data analysis chapters to follow. I situate this study within a frame of feminist poststructuralism in order to critically theorize conceptions of language and meaning, knowledge and truth, and discourse as it relates to gender and sexuality in particular. Through my theorizing, I question dominant and commonly held beliefs that perpetuate heteronormative ideologies and maintain notions of gender essentialism. Subjectivity and performativity provide the main context for this chapter as a way to understand how we come to know ourselves and make meaning of the world through the construction of discursive practices and social processes. I theorize subjectivity as a process of “becoming” that is produced and reproduced through discourse. In other words, we construct our reality through speech acts that create our cultural narratives and storylines. I make connections to performativity as the embodiment and performance of that reality in a way that appears natural to our subjectivity. This frames the ways in which Oak Lane Academy students performed masculinities and femininities as smart, elite, and gender inscribed subjects. I allude to the vast differences in these performances, which reveals gender inequality in the school. A thread I follow throughout the entire dissertation is that the boys received privileges that were not afforded the girls, which reinforce patriarchal ideologies of entitlement, superiority, and hegemonic masculinity. Lastly, the chapter addresses the hidden curriculum as a mechanism for maintaining dominant gender discourses in the school. I argue that this resulted in unintended learning outcomes for students, which enforced gender inequality and gender-based violence.
Chapter Four offers a detailed account of the methodological framework and investigative processes that were required of this study. I highlight the methodological, ethical, and political challenges of conducting a study on school-related gender-based violence, which resulted in the work being rejected from three Canadian public-school boards before being accepted by one elite private school. I share how the process of shifting the focus from public to private required several adjustments to my research design in order to appease the needs of Oak Lane Academy. Methods I had not initially considered as a means for data collection became integral to the study, whereas other methods were removed. A significant change was shifting from a movement-based ethnography to one of embodiment. However, this proved in my favour by bringing deeper meaning to my investigative questioning and observational acuity. I shed light on my own embodiment in the work, which I had not originally taken into consideration as a methodological perspective. The chapter also outlines participant recruitment and pseudonym selection, data collection procedures of observations, interviews, and focus groups, and defines data analysis as a reflexive process. I also share my struggles with using a computer assisted qualitative data analysis system, which resulted in manually analysing the data. To conclude, I revisit feminist poststructuralism within the frame of storytelling. I acknowledge the messiness of interpretation and impartial truths.

Chapter Five looks closely at what it means to be “a boy” and “a girl” in the context of Oak Lane Academy through the lived experiences of Grade 7 and 8 students. This is critical for understanding how masculinity and femininity are construed in a particular space, which creates conditions for gender-based violence to exist and persist. I illustrate that gender is hierarchical within and across the gender divide and that as students were subjected
to the labels “girl” and “boy,” they were differently granted access to privileges at the school despite the illusion of gender equity and the equal distribution of students along normative gender labels in the classroom. I write about the social and gender hierarchies (“nerds,” “cool kids,” and “perverts”), revealing how being able to enact masculinity granted “boys” a certain ease at the school in comparison to those students who enacted being a “girl” who were much more constrained. I highlight this comparison by offering a narrative of the "ideal girl” and the “ideal boy.” My analysis reveals that the more normative the performances of masculinity and femininity, the more likely for gender-based violence to manifest and prevail. This school setting was particularly interesting because all of the kids were considered "smart," which added another layer of complexity to their gendered performances and the ways they justified their attitudes and behaviour.

Chapter Six transitions from subjectivity to relationality. I re-articulate that what it means to be a girl and what it means to be a boy determines how students embody and enact masculinity and femininity, which directly impacts how they navigate, negotiate, resist, and redefine peer relationships and understand love. I illustrate that competition was at the crux of these relationships, particularly among girls, in the ways they developed friendships, entered into cliques, and engaged in gossip and drama. Girls were not afforded the same kind of ease as the boys, which contributed to competitive efforts to maintain their social status with each other and their relationships with boys. I also shed light on the heteronormative practices (promposals, dating rules, etc.) through which gendered hierarchies were displayed and governed at Oak Lane Academy. These enactments demonstrated the ways patriarchy permeated the school by impacting student relationships and how students understood love in relationship to their identification as “boys” or as “girls.” To be “girls” was to constantly
compare oneself to other “girls” and use boys as markers for behaviour that was appropriate and inappropriate. I conclude that the various ways students engaged socially provided a gateway for gender-based violence to occur.

Chapter Seven illustrates games and game-like behaviour as part of the ways Grade 7 and 8 students experienced Oak Lane Academy by looking at the implicit and explicit ways they engaged in "play." While there were games with curricular content for learning purposes, which were student-centred and teacher-driven, many games took place in the hidden crevices of school spaces where adults were absent and youth positioned themselves as autonomous decision-makers (e.g., truth or dare). I reference these types of games as “organic” rituals (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2009a) by the very nature of how they were constructed and reproduced with masculinity and femininity as the driving force of the ritual. This chapter explores games that took place both inside and outside of the classroom, and shows evidence of how various types of games and game-like behaviour provided opportunities for students to make connections with peers, developed and tested the boundaries of relationships, and reinforced the gender and social hierarchies within specific classes and their grade level. I explain how various aspects of these games were produced and reproduced through gender discourses, specifically masculinities and femininities that were always being performed, and make direct connections to these games and the manifestation of gender-based violence.

Chapter Eight concludes the dissertation by bringing my thoughts full circle. I reflect on how this study emerged from a personally challenging predicament into a politically relevant and critically important study on school-related gender-based violence. I begin by revisiting the research questions, which follows with a detailed account of the four key
findings of the study and their implications on school policies and procedures, curriculum, pedagogy, and the curricular spaces in which students learn. The summary of the findings aims to provide a reminder of the cultural narratives of Oak Lane Academy while also emphasizing the dire need for ongoing research in the area of school-related gender-based violence. Knowing that students are being harmed physically, psychologically, and/or sexually on a daily basis (in and around schools), from seemingly minor infractions to violations of their human rights, I cannot help but to share my desire to actively pursue this work on a larger scale beyond the doctoral study. I offer three specific recommendations for future study that I feel are most relevant, considering the current political landscape of schools. I also share the limitations I had to overcome as part of the ethnographic experience, some of which becomes evident in the methodology chapter. However, I emphasize that it was because of these limitations that my study was strengthened, and my resolve for further research solidified, while also gesturing to what I would do differently. Ultimately, this final chapter is about coming to terms with school-related gender-based violence, thinking about future possibilities in the realm of research, curriculum and pedagogy, and asking the question, “Now what?!”
CHAPTER TWO
ENTERING THE ELITE SCHOOL CONTEXT

It was a warm spring morning at the end of May, when the Grade 7 students trickled slowly into the English classroom on the third floor of the school. The sun poured through the large west-facing windows, flooding the room with light and heat. Jay Han,15 a Grade 7 male student with short ruffled hair and glasses, stood on a desk closest to the windows, struggling to pull the half falling down drapes together, and managed to hold the fabric in place with a large binder clip. Satisfied with his handy work, he sat down at his desk and waited for class to begin, as did other students once they had made their entrance. The end of term was fast approaching and the general feeling in the classroom was one of distraction and fatigue, as the students were preparing for a number of tests and assignments, due or scheduled to take place, at the beginning of June. With such promising weather to enjoy outdoors and the commencement of summer plans on the horizon, it required patience and creativity on the part of the schoolteachers to maintain student engagement. On this particular morning, the Grade 7 English teacher, Hannah Lewis, a talkative and petite woman with dark frizzy hair, decided to tap into the students’ playful side by offering them the opportunity to play a game. It was a game with a purpose to prepare for their final unit test on the Shakespearian play A Midsummer’s Night Dream, but it was a game nonetheless. The students’ interest was immediately piqued and the excitement meter raised several notches with the growing energy in the room.

15 All names of participants (students, teachers, and school administrators) mentioned throughout this dissertation are pseudonyms, which will be discussed in detail in the methodology chapter.
Drawing a line down the middle of the room, Hannah swiftly split the class into two groups. Those on the left were one team and those on the right were another. As the students were already in assigned seats, with boys and girls alternating from one desk to another, both teams were fairly evenly gender mixed. The rules of the game followed. The students would be read a quote from the play and would have to determine the speaker, the listener, and the context. Each team was responsible for gathering quotes that could challenge their opponent. Hannah stressed that when it was their team’s turn, the students were not to shout out answers. Rather, players on the teams would calmly take turns standing at the front of the class to represent their team and gain points for correct answers. The energy in the classroom soared with excitement, prompting Hannah to remind them it was just a game and they were not to take it seriously. In a highly competitive, elite school environment, this was easier to suggest than follow. Remaining calm under pressure, when points and winning were at stake, was a lot to ask of twelve- and thirteen-year olds.

The class played the game for a total of fifteen minutes and then resumed it the following morning. However, Hannah slightly changed the rules of the game for the second round, saying she would read a quote of her choice and one person from each team could run to the chalkboard as quickly as possible to write down the speaker, listener, and context. Whoever wrote down the correct answer first would be the winner and would receive points for their team. This would repeat a number of times with select quotes. What seemed highly energized, but friendly competition the day before, in an instant became a manic and cutthroat rivalry within each team and between them. It became a race between team members to see who could get to the board first. Students had to complete a crazed scribble of illegible writing, to produce a correct and winning answer before the other team. This was
a classroom full of (presumably) highly intelligent students, many of whom I imagined believed they were their teams best asset.

Students sat poised on the edge of their seats, bums barely touching plastic, like sprinters ready to spring from starting blocks. The teacher read a quote and students pounced. There was screaming and shouting, confusion and frustration, and laughter and cheering. If a team member at the board wrote down a wrong answer, there was a plethora of help, which was not always helpful. When a team won a round, the students went wild with shrieking, jumping up and down, and applauding. For some, like Safia Aamin, a popular classmate, it was overwhelming. After a hearty round at the board, she bellowed back at her teammates, “Why are you yelling at me?” For others like Norman Spielman, the youngest male student in the class, it was an experience of frustration. He changed his answer to satisfy a highly insistent teammate, and when it turned out the change was wrong he cussed, “Idiot! I knew that!” And yet another voice in the symphony of mayhem exclaimed, “This is the best practice for the test, ever!” As the excitement was reaching its climax, bodies started to fill the aisles, with students ready to trample each other, if necessary, to make it to the board. Hannah asked them to stay seated, which they attempted half-heartedly.

Finally, after seventeen minutes, the last quote was read. Quinn Ma, a well-liked and popular female student, and Arun Chopra, who was friendly with all of the male students, won the race to the chalkboard. They wrote furiously, while the entire class was on their feet. Although Quinn and Arun both had the correct character names for the listener and speaker, their answers were written in reverse. The teams screamed equally at the top of their lungs and confusion ensued with Quinn and Arun looking at their teams, turning to the board, peeking to see what move the other one would make, looking back to their teammates
helplessly, and being completely unsure of what to do. Hannah decided Quinn had written
down the characters first, despite being in the wrong order, and gave her the first opportunity
to share the context of the quote verbally. Quinn was crushed that she could not remember
the answer and Arun’s team won the game. Above the last trumpet of noise from the
students, through the disappointment of losing and elation of winning, Hannah cried out in
utter exasperation, “It’s just a game!”

Oak Lane Academy is an intensely competitive environment where students desire
academic success and yearn to be the best. Despite Hannah’s intentions for the students to
have fun while reviewing Shakespeare material for their unit test (and to relieve some end-of-
year stress), there was much more at stake for the students than just playing a game. Being
presumed as smart and maintaining a competitive advantage was an essential aspect of
claiming elite status and feeling a sense of belonging at this highly selective and exclusive
school (Chase, 2008; Gaztambide-Fernández, 2009a). Notions of smartness were critical to
students’ subjectivity and formation of elite identifications (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2009a;
Hatt, 2014). Students were constantly talking about the competitive environment and needing
to prove their intelligence to fit in, which included having stellar grades and being seen as
smart. There were acceptable norms for how students could express their intelligence that
were carefully constructed and policed.

Emanating a sense of rationality and worldliness in the ways students spoke in class
and with their peers was considered an acceptable enactment of intelligence. Being highly
motivated to tackle tough class assignments, demonstrating ambition by balancing academics
with extra-curricular activities, and having a social life was another marker of being smart.
As well, performing intelligence was about conveying a maturity level that far surpassed the
average youth at “other” schools. This did not mean students were actually emotionally mature, but that they appeared to be. Being smart was a performance in itself that was constructed through various discursive practices and social processes that students adhered to. However, as later chapters will indicate, being smart and competitive had different meanings and consequences with particular attention to performances of masculinity and femininity. In other words, how students performed smartness was congruent with how they embodied and enacted masculinity and femininity. These gender performances were hierarchical in nature with those performing “boyhood” being granted privileges over those performing “girlhood,” which had implications on how individual students were able to navigate the school space, develop and maintain friendships, and experience school life. Gendered privileges also set the conditions for gender-based violence to prevail, which will be explored in later chapters.

Aspects of this introductory chapter will foreshadow gender and social hierarchies at Oak Lane Academy, as I illustrate how students began to identify with the school (as new students) through gendered performances, how many of them came to terms with their start in education as public-school pupils, and ultimately how they gained elite membership in their new school. These are key elements for understanding the culture of Oak Lane Academy, which will help support the unfolding narrative in the three analysis chapters coming later in the thesis. I will also elaborate on what was not seen or heard by bringing attention to the very present “silences” in the space. Students rarely spoke about race or class distinctions in the school or about their own race/class identifications, which also helps understand the culture of the school. By telling stories about what was present and absent
through my own reflexivity and in the analysis will allow for greater depth of understanding of the ethnographic experience.

As an aside, I felt a sense of camaraderie and connection with these young students as I came to terms with my own elite subjectivity as a doctoral candidate at a prestigious university. My own schooling experience (like my children’s) was within the public system. It was a system I knew well and felt I belonged to. Being granted permission to conduct my research at Oak Lane Academy required acknowledging my own eliteness, which I had not fully embraced previously (or so I told myself). As the students shared stories about their lives and the privileges afforded them by attending Oak Lane Academy it allowed me to reflect on the transition I experienced through my own upward mobility of privilege from a public education to doctoral status. I will offer more insight into this in the methodology chapter. Formulating this chapter in particular (especially the public versus private school stories at the end) evoked uncomfortable feelings about my own privilege that I needed to come to terms with, feeling at times that I did not belong where I was or deserve what I had. It does not elude me that as a woman, I questioned my own smartness and competitive ability to uphold my elite status, while at the same time attempting to convince myself of my worth.

In the following section I will introduce Oak Lane Academy through illustrations of how year one (Grade 7) students assimilate to their new environment and explain specifically what determines elite school status. This will help to frame the context and see it as distinctly different from other schools.
Introducing Oak Lane Academy

Every September Oak Lane Academy opens its doors to over one hundred new Grade 7 students, an equal number of self-identified boys and girls, and into the fold of elite private school membership. Some attended private school prior to this moment, but many left behind the public-school experience. Although a few students arrive at Oak Lane Academy with an older sibling, a previous school friend, or neighbour, the majority knew no one. Eager to be challenged academically, yet nervous about the unfamiliar environment that will become their second home for six of their teen years, these students take steps towards feeling comfortable in their new environment and finding a place within their peer group. There are a number of initiatives and strategies executed by the school to welcome new students, while simultaneously the newcomers intuitively navigate their own way. In equal measure, school and students work towards a common goal of assimilation, which is the start of becoming one with Oak Lane Academy.

To make the Grade 7 transition as easy as possible, the students are divided into five classes, with equal numbers of students identified as boys and girls, in which they will spend the entire year. Their lockers are side-by-side in rows on the main floor of the school and they attend all of their classes together, except for music and physical education, which they share with another Grade 7 group. It is not until they reach Grade 8 that they will have their lockers away from the watchful eyes of school faculty and staff on the main floor, and attend

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16 School statistics show that approximately 75% of the student population attended public school before being enrolled at Oak Lane Academy with the balance of students coming from other independent/private schools in the city.

17 Rotating from class to class as a group (from one subject to the next) is common practice for students of this age group in other elementary or middle school contexts.
classes based on their own individual schedules, which is common for Ontario secondary school students.

As the youngest students at Oak Lane Academy, who might otherwise feel isolated in their fixed classrooms, the school structure is set up to create opportunities for them to integrate into the school and meet others outside of the classroom. There is a large offering of extra-curricular activities that they can join, of which the debate and drama clubs, music groups, and sports teams, are very popular. Students can also participate in various school groups that support events and programs such as International Day of Pink and other equity initiatives. As well, each Grade 7 student is paired up with a senior in Grade 12 as part of a mentorship/buddy program. Special lunches and events are scheduled throughout the year to support these relationships and to make assimilation into Oak Lane Academy more palatable. The school also has a house system, and every student from Grade 7–12 is assigned to a specific “house,” for the purpose of creating school spirit and community. Founded in 1957, these four houses are known by unique names that have their own recognizable symbol and colour for identification. Each year students elect a Prefect, Deputy Prefect, and Literary and Athletic Representatives for their respective house, which are responsible for its overall function and management. Oak Lane Academy students participate in numerous house activities from intramural, athletic, and literary, events and competitions, to food drives and talent contests; plus, they enjoy high energy pep rallies and the camaraderie that comes with making friends and belonging to what feels to them as an

\[\text{\footnotesize\(18\)}\text{ These pairs are of the same gender identification based on a male female binary. Senior students connect with their incoming buddy before the Grade 7 year begins, by writing them a letter that gets mailed to their home. Some buddies choose to meet in person before the start of school. Buddies are known to stay friends long after their time at Oak Lane Academy. This is part of the process of becoming and maintaining elite status.}\]
exclusive club. Essentially, the efforts of the school to guide and support student integration, and help them create ties to the elite environment, is embedded in a framework of playfulness and being a welcome addition to one big happy family.

Despite the elite setting and effort to create school membership, students at any age were not required to wear uniforms (such as tartan skirts, uniform long pants, button-down collars, ties, vests and blazers that are frequently worn by students at other elite schools) to unify them visually as Oak Lane Academy students.\textsuperscript{19} They could express their gender as they pleased and were not recognizable as Oak Lane Academy students beyond the school premises. Students displayed modest hairstyles, wore few accessories, and chose comfortable clothing to reflect a more relaxed and carefree gender expression. I often thought of the students’ gender expression and how they dressed, as a direct reflection of their performance of smartness. Rather than an enforced look of uniformity by the school to represent eliteness (and therefore intelligence by association), Oak Lane Academy students found another way to collectively express their class privilege.

Performing girlhood seemed to involve paying heed to appearance, but it was a fine line between looking presentable (clean, neatly put together), current, and for the most part feminine, but not too much to detract from their intelligence. Being smart meant they would have to “sacrifice other markers of feminine status” (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2009a, p. 181), such as fancy clothing, make-up, and so forth. Studying and working hard definitely took precedence over primping and preening, although looking good was important. In performing boyhood, on the other hand, smartness was assumed and so there was little to no pressure to dress the part of “boy.” In fact, expressions of masculinity often included unkempt hair and

\textsuperscript{19} Any piece of clothing resembling a uniform was used for specific purposes such as being identified on a sports team or wearing a t-shirt to indicate the house a student belonged to.
rumpled clothing. It was not uncommon for students performing boyhood to repeat the same outfit day after day.

I did not notice outrageously expensive clothing or accessories on any student that demonstrated their access to wealth, although performing girlhood sometimes involved calf-length leather boots, Uggs, and other designer shoes that were not required to perform boyhood. However, many of the Grade 7 students (regardless of gender) wore Aeropostale clothing, particularly track pants, sweatshirts, and t-shirts with the name of the brand emblazoned in large print across their bodies. I asked a couple of female identified students on separate occasions why Aeropostale was so popular. They both replied it was designer wear at a reasonable cost. I found this an interesting juxtaposition between the high tuition costs associated with being an elite school student and the choice to acquire cheap brand name clothing. However, the fact that they desired designer wear regardless of the cost (affordable or not) illustrated how they were negotiating their class status as elite subjects. To fit in as a group, the majority of Grade 7 students wore the same brand name.

For the most part, students experienced very little free time during the school day between attending their academic classes, committee meetings, and/or extra-curricular practices. However, there was a daily forty-five-minute lunch break that allowed students the opportunity (when they were able) to relax in the hallways with friends, play games, or explore the local restaurants and cafés within minutes of the school. Students of all ages seemed to have money to spend on expensive drinks (like bubble tea and Starbucks) and food (pizza and burgers were popular). Being together at lunch, regardless of how it was spent, was critical for socialization and bonding. Students shared that their experiences of Grade 7
was pivotal to their development of friendships, how they felt they fit into the school, and what they most loved about Oak Lane Academy.

**Defining Oak Lane Academy as an Elite School**

Oak Lane Academy is situated in the heart of a large bustling city in the Southern Ontario region of Canada.²⁰ Like several schools of its kind in the neighbouring area, Oak Lane Academy was founded over a century ago to provide excellence in education for qualifying students. However, unlike most elite schools, Oak Lane Academy has also served as a laboratory school for a locally situated elite university (Advani, 1991).²¹ Plus, students are admitted based on their academic merit with only the most intelligent applicant gaining entry into the school. Housed in its original three-storey stone building on a busy thoroughfare, Oak Lane Academy operated exclusively as a boys-only school until it switched to a co-educational program in the early 1970s during the historical second wave of feminism. This was a common turn starting in the 1960s when “the cultural change in attitudes toward youth and ideas about equality, coupled with the generous funding of the public school system, resulted in a decline in the enrolment and the actual number of private schools” (Maxwell & Maxwell, 1995, p. 336). Therefore, a number of single-sex private schools became co-educational as a response to the changing times and to bolster their enrolment. However, enrolment at private schools (in general) remained low until the promise of quality public school education started to dwindle. It was during the early 1980s

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²⁰ Throughout the thesis, I refer to Oak Lane Academy as an elite private school, which is common in the social sciences when referring to a not-for-profit independent school (Maxwell & Maxwell, 1995). Oak Lane Academy became officially recognized as a non-profit independent school at the turn of the twenty-first century.

²¹ A laboratory school educates students within the K–12 grades and is typically affiliated with the Faculty of Education of a university or college (Kennedy, 2016). The purpose of this type of school is to provide a space for the training of teacher candidates, for the professional development of practicing teachers, and to conduct educational research.
that private schools started to grow in interest again and more parents were willing to pay substantially for their children to receive an elite education (Maxwell & Maxwell, 1995).

According to Gaztambide-Fernández (2009a, 2009b) a school is recognized as elite (and viewed separately from other types of private schools), based on a five-point criteria with specific and converging traits. He describes these school spaces as being typologically, scholastically, historically, demographically, and geographically elite, which I will elaborate on to situate Oak Lane Academy as an elite school. Although Gaztambide-Fernández (2009a, 2009b) articulates this theory to illustrate the elite boarding school context (particularly in the United States), it also serves a purpose for explaining other elite spaces such as Oak Lane Academy (a Canadian day school). While it may be assumed that American and Canadian elite private schools are vastly differently, they are actually remarkably similar. This is precisely because they are modeled after public schools in England, as are all other elite private schools worldwide (Bates, 2011; Gaztambide-Fernandez, 2009a, 2009b; Kenway & Lanmead, 2017; Kenway & McCarthy, 2015; Maxwell & Aggleton, 2016). This will be discussed further in the section on historically elite schools.

To begin, *typologically elite* schools are recognized as *independent* schools, which means they abide by “six basic traits: self-governance, self-support, self-defined curriculum, self-selected students, self-selected faculty, and small size” (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2009a, p. 27). As stated by the Canadian Accredited Independent Schools (CAIS) website, independent schools are recognized as “not-for-profit” with “charitable status,” that are “overseen by an elected Board of Governors,” and “are licensed by the provinces in which they operate” (CAIS, n.d., no page). This is distinctly different from *private* schools that “can be for profit” (CAIS, n.d., no page) and Canadian *public* schools, which are government
funded and managed by district school boards (Ontario Ministry of Education, n.d.). Independent schools are also recognized for having large endowments (or bursaries), which can differ significantly from one school to the next (Angod, 2015). The size of the endowment determines the scope of “initiatives that facilitate recruiting for racial and socioeconomic diversity” (Angod, 2015, p. 16).

With fewer than seven hundred students at Oak Lane Academy, class sizes are considered average, with approximately twenty-five students (approximately 22 in the junior classes – Grades 7 and 8), taught by highly qualified teachers, many of whom have masters or doctoral degrees. These teachers are selected by the school for their expertise in a number of academic subjects such as Latin, World History, Calculus, and Physics to satisfy a traditional curricular offering. The small teacher-to-student ratio allows for each pupil to receive focused attention and to be supported for optimum learning. Oak Lane Academy also offers its students a variety of athletic opportunities, arts programs, and outdoor education events, although academic achievement remains at the forefront of the school’s vision and mission. Similar to other elite private schools, Oak Lane Academy boasts the number of students who have won prestigious awards, the universities that former graduates have attended around the world, and the names of famous alumni who have held influential positions of leadership in business, commerce, research, and politics. The school clearly adheres to the six basic traits that make it typologically elite.

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22 Faculty are required to be in good standing with the Ontario College of Teachers to be hired at Oak Lane Academy. However, this is not the norm for all elite private schools, which may dispute the idea of a highly qualified teacher for those without accreditation.

23 In a research paper for the Analytical Studies Branch of Statistics Canada, Frenette and Chan (2015) claim that students who attend private schools tend to outperform public school students in reading, mathematics, and science assessment. This was determined through a cross Canada sampling of fifteen-year-old students’ test scores. The study further revealed that private school students receive higher levels
Oak Lane Academy is also a *scholastically elite* school in that it offers its students an extensive range of academic subjects, as well as many opportunities to pursue athletics, the performing arts, and co-curricular (i.e., extra-curricular) activities. Oak Lane Academy is committed to creating globally conscious students who are concerned with world issues and public affairs. This includes providing opportunities for student competitions and events in public speaking and debate, which is commonplace with elite schools. There are also a number of leadership opportunities that students can be involved with, both in and outside of the school community. A school is also considered scholastically elite in having access to the most current technological advancements. Technology is available and widely used at Oak Lane Academy to support learning. Laptop carts are available for classroom use, there are computer labs dispersed throughout the school, and there is ample filming and photography equipment for projects and events. As I will illustrate later in this chapter, many of the Grade 7 students were excited to be part of the Oak Lane Academy community because of the many scholastic offerings available to them that they did not experience at their previous (namely public) schools.

From an *historically elite* perspective, “official school narratives of elite school origins are tied to the story of the nation, how the school was modeled on those in England, and ongoing relationships with European royalty” (Angod, 2015, p. 16). In Angod’s 2015 doctoral dissertation on the production of elite students, she states that elite schools in
Canada originated from the public schools in England. She substantiates this claim with a document she found in the archives of a school where she did some of her research. This archive claims that the driving force behind creating grammar schools in Canada was to educate the upper class in order to extend Christian values to the New World, to bolster the British political agenda, and to generate civilized and capable citizens who were dedicated to the intentions of the church (Lang, 1980, as cited in Angod, 2015, p. 16). However, a critical aspect of what makes Oak Lane Academy historically elite is its direct affiliation with an elite university in the city in which it resides. This connection allows Oak Lane Academy students access to a number of resources unavailable to those attending many other schools (e.g., public, private, or independent). Oak Lane Academy is also historically elite in that it was founded with the intent to educate students who excel academically. In other words, Oak Lane Academy is a school that has always been recognized uniquely as a place for smart students.

Oak Lane Academy is also situated as a demographically elite school when considering the diverse student population, the admission requirements that students must pass successfully to be accepted into the school, and the number of families that are able to afford the school fees (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2009a, 2009b). Typically, the vast majority of students attending elite private schools are white, with students of colour being the minority (Angod, 2015; Chase, 2008). However, most students at Oak Lane Academy appeared to be visible minority, based on my own assumptions about phenotype and physical appearances. Few participants in my study spoke directly about their ethno-racial identities, which often left me guessing based on their physical features, names (sometimes first, but mostly last names), and a smattering of personal information that students revealed during interviews.
and focus groups. Over time, I became very aware of the absence of these conversations through student avoidance.

For example, during the first interview students were asked how their best friend(s) would describe them. This was a question they answered easily with character descriptions such as “crazy” or “fun” or “smart.” However, during the second interview I said I wanted to write about them in my dissertation and asked how they would describe themselves. Most students could not (or would not) answer the question and instead gave me permission to write what I wanted about them. I was not comfortable or willing to describe students based on my guesses or assumptions. I also did not have access to current school statistics regarding the students’ racial identities to support my writing. With that said, there was one interview with a (presumed) Caucasian male student. When I asked him to describe the girls in his class he said, “Asian, mainly, since we only have one Caucasian girl.” These were brief moments that spoke volumes, but also provided little data to work with. I elaborate in the methodology chapter on the challenges of describing participants throughout the study or being able to offer an intersectional analysis of the data because of this.

As previously mentioned, Oak Lane Academy is recognized for its acclaimed academic and leadership programming. Therefore, students are accepted into the school based on merit after adhering to a rigorous admissions process where they must demonstrate excellence in “academic achievement and scholastic aptitude” (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2009a, p. 36). This is also about being demographically elite as a school. Incoming applicants must successfully pass two phases of the process, which includes SSAT testing, an

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24 Most students apply to Oak Lane Academy during their sixth year of schooling (to attend the school from Grades 7–12), although there are limited spots available for applicants from Grades 9–11. Students are not accepted for a Grade 8 start.
entrance examination, and an interview to assess math and language proficiency. These requirements are also coupled with gender stipulations to manage the number of identified boys and girls entering the school at any one time for the purpose of gender equality. In other words, admission is not granted to the top applicants overall, but to the top applicants in each gender category. Therefore, enrolment comprises of a balanced ratio (50/50) along the gender binary, which means that the binary categories of “boys” and “girls” are balanced into equal numbers within the school as a whole, but also at each grade level. The expectation is that all students, regardless of how they identify in relationship to the binary categories of boys and girls will do equally well academically and socially because of this structural decision, where neither gender will overpower the other in number. However, it was evident that equal numbers did not create gender equality. Students who identified as boys and performed masculinity were granted privileges that did not apply to those who identified as girls and performed femininity, although many students claimed differently in comparison to “other” schools where matching the number of boys to girls was not considered a priority.

Putting the admissions process and gender aside, the privilege of having small classroom sizes, teachers with graduate level degrees, and the many academic, artistic, and extra-curricular options available to students, usually comes with at a steep cost. Oak Lane

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25 It must be noted that the school embraces a gender binary, which classifies the students as either boys or girls. This categorization has consequences that will be illustrated throughout the thesis, particularly when considering it as a form of violence.

26 This point will be discussed at various points throughout the remainder of this thesis, as the enrolment of equal boys to girls is a critical aspect of the study.

27 Participants I interviewed often referred to “other” schools (namely public schools) as a way to make comparisons to Oak Lane Academy and why their new school was exceptional. Being a gender-balanced school was important to many students as it represented what they considered to be a sign of gender equality. This notion of equality was embedded into identifications that were formed about being an Oak Lane Academy student, which in turn made the inherent violence that existed in the school invisible.
Academy tuition fees are relatively reasonable at $25,350 (for the 2017-18 academic year), when compared to other similar schools in the vicinity that charge over $30,000. Private school tuition in Canada is typically between $20,000 – $40,000 per year for day students and upwards of $50,000 for boarding options (Bennion, 2014). All elite private schools boast financial assistance, based on family need, with monetary awards paying part to all of the tuition costs, so that the finest and brightest students are not turned away. Oak Lane Academy has a large bursary program (also known as an endowment) for that very purpose and is proud to call itself a financially accessible school. The school states that any student, who is qualified to attend, based on merit, will be ensured access. When I first started collecting data, I was told that many Oak Lane Academy students did not come from wealthy families, although many parents of students were professionals. At least one participant shared that her aunt, grandparents, and parents had to pull their resources together so she could attend the school. However, official school data claims that only one fifth of Oak Lane Academy students require financial assistance from bursaries that covers anywhere from 5 – 100% of their school tuition fees. Therefore, the majority of families who send their children to Oak Lane Academy are able to afford the annual tuition fees.

From a demographic perspective, what surprised me about the students who attended Oak Lane Academy was where they lived in relation to the school. Many of the private schools established in the same city as Oak Lane Academy can easily be found within a twenty-kilometre radius of each other and are situated in neighbourhoods populated by

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28 These figures are based on research I conducted on the Internet, aside from the Bennion (2014) article. Tuition fees are accessible on school websites.

29 Principal Frances Day, and the school’s Board of Directors, oversee the financial stability of the school. The board consists of school alumni, parents of current students, and parents of previous students.
families with considerable socio-economic capital. Yet on average, Oak Lane Academy
students do not live close by, with many traveling over one hour each way to attend school
each day. Essentially Oak Lane Academy is a commuter school with students as young as
Grade 7 (typically twelve years old) travelling long distances into the city by bus and train.
Others have parents who work nearby and who are able to drive them to and from the school
on a daily basis. When I first started my fieldwork at Oak Lane Academy, I assumed most
students would come from wealthy professional families living within a close proximity to
the school. However, I also came to realize the urban location of the school differed
significantly from many other private schools nearby.

The fifth criteria to be considered when describing an elite school is that it be
geographically elite, which includes both “space and physical facilities” (Gaztambide-
Fernández, 2009b, p. 1108). In other words, it is not just the surrounding landscape but also
the “architecture and spatial aesthetics” (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2009b, p. 1108) that help
shape the character of an elite school and the students’ experiences of elite education
(Gaztambide-Fernández, 2009b). This is where Oak Lane Academy differs somewhat from
the norm. From an aesthetics perspective, Oak Lane Academy appeared to be run down.
When I was there I noticed drapes falling down in classrooms, old flooring, and cracks in the
paint. Classroom technology was sometimes ineffective, which on one occasion in drama
class caused a thirty-minute delay while the teacher attempted to show her students a film.
Many of the lockers were painted in retro art from the early 1970s that was less than
appealing, some of the hallways were dark, and there was a general feeling that the building
was old and in need of repair. One student referred to the school as “sketchy” in appearance
despite the positive energy she felt being in the school because of the people. Oak Lane
Academy was a busy place with many community programs happening in the building due to its association with the university. A number of people entered the school each day to take advantage of the space and its location. Therefore, it had a significant amount of wear and tear from human traffic.

Typically, elite schools are recognized for their large campuses with pristine gardens and sweeping landscapes, as described in the literature I read before the study (Angod, 2015; Chase, 2008; Gaztambide-Fernández, 2009a, 2009b; Khan, 2012). An elite boarding school I worked at many years ago in England was situated just outside of a small town in the countryside, an hour south of London. There were acres of rolling hills as far as the eye could see with multiple green fields for outdoor sports, an outdoor swimming pool, tennis courts, and a large indoor gymnasium. The school had a state of the art theatre for drama, dance and musical performances. Plus, there were a number of buildings where the students slept, ate, and attended classes daily.

Oak Lane Academy by contrast is a single building situated on a small piece of property, in a large urban centre. Being situated in the hub of a busy city, sprawling fields and multiple buildings to host athletics and such are hard to come by. However, as mentioned previously the school is situated in proximity to (and affiliated with) an elite university that allowed students’ access to a number of their facilities for athletics (e.g., track, fields, swimming pool) and academics (i.e., libraries). In turn, this abundance of space offered each student a means in which to fully explore academics and a social life. According to Gaztambide-Fernández (2009b), “this elite meritocracy, in fact, operates on the assumption that everyone can find a niche because space is, as it were, unlimited and expansive” (p.
It is this kind of privileged access, generally not granted to other types of schools, which makes Oak Lane Academy geographically elite.

The five criteria used to describe elite boarding schools in the United States helps to determine Oak Lane Academy as an elite school and differentiate it from other independent, private and public schools in Canada. These criteria are explicitly highlighted in the ways Oak Lane Academy is promoted. Brochures and other marketing materials, selling school camaraderie and excellence, are used to support claims of eliteness that Oak Lane Academy profits from. Wardman, Hutchesson, Gottschall, Drew, and Saltmarsh (2014) suggest that this kind of school promotion provides, “an important dimension of the impression management strategies that have been adopted by schools in the recent decades of a highly competitive education market” (p. 249). From the outside looking in, Oak Lane Academy reflects a respectful and equitable space where everyone is welcome, safe, and included, regardless of their gender identity, perceived identity, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, or racial identity. Furthermore, Oak Lane Academy successfully embodies the image of an idyllic environment for above average intellectuals in Grades 7–12 to learn, grow, and thrive.

As a researcher, I was curious about where the contradictions would fall between the public view of the school and the students’ actual lived experiences of being elite and smart. Classroom observations (public performances, or absences, of gender, class, and race) and individual interviews (private sharing of personal experiences) perfectly orchestrated these contradictions over time. Oak Lane Academy proved less than picturesque from the persona it portrayed. Clearly, no school is perfect. However, it required a perceptive eye and intuitive sense to see beneath the (mostly) shiny exterior. Coming from the public-school environment
as a parent and educator (a space I knew intimately and felt a deep belonging to), with minimal time spent working in an elite boarding school (as a much younger person), challenged my orientation as an ethnographer at first. I had to put aside my own preconceived ideas of elite private schools so I could see the contradictions that were evident. This included questioning deeply what was underneath many of the sanitized and predominantly carefree stories students told me about their new school and new opportunities that they so wanted to believe as truth. Stories of perceived gender equality where everyone was presumed to be smart, and stories where race and class went unmentioned. They romanticized their new school as much better than their old one, while also seeing it as the best private school.

This leads into the final section of this chapter where the voices of the junior students start to articulate what it means to embrace elite identifications and the many opportunities and privileges afforded them by being students at an elite school. I begin by relating stories that they shared with me about their enthusiasm of being new to Oak Lane Academy. I will follow these stories by tales of the “other” (the ghastly public school), and how students compared their previous schooling to their new life. These stories emerged in the first interviews I conducted at the start of the study. They were my introduction to the school, the participants, and cultural narratives of elite existence. It is important to note that incidents of gender-based violence remained invisible to me at this point. Race and class was also rendered absent, as mentioned earlier. I was adjusting my lens to see differently within this space than I had become accustomed to observing in other environments. Like any complex puzzle, the pieces eventually started coming together, which will be revealed in chapters to follow.
New School, New Opportunities

Similar to the idea that gender is a social construction and a performance of gendered acts rather than a stable essential self, this theoretical understanding is further applied to the notion of identity (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000; Gleason, 1983; Goffman, 1969). From a sociological perspective, the subjective self is continually produced and reproduced in every social interaction, which is influenced by expected norms, behaviours, and attitudes of others within particular situations (Gleason, 1983). Gaztambide-Fernández (2009a) states that “identity as a performance points toward a definition of identity as something people do, rather than something people are or something people have” (p. 12). Gleason (1983) offers a similar view of identity as a succession of acts that is accepted, internalized, and conducted according to specific set of norms and rules. In the context of Oak Lane Academy, students experienced a process of becoming elite by identifying with various aspects of their new school that supported a burgeoning identification as being smart and elite. These “processes of identification” (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2009, p. 12) occurred through cultural practices where students were able to make claims about their identities (or of others) in very specific ways related to social hierarchies and/or categories, and individual characterizations or labels.

In my interactions with participants, it started to become evident that an aspect of assimilating to life at Oak Lane Academy was embracing the opportunity to reinvent oneself both academically and socially, to disassociate from the person one used to be (e.g., bullied, excluded, bored, ordinary) to becoming the person one wanted to be (e.g., accepted, belonging, engaged, elite). This is not surprising considering the powerful role elite schools play in the reproduction of social-class status, which is recognized as a process of
“becoming” (Bourdieu, 1996). Students no longer associate with the “other” (their previous schools and classmates), but with their current environment. Angod (2015) argues that becoming elite requires students to alter their subjectivity, which occurs through school practices. This process of becoming elite includes what Gaztambide-Fernández (2009a) coined “the five E’s of elite schooling: exclusion, engagement, excellence, entitlement, and envisioning” (p. 6) within a privileged private school setting. The students quickly embraced their smart and elite identifications with pride, in the company of many, within months of arriving at Oak Lane Academy. The following illustrations will begin to shed light into this very process.

One of the very first interviews I conducted at the start of my study was with Avery Wu, who described her newfound feeling of connectedness to Oak Lane Academy. Avery was a Grade 7 student with dark black hair that hung in a long straight ponytail to the curve of her lower back. Her face was devoid of make-up and she wore rimmed glasses that highlighted her sparkling dark brown eyes. She lived north of the city in a condominium complex and took the long subway ride to and from Oak Lane Academy every day with another classmate who lived in the same building. We met afterschool in the school’s conference room that held a long oval table with high back swivel chairs. As soon as Avery arrived she remarked on how much she liked the chairs before finding one to settle into. Avery was engaging and very chatty, as she described herself as “crazy,” “random,” and “energetic,” and related what she loved the most about the school,

The diversity of everything. I mean here there’s a club or an extra-curricular for everything you might ever want to do. And even if there isn’t they give you the opportunity to start about [sic] it, to, like, actually follow a path where
you can actually do everything you want, while still benefitting from the education, and stuff. So it’s sort of like letting yourself be individual.

I asked Avery if she had joined several activities, based on the enthusiasm she shared when talking about them, but she admitted to joining very few her first year because, “Everyone here is, like, extraordinarily smart, and I feel stupid.” Although Avery described Oak Lane Academy as scholastically elite, with something for everyone to engage in and excel at, she did not fully believe that she deserved to be there.

Avery was involved in debate for years before enrolling at Oak Lane Academy and her mother was continuously encouraging her to start again. She said that just the week before our interview together, she had finally agreed to attend a debate club meeting. Although she felt she had lost much of her “quick thinking,” it had been a lot of fun. Avery said she would likely continue with debate club and she had recently tried out for the junior play, but she did not want to take on any more commitments until she could “catch up with everyone.” I mentioned that she had another five years to join as many clubs as she wanted. In her response, she said, “But then we have to, like, in our last few years, start thinking of colleges.” Despite being happy at her new school, Avery was already feeling the pressure to measure up and compete academically with her peers. She had yet to confirm her entitlement as an Oak Lane Academy student, although she was already envisioning the next academic step in her future, which included applying to universities. Therefore, her ability to claim elite status was developing.

Melanie Song also loved Oak Lane Academy for the vast selection of activities she was able to participate in, such as drama club and sports teams. However, what made the school a haven for her were the people and how she felt in their presence, although she never
specifically identified who these people were by gender, age, race, or any other marker.

Melanie was a tall Grade 7 student with braces who typically dressed in t-shirts and sweatpants rolled down at the waist. She was a “fangirl” of Korean pop and loved to dance. Melanie said her best friend would describe her as, “Funny, very outgoing,” and she laughed as she added, “kind of violent.” She continued, “pretty cheerful, um, very athletic.” I assumed Melanie meant she was violent in an amusing way and she explained, “I hit people sometimes when they’re, like, being very annoying. I kind of, like, play punch them and stuff.” This did not seem to deter Melanie from getting along with others at Oak Lane Academy, as she claimed to have many friends, and I also saw her laughing and having fun with her peers on a daily basis. This was a dramatic change from her public-school experiences. When I asked her what she loved most about school she said,

I like how different people, like, they don’t really judge you ‘cause at your old school, I mean, if you’re, like, more smart or, like, outgoing, people won’t really talk to you that much cause they’re all off doing their own things. But in this school everyone’s up in that level because they got into OLA and they’re like that. And you can talk to a lot, a different array of peoples, like, people, without, like, being (pause). I talk to older grades and they’ll talk to me but they won’t talk down to me like I’m some Grade 7.

I imagine the transition Melanie experienced of moving from her public school to Oak Lane Academy would be considered a success. The intentions of the school were for students to embed themselves into the social milieu, which she did. Melanie took advantage of the many activities available to her (particularly drama and sports), while also establishing relationships along the way. Not only did she make friends in her class and grade, but she was proud to get to know many of the older students as well.
Being athletically competent certainly helped Melanie bridge the age gap and maintain a busy social life. She clearly connected to her new elite private school position in multiple ways. Melanie also felt she fit in at Oak Lane Academy because she was smart like everyone else “up in that level,” regardless of being one of the youngest students in the school. She did not appear at any time to be intimidated by her peers, she was always on task in class with independent work, and often contributed to class dialogue. Being smart was undeniably a way that students at Oak Lane Academy could create a distinction between them and ‘others’ (and reinforce their entitlement as Oak Lane Academy students), which Melanie did when making comparisons to her old school. This is what Gaztambide-Fernández (2009a) refers to as the discourse of distinction in which students “develop a sense of collective identification,” (p. 14) which at Oak Lane Academy was heavily weighted on being smart. The students learned through various processes that the discourse of distinction enabled them, “the knowledge and the power that their status as elite students grants them” (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2009a, p. 15).

Beyond the structured and controlled realm of Oak Lane Academy, facilitated diligently by administration, faculty, and staff, students themselves take on various responsibilities and actions to construct and manage the environment and their experiences. Making friends, like Melanie did, is often a first step in feeling comfortable and secure in an unfamiliar place, particularly when entering a new school and classroom environment (Schaefer, Simpkins, Vest, & Price, 2011). At the beginning of the Grade 7 school year, students are admittedly shy about meeting new people and careful in their assessment of one another, their interactions timid until their comfort level increased. However, they want to make friends and fit in to their new school. This process of creating bonds with others helps
students to feel they are not alone, but rather have a sense of “belonging” and that they are part of a community (Hamm & Faircloth, 2005; Vaquera & Kao, 2008). Within the context of Oak Lane Academy this has even further value as, “bonding is a crucial aspect of both engagement and excellence in the process of becoming elite, because it generates implicit boundaries around entitlement and gives students a sense of certainty around their future” (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2009a, p. 136).

Navigating these budding relationships was also about assessing who was smart versus the smartest, and determining their own rank on the continuum of intelligence. Students regularly compared their grades with others on quizzes, tests, exams, and assignments as an “assessment” of intelligence. Despite being asked by teachers that they not compare marks, they often did. The students quickly realized that being the smartest in their old school did not mean they would be top of their class at Oak Lane Academy. Everyone was considered “smart.” Being smart meant that they were among a small minority of people who were selected to attend the merit-based school, starting the process of becoming elite and solidifying their privilege in education. Yet, competition to be the best would quickly reveal itself to be fierce and add a complexity to their developing friendships. It was not enough to be the best academically, but many students also wanted to be the best friend, the coolest kid, and the most popular to stand out.

This process of achieving status, however, hinged a great deal on how students performed gender identities; specifically, the ways they enacted masculinity and femininity. Competition bled into all aspects of school life in ways that supported a gender hierarchy, placing those who enacted (hetero)normative masculinity in positions of privilege over those who enacted femininity (and male identified students who did not conform to elite masculine
ideals), which I will illustrate at various point in chapters to follow. However, the initial initiation of friendships within and around the borders of Oak Lane Academy, served as a vehicle for bonding for students, regardless of gender performances that scaffolded elitist ideals and imaginings, taking students beyond their experiences of the past. They were quick to detach from the “other” (previous schools and peers) in order to shift towards a reinvention of the self that solidified their exclusive belonging to Oak Lane Academy. This was made possible by the cultural narratives available to them in their new environment, which invited them to engage and excel socially and/or academically. As their sense of entitlement expanded so did their ability to envision equally elite imagined futures.

Students often spoke with disdain about their previous schooling experiences where many felt bored by the curriculum, unchallenged academically, excluded by others, and the recipients of bullying incidents. Vlad Andrews articulated this well in our first interview together. A simply dressed Grade 7 student of average height, with short dark brown hair that sat flat on his head. Vlad enunciated some of his words like a typewriter hitting paper. He described himself through the eyes of his best friend as, “A complete nerd, um, sucks at running, um occasionally interesting, goes on too many rants, um lazy, and a game addict. And possibly an Otaku.” I learned that Otaku is a Japanese word for “someone who is completely addicted to Manga anime and/or video games.” I asked what his favourite video game was and he laughed, “I don’t know.” He seemed to have too many to choose from.

Vlad was willing to talk about his previous school experience when I asked him what were the biggest problems kids his age had to deal with. He replied, “I’d probably say bullying.” Vlad was not the only participant to speak about being on the receiving end of bullying (e.g., teasing, exclusion, name calling) before attending Oak Lane Academy.
Curious of his knowledge and history with bullying, I asked if it was something he had experienced personally, to which he answered, “Ya, I guess, at my old school. I hate my old school.” Not wanting to make Vlad uncomfortable, I gingerly inquired about the type of bullying he experienced, but he jumped on the question with “name calling, stuff like that.” Since he seemed eager to share, I asked why he felt he didn’t fit in at his old school. He shared, “Everyone at my old school was basically an athlete and I’m that awkward nerd.” He let out a small chuckle after his admission. I had heard students and faculty claim there were few incidents of bullying at Oak Lane Academy, as most students were considered smart and nerdy, but I wanted to know if that was Vlad’s assertion as well. I asked, “How about here at Oak Lane Academy? Would you say that you have ever experienced any kind of bullying here?” to which he replied, “No, I don’t think so.” When I asked Vlad if he felt he fit in, he replied nonchalantly, “Yah, I guess.” I assumed that meant an “awkward nerd” like Vlad had a place of belonging at Oak Lane Academy, unlike at his old school.

Undoubtedly, Vlad was more engaged academically than he had ever been. When I asked him what he loved most about school he replied, “Not being bored. Having stuff to do. That’s about it.” At his previous public school, Vlad was intellectually numb and never had homework, which is how video games became a staple in his life, to fill time. I found it interesting that despite learning during the day and having a lot more homework to do at night, he still managed to play “three hours of video games” after school. He said, “My parents don’t like this, but yes I do,” and he claimed to balance playing games with “eight hours of homework” that he could “do in two hours.” There seemed to be little else that excited Vlad besides video games and school, although he never professed to love hard work and studying. It was not until his second interview that I came to know that video games
were also part of his identification as a self-professed “nerd,” besides being awkward, which I will examine in more detail when addressing gender and social hierarchies in the school. The word “nerd” was casually used by faculty and students at the school, which I came to understand meant many things. However, it took time to realize that nerdom was specifically reserved for boys, as I will describe in Chapter Five.

Time and again students revealed they had been the smartest person in their class and/or grade at their old school, which made it difficult for them to learn anything new, despite their burning desire to be pushed further intellectually. Caroline Li, a Chinese speaking, tall and lanky Grade 7 student, with petite features and braces, who consistently dressed in casual but trendy clothing, was one of the students who had recent memories of learning very little in public school. Speaking quickly, often interjecting “like” as she spoke, she explained,

In my previous school I wasn’t really learning anything. And then, there was just, like, a group of us and, then, we were literally, like, just doing coffee run [sic], errands, that kind of thing for my teacher. And it wasn’t that fun, but then I was studying, like, trying to get into this school and even though I was working a lot harder, which I guess some kids wouldn’t like as much, it was like, I would look forward to that more than going to school and just sitting around. Right? So I really like learning.

Therefore, the academic leap Caroline experienced from being at her public school to attending Oak Lane Academy accentuated her feelings of belonging and connectedness. She was delighted to be in close company with people who wanted to be challenged academically and learn as much as she did, on a daily basis. Like many students at Oak Lane Academy, Caroline had a very long commute to school and back home again. However, rather than
complain about the time sitting on trains, she loved the anticipation she gained while traveling to school, thinking of what she was going to learn that day, “Even like rushing to get my homework done on the subway or whatever. I think that’s all part of it.” Caroline had been accepted into a privileged world of education where she performed her smartness and gender every day at school, in the company of other smart people, who pushed her to be her best. She proudly extended her performance of smartness outside of school, on the subway ride to and from home, as a declaration of her elite privilege. At the same time, she was able to demonstrate her intelligence as part of how she performed girlhood, which many female students at Oak Lane Academy felt they needed to do to prove themselves to be as smart or smarter than boys. Caroline excelled in her new school, reinforcing her sense of entitlement that she belonged there.

Another note of contention that many participants spoke about regarding their old school was being able to develop close friendships, as they felt there were few people with whom they had anything in common. Being the smartest in their class and having little to do academically from day-to-day, automatically set them apart from their peers. Vlad, who shared that math was his favourite subject, stated, “In Grade 6 there was one or two girls that . . . barely knew how to do basic division . . . even with our school we had math, like, once or twice a month. It was ninety percent social studies.” I thought it was interesting that Vlad suggested it was a small number of struggling girls as the main reason why he was held back in math. When I asked him if there were any kids he would hang out that had similar interests, he responded with uncertainty, “There was, I guess, one guy? Except then, yah, I guess, there’s one kid, but that’s about it.” It was apparent that Vlad had few friends
regardless of their gender and he stood out as a smart male nerd in a way that he was able to blend in at Oak Lane Academy.

Karen Chen, who claimed she was not bullied in her previous school, but was excluded a lot, also found it difficult to fit in and make friends before attending Oak Lane Academy.\(^{30}\) Karen, a quiet Grade 7 student with braces and rimless glasses, who tended to wear the same generic pants, t-shirt, and zipped hoodie, day-after-day, said her friends would describe her as, “I do a lot of homework, and I like to do work, and I like studying, so they usually, like, call me like, the nerd, but I’m used to that because it’s been there for six years, seven years.” I asked if she knew why she was excluded a lot at public school and she replied, “I don’t know, ‘cause I usually read and did my homework. I talked with the guys more than the girls.” I wanted to know if she felt she fit in at Oak Lane Academy more than her public school, which she did. She also agreed that other people she knew felt similarly. Karen expressed that there was a place for everyone to fit in at Oak Lane Academy, based on common interests.

You kind of fit in with, like, with your, like, your group of people ‘cause there’s people who like to talk about this stuff and then people who like to talk about this stuff. So, I think I fit into, like, where my group is kinda, like. We don’t talk about what the guys talk about or what other girls talk about.

I wondered what it meant to not engage in guy or girl talk. Karen said she did not like to gossip like many of her female peers, nor was she interested in talking about boys or their level of cuteness. She also found many of the boys were “perverted” in the ways they talked incessantly about sex, female body parts, and girls in general. The kind of talk Karen

\(^{30}\) According to the copious amounts of literature (books, articles, educational documents) on bullying, exclusion is considered a form of social bullying (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013a; Wang, Iannotti, & Luk, 2012; William, Forgas, & von Hippel, 2005).
considered “normal” was “stuff like work and games,” and when I asked Karen to describe herself in one word, she said, “chess.” She was respected for her interest and aptitude in chess and had found a group of peers to connect with on common ground.

Unsurprisingly, few students I spoke with felt a deep connection to their old school or a group of friends, even if their experience had been relatively positive. They were clearly besotted by romantic ideations of their new private school in comparison to what they had left behind. Attending Oak Lane Academy appeared to be a turning point in these students’ lives. With other “smart” people surrounding them, they could participate in any activity that interested them, and they imagined they could be who they wanted to be without judgment. This included Quinn who attended another private school before arriving at Oak Lane Academy. Despite being happy where she was, she was thrilled to be at her new school. She attempted to reinforce for me that everyone at Oak Lane Academy had friends and that the school was very accepting of diversity. However, how Quinn spoke of diversity was relative to individual characteristics (e.g., “weird” or “different”) and expressions of gender (e.g., dye hair) rather than an inclusion of race or class. She also alluded to the fact that everyone at the school was “unique” and not trying to be the same as anyone else. Oak Lane Academy was a school of smart and independent individuals. A utopian bubble in the centre of the city.

OLA is such a great environment, it has such a great community, everybody’s, like, always so welcoming. Even if you’re that totally weird, or something, or, you’re always going to find a friend here at OLA, and especially since everyone’s so caring . . . That’s one of the great things about OLA. That’s what I love about OLA. No matter how weird you are, or different, if you dye your hair or whatever, whatever, . . . people are still going to love you because you’re unique and you’re, like, not trying to copy and fit in with others.
At Oak Lane Academy being smart meant you were looked up to, not down at, as many of the students had been in public school. Recognizing they were selected from a large pool of applicants for successfully passing the admissions process, which excluded others from being accepted to the school, was a critical part of becoming Oak Lane Academy students. The students were excited for a heightened engagement with their teachers and peers, both in the classroom and by joining extra-curricular activities. Plus, there was a social or extra-curricular group for every person to fit into, regardless of being a videogame addicted awkward nerd, a hardworking and well-read chess player, a Korean pop loving drama buff, a perverted boy obsessed with girls and their bodies, or a debate club competitor who struggled with her self-worth. The more the students were able to find their place in the school, which allowed them to display their excellence in some way, the more entitlement they garnered for being an Oak Lane Academy student. Although these students were young, they were already envisioning a future “in equally elite spaces, pursuing challenging careers and assuming leadership roles” (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2009a, p. 6).

Conclusion

Oak Lane Academy has been established as an elite, merit-based, private school in a large urban centre in Southern Ontario, Canada, where competition to be the best and brightest is embedded into the social and academic milieu. Being recognized as “smart” was critical to claiming elite status and feeling a sense of belonging at the school. Despite the pressure to excel scholastically, students professed to be highly engaged and happy compared to many of their schooling experiences of the past where they were bored, disengaged, and often excluded socially. In the process of becoming elite in this new environment, the students were determined to shed aspects of themselves that they deemed unfavourable or
unfitting for their expanding reality and evolving subjectivity. The more they excelled in their new environment (academically, relationally, socially), the more entitlement they claimed as Oak Lane Academy students who were deserving of their newfound opportunities and privileged education.

Much of this thesis will address how students engaged socially and relationally, in public and in private, as part of their elite subjectivity and the cultural practices that formed their elite identifications. Understanding the role gender played as part of students’ subject formations supports this knowledge and specifically points to the manifestation of gender-based violence. As I mentioned earlier in this chapter, being a smart “boy” or “girl” within this particular elite context, played an enormous role in how students experienced school life (although this was not fully apparent to them at their young age). Privileges were not granted to all students equally, based solely on their elite and intellectual status’, but were also determined by how appropriately masculinity and femininity was performed. Hierarchies were formed on the basis of these performances, which shed light on conditions cultivated in the school for patriarchal values, power relations, and gender inequality to subsist. These conditions, and the consequences of them, were responsible for gender-based violence in the school. Despite an equal enrolment of male and female students in each grade, there was an illusion of gender equality that was often contradicted by the evolving gender and social hierarchies. A much deeper analysis of gender performance, gender relations, and gender encounters will be articulated throughout the pages of this thesis.

The chapter to follow will address the theoretical framework that this study was founded on. It begins with a side-by-side narrative of two similarly run focus groups (same-gender groupings) that demonstrates distinct differences in the performances of masculinity
and femininity at Oak Lane Academy. While the story highlights the gender binary, it is only to bring attention to the cultural narratives, discursive practices, and social processes that will be explored in depth throughout the chapter. Subjectivity and performativity are the main foci of this chapter with feminist poststructuralism being employed as a means for theorizing the ethnographic experience at Oak Lane Academy. The chapter details how meaning is made through language, which is implicated in discourses. It also highlights the establishment of gender categories, the purpose of category maintenance work, and processes of subject positioning. The chapter ends with an in-depth discussion of the hidden curriculum as a mechanism for maintaining dominant gender discourses in the school. I argue that this resulted in unintended learning outcomes for students, which enforced gender inequality and gender-based violence.
A bag of Smarties travelled around the table. Each girl took two or three then placed the coloured candy on the surface in front of them. My instructions to the group were simple. We were going to play a quick and easy focus group icebreaker for which they needed a few Smarties to play. For every Smartie each person had, they had to say one thing about themselves (this detail was shared after they selected their candy). The bag of Smarties arrived back in my hand and I asked the girls if they could guess how many Smarties the boys took (compared to them) during their focus group a few days earlier. Caroline Li guessed at least ten. I confirmed the average was twelve. Caroline asked if Vlad Andrews was there, as he was the biggest “mooch.” He was and he ate a lot of Smarties. Together, we all laughed (the Grade 7 students, in general, seemed to be food obsessed and were often seen begging each other for bits and bites of whatever treats were at hand).

Despite offering the exact same instructions to both groups, the contrast in action and amount was evident. Each boy had reached into the bag and grabbed a handful (except for one who was not a Smartie fan), versus the careful selection of picking out a few favourite colours by the girls. The boys took what they wanted with ease, while the girls enacted restraint by not taking too much, or more than they needed. This performance of entitlement came as little surprise where doing “boy” included privileges that were not accessible in the same way to those enacting “girl.” Male ease and female restraint were gendered subtleties that I regularly observed being performed socially and relationally in the classrooms and hallways of Oak Lane Academy.
The icebreaker followed. The five girls in attendance took their time to tell me tidbits of personal information such as where they lived and what they loved to do. Avery Wu was particularly fond of gymnastics, but asserted she was “awful” at it. She also admonished herself for getting too easily “obsessed” with things. Caroline admitted to spending far too much money on Starbucks drinks. Karen Chen, an internationally successful chess competitor, said she was “kind of” into chess and math. Her friends mocked her choice of words, by letting me know of the level at which she played. The self-diminishing language that the girls used to describe themselves and their accomplishments did not surprise me. Normative discourses dictate this type of gendered recrimination, which is learned at an early age (Guerrero-Witt & Wood, 2010; Tan & Chun, 2014; Thorne, 1993). In my five months at Oak Lane Academy, hearing these types of personal put downs (either doing something too much or not being good enough) was a common occurrence. Performing girlhood with a high level of assuredness and self-confidence was akin to social suicide. Nor was I stunned by the admission of a twelve-year-old buying expensive Starbucks drinks on a regular basis. The students at Oak Lane Academy were often off campus at lunchtime visiting local cafés and restaurants in the surrounding area, which reflected their class privilege.

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31 Research psychologist and Fellow of the Association for Psychological Science, Dr. Denise Cummins, claims that one reason women put themselves down is “to protect themselves from envy and jealousy. And they deploy this behavior strategically” (2015, para. 3). Playing coy allows for greater bonding and belonging within female groups and helps maintain hierarchical structures and the status quo (Culotta & Goldstein, 2008; Kraft & Mayeux, 2018). Perceived threats that perpetuate jealousy can “play a role in relationally aggressive behaviors such as social exclusion, spreading rumors, and gossip” (Kraft & Mayeux, 2018, p. 387). Therefore, performing girl at Oak Lane Academy required acting out a certain level of subordination rather than explicit self-confidence to maintain friendships. I write more about female friendships, gossip, and jealousy in Chapter Six.
The last person to speak was Diana Gao, who professed that she was a “fangirl,” which sent the majority of the group into frenzied laughter and clapping. Just the idea of fangirling created a fangirl reaction in the room. This pop culture concept was new to me (not my daughter nor her friends engaged explicitly in fangirl discourse or spoke of the term), but I quickly became acquainted with the performance of femininity it produced. This would not be the last time over the course of the focus group that the girls would spin off excitedly into discussions about television shows and celebrities. Even their responses to questions about relationships were enough to trigger their digression. The word “trust” alone led to a flurry of side dialogue, which Melanie Song apologized for on behalf of the group. Diana furthered the apology and explained they were so excited as it was only “twenty-something-days” until the start of the new season of *Pretty Little Liars*, a teen drama based on a book series by the same name. When asked specifically about how they might describe unhealthy relationships, answers such as “murderous thoughts” and “restraining orders” (followed by laughter) seemed to be another direct reflection of their upcoming favourite show. I redirected their attention as necessary, towards “real life” relationships (namely, their own). It was an interesting juxtaposition to observe their distracted and frenetic energy, coupled with apologies, and continual shifting back into “appropriate” (aka restrained) behaviour expected of Oak Lane Academy girls. These subject positions were further complicated by

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32 The online Urban Dictionary (n. d.) describes a fangirl as “a rabid breed of human female who is obsessed with either a fictional character or an actor,” and fangirls as “girls who are fanatical about a particular person, group of people, or idea.” Horan (2013) states, “Fangirls (or fanboys) have many different levels of dedication. For the unaware, they are a group who obsesses over a fictional character or actor.” Melanie (participant) said fangirling “involves screaming, jumping up and down, like, and shaking a lot.”

33 Research indicates that girls/women tend to apologize more than boys/men (Schumann & Ross, 2010). Male and female participants were required to record in a diary (daily) all perceived infractions they committed or experienced, and report whether they had offered an apology as a result. While there was no gender difference in the number of offenses that incited an apology (both men and women
discourses of smartness that dictated these female students practice civility and earnestness. Clearly, embracing girlhood in its multiplicity could be equally dynamic and conflicting for the female subject (B. Davies, 1990), which was evident in the focus group. Doing “Oak Lane Academy girl” was ruled by oppressive gender discourses that denied girls their full expression of self.

The focus group with the boys was a very different experience, from the way they shared to what they shared. This was also partly due to the fact that they each had so many Smarties to get through as part of the icebreaker. The activity became somewhat of a competition to see who in the group could ramble off personal facts the fastest. They named their names, where they lived, their favourite sport and favourite subject, the mode of transportation they took to get to school, where they were born, and what they wanted to study in university. I learned who had three passports and who made the best pizza. It was also stated who wanted a career in politics, business, or science. There was not a hint of self-criticism, nor did these male participants engage in discursive tangents aside from the focus group conversation, but rather they answered questions on point. They also shared with me (not part of the icebreaker) what pseudonym they would like to be called. Political figures, Mike Duffy and Vladamir Putin, provided inspiration to two of the four boys in attendance. I rarely heard boys talk about favourite celebrities, but it was not uncommon for them to talk about well-known public figures in positions of power that they found interesting or

apologized proportionally to their offenses – approximately 81%), study findings showed that women reported to committing more offenses, which resulted in more apologies. Schumann and Ross (2010) argue, “the diary data suggest that women offer more apologies than men do because women have a lower threshold for what constitutes offensive behavior” (p. 3). In a second study, they tested the threshold hypothesis. They concluded that men and women perceive offenses, and what requires an apology, with less (men) and greater (women) severity. I offer this study to support my argument of how girls/women are conditioned to be restrained and perceive offenses (their own or others) based on ideological notions of gender.
(possibly) looked up to. As mentioned previously, there was a level of ease that accompanied enactments of boyhood, which also included performances of smartness. Privileges attributed to being male at Oak Lane Academy allowed for a wide berth of appropriate behaviour that the boys accepted in stride. These privileges reinforced patriarchal ideologies of entitlement, superiority, and hegemonic masculinity.

I chose to start this chapter with a side-by-side snippet of two similarly facilitated focus groups, as an entry point to the theoretical framework that this study rests on. While I am intending to emphasize obvious gender differences within these examples, it is not with the purpose of bringing attention to those differences within a binary frame. I acknowledge that how students enacted gender was also fluid. Not all girls performed femininity through “fangirling” or obsessing over male celebrities. Karen did not join in on the giggling, clapping, and rambling about soap opera characters. Yet, as a female identified student, she knew how to position herself to fit in and be accepted by downplaying her chess accolades and not disrupting the normative behaviour of some of her peers. Similarly, not all boys performed masculinity by claiming to love sports or look up to powerful public figures. In interviews, Vlad claimed to be a nerd who was terrible at sports and in observations Norman seemed to be more interested in play fighting than popularity status. Regardless, they, too, were accepted into the fold of male membership, based on how they performed masculinity, even if it was less dominant in nature than others. At Oak Lane Academy identifying as “boy” versus “girl” in the junior grades (based on my observations of Grade 7 and 8 students), regardless of individual gender performances (normative or non-conforming), did set a precedence of male privilege and entitlement as part of the school culture. Therefore, rather than making a statement with the opening narrative about how girls and boys speak or
act that is essential to their nature, or considered “normal” gendered behaviour, it is my aim to explicate the cultural narratives, discursive practices, and social processes, responsible for these performances of masculinity and femininity at Oak Lane Academy.

In doing so I queried, what can be learned from these normative gendered demonstrations? What theoretical tools need to be utilized to make meaning of language used by this group of Grade 7 students? How is that language implicated in discourses, which are embedded in these students’ subjectivity? Furthermore, in what ways do these female and male students explore their subjectivity within an elite private school, where being smart and competitive is seemingly virtuous? In this chapter, I argue that exploring these questions as a starting point (in relation to these examples and others) is critically important for understanding how Grade 7 and 8 students make meaning of school-related gender-based violence. This is not just about violence perpetrated between boys and girls, but also about how non-binary people are targets of discrimination and harassment. While moving from a simple icebreaker observation to school violence may seem like a giant leap, it is through analysing processes of subject formation and gendered performances that I will offer insight into this school phenomenon.

This theoretical chapter illuminates the “ideal” Oak Lane Academy student, by exploring subjectivity and the process of “becoming” a subject within an elite private school. Weber’s (1987) theoretical concept of “ideal types” is applied to “subjective processes” (n. p.) in this context.34 According to Gaztambide-Fernández (2009a) “ideal types are not to be taken as an evaluative representation of the ‘best kind’ of any social entity. Rather ideal types

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34 I accessed the book *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology* (Weber, 1978) online with no page numbers available. However, discussion of “ideal types” can be located under “The Definition of Sociology and of Social Action” (found in the table of contents listed under: VIII Analytical Contents, Pan One: Conceptual Exposition, Chapter I, Basic Sociological Terms 3, Prefatory Note 3).
are abstractions drawn from reality in order to illustrate a particular social phenomenon” (p. 20). Therefore, the “ideal” is constructed on the premise of the imagined Oak Lane Academy student (e.g., smart, competitive, rational, mature, entitled, heterosexual, etc.). The students developed their subjectivity in connection to those imagined ideals. This is particularly relevant when considering the process the students experienced in disassociating from their past (previous schooling) to embracing the present (elite private school). They were subjectified to the “ideal” Oak Lane Academy student through social interactions and discursive practices. With that said, it must be explicitly pointed out that this “ideal” subject is taken for granted as white and of upper middle class status. With intelligence being the reason students were accepted to Oak Lane Academy in the first place, the notion of being “smart” essentially made race and class unspeakable. Students identified by gender as part of the application process, class was assumed in being smart enough (and privileged financially) to attend this elite school, and silences around race implied whiteness as critical to the students’ subjectivity. In fact, not one student of any racial identification (Caucasian, Asian, etc.) spoke directly about race in connection to their sense of belonging at the school or process of becoming elite. Not speaking about race secured whiteness as the norm.

Mills (1997) argues in the introduction of his book The Racial Contract, “white supremacy is the unnamed political system that has made the modern world what it is today” (p. 1). In other words, whiteness represents a type of privilege and domination that is so taken for granted and unspoken that “it is the background against which other systems, which we are to see as political, are highlighted” (p. 2 [emphasis in original]). Zhou (2004) claims being labelled “white” is less about biology than it is about privilege. In fact, there are racialized groups that were at one time considered non-white (e.g., Irish and Jews) until they
obtained status and wealth, which granted them white membership. This is similar for Asian Americans who achieve “honorary white status” for being “model minorities” (as new immigrants or native-born to the United States) by doing well in school, attaining university degrees, achieving careers as professional, and reaching high levels of socioeconomic status (Lee, 2009; Louie, 2004). Zhou (2004) goes further by asserting that Asian Americans accept whiteness as “mainstream, average and normal, and they look to whites as a frame of reference for attaining higher social positions” (p. 35). Unfortunately, consequences for this point of view diminish other racial minorities and perpetuate racial discrimination.

Oak Lane Academy was exceptional at selling “whiteness” as part of their promise to students for a life of privilege, status, and future wealth when choosing an elite education. With students buying into this particular image of elite subjectivity they in turn moved towards cultural narratives that supported white membership and away from anything that conflicted with the “ideal” (e.g., identifying as a person of colour or disowning aspects of their ethnicity). Therefore, performing whiteness became a symbol of (and an instrument) for success at the school (Zhou, 2004). Silences around race (in particular) were so consistent in the data that it enabled me to see more precisely how successful Oak Lane Academy was at upholding idealized images of eliteness that required white embodiment.

I begin by situating the study in feminist poststructuralism as a means for theorizing the ethnographic experience and questioning ideologies and assumptions that are too often characterized as “normal.” I will illuminate how this theoretical lens allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of cultural narratives (discourses) and how subjects come to know what they know based on the cultural context that they find themselves in. I bring attention to poststructuralism as a means to query what is invisible or absent (e.g., racial distinctions), as
much as what is visible (e.g., gender division), while shedding light on new possibilities and
knowledge(s) that emerge from this questioning. This follows with a theoretical argument to
differentiate between the subject (as socially constructed) and the individual (as having an
essential nature), which will support various threads of understanding as they weave through
the pages to follow. Within the topic of subjectivity, I will address how language occurs and
produces meaning, while making direct connections to discourses and discursive practices,
particularly those related to gender. This framework will lend theoretical support the way I
examine how students performed category maintenance and experienced subject positions in
the school environment and in their relationships. An integral part of this framework is to
correspond subjectivity with performativity. I will explore what it means to “do” boy and girl
as performances of gender and sexuality, highlighting patriarchal and heteronormative
ideologies. I will also explain the hidden curriculum as a mechanism of maintaining the
status quo (particularly pertaining to gender and the implications of violence), in order to
develop an analysis of school violence through a close look at symbolic violence and its
relationship to social inequality. As a way to conclude this chapter, I will share how feminist
theory allowed me to weave politics into the realm of theorizing by highlighting the
“personal is political” (Hanisch, 1969) as part of the ethnographic journey.

Situating Feminist Poststructuralism

As an educator concerned with dominant (gender) discourses that can confine
students to traditional ways of knowing and being (with limiting and at times harmful
effects), I chose to employ feminist poststructuralism as a means for theorizing my
ethnographic experience at Oak Lane Academy. As a researcher, with a desire to fill gaping
holes in the current literature on school-related gender-based violence, I was aware that
feminist postructuralism could challenge my thinking around this global epidemic. Despite some success of incident reporting on social media and news platforms, the development and implementation of new safe school programs and initiatives, and efforts by working groups (such as the Global Working Group to End School-Related Gender-Based Violence) to bring attention to gender-based violence in schools, the problem seems to be increasing rather than decreasing in proportion. This is in part due to societal narratives that perpetuate patriarchal values, heteronormative ideals, and hegemonic discourses, which reinforce gender binary assumptions. For example, heterosexism actively plays out in schools with middle-school aged students (Grades 6 and 9) where heterosexuality is assumed, which perpetuates traditional gender roles and “the culturation of homophobia, misogyny, and male dominance” (Mandel & Shakeshaft, 2000, p. 77). Moreover, there continues to be limited research available on school-related gender-based violence in order to understand, and respond to, the epidemic appropriately. Poststructuralism “offers critiques and methods for examining the functions and effects of any structure or grid of regularity that we put into place, including those poststructuralism itself might create” (St. Pierre & Pillow, 2000, p. 6).

Initially, I was drawn to poststructuralism for its capability of questioning “normal” or “common sense” ideologies and assumptions (of ideas, beliefs, values, or processes) within specific cultural contexts, and for its attention to deeper understandings of how we know what we know (Britzman, 2000; Davies & Banks, 1992; Gavey, 2011; St. Pierre, 2000). Barrett (2005) argues that “poststructuralism attempts to gain some understanding of ways we have come to understand ourselves, questions the legitimacy of these
understandings, and brings previously marginalized discourses to the fore” (p. 80). In other words, poststructural inquiry can uncover ways that we have been subjected to traditional modes of thinking and being (often without our knowing), which have been at the mercy of hegemonic discourses (B. Davies, 1990). Therefore, I found myself excited by new possibilities and knowledge(s) that might emerge from this line of query, knowledge production that could transgress notions of what is typically considered natural or absolute such as the dualism between boys/men and girls/women (B. Davies, 1990; J. W. Scott, 1988).

Throughout this thesis, I apply and reinforce the theoretical concept that gender and sexuality are social constructions where meaning and knowledge is produced through daily discursive practices (Butler, 1990). This study relies heavily on this theoretical basis to uphold non-binary narratives in order to understand how Grade 7 and 8 students make meaning of school-related gender-based violence.

Poststructural questioning is not only for the purpose of gaining knowledge and truth, but to investigate “the production of contextual meanings” (Barrett, 2005, p. 80). Britzman (2000) contends that poststructuralism requires interpreting what is absent as much as what is present. In thinking about race specifically, there was an evident “silence” that I started to acknowledge during the ethnographic process, but even more so during the analysis phase. In interview and focus group data, I noticed that students rarely spoke about themselves with reference to their ethno-racial identities, language spoken other than English (if they spoke

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35 Legitimization, according to McLaren (2009) is a “negative function of ideology,” which is connected to a “theory of domination” (p. 69). Domination is equated with power relations where there is a privileging of some people/groups over others. Therefore, “legitimation occurs when a system of domination is sustained by being represented as legitimate or as eminently just and worthy of respect” (McLaren, 2009, p. 70). As an example, Oak Lane Academy students believed that gender equality existed because of the balanced enrolment of boys and girls and equal gender distribution per class and grade. Yet, power relations inscribed in dominant gender discourses that the students embodied and performed suggested otherwise.
more than one language), origin of birth, traditional cuisine that would connect to their cultural identity, or anything else that might give some indication of how they defined themselves within a framework of racial identification. Despite scouring the data for a glimmer of information, with the intention of writing an intersectional analysis, I mostly came up empty-handed. Regardless of how students were engaged (by teachers) in classroom conversations, shared details of themselves and their lives with me in interviews, or participated in focus groups, the topic of race remained predominantly silent. In comparison to talk about gender (in and out of class), the absence of race was glaring. Yet, in interpreting this absence (aside from feeling at a loss to offer an intersectional analysis) I gained deeper researcher reflexivity and learned to accept the incompleteness of knowledge(s) and truths about these students. Moreover, I disrupted my initial assumptions of Oak Lane Academy students based on my own preconceived notions of race and identity. Also, what they did not speak of supported a different analysis of how I understood intelligence, whiteness, and belonging as part of their subjectivity. I will address this absence of race more directly in the methodology chapter to follow.

Uncovering the invisible and making it visible was also key to my understanding of how students made meaning of gender-based violence (e.g., the hidden curriculum and symbolic violence). At the start of the study I was hard pressed to identify anything that resembled school-related gender-based violence as described in the literature or compared to what my daughter had experienced. I was looking and listening for specific forms of gendered violence that I had determined as “truth,” according to what I thought I already knew. Therefore, I found myself caught in a loop of predetermined knowledge and truth, held together by my own personal narratives and the persuasive theories presented in the literature
that I had access to. It took time for me to let go of preconceived notions and fully embrace a poststructuralist perspective. Once I became more familiar with Oak Lane Academy discourses, produced by elitist language practices I was somewhat unfamiliar with, I could begin to shine light on my research questions. This also helped me to understand how student subjectivity was formed as “a dynamic, unstable effect of language/discourse and cultural practice” (St. Pierre, 2000, p. 502). With that being said, I will transition into a discussion of the poststructural subject as differentiated from the individual defined in humanism. I will do so by arguing that in the realm of individualism, gender essentialism is a highly problematic concept. This will segue into a more succinct theorizing of subjectivity.

Differentiating the Subject from the Individual

The majority of students start their educational journey at Oak Lane Academy in the seventh grade, beginning the process of “becoming” elite subjects. As Cairns (2011) states, this notion of becoming is not inferred “in a developmental sense that locates young people in the early stages of a journey to adulthood,” or migrating towards a “stable adult self,” but rather “evokes a poststructuralist approach in which subjectivity itself is understood to be a process of becoming” (p. 26). She further articulates that this process is produced and reproduced through discourse. In other words, the way we come to know ourselves, and make meaning of the world we live in, is constructed through social interactions and discursive practices (Barrett, 2005; Butler, 1997; St. Pierre, 2000). According to B. Davies (2000) “we speak ourselves into existence within the terms of available discourses” (p. 55). Barrett (2005) articulates that within the framework of poststructuralism, “people are the ‘subjects of’ cultural narratives, or storylines” (p. 83). At Oak Lane Academy, the process of becoming is layered with notions of smartness and gender identity. What it means to be a
“smart” girl or boy within this particular elite school is clearly implicated in the students’ subjectivity and ongoing subject formation.

Before delving deeper into (youth) subjectivities and (gender) discourses, it is important to distinguish the difference between the students in this study as constructed subjects rather than as individuals with essential selves. The inscription of the individual stems from humanism, which “is generally understood to be a conscious, stable, unified, rational, coherent, knowing, autonomous, and a historic individual” (St. Pierre, 2000, p. 500). This essentialist understanding posits that all living beings come into existence with a fixed, absolute, and unchangeable “essence” that defines who they are. In other words, the essential nature of an individual (how a person thinks, acts, and feels) is more or less enduring and resolute throughout their lives. Oderberg (2007) argues, “there must be an essence for everything that exists: it must be possible to say what it is, what it could not be, and why it is as it is” (p. 47 [emphasis in original]).

Furthermore, the humanist individual is accepted as an “all-knowing subject” who is “the origin of truth and knowledge,” with “an inherent agency” (St. Pierre, 2000, p. 500). With that in mind, the individual is then thought of as making observations of the world outside of themselves, making predictions about what is happening, attempting to control their environment, while at the same time producing knowledge that is “true” and affords them the power to create change. St. Pierre (2000) states that this viewpoint of the individual perpetuates a “self” that is internal and seemingly unaffected by the outside world or others in it. Besley (2002) affirms this description of the humanist individual as “often characterized as fully transparent to itself and responsible for his or her actions” (p. 42). This, of course, differs significantly from the subject that is suggested by poststructuralism – a socially
constructed self that is constantly changing in response to experiences, circumstances, and particular environments they find themselves in.

This account of the individual is particularly problematic when considering the gendered subject with a gender inscribed body (Butler, 1990). Gender essentialism, as it is critiqued through poststructural feminist theory, implies a fixed essence of what it means to be a girl/woman (or boy/man) (de Beauvoir, 1949/2009; Grosz, 1990; Heilmann, 2011).

According to de Beauvoir (1949/2009), sexual distinctions of the individual have historically been taken for granted without any attempt to explain why. Grosz (1990) explains that a “woman’s essence is assumed to be given, universal, and is usually, though not necessarily, identified with women’s biology and ‘natural’ characteristics” (p. 334). She goes further to clarify that the description of a woman’s essence goes beyond biologism and naturalism to also include psychological characteristics. For example, women (and girls) are often labelled as nurturing, empathetic, supportive, non-competitive, and so forth. She further points out that a perceived essence of womanhood may be attributed to “certain activities and procedures (which may or may not be dictated by biology) observable in social practices, intuitiveness, emotional responses, concern, and commitment to help others, etc.” (Grosz, 1990, p. 334). Essentialism (and biologism, naturalism, and universalism), therefore, tends to assume that all women (at any given time) share this intrinsic nature, which is limited in its variations.36 Grosz (1990) concludes that these theoretical perspectives reinforce patriarchal

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36 In the edited book *Feminist Knowledge: Critique and Construct* by Sneja Gunew (1990), Grosz delineates essentialism from biologism (connected to a woman’s reproductive functions and other biological differences compared to men), naturalism (the fixed nature of the female individual, which might also include attributes gifted to her by God), and universalism (related to social structures and roles that all women are commonly assigned to regardless of cultural context). While there are clear differences between these theories, they are also intricately linked conceptually “sharing a common concern for the fixity and limits definitionally imposed on women . . . in patriarchal discourses to justify women’s social subordination and their secondary positions relative to men in patriarchal society (Grosz, 1990, p. 333).
knowledges, ideologies, and values that position gender as a clear binary where the stronger (male) is in opposition and superior to the weaker (female) sex. B. Davies (1990) refers to this as male/female dualism, which maintains binary oppositions that are hierarchical and harmful towards any resemblance of femininity.

In claiming that women’s current social roles and positions are the effects of their essence, nature, biology, or universal social position, these theories are guilty of rendering such roles and positions unalterable, necessary, and thus of providing them with a powerful political justification. They rationalize and neutralize the prevailing sexual division of social roles by assuming these are the only, or the best, possibilities, given the confines of the nature, essence, or biology of the two sexes . . . they confuse social relations with fixed attributes; they see these fixed attributes as inherent limitations to social change; and they refuse to take seriously the historical and geographical differences between women across different cultures as well as within a single culture. (Grosz, 1990, p. 335)

In this study, developed within a feminist poststructural framework, I work against gender essentialism and instead theorize gender as a social construction (Butler, 1990; Heilman, 2011). Through my analysis and narration of the data, I consciously and consistently endeavoured to “break up these dualisms, and to disconnect them from the idea of persons who happen to have one or another set of genitals” (B. Davies, 1990, p. 509).37

The purpose of this chapter is to illuminate the ways in which students are continually going through the process of becoming, both as elite andgendered subjects, through the various discursive practice that are available to them. It is important to point out that this process of becoming is always in relationship to constructions of dominant gender discourses that reinforce a gender binary of male and female. Later in this chapter I will discuss gender

37 While I understand gender as a social construction that is fluid and changeable, I am also interested in how gender binaries are produced and enforced by dominant gender discourses to maintain social order and gender hierarchies. My analysis is not about how students experience gender fluidity, but rather how they relate to hegemonic gender ideologies as they are experienced through imposed binaries.
categories and maintenance work that uphold these categories. I will also discuss how subjects position themselves within these categories and how these positions are constantly being negotiated and revised, where nothing is fixed, stable, or of a biological, natural, or universal state.

Undoubtedly, the characterization of the individual/subject has evolved throughout history. Significant contributions to the topic have been made from the philosophy of Marx and Nietzsche to the psychoanalysis of Freud and Lacan. However, it was Althusser (1971) who introduced a more contemporary subject with his notion of interpellation within the realm of structuralism (moving away from individualism), which was then furthered by Foucault. The movement from Althusser’s ideology-based analysis of the subject towards a Foucauldian poststructuralist perspective is widely acknowledged in the social sciences (St. Pierre, 2000). In the 2008 editorial publication of the journal Subjectivity, Blackman, Cromby, Hook, Papadopoulos, and Walkerdine emphasize the importance of the shift from ideology to power/knowledge where subjectivity is understood as “the experience of the lived multiplicity of positionings” (p. 6). They assert that Foucault understood that “all knowledge was itself fictional and productive of subjects,” which “placed a great deal of emphasis on the historical emergence or genealogy of the present ‘truths’, and on the multiple sites through which these historically contingent truths are productive of positions for subjects to be formed” (Blackman et al., 2008, p. 6). The shift from a singular theory and belief system as expressed through humanism, to that of plurality in poststructuralism, signalled a clear distinction of the subject as produced in power/knowledge, discursive practices, and social structures (Blackman et al., 2008).
Subjectivities at Oak Lane Academy

Poststructuralism does not speak of identity in the sense of a singular or unified means for sameness, but of subjectivity in terms of difference and plurality (Besley, 2002). This is the contrast between a process of “becoming” versus existing in the world as already “known.” Therefore, the subject (inferred in this study) does not have a core or essential nature, but is associated with various “social pluralities” (Besley, 2002, p. 36) such as gender, race, class, ethnicity, and age. These pluralities may also be thought of as “sociological concepts” (Jackson & Scott, 2002, p. 20). Plurality, theoretically speaking, suggests that there are multiple ways of being in the world and various avenues for approaching “truths” in everyday living. It is the “existence of a multiplicity of identities and perspectives from which different groups and people experience social reality” (Kunelius, 2008, p. 1). In turn, I understand difference (of individuals) in terms of their constructed pluralities and the ways these pluralities are used for comparison with others (people/groups). Therefore, poststructuralism lends to philosophical and theoretical questioning that helps us make meaning of what we know about ourselves, others, and the world around us. With this in mind, subjectivity can be thought of broadly as a term that refers to “beliefs, attitudes, outlooks, convictions, subconscious tendencies, orientations, proclivities, understandings, etc., that people may hold” (Bazzul, 2016, p. 7). In other words, subjectivity is what emerges between the subject and the experiences of those pluralities. Subjectivities are, therefore, constantly under construction and evolving.

On the topic of youth subjectivity, Cairn’s (2011) acknowledges that “subjectivity formation operates at multiple levels” (p. 20) through a process of construction. She articulates how students are situated within specific discourses, how they negotiate and revise
these constructions, and the ways they operate to locate themselves in positions and relations that shift from moment to moment. Cairns (2009) further articulates that subjectivity is performative, which is enacted through social processes and practices. This idea is affirmed by Butler (1997) who suggests, “we must lose the perspective of a subject already formed in order to account for our own becoming” (p. 30). She goes on to elaborate that “‘becoming’ is no simple or continuous affair, but an uneasy practice of repetition and its risks, compelled yet incomplete, wavering on the horizon of social being” (Butler, 1997, p. 30). I found these concepts particularly helpful when thinking of subjectivity formation at Oak Lane Academy and the ways students constructed and performed meanings associated with intelligence, gender, and the many opportunities (e.g., social, relational, educational) afforded them as elite private school students (some of which was illustrated in Chapter Two). At the same time, I was also aware of how invested these students were in their every day lived experiences, navigating their shifting realities, and attempting to understand themselves and their place in the world. This will be further explored in the following analysis chapters, where I will illustrate what it means to be a Grade 7 and 8 “boy” or “girl” at Oak Lane Academy, how these students embodied and enacted masculinities and femininities, which influenced the ways they navigated peer relationships and love, and how gender discourses (re)produced game and game-like behaviour as performances of “play.”

Gaztambide-Fernández (2009a) describes how “particular subjectivities are achieved in a given context, and how ‘webs of meaning’ are produced to sustain the status arrangements implied in such subjective positions” (p. 15). This was certainly the case for Oak Lane Academy students in the process of maintaining their smart/elite status, but also in the development of social and gendered hierarchies within their peer groups and grade levels.
Gaztambide-Fernández (2009a) asserts discourse determines subjective positions “that thickens how individuals understand their ‘positioning’ and, therefore, how they behave” (p. 15). I will address discourses in more detail, and the ways they shape subjectivities, following a discussion of language and meaning.

**Language and Meaning**

Meaning is made through language (words or text) within specific cultural narratives and practices (Bruner, 1990; Gaztambide-Fernández, 2009a; King, 2003; St. Pierre, 2000). Barrett (2005) argues that until these narratives and practices take place, words themselves have no meaning. Within poststructuralism meanings are not singular, but plural in nature. Moreover, meaning is made through difference rather than “an identity, between a word and something in the world” (St. Pierre, 2000, p. 480). In other words, language is a system of signs, which each have a signifier (sound, word, or image) and are signified (a meaning/idea is communicated by a sign). Signs acquire meaning when they are compared to other signs, creating differences in language that are available to us in various social circumstances (St. Pierre, 2000). Difference also points out oppositions and binaries (subject/object, us/them, man/woman, etc.) that separate people (Besley 2002; J. W. Scott, 1988), as well as what is missing or absent within language narratives (Derrida, 1967/1997). According to J. W. Scott (1988), difference in poststructural analysis implies that “meaning is made through implicit or explicit contrast, that a positive definition rests on the negation or repression of something represented as antithetical to it” (p. 37).

To understand how Oak Lane Academy students made-meaning of gender-based violence, it was critical to pay attention to the ways difference played a part in their gendered subjectivity. Identifying as a “boy” or “girl” carried particular meanings that were produced
on a daily basis through social processes and discursive practices. As illustrated in the focus group example at the beginning of the chapter, boys performed privilege and ease whereas girls enacted inferiority and restraint. That being said, the girls likely did not think of themselves as inferior or restrained, but rather their gendered performances demonstrated these understandings of what it means to be female. This was evident in numerous observations I conducted, in classrooms and around the school, as well as during individual interviews. Despite the assumption of gender equality at Oak Lane Academy, the difference in how male and female identified students were treated, spoken about, and understood (by each other, teachers, school staff, etc.), positioned them in opposition of the “other” within a gender binary. Normative gender discourses were continuously being constructed and reinforced through implicit expectations that urged students to think, feel, and behave in particular ways. As a result, girls experienced far more limitations than boys in the shaping of their subjectivities (McLaren, 2009).

With “gender” situated at the crux of this study, language (produced and reinforced in the school space) required dismantling and reenvisioning through what Derrida terms deconstruction (Derrida, 1967/1997). St. Pierre (2000) argues that a powerful effect of deconstruction is that “it foregrounds the idea that language does not simply point to pre-existing things and ideas but rather helps to construct them and, by extension, the world as we know it” (p. 483). She goes further by stating, “In other words, we word the world. The ‘way it is’ is not ‘natural.’ We have constructed the world as it is through language and cultural practice, and we can also deconstruct and reconstruct it” (St. Pierre, 2000, p. 483). St. Pierre (2000) claims that deconstruction is a tool that serves to critique any structure, which can support in the continual rewriting of the world and ourselves. In Derrida’s (1988)
own words, “Deconstruction takes place, it is an event that does not await the deliberation, consciousness, or organization of a subject, or even modernity. It deconstructs itself. It can be deconstructed” (p. 4).

Aside from applying deconstruction to my data analysis, I could also see it in action in the school. A perfect example of deconstruction at work took place in the Grade 8 English classroom as part of curricular inquiry. Students were subjected to several lessons on gender and sexuality through media literacy and literature units. The Grade 8 teacher encouraged students to question dominant discourses found in social media, commercials, print advertisements, and propaganda. He would ask them to find meaning behind the text, or image, or invite them to unpack discriminatory language. During the study of *Twelfth Night* by Shakespeare, he asked students to question heteronormative relationships, inappropriate sexual behaviour, rape culture, and the homoerotic dialogue between characters. These lessons were meant to connect to the students’ lived experiences so that as a class they could explore new discourses together.

In these moments, I was able to observe a number of ways that this teacher’s pedagogical approach disrupted normative gender discourses and hegemonic teaching practices, which had an impact on the students’ subjectivity (Bazzul, 2016; B. Davies, 1993; McLaren, 2009). However, taking up new discourses requires new subject positions, which was not forthcoming by (or available to) all students. Some performed category maintenance as to not disrupt the status quo. For example, some male-identified students in particular were resistant to ideologies outside of the gender binary and resisted these class conversations by making sexist jokes, being behaviourally disruptive, and engaging the teacher in controversial debates. Others shifted their subject positions to consider alternative ways of
understanding themselves and the world they were studying (Barrett, 2005; B. Davies, 1990; Davies & Banks, 1992). This was evident in focus groups and interviews when I asked participants if they had learned anything from the English lessons and conversations. One student reflected that she had learned a lot of new information that made her question her own opinion on various topics. Another student discussed his conflicting feelings around the rights of men and women in relationships, which stemmed from a class debate on rape. His subject position changed from identifying as a male with a mother and sister, who he believed deserved equal rights, to a feeling that he as a male was being stripped of his own rights as the expense of women’s.

Identifying how Oak Lane Academy students used language with each other was also critical to this study, particularly when thinking about how they made meaning of gender, sexuality, and violence. For example, in the focus group I conducted with the boys, they shared that some of their male peers made inappropriate comments by overusing the word “rape” to imply physical touch. If a person was touched in a way that was perceived as “the wrong thing” or someone sat on your lap, they might say they were raped. The boys talked about the word rape being taken out of context from being a violent act to having very little impact or power in how it was used at school. In fact, throughout my research, I observed how language was often misconstrued to create humour, to make violence laughable (Cox, 2015; Mackie, 1990; Mallet, Ford & Woodzicka, 2016). In the focus group with the girls, they shared their frustrations of being labeled “prude” by boys when they refused to discuss their sexual desires or experiences with them. In their attempt to set boundaries around talk of a personal nature, the girls were belittled and teased for choosing privacy. They felt that the word “prude” undermined their subjectivity and sense of self when they were working to
exercise agency within a discourse of patriarchy. Another word that was used frequently by many of the Grade 7 students was “pervert,” to describe a male student who was heterosexually explicit in his actions and attitude. Perverts were misogynist in nature (e.g., telling rude jokes about girls or asking girls personal information about their sexuality), but within a frame of acceptability. While some students found perverts to be inappropriate, they also laughed at the antics that perverts performed. The pervert label was a contradiction in terms of being acceptable when it was funny and wrong when it went too far. This will be further explained in the analysis chapters to follow. By deconstructing what I saw and heard, I was better able to identify performances of masculinity and smartness that revealed gender-based violence.

Discourse

There were numerous discourses operating at any given time within Oak Lane Academy, which students performed in particular ways depending on the circumstances, in which they found themselves. Discourse in this educational frame refers to a system of concepts, statements, beliefs, and understandings, which are comprised of discursive practices that structure social spaces (McLaren, 2009; J. W. Scott, 1988; St. Pierre, 2000). Discourse is not specifically a language or text, or even a means for communication, but “how statements and representations, whether symbolic or more narrowly linguistic, relate to one another and to the sociohistorical context in which they are uttered” (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2009a, p. 14). Discourses are inscribed with power relations and rules that are practiced discursively in dominant, deferential, or subversive ways. In this study, I am most concerned with those of a hegemonic nature. McLaren (2009) refers to dominant discourses in education as a production of the dominant culture or “regimes of truth,” which he
describes as “general economies of power/knowledge, or as multiple forms of constraint” (p. 73). St. Pierre (2000) argues that dominant discourses are challenging to act or think outside of once they are normalized, or thought of as natural or common sense. The rules they abide by control what can be said, who can speak, what is intelligible, and what is no longer possible, when regulated by power.

My time spent in the classroom observing teacher-to-student and student-to-student engagement (teaching, learning, social, and relational opportunities), offered significant insight into dominant discourses being constructed and acted on at the school. For example, dominant discourses of achievement determined “appropriate” pedagogical approaches to teaching, subject specific resources and books to support scholastically elite student learning, and elitist ideas, beliefs, and values to encourage excellence and imagined privileged futures (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2009a). Traditional and academically elite subjects were taught at Oak Lane Academy such as debate, persuasive writing, and Shakespeare. Scholastic achievement was privileged over creative expression. The STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) subjects were prided over the humanities and the arts. Gender stereotypes were often attached to these discourses where assumptions were made about who performed better in these subject areas. Oak Lane Academy students were known to compete aggressively in every subject (and special interest clubs), but females in particular expressed their need to prove themselves in typically male dominated areas of expertise (e.g., math, chess). Therefore, performances of smartness required different levels of effort by male and female students, which were dictated by discourses.

Dominant gender discourses were also prevalent in the ways students embodied and performed masculinities or femininities, which served to reinforce binary narratives and the
privileging of male students. As I will describe in greater detail in other chapters to come, “doing boy” was associated with acts of entitlement, superiority, and ease (Pascoe, 2007; Thorne, 1993). Boys tended to take up more space physically and vocally than the girls, and were often excused for unruly, rude, or sexist behaviour as a justification for being a “boy” (Adler, Kless, & Adler, 1992). With boys positioned as dominant subjects, girls were subjugated to inferior status and given little space to speak and act (Renold, 2005). These hegemonic discourses enabled patriarchy to function and thrive through regulatory practices that were upheld by the school community. Gender and social hierarchies were also produced and maintained by these discursive practices, as were heteronormative rules of engagement when it came to friendships and dating norms. Students positioned themselves within these discourses in various ways depending on the class they were in (e.g., math, art, science), the friends they were with, what was expected of them (e.g., academically, socially), and how they saw themselves.

As maintained by McLaren (2009), discourses and discursive practices impact our lived experiences as aware and thinking subjects. He goes further by expressing that they “shape our subjectivities (our ways of understanding in relation to the world) because it is only in language and through discourse that social reality can be given meaning” (McLaren, 2009, p. 73). It is important to note that discourses are not created equally nor do they carry the same amount of leverage in particular cultural narratives. Some discourses have the power to regulate hegemonic conditions and the status quo, whereas others serve to resist practices that are socially and institutionally imposed. In the next section, I will explore the subjective experience of category maintenance and the positioning of oneself within particular discourses to uphold, resist, and redefine categories of difference.
Categories, Category Maintenance Work, and Subject Positioning

Poststructuralist theory examines categories and category maintenance as a means to explore subjectivity (Barrett, 2005). There are multiple categories that individuals are assigned to, and find membership in, that they work to separate themselves from or maintain (B. Davies, 2006). According to Davies and Harre (1990) there are certain processes involved in developing subjectivity, which includes identifying with specific categories that people are included or excluded from. Through participating in various discursive practices, meanings are assigned to those categories as story lines “which different subject positions are elaborated” (Davies & Harre, 1990, p. 47). In other words, positioning oneself within a category and storyline requires that the subject find membership or belonging. According to Barrett (2005), “the poststructural self takes up discourses available, and in doing so, is constantly (re)inscribed as a subject within a category” (p. 83). Categories are understood as binary, where positioning oneself within a particular category requires being in opposition to another (B. Davies, 1993, 2006; J. W. Scott, 1988). For example, positioning oneself in the category of girl would be in opposition to boy. Similarly, being situated in the category of elite private school student would be antithesis of public school student. Oak Lane Academy students claimed membership in many categories, including boy/girl and elite student, which shaped their subjectivity.

Yet, categories are not static and cannot be seen as such. Rather, they are fluid and shifting, requiring category maintenance work to determine appropriate membership in one category to define it differently from the other (B. Davies, 1993, 2006; Westbrook & Schilt, 2014). In the instance of boy/man as a category, dominant masculinity tends to reign (compared to other expressions of masculinity that resist the binary) and is determined by the
rejection of the feminine (Connell, 1987; West & Zimmerman, 1987). This type of masculinity is a construction of normative gender discourses governed by discursive practices that are maintained through the preservation of hegemonic masculine traits (e.g., virility, strength, bravery). Femininity, on the other hand, is typically described as everything masculinity is not. Earlier in this chapter, I talked about gender essentialism, which made explicit mention of the ways girls, women, the feminine, and femininity is contextualized. With that said, it must be acknowledged that categories and category maintenance work is constantly being challenged as a process of subjectivity. Individuals rarely fit neatly into gendered boxes, or fully meet perceived membership requirements of belonging to dominant ideologies of “boyhood” or “girlhood.” Gendered categories are often in question and contradicted, which is part of the entire process of category maintenance by many individuals. However, there are consequences for those who are far removed from the norm, which implicates gender-based violence in school spaces (Mills, 2001; Pascoe, 2007; Renold, 2003).

At Oak Lane Academy, students worked in various ways to construct their gendered experiences through the cultural narratives they had available to them. For some, dominant masculinity was accessible and for others it was not. This was similar for students accessing discourses of femininity. However, just as categories are fluid, subjects are always in the process of negotiation and change as well. Through every social interaction that students engaged in there were opportunities for them to (re)position themselves or be positioned by others (Barrett, 2005). Davies and Harre (1990) claim “in speaking and acting from a position people are bringing to the particular situation their history as a subjective being, that is the history of one who has been in multiple positions and engaged in different forms of
discourse” (p. 48). This was particularly relevant in the ways students were positioned on the
gender and social hierarchy. In Chapter Five I illustrate how male and female students
identified (or identified others) as “nerds,” “cool kids,” and “perverts,” within a framework
of smartness. Some students who had started the school year as “nerds,” managed to
reposition themselves as “cool.” Others gladly found themselves maintaining “pervert”
status. However, these categories were not equally available to all students, particularly those
identified as girls. As dominant gender discourses regulated the school space, girls were still
subject to limited discursive practices that denied them particular privileges. Nevertheless,
within the five months I spent at Oak Lane Academy, the shifting of these social positions
and those that embodied them was evident.

Category maintenance also occurred with students positioning themselves in
opposition to public school students. Despite the fact that many of them had attended public
school in their formative years, the memories represented bullying and/or boredom compared
to their self-professed current position as included and engaged. There was a great deal of
“othering” towards public education in their comparative storytelling, as students legitimized
their newfound subject positions as elite private school students. This type of positioning in
opposition of the “other” is evident in “how young people construct spatial boundaries to
demarcate social groupings” (Cairns, 2013, p. 625). Therefore, they embraced their evolving
subjectivity gleefully and worked ceaselessly to position themselves appropriately within
discourses that best served their budding desires, which included envisioning heightened
experiences and new opportunities.

The most challenging aspect of shifting subject positions within available discourses
is that it can create internal contradictions and conflict. This was most noticeable in
conversations with female students during interviews and focus groups. In one moment they would accuse male peers of being “perverts,” and asking them sexually inappropriate questions, but in the next breath justify the behaviour as a joke or good fun. In another example, they would talk about being young, innocent and not ready for a relationship, but follow with a longing to be “liked” by a boy whom they had a crush on. While these students did not specifically comment on how they experienced these contradictory narratives emotionally, as a grown woman these narratives recalled memories of confusion. Barrett (2005) offers words of assurance, “the notion of subjectivity, category maintenance, positioning and desire help us recognize that being contradictory does not mean being hypocritical” (p. 86). Instead she reminds us that we are always being (re)positioned within accessible discourses and that discourses are often contradictory. Therefore, “we can begin to give ourselves permission to be contradictory without as much pain and guilt” (Barrett, 2005, p. 86). This served me as a researcher, to grasp the power that these social processes and discursive practices could have to help or hinder the well-being of the students I engaged in my research.

Category maintenance and subject positioning are important when thinking through school-related gender-based violence. For one, they support our understanding of how categories of difference (binaries) operate to create separation and opposition (de Beauvoir, 1949/2009; Grosz, 1990; Heilmann, 2011). You cannot consider one without the other, as they are entwined relationally (B. Davies, 1990). Furthermore, there is always a privileging within dualism. One half of a category is seen as positive while the other negative (generally speaking). Category maintenance works to sustain this coupling, which can have dire consequences for those unable to access appropriate or desired subject positions. As
discourse and power are implicitly connected, dominant discourses can construct patterns of violence within social interactions (O’Neill & Morgan, 2001). What is important to note is that category maintenance work is both accomplished by oneself and by others (B. Davies, 2006). In other words, if an individual is unable to perform category membership appropriately to belong (e.g., gender variant or non-conforming person), category maintenance will be performed for them at their exclusion and/or harm.

After a careful discussion of subjectivity, I will now make connections to performativity. By exploring the body as a gender inscribed aspect of our subjectivity, I articulate how gender can be expressed through performances of masculinity or femininity, a process known as “doing” gender.

**Subjectivity as Performative**

A key aspect of this study is how subjectivity and performativity intersect, which has already been alluded to throughout this chapter. As we speak ourselves into existence with available discourses, constructing and reconstructing our cultural narratives, this in turn is enacted through our bodies (Butler, 1990; Connell, 1987; Jackson & Scott, 2002; West & Zimmerman, 1987). By engaging in daily social interactions and discursive practices we create a reality that is performed. However, it could also be stated that as we perform our subjectivities, our subjectivities are simultaneously being formed. In other words, subjectivity and performativity are co-constitutive.

In *Bodies That Matter* (1993), Butler argues that performativity is “citational” (p. 12). It originates in linguistics, which distinguishes performatives as forms of speech. Butler (2003) asserts, “within speech act theory, a performative is that discursive practice that
enacts or produces that which it names” (p. 13). It is a socially constructed process where our perceived reality is cited into being through speech acts, which are then embodied and performed in a way that appears to be natural to our subjectivity. Jackson and Scott (2002) contend that performativity as citational is effective in that it “entails citing past practices, referring to existing conventions, reiterating known norms” (p. 19). They share the example of a child being born with the exclamation, “It’s a girl!” which then brings a girl into being and starts the process of her becoming. The process works because the very act of stating it is a “girl” automatically points to gender norms and ideologies that establish and regulate what it means to be a girl. Butler (1993) reinforces the notion that performativity is “not a singular ‘act,’ for it is always a reiteration of a norm or set of norms, and to the extent that it acquires an act-like status in the present, it conceals or dissimulates the conventions of which it is a repetition” (p. 12).

Butler (1990) has also made a significant impact in her theory of gender as performative. According to Salish (2002) our bodies become gendered from birth, which is the start of our social existence. As all existence is social, we are therefore gendered. However, this is not in a true sense of having a natural body or fixed essence, but a body that is inscribed through interactions and discursive practices (Renold, 2005; West & Zimmerman, 1987). Butler (1988) argues that gender is not a stable identity from which various acts proceed; rather it is an identity that is developed over time through a repetition of acts. Jackson and Scott (2002) state, “bodies become gendered through the continual performance of gender” (p. 19). Therefore, gender is performative. In other words, to perform femininity is to be feminine or to perform masculinity is to be masculine. With that said, performances of femininity and masculinity are enacted in various ways by boys, girls
and those who identify as gender-fluid, as people do not have only one experience of gender throughout their lives. Performativity does not assume that people embrace one gendered category over another, but rather it articulates the process in which a gendered subject is constructed.

Butler (1988) insists that gender is initiated by different mannerisms of the body (e.g., movements, gestures) that give the illusion of a “gendered self” (p. 519). While there are subtle and individual ways of expressing one’s gender, how our bodies are performed is ultimately not fully of an individual’s doing. According to Butler (1990) “acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this on the surface of the body, through the play of signifying absences that suggest, but never reveal, the organizing principle of identity as a cause” (p. 136). Yet, we live in a world where many individuals continue to assume that our gender is intricately linked to our biology in a stable manner, which only perpetuates dualistic notions of gender. Butler (1993) reminds us that this normative way of thinking is merely part of “a regulatory practice that produces the bodies it governs, that is, whose regulatory force is made clear as a kind of productive power, the power to produce—demarcate, circulate, differentiate—the bodies it controls” (p. 1). This is evident in the ways heteronormative gender discourses enforce gender binaries, such as in schools where heterosexist behaviour is a critical construction of gender identity (Mandel & Shakeshaft, 2000).

Essentially, our gender is not who we are, it is not our identity. Rather, gender is something we “do.” West and Zimmerman (1987) illustrate, “doing gender involves a complex of socially guided perceptual, interactional, and micropolitical activities that cast particular pursuits of expressions of masculine and feminine ‘natures’” (p. 125). They argue
that when we understand gender as an achievement, something that occurs through social interactions and processes, we are able to detach from gender as an internal aspect of an individual. Gender is not the “property of individuals” but rather “an emergent feature of social situations” (West & Zimmerman, 1987, p. 125). This theoretical lens supported my study in the hours of observations I conducted in classrooms and the hallways of Oak Lane Academy over the course of five months. I was always curiously taking in how students performed their gender in particular ways depending on their social positioning. This, of course, changed depending on whether they were sitting in class preparing to engage in learning, casually hanging out with close friends, or perhaps trying to flirt or impress someone they “liked.” I also looked for markers to better understand performances of masculinity and femininity at Oak Lane Academy that intersected with smartness.

To clarify, this discussion of gender discourses through the lens of feminist poststructuralist theory affirms that being female or male involves the embodiment of gendered behaviours (i.e., masculinity), and normative and regulated ways of knowing, through subjectification. These behaviours become part of the self and are then performed outwardly to others. The more gendered behaviours are performed over time, the more they are embodied and represented as the true essence of an individual, insomuch as they do not feel performed but natural. Unfortunately, for those who do not conform to gender norms of what it means to be a girl/boy, woman/man, or feminine/masculine, there are punitive consequences (West & Zimmerman, 1987). Homophobia and transphobia are one result of gender non-conformity, but there are many other ways students can be at the mercy of peer scrutiny (e.g., not wearing the “right” (designer) clothes or for wearing clothes that have religious significance, for having the “wrong” haircut, for not having the “right” body shape,
etc.). Factors such as race, class, ability, and weight also seem to play a significant role as to whether a student performs their gender “correctly” within the norms of a patriarchal society.

Language, or speech acts, constructed within cultural narratives and social practices creates meaning in our lives that shapes our subjectivity and are performed as an expression of self. In particular, performances of masculinity and femininity help to situate the argument to follow regarding the hidden curriculum, which supports understanding particular gender performances in the context of a school like Oak Lane Academy.

The Hidden Curriculum

Oak Lane Academy claims to offer equal learning opportunities for male and female identified students in Grades 7 through 12. From the application and admissions process, to gender balanced classes and grade levels, the school prides itself on its equity policies and programs. Additionally, the school is committed to student and teacher led clubs and organizations that support gender equality and challenges impacting LGBTQ+ people (e.g., homophobia and transphobia). Oak Lane Academy also works with community partners and research institutions to further this work scholastically. From an outside perspective one might assume that gender equality was thriving in the school. However, equal numbers did not automatically translate to the vision the school publicized.

Given their expressed commitment to gender equity, one might wonder why in such a school dominant gender discourses would keep the gender binary rigidly in tact. After spending time at the school, it was not until I started to question the school’s admissions process with gender as a pivoting factor for enrolment that I began to put the pieces together. I wondered, how was gender defined as a precursor to the admissions process? To what end

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38 Refer back to Chapter Two for more information on this topic.
did this school structure support student success or discourage it? More specifically, were all students, regardless of their gender identity, able to access equal learning opportunities as promised by Oak Lane Academy? I realized that I had been paying close attention to intended outcomes of the school rather than questioning what students were being exposed to unintentionally. Consequently, it led me to acknowledge the ways in which the hidden curriculum was operating in the shadows and shaping students’ subjectivity (McLaren, 2009).

Apple (1990) defines the hidden curriculum as “the norms and values that are implicitly, but effectively, taught in schools and that are not usually talked about in teachers’ statements of end of goals” (p. 84). While the word “hidden” implies something as concealed or invisible, Margolis, Soldatenko, Acker, and Gair (2001) suggest that the hidden curriculum might actually be “hidden in plain sight, precisely so that it will remain undetected” (p. 2). Often what is right in front of us cannot be seen. However, our lack of sight does not make the hidden curriculum any less powerful in its effect. While it is important that I articulate an understanding of the hidden curriculum to support this work, my main focus is to address how the hidden curriculum functioned as a mechanism for maintaining dominant gender discourses. In other words, what were the students learning and how? What “unintended outcomes of the schooling process” (McLaren, 2009, p. 75) were instigating particular cultural narratives to the fore? Rather than focus on a broad spectrum of concepts, I will specify ideas, beliefs, and values implicated in how gender norms are (re)produced and school violence escalates because of the hidden curriculum (Apple, 1990).

There are multiple ways in which the hidden curriculum operates, from codes of conduct (e.g., implicit rules and ways of behaving), life skill acquisition (e.g., turn taking,
working on task), classroom management and organization (e.g., how the class is set up for learning), grading systems (e.g., EQAO); plus, other systemized learning situations, agendas, and informal pedagogical methods (Giroux 1978; McLaren, 2009; Portelli, 1993). However, displaced “educational ideals and goals of the classroom teacher or school” and “classroom sexism” (McLaren, 2009, p. 75) best support my theory. This is framed within studies showing evidence that teachers pay more heed to students who perform “boy” than those who enact “girl” (Beaman, Wheldall, & Kemp, 2006; Margolis et al., 2001). McLaren (2009) claims that this includes more attention, praise and extra academic support for males. While teachers typically perpetuate inequality unconsciously, the results produce hidden messages that support patriarchal ideologies such as boys are more deserving, entitled, and privileged (Chase, 2008; Pascoe, 2007; Thorne, 1993).

The hidden curriculum upholds classroom sexism that “results in the unwitting and unintended granting of power and privilege to men over women” (McLaren, 2009, p. 75). Observations in Oak Lane Academy classrooms demonstrated preferential treatment of boys over girls time and again. Regardless of the Grade (7 or 8) or subject matter, boys were often granted space to shout comments out loud, whereas the girls knew to raise their hands. Thus, the boys played boisterously in class while girls were expected to maintain poise at their desks. There were incidents in the Grade 8 English class where boys would monopolize lessons by debating topics with the teacher and it was a common occurrence to hear sexist/misogynist jokes and comments thrown out casually into classroom conversation. Although teachers reprimanded these behaviours at times, more often than not they were ignored or dismissed.
The overarching message was that *boys will be boys* (Renold, 2005; Thorne, 1993). Their loud, assertive, rowdy and sexist behaviour was assumed to be a natural state and excusable (B. Davies, 1993; Hart, 1996). The more boys were enabled to perform these types of masculinities in the classroom, the more reinforced the gender norms became. While not all boys behaved in these ways, many did. In referring to the hidden curriculum Pascoe (2007) argues, “teachers shouldn’t try to garner masculine favour by allowing sexism or homophobia to go unchecked” (p. 172). Giroux (1978) offers a similar take. He states that the hidden curriculum works to prevent solidarity and community within classrooms and amongst peers. Therefore, “only by diffusing classroom power along horizontal lines will students be able to share and appreciate the power of learning collectively” (Giroux, 1978, p. 151).

Mandel and Shakeshaft (2000) point towards another aspect of the hidden curriculum, which are “the complex ways heterosexism underlies adolescents’ ideologies of masculinity and femininity—in their self-concepts, in their relationships, and within gender relations in school” (p. 75). In particular, they describe how boys perform masculinity in ways that support anti-female and homophobic attitudes, whereas girls tend to perform femininity with the intention of attracting male attention. This is most prevalent during the middle school years (Grades 6–9) when students are actively working on “identity formation and the development of self-worth” (Mandel & Shakeshaft, 2000, p. 75). While I did not hear or see displays of homophobia at Oak Lane Academy in any capacity (despite being alert to the possibility at all times), other aspects of heterosexism (e.g., hegemonic masculinity and misogyny) clearly played out within the hidden curriculum. This perpetuated an assumed and compulsory heterosexuality that positioned students into specific gender and sexuality
categories regardless if they felt they belonged there. The messages boys received were that they needed to prove their masculinity through heterosexist behaviour and girls were at their mercy. I share many more stories of performed masculinities in my data analysis chapters.

There are two important points that Giroux (1978) makes clear in his argument about the hidden curriculum that is critical to understanding how it functions in order to identify “the origins of specific patterns of socialization in the classroom” (p. 151). One, students tend to learn more from the hidden curriculum than they espouse from the “official curriculum” (Giroux, 1978, p. 148). This means looking closely at structural features that are established and enforced, which perpetuate the ways students socialize in the classroom and school. Secondly, educators must acknowledge the hidden curriculum when planning lessons and pedagogical strategies for teaching in order to disrupt norms, attitudes, beliefs, and values that undermine equity and inclusivity in school spaces. Giroux (1978) emphasizes “the heart of the school’s function is not to be found in the daily dispensing of information, but in the day-to-day social encounters shaped by the structural properties of the educational setting” (p. 148). Despite many provisions put in place to support gender equity at Oak Lane Academy, the hidden curriculum worked discreetly and effortlessly to undermine these efforts.

Regardless of how gender was taken up for Oak Lane Academy boys and girls to access equal opportunity in learning, it did not match the cultural narratives responsible for their subjectivity. How they were treated, responded to, or what was expected of them for the most part differed depending on which side of the binary line they resided. Many teachers and students reinforced dominant gender discourses through their beliefs, behaviour, and attitudes that supported hegemonic and patriarchal norms. Students also learned from the
admissions process that gender mattered, as they were required to identify with and position themselves in a specific gendered category. They were either “boy” or “girl” and there was a specific way to perform masculinity or femininity to match their gender identity. Their experiences as new students in a highly social environment included making meaning of particular gender discourses that supported their process of becoming in an elite space. This reaffirmed gendered ways of being that were heteronormative, divisive, and ruled by power relations.

This brings me to the topic of violence as a manifestation of dominant gender discourses that was enforced by discursive practices and social interactions in the school space. As a review, gender inequality and (hetero)sexism were unintended outcomes of the hidden curriculum at Oak Lane Academy as a result of these discourses. Gender-based violence assumed its place in the hidden curriculum because of this imbalance and oppressive regime. I am referring specifically to symbolic violence. Bourdieu (2001) describes symbolic violence as “a gentle violence, imperceptible and invisible even to its victims, exerted for the most part through the purely symbolic channels of communication and cognition (more precisely, misrecognition), recognition, or even feeling” (pp. 1–2).

While this quote reads as an oxymoron when considering “gentle” and “violence” in the same sentence, it speaks to the implicit ways violence is symbolically produced and perpetuated by power. Scott (2012) asserts this is a function of dominance, which supports existing social structures that are “founded on and strengthened by social inequality” (p. 532). Therefore, this “gentle violence” is often taken for granted as normal and is easily justified and rationalized. It is this type of violence that supports “common” or “natural” behaviour that separates and opposes boys and girls. Through understanding the operating
function of the hidden curriculum, it becomes much clearer to make connections to school violence.

While not all aspects of the hidden curriculum are negative, the point is to identify the “structural and political assumptions upon which the hidden curriculum rests and to attempt to change the institutional arrangements of the classroom so as to offset the most undemocratic and oppressive outcomes” (McLaren, 2009, p. 76). Oak Lane Academy administration and faculty would be prudent to look closer at the destructive discursive practices taking place in the school that bolster patriarchal ideologies and dominant discourses of masculinity. From the admissions process to the classroom, the hidden curriculum worked effectively as a mechanism to maintain normative gender categories that separated and divided students into essentialized notions of boy and girl. The consequences of these events and situations created conditions for gender-based violence to evolve and manifest. In a sense, as I hope to show in this dissertation, gender-based violence was “hidden” in the curriculum, in the ways boys and girls established and accepted their social positionings, which influenced their sense of self, agency, and behaviour. Violence was always present, but “unseen.” This almost feels more dangerous and insidious than a direct punch in the face. There is rarely comfort in the shadows.

**Feminist Perspectives**

In introducing feminist theory to the poststructuralist conversation, I was able to weave politics into the scope of theorizing, with the intent to reveal oppressions and power relations associated with gender and sexuality (Barrett, 2005; J. W. Scott, 1988). Barrett (2005) argues that by “providing ways to examine socially available discourses and ways in which people take them up, feminist poststructuralism opens up to possibility of change” (p.
As discourses are known to be changeable there is always possibility for “shifts in historical thought and material conditions” (St. Pierre & Pillow, 2000, p. 4). This leads to J. W. Scott (2008), who succinctly articulates my reasoning for a feminist approach,

> We need theory that can analyze the workings of patriarchy in all its manifestations—ideological, institutional, organizational, subjective—accounting not only for continuities but also for change over time. We need theory that will let us think in terms of pluralities and diversities rather than ofunities and universals. We need theory that will break the conceptual hold, at least, of those long traditions of (Western) philosophy that have systematically in terms of masculine universals and feminine specificities. We need theory that will enable us to articulate alternative ways of thinking about (and thus acting upon) gender without either simply reversing the old hierarchies or confirming them. And we need theory that will be useful and relevant for political practice. (p. 33)

When I began this study, the spirit in which I approached the work was highlighting the personal is political (Hanisch, 1969, 2006). Rather than remain private regarding my daughter’s experience and embody the energy of the “powerless mother” within a system that would have preferred my silence and subordination, I sought to give voice to a social issue that needed urgent attention. It was with my daughter’s permission, plus her courage to show

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39 In February 1969 Carol Hanisch, a well-known American feminist and activist, wrote a memo for a women’s caucus of the Southern Conference Educational Fund (SCEF), a group that she was “…a subsistence-paid organizer doing exploratory work for establishing a women’s liberation project in the South (Hanisch, 2006, para. 3). The memo was written in response to a staff member of the caucus named Dottie Zellner, who suggested that “consciousness-raising was just therapy” (Hanish, 2006, para. 3). Dottie was not convinced that the Women’s Liberation Movement was political in nature. Hanisch titled the memo “Some Thoughts in Response to Dottie’s Thoughts on a Women’s Liberation Movement,” which eventually became published as a paper in Notes from the Second Year: Women’s Liberation. The paper argued that “personal problems are political problems” (Hanisch, 1969, para. 5). Hanisch (1969) further asserts, “I went, and I continue to go to these meetings because I have gotten a political understanding, which all my reading, all my ‘political discussions,’ all my ‘political action,’ all my four-odd years in the movement never gave me. I’ve been forced to take off the rose colored glasses and face the awful truth about how grim my life really is as a woman” (para. 5). Hanisch (2006) insists that she did not title the paper, “The Personal is Political.” Rather, she gives credit to editors Shulie Firestone and Anne Koed of Notes from the Second Year for the wording. According to Hanisch (2006) the word “political” refers to “the broad sense of the word as having to do with power relationships, not the narrow sense of electoral politics” (para. 2). Since the paper was published in 1970 it has gone on to be reprinted, translated into many different languages, and “revised and misused” (Hanisch, 2006, para. 16). It has also made an enormous impact in feminist literature and debate.
up to school every day despite the injustices inflicted upon her (by male peers who perpetuated patriarchal values and unbalanced power relations, by untrained and ill-informed administrators/teachers, flawed school policies, and structural/systemic inequalities) that encouraged me to do this work. It is my hope that her experience, and what I have learned in the process of completing this doctoral study, will make a difference in other people’s lives going forward.

**Conclusion**

This chapter started with two focus group storylines to create distinctions between Oak Lane Academy boys and girls and the cultural narratives, discursive practices, and social processes responsible for their subjectivity and performances of masculinity and femininity. I posed questions that asked what could be learned from these elite private school students’ displays of normative gendered discourses. I further queried in what ways the “ideal” Oak Lane Academy student could be understood by paying attention to their process of “becoming.” Situated in a feminist poststructural framework, this study was all about questioning “normal” or “common sense” ideologies and assumptions to gain some sense of how we know what we know. I wanted to uncover how traditional ways of thinking and being were implicated in students’ subjectivity, gender relations, category formation, and the manifestation of gender-based violence. This required interpreting what was absent as much as what was present in the school context, while paying close attention to socially constructed gender discourses.

I differentiated between the students in this study as constructed subjects rather than as individuals with essential selves. It was important to situate the subject in the poststructural framework to uphold my critique of gender essentialism, which reinforces the
idea that individuals have a “natural” essence. I clearly dismiss the argument of the essential self in my theorizing of subjectivity and performativity. For one, I address subjectivity as constantly changing and evolving through a process of construction. I suggest that we speak ourselves into existence with the discourses available to us, which determines how we come to know ourselves and make meaning of the world. However, this does not happen in isolation, but through the construction of social interactions and discursive practices. Understanding how meaning is made through language, which is implicated in discourses, serves to support the statement that we are subjects of cultural narratives and storylines. Performativity operates similarly in that it too relies on discourses or speech acts to construct our reality, which is embodied and enacted in a way that appears natural to our subjectivity. We are always in a state of performance through our bodies, which is gender inscribed. Essentially, our subjectivity is performed and being formed through performativity, which occurs as part of daily social processes.

This chapter narrows towards a discussion of the hidden curriculum as a mechanism for maintaining dominant gender discourses. After months in the ethnographic space, observing the myriad of ways Oak Lane Academy worked to establish equity and inclusivity as foundational to their school mission statement, I found myself questioning why the gender binary remained so rigidly intact. How was sexism and gender inequality alive and well with such careful planning put in place to avoid it? I illustrate how the hidden curriculum perpetuated norms and values to support dominant gender ideologies and assumptions, which created these unintended learning outcomes. Furthermore, I discuss how the hidden curriculum was responsible for the manifestation of violence. Violence does not root itself in place without fertile ground to do so. The patriarchal systems that flourished in the school
created the perfect opportunity for violence to evolve. I make connections between symbolic violence and the hidden curriculum by highlighting the invisibility of that which is in plain sight. This will be evident in the reading of the three data analysis chapters.

The chapter to follow offers a detailed account of the methodological framework and investigative processes that were required of this study. I open the chapter with a tale of recruitment and first impressions, which segues into the challenges and solutions I experienced in securing a research location. School-related gender-based violence as a topic to be explored did not sit well with public school boards, which explains why this study was conducted in an elite private school. I also explain in detail why and how the study needed to undergo several transformations to suit the needs of Oak Lane Academy so I could proceed. This chapter aims to clearly illustrate participant recruitment and pseudonym selection, outline data collection procedures of observations, interviews, and focus groups, and define data analysis through reflexivity.
CHAPTER FOUR
EMBODIED METHODOLOGIES

It was a frigid January morning as I made my way from the train station along the busy, grey salt-scrubbed streets to Oak Lane Academy. It was the first time I would be performing my role as a doctoral ethnographer, although I would not be collecting data for another four days. Reaching the entrance of the school I walked up a broad set of cement stairs, stepped through the heavy wood and glass doors to arrive in the front foyer. Not knowing where to go, I entered the main school office, only to be redirected to the admissions office across the hall. Emma Collins, Oak Lane Academy’s Academic Director was waiting to greet me. She showed me where to hang my coat and scarf, handed me a welcome folder replete with printed information about the school, and a laminated badge with “Ms. Traci Scheepstra, PhD Candidate,” typed on the front. I was instructed to wear my identification at all times while conducting research, as there were many different visitors in the school space on a daily basis. Emma then walked me back to the main office to introduce me to two administrative staff and indicated where I was required to sign in and out of the school on each subsequent visit.

The purpose of my visit to Oak Lane Academy this particular morning was to meet the Grade 8 English teacher Daniel Evans, talk with one of his classes about my research, hand out consent forms, and become familiar with the school environment. Once I signed in

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40 This folder contained a floor plan of the school, Oak Lane Academy Administrative/ Support Staff job titles, job descriptions, and contact information, a timetable structure, assembly day schedule, alternative day schedule, late day schedule, library services, parking details, subject coordinator list, student referrals, staff washroom access, and a school calendar of events from January from March.

41 I had originally decided to observe one Grade 8 English class in the mornings, but Daniel quickly suggested I include his afternoon class as well. He stated the afternoon group had a different
on the visitor’s log, Emma led the way to Daniel’s classroom. With my heavy rolling bag in tow, we travelled up the elevator to the second floor, down a long and noisy student filled hallway the length of the school, past offices, classrooms and colourfully painted lockers, to the east wing where students sat quietly on benches or stood as they waited for their teacher to appear and unlock the classroom door.

Daniel, a tall man with shoulder length light brown hair tied back in a ponytail, arrived a few minutes after we did. After being introduced, Daniel proceeded to tell me how excited he was about my research topic. He remarked that he viewed his participation in the study as a professional development opportunity, hoping I would be able to offer him feedback on how to talk more effectively with his students on topics such as gender, stereotypes, and healthy relationships. I assumed Daniel and I would speak regularly after class, which would enable reflexivity on both of our parts. I was also aware of the collaborative nature of educational school research in which “educators can have conversations with academic researchers, getting close, appreciative but critical attention to and feedback on their work. Each side can develop new insights and open up opportunities for further collaboration and contact” (Gaskell, 2008, p. 121). I was more than willing to accept his request and looked forward to supporting his teaching practice, in exchange for my own learning.

Emma announced her departure and we agreed to meet back at her office after I finished my recruitment speech. I followed Daniel to the front of the class as a number of male and female students trickled into the room and sat at their desks. Daniel introduced me dynamic than the morning, which might offer my study a broader perspective. Plus, I would see him teach the same lesson twice. I was able to recruit participants from the afternoon class a few days after my initial morning visit.
and gave me the time I needed to share my information with the students. I explained the purpose of my study, the time I would be in the school conducting research, and the various methods I would be using to do so. As I spoke about the challenges of relationships I could see a few girls giving each other glances and nodding their heads in agreement. When I was done talking, I asked if there were any questions, which prompted three boys to put up their hands. They wanted to know how much time would be required of them if they participated (approximately 1.5 hours), would there be free food provided at the focus groups (there was excitement when I said yes), would video recordings of focus groups be used for publication purposes (data analysis only), and would participating in the study be considered volunteer work (I later found out it would be). Daniel thanked me for coming in and said he would hand out the consent forms at the end of his lesson.

As I made my way down to Emma’s office I reflected on the questions the boys had asked. I wondered if any of these students had participated in a research study before or had a parent in academia, as they seemed to have an idea of what was required of a research project. I was also struck by the fact that only the boys asked questions, whereas the girls indicated through knowing looks their knowledge of conflictual relationships. Although I was not aware of it at the time, this brief moment in the classroom foreshadowed the gendered dynamics that would be revealed as I gathered data.

Arriving at the Admissions Office, Emma and I sat together while she explained the school calendar and daily schedule in detail. To say I was overwhelmed with the schedule was an understatement, as it was unlike any schedule I had ever experienced in my years of
teaching or schooling. Emma assured me I would be much more comfortable in a few weeks once I was in a routine. She also printed off more schedules that were specific to the Grade 7 and 8 classes. I learned of the teachers who were interested in the research and those who were not, what classes would be complicated to visit and the ones that were ideal. I will elaborate on this later in the chapter. Collaboratively, we decided that I would begin by attending the Grade 8 English class and the Grade 7 Drama and Visual Art classes. I would integrate observations of other subjects when I was ready to increase my workload. Emma was forthcoming in stating that I was welcome at Oak Lane Academy as much as I liked as long as it fit with the school and class schedule. I was also granted permission to do research up to the end of the school year in June. We agreed to meet again the following afternoon so I could recruit the Grade 7 class during their drama period.

Although I was relieved (and excited) to have secured a research site for my study, my introduction to Oak Lane Academy was also fraught with apprehension. I questioned my qualifications and scope of knowledge to conduct a study on gender-based violence in an elite private school setting, especially as my initial plan was directed towards elementary public schools. As I described in Chapter Three, I felt I knew what to ‘look for’ in a public school, whereas, I wondered if my observational skills would be adequate at Oak Lane Academy. Furthermore, I held preconceived notions that smart kids in a private school would not render the same kinds of results I had anticipated in a public setting because these

42 Oak Lane Academy operated very differently from any Canadian public school I had ever worked in. Courses rotated through the schedule at different times at the beginning of the week compared to the end of the week. There was one alternate day, which courses ran on every other week. Furthermore, each period block was assigned a letter (e.g., A, B, C), and there were codes for every grade and subject. This was a challenge to memorize and I continued to carry the school schedules with me at all times throughout the study.

43 Daniel spoke to me about observing his afternoon Grade 8 English after this meeting.
students had parents and teachers who were (presumably) highly invested in their education and well-being. I connected the private school costs, associated with providing excellent educational and social opportunities for students, with equity and safety. I also doubted how my work could possibly support school policies and programs regarding gender equity and inclusiveness on a broad scale, when I was conducting research in a very specific context that seemed isolated from the norm.

In the first few weeks of my fieldwork I did not see explicit examples of school-related gender-based violence, at least not as described in the educational and academic literature I had reviewed as part of my thesis proposal (e.g., Mandel & Shakeshaft, 2000; Pascoe, 2005; Pinheiro, 2006), or based on my daughter’s experience. Nor did student interactions represent the definition of gender-based violence I had used as a means to illustrate my study (Toronto District School Board, 2010b). For instance, I did not hear homophobic language or observe sexually inappropriate behaviour, which I thought was a sure indication of school-related gender-based violence. I started to doubt my ethnographic ability. I also almost believed Oak Lane Academy faculty members who informed me that gendered violence was not an issue at the school, despite not asking them what their definition of gender-based violence was, and knowing intuitively this could not actually be true.

In a review of the literature on ethnographies in elite private schools, I came to acknowledge there were certain challenges specific to conducting research in elite settings that differed from other school contexts. Mercader, Weber, and Durif-Varembont (2015) describe one particular ethnographic challenge as the perception of the researcher. They share an example of an ethnographer who had expectations of what she would “see” in
observations at an elite school, based on her previous research in a working-class school.
They highlight her surprise at the differences between the two. The elite school proved to be nothing like what she expected. Taken out of a journal excerpt from the field (scribed at an elite school), the authors share what the ethnographer wrote, “I have the impression that I’m not observing anything in terms of the students’ behaviour. Maybe it’s just that, they obey the adults so well and have perfected behaving to expectations . . . they put on a perfect show” (Mercader et al., 2015, p. 1102). This was an issue I too had to overcome, which required a feminist poststructural lens to critically theorize my collection of data. What I deemed as a lack of gender-based violence at Oak Lane Academy was actually “an insidious, silent violence that implicitly structured banal everyday social interactions” as well as “the power relations that foster the production of the future elite through the dynamics of social selection and exclusion” (Mercader et al., 2015, p. 1102).

This brings me to another obstacle I had to make sense of, which was the general discourse circulating Oak Lane Academy in defense of the school as an equitable, inclusive, and safe space for all students. With so many measures in place to support gender equity and equal learning opportunities for male and female students, Oak Lane Academy presented itself as a place of tolerance that was immune to widespread social issues such as school-related gender-based violence. While I do not doubt that many people in the school community believed this, it cannot go without saying that elite discourses solidify notions of excellence, equity, and inclusivity through their adherence to competitive branding. In other words, fancy websites, glossy brochures with smiling pupils, and other forms of advertising have a way of making illusions believable. According to Doherty and Pozzi (2017) achieving and sustaining elite status “relies on the extra work of carefully curating reputations and
School-related gender-based violence would obviously not offer the type of image an elite private school would want to portray. With that said, Doherty and Pozzi (2017) caution that there are significant risks to being dependent on constructed reputations. In striving for excellence and perfection, violence that is present and perpetuating harm can easily be rendered invisible and “hidden” from sight. This can have dire consequences for students.

Navigating my way through these ethnographic challenges was par for the course and contributed to my process of becoming a proficient researcher. I started to construct my subjectivity through the discourses available to me as an outsider, while also gaining acceptance by some as a welcome member of the school (Gaztambide-Fernández & Howard, 2012). I learned through being subjected to discursive practices that “the ethnographer can only observe from within a social role attributed to them, and therefore accepted by, participants in the field” (Mercader et al., 2015, p. 1099). The more time I spent at Oak Lane Academy, the more familiar I became with the cultural narratives and social processes under construction, which impacted my evolving performances as researcher, educator, and woman. While collecting data I enacted researcher and there were a few times when I was asked to facilitate a workshop on gender and relationships in which I embodied the educator. I was always aware of my gender identity as female/woman and how that intersected with other aspects of my social identity (such as age, race, ethnicity) while in the field. With my initial apprehensions eased, the ethnographic experience unfolded in unimaginable, surprising, and riveting ways.

Before indulging the reader in the methodological framework that illustrates embodiment as foundational to my research process, I will share the challenges and solutions
of securing Oak Lane Academy as a research location. This section will illustrate how difficult it was to get this study off the ground and running, which speaks volumes about how research on school-related gender-based violence is taken up in educational spaces. I will share narratives about how Ontario public school boards are run in comparison to private schools, as well as how this type of work is received.

**Challenges and Solutions: Securing a Research Location**

In the fall of 2012, the Ontario Government passed Bill 115, *Putting Students First Act,*⁴⁴ which prompted the provincial education labour disputes led by the Elementary Teachers’ Federation of Ontario (ETFO) and Ontario Secondary School Teachers’ Federation (OSSTF). Over the course of the 2012–2013 school year, public school teachers ceased all voluntary and extra-curricular activities and prepared to participate in a one-day strike scheduled for January 2013. While the strike was deemed illegal and therefore did not happen, it took several more months for both unions to come to a new agreement with the province (MacNeil, 2014; University of Toronto, 2016). At the same time that the labour dispute was gaining momentum, I was seeking permission with various Ontario school boards to conduct my research. The challenges I faced were two-fold: (a) school boards were being particularly selective during the screening process of incoming research applications with respect to teachers and school faculty during a politically contentious time, and (b) I was requesting to work collaboratively with two or three teachers, in one elementary school, in order to conduct a study with Grades 7 and/or 8 students on a highly sensitive subject.

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⁴⁴ September 11, 2012, the Ontario Government passed *Putting Students First Act,* as a means to reduce the government’s $14.8 billion deficit, by imposing a two-year teacher contract that included a two-year salary freeze, a pay cut directed at professional development days, reduced short-term sick leave and sick days, removal of sick day banking, and prohibited teachers from going on strike.
I decided to start the school board research application close to home, in the region where my children attended public school. This was strategic in that I had several contacts in the area. Plus, it was also the community where my daughter had experienced gender-based violence and repeated harassment throughout her Grade 8 year (2010–2011). Aside from typical bullying initiatives, this school board did not specifically address gender-based violence in any way. Therefore, I deemed it a good place to begin my research. I approached an administrator at a local elementary school who had a reputation for implementing innovative strategies to deal with bullying issues (prevention/intervention). He was more than willing to welcome me into his school and agreed to his name being included on the research application that I submitted to his school board. Despite the support I received from the school principal and evidence of violence experienced at a school in this board’s jurisdiction to support my claim for the basis of the study, the school board rejected my application. I was told that only survey-based or low risk projects, requiring little teacher participation, were being approved at the time. Furthermore, in a phone conversation with a member of the external research committee, I was told that my work was too sensitive to approve as it might “stir the pot,” causing students grief. While the committee member agreed more work needed to be done in this area in his school board, and he commended me on my commitment to addressing issues of violence in schools, his hands were tied.

There are clearly methodological and ethical challenges that must be taken into consideration for the study of school-related gender-based violence, which can dissuade the most enthusiastic educational stakeholder from allowing projects such as this one to begin. Leach et al. (2014) list many of the concerns associated with conducting this type of research, from a need to protect vulnerable subjects from harm in discussing gender-based
violence, to developing reliable methods for investigating the problem. They assert, “there is as yet no proven methodology for researching sensitive behaviours among young people” to safeguard their well-being and generate data that is comprehensive. While it is worth acknowledging that no methodological approach is perfect, there is always caution attached to studies that include young people and sensitive topics. Leach et al. (2014) insist that extreme care must be adhered to at all times in studying school-related gender-based violence, but “the ethical challenges of working with children to combat SRGBV should not lead to inaction” (p. 28).

Not willing to give up easily, I called another school board, but was rejected over the phone after offering a description of my study. Finally, I submitted an application to one more school board in Ontario with the same results, based on similar reasons to my previous fails. It was not a good time to request permission to conduct research in publicly funded schools. However, it might never have been a good time for a project of my scope, which addressed gender-based school violence head on. It is hard to know if the application rejections were due to the labour disputes at the time, the topic I chose to investigate, or both. Either way, the final decisions I received were politically driven.

After significant brainstorming I decided to approach private schools as potential sites. While I was reticent about the idea—public and private schools are very different environments and I had minimal theoretical knowledge of elite education—I was also aware that my choices were limited. It was then that my supervisor offered to connect me with Principal Frances Day of Oak Lane Academy. A previous research relationship between the school and my dissertation supervisor proved to be invaluable to the success of my project getting started. While I initially took for granted the ease afforded me in gaining access to
Oak Lane Academy, I soon became aware of the difficulties associated with accessing elite private school spaces when not having a personal connection in some way. Gaztambide-Fernández and Howard (2012) address the challenges that researchers face when their aim is to “study the social conditions of groups with power and privilege or analyze institutions that wield social and political power” (p. 290), which offers one explanation why there is a lack of literature on “spaces with high status” (p. 291). With no prior research experience or social positioning within elite schools, I realized having a personal contact was paramount to my welcome. This speaks to the varied privileges of elite education I was gaining access to like others before me (Angod, 2015; Chase, 2008; Gaztambide-Fernández, 2009a).

Once introductions had been made, seeking permission to conduct research at Oak Lane Academy was much simpler than obtaining permission to gain entry into a public school. Canadian public-school boards have external research committees in place consisting of approximately six to nine educational stakeholders (principals, school board employees, etc.) that view lengthy external research applications on select dates throughout the school year. By contrast, private schools vet inquiries on an individual basis as they are submitted. This usually includes a small team, involving the principal. External research committee members have the power to determine the types of research they feel is in the best interest of the diverse student body in their public schools (many boards have agendas to follow such as paying special attention to research on literacy or numeracy), which depending on the size of the board, could be hundreds of schools. Private schools, however, directly regulate what is in their own best interest. Both public and private schools are concerned with protecting their public images, which also accounts for the research they are willing to grant approval for.
After experiencing an approximately two-month application process with each school board I applied to, only to be rejected, it was a relief to have an appointment at Oak Lane Academy merely days after being in contact with Principal Day. She was keen to know more about my project, particularly as Oak Lane Academy was already working with a University of Toronto research team on an equity initiative. In an immediate response to my supervisor, when learning of my study, she wrote in an email, “The focus for the research would be very appropriate for our environment and would enhance the work we have started. The gender focus is one I am very interested in better understanding” (November 28, 2012). As mentioned earlier, Oak Lane Academy put several measures in place to construct an image and reputation for being an equitable and inclusive school where tolerance for diversity and equality prevailed. I assumed that the type of research I was seeking permission to conduct added value to Oak Lane Academy’s mission statement, which supported their reputation as being progressive.

I met with Principal Frances Day, Vice-Principal Susan Bauer, and the Academics Director, Emma Collins, on a cold December afternoon in 2012. We gathered comfortably in Principal Day’s office and drank tea while we talked. I learned that Susan Bauer had only started her appointment as Vice-Principal of Oak Lane Academy months before the start of my fieldwork. She had spent much of her career in the public-school system and brought a wealth of knowledge and experience to her new position, particularly in the area of equity and diversity. Susan was committed to the development of a new equity policy that would elevate and improve how the school addressed issues of discrimination, harassment, and exclusion. She hoped to provide guidelines for creating a space where all students regardless of their various identity markers would be treated with dignity and respect. My research was
of great interest to Susan because of its particular attention to gender and student relationships under the umbrella of gender-based violence. Principal Day and Emma Collins were equally intrigued, granting the approval of my study starting in January 2013. Although they felt Oak Lane Academy for the most part was a welcoming, inclusive, and safe school, with few incidents they would consider as violent in nature, they were looking forward to the discoveries my ethnography would reveal.45

What I found most ironic about seeking permission to research in a public-school setting versus an elite private academy is how quickly Ontario school boards were willing to dismiss my study as a threat to their students’ mental health by “stirring the pot.” Despite having firsthand knowledge of gender-based violence in one of these school boards, based on my daughter’s experience, and from a written report about another school board documenting systemic gendered violence (Falconer et al., 2008), I was still denied access. Never mind that the students themselves were already “stirring the pot” by perpetuating violence, causing physical and mental health consequences to those affected. There seemed to be more concern over what might happen during my study by talking about gender and sexuality than what was already occurring in countless schools across the province.

I wrongly assumed public-school educators would welcome my field of study with open arms to get to the root of the problem. This is my admitted naivety as a novice researcher. However, this should come as little surprise when considering the ongoing controversy in Ontario over the updated Health and Physical Education Curriculum (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2015b), deemed inappropriate by conservative groups trying to stop students from being educated about their bodies, sexuality, and consent (Soh, 2016). Becker

45 *Administrator Information Letter and Consent Form* (see Appendix A).
(1983) argues that there is always resistance when providing access to ethnographers studying critical issues in schools. This sentiment is affirmed by Delhi (2008) who states that the concern is researchers will “see and reveal the secret of schools’ inequality and failure” (p. 54).

In contrast, I was granted access to Oak Lane Academy, an elite private school setting in which administration, faculty, and staff claimed to have little to no gender-based violence taking place in their school and were actively doing work around this topic. Despite what they purported to see on the surface, Principal Day was willing to grant me the opportunity to make discoveries that might prove otherwise. Perhaps it was because I posed no evident threat to the school and their reputation and/or due to the fact that Oak Lane Academy regularly engaged in collaborative partnership with OISE on various research initiatives. Had I not been a doctoral student at OISE with a supervisor who had already established a trustworthy relationship with the school, this might not have occurred. Regardless, I was granted permission to conduct research on gender-based violence in an elite school setting where I would have assumed access to be much more stringent than the public-school system.

I will situate this study within a methodological framework that illustrates embodiment as foundational to my research process. I will address how the body is often absent in educational spaces and fieldwork, which I argue must be rectified to address school-related gender-based violence. I also explain how I accounted for bodies in the research including my own.
Methodological Framework: Embodied Ethnography

Positioned as an embodied ethnography within a feminist poststructuralist framework, this study recognizes the “interdependence of subjectivity with a physical body that is simultaneously enrolled within and constitutive of social processes” (Brown, Cromby, Harper, Johnson, & Reavey, 2011, p. 495). With school-related gender-based violence at the helm of investigation, the focus on the gender inscribed body (theoretically and observationally) remained integral to methodological processes. Not only was I interested in the embodied subjectivity of Oak Lane Academy students, but of my own. I was unable to separate the experience of my own embodiment within the work, as I focused on understanding gendered subjectivity and performativity in the school space (Pillow, 2000; Turner, 2000). In reading Dombroski (2011) I was reminded that “it is in fully experiencing our own bodily vulnerability that we are able to become aware of and connect with ‘the Other’” (p. 19). Pillow (2000) argues that paying attention to the body (ours and others) can serve to enlighten and disrupt methodological practices. This can happen figuratively or literally by asking questions that “change what we look at, how we look, what we ask, and what we choose to represent” (Pillow, 2000, p. 200).

The body can be a “taken-for-granted ‘absent presence’” (Dombroski, 2011, p. 20) both in educational contexts and as part of ongoing fieldwork, which I wanted to rectify in my research. For example, in the introduction of this dissertation, I argue that contemporary measures for addressing school-related gender-based violence are problematic in that they tend to ignore the performed body as the site of students’ lived experiences and where gender discourses are embodied. They focus on the psychology of the individual stable (or fixed) self, rather than considering the fluid subject with a lived body (e.g., Pepler, 2006; Pepler et
The “lived body” is described by Grosz (1995) as the “lived experience of the body, the body’s internal or psychic inscription” (p. 33). Yet, in order to grasp the cultural narratives and social practices being constructed in school spaces, attention to subjectivity and performativity has to be adhered to as a way to make meaning of the lives students live (Barrett, 2005; St. Pierre, 2000). Therefore, methodologically it served my work to investigate how students experienced, embodied, and enacted their social reality as a process of embodiment “through which realities, relationships and social order are constituted for people in the processes of ongoing social interactions” (Turner, 2000, p. 52). This led me to query how the human body could be seen as a site of knowledge(s) and meaning-making where “the body is not an object to be studied in relation to culture, but is to be considered as the subject of culture” (Csordas, 1990, p. 5).

Critical to the methodological process was being able to account for the performativity of the students’ bodies in the research. Therefore, I took Fusco’s (2008) lead by paying attention to (and questioning) “what bodies do, how they function, what they affect, and what they produce” (p. 167, [emphasis in original]). In classroom observations I found myself taking detailed notes of individual bodies that best described gender, race, and class inscriptions (such as height, size, shape, hair colour, clothing choices, etc.). I noted subtle gestures from hair twirling and leg shaking, to sideways glances and facial expressions. I recounted human connections such as friendship hugs and playful jabs. I also observed individual students at length to understand their shifting gendered performances within various contexts and social groups. Masculinities and femininities were performed in a multiplicity of ways depending on whom they were performed for (teacher, administrator,
friend, “cute” boy, girl in short shorts, etc.). Every action (nuanced or full-out) had its own story to tell, which reflected subjectivity under construction.

In interviews and focus groups, I asked about gendered relationships, in what ways the body was experienced, and the feelings it rendered (Fusco, 2008). I often heard about objectified bodies where female subjects felt violated and disturbed by questions or suggestions regarding their sexuality, physical characteristics, or clothing choices. I noted in particular that there was “a voyeuristic fascination with the sexualisation of the female body as evidenced in our media, advertising, fashion, cultural practices, and myths” (Pillow, 2000, p. 203). This was apparent in classroom spaces when curricular topics on gender discourses (such as gender stereotypes and assumptions, character analysis in literature, and discussions of healthy and unhealthy relationships) perpetuated privileged male bodies (the embodiment of rationality and superiority) and rendered female bodies as something to diminish, dismiss, laugh at, or make jokes about. However, I also noticed female bodies “as sites of resistance” (Pillow, 2000, p. 204). Girls worked to set boundaries to disengage from the ruthless male gaze or sexually offensive comments in ways that demonstrated the power they had over their own bodies (Davis, 2002). They would refuse touch, ignore the presence of certain males in their space, walk away, or in some other way take charge of their bodies through performances of resistance. The discursive practices and social processes responsible for their ongoing subject formation and sense of agency was repeatedly embodied and (re)enacted in various ways (Butler, 1990; A. Y. Jackson, 2004). The girls worked to negotiate and revise their positioning within these specific discourses, which added to their process of becoming. Davis (2002) succinctly explains these negotiations as embodied agency,
Although the objectification of the female body is part and parcel of the situation of most Western women and accounts for a shared sense of bodily alienation, women are also agents – that is, knowledgeable and active subjects who attempt to overcome their alienation, to act upon the world themselves instead of being acted upon by others. (p. 427)

As a researcher, I became aware of my own embodiment in the school space as part of my ongoing subjectivity (Pillow, 2000). I experienced a process of becoming a privileged self within the elite context. Through discourses available to me, I was able to make meaning of cultural narratives I helped to construct, negotiate, and resist (Barrett, 2005). My interactions with the school community at large allowed me to become more connected with the students in the methodological process. I acknowledged that I could not “be present in a social field without participating and becoming a significant author of events, practices and political configurations, thereby effecting what happens and the significance it has for the constructions that emerge for participants” (Turner, 2000, p. 53). Therefore, it was an ongoing process of “doing” together (Butler, 1990; Thorne, 1993; West & Zimmerman, 1987). Doing in the sense of interacting and engaging, formally and casually, in ways that supported the ongoing storylines of our lived experiences and the evolving research. I was not just the observant researcher, but at times embodied teacher or mother, which always brought attention to my gendered subjectivity and performances. McGuire (2003) expresses embodied methodologies as a way in which the researcher and participant(s) connect in somatic awareness. This connectedness and understanding of each other is not only cognitive and emotional, but also embedded within the body as memory. We developed bonds of trust and respect as the weeks and months progressed, which were embodied understandings of each other (Turner, 2000).
One the greatest challenges of this work was in making interpretations of bodies and their embodiment (Fusco, 2008). Turner (2000) affirms “there is a distance between the observed actions of embodied subjects and the representations of these” (p. 55). Data analysis can serve to bridge the distance by carefully following threads of data to make sense of what is present and absent. Yet, according to Fusco (2008) “the problem of interpretation appears to be centred on the concept of meaning” (p. 173, [emphasis in original]). What is observed of the embodied subject is not a matter of constructing conclusive meaning or truth but determining the layers of stories being told in their fragmented state. I was often in the position to acknowledge that what I observed or heard in the field only represented a possible meaning (or partial truth) of any interaction or process. However, employing an embodied ethnography brought attention to bodies in ways that likely would have been missed with another methodological approach. I was able to keenly investigate gender discourses through subjectivities and performativities, which served to shed light on bodies in relation to gender-based violence.

I will now transition to telling aspects of the research process from securing a research location to detailing the data collection and analysis process. This will include a discussion of my own reflexivity in relation to the study.

**Research Design Compliance and Flexibility**

Despite being granted access to Oak Lane Academy as a field site, several changes were required of the research project after its initial approval by my thesis committee and the Research Ethics Board of the Office of Research Ethics at the University of Toronto. This “complicated process of negotiation,” which is characteristic when “negotiating access to spaces with high status” (Gaztambide-Fernández & Howard, 2012, p. 291) was necessary to
satisfy the needs of Oak Lane Academy and to adhere to limitations that surfaced throughout the duration of the study. I was required to comply with the academic rigour of the school by not disrupting the structural framework in place (daily schedule, student routines, etc.). Plus, the study needed to be presented to parents in a way that demonstrated its value rather than a deterrence to their child’s educational experience and academic achievement. I will first elaborate on the initial research plan, followed by the changes that needed to be made, and why.

**Initial Research Proposal**

My initial proposal was to engage middle school (Grades 7 and/or 8) students in a collaborative learning process where gender discourses would be studied. I proposed to examine these students’ experiences, perceptions, and attitudes about gender and sexuality, and by extension, make connections to gender-based violence. I emphasized the significance of the lived and performed body played in this process – the body as the site of students’ lived experiences (Snowber, 2002) and where gender discourses are embodied (Butler, 1988). Taking into consideration that gender discourses are already embodied, which students may associate as their natural way of being (Felluga, 2011), I intended to involve students in (re)enacting gender norms and stereotypes through the body using movement activities. Essentially, it was to be a process of re-embodying what has already been embodied. In other words, by asking students to purposefully perform aspects of gender that they typically perform and embody unconsciously, I wanted to examine whether they were able to make meaning of gender-based violence in ways that disrupted normative inequities and power imbalances.
My vision was to work closely with a Health and Physical Education teacher and/or Language Arts teacher to be able to tie my work directly to the Ontario curriculum. I proposed collaborative lesson planning with the teacher(s) I would be working with, to build the research into subject areas. Movement activities would take place approximately twice per week during allotted class time, including participants and non-participants as part of their regular schooling involvement. This would include talk time to introduce concepts, whole class movement exploration, work in small groups or partners to plan performance pieces, and dialogue for reflections and questions. I also proposed to invite each study participant to take part in two focus groups, which were to be an extension of classroom activities and would allow me to work more intensely with a small groups of students. Furthermore, students would also be required to reflect on group activities and the embodiment process by journaling their experiences.

To maintain connection, and build trust with the study participants, I proposed three semi-structured and collaborative interviews at the beginning, middle, and end of the study. By ensuring collaboration, I was keen to invite participants to suggest questions for the second and third interviews based on their insights of our work together. Lastly, my intention was to implement digital video research methods to capture the movement activities in class and during focus groups as a data collection procedure and artistic practice. This also allowed collaboration as students would not only be filmed, but be producers of the work. In keeping with collaborative research, this collective approach was “important both to the idea of distributing power and to the widening of the aesthetic and knowledge-producing sphere of the research” (Gallagher & Kim, 2008, p. 109).
Class observations were not originally a significant part of the study. I had only planned to spend two to three weeks observing the students as they interacted in classrooms, hallways, the lunchroom, and on the playground, and only in order to become familiar with the school’s policies and procedures, the Grade 7 and/or 8 schedule and classroom climate, observe classroom management strategies performed by the teachers I would be working with, and forge relationships with the students and their teachers. I expected to be in the school during the observation part of the study for approximately two hours, three or four days each week, for two or three weeks.

Evolving Research Plan

When I was preparing to meet with the administrative team at Oak Lane Academy, I started to consider how I might alter my research proposal to receive approval for my fieldwork at the school. In thinking through the elite school setting, I felt certain my study would require modifications. I understood I would likely not be permitted to use class time to work with students on a collaborative, performance-based, embodiment process. Academic achievement was paramount at Oak Lane Academy, with a significant amount of curriculum to cover during the year, which was more advanced than students of the same age would cover in a public-school context. Additionally, there were no significant recesses throughout the lengthy day, with the exception of a few minutes to move between classes and a forty-five-minute lunch break to give students a brief respite from academia.⁴⁶

With this information at hand, and through dialogue with Frances Day, Susan Bauer, and Emma Collins, we decided that I would conduct focus groups at lunchtime to engage

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⁴⁶ The Oak Lane Academy day was exactly seven hours and seven minutes long with four minutes of time to transition between the various classes throughout the day.
students in movement-based exploration. However, as students often used their lunch breaks to leave the school to eat, play intramural sports, complete homework, and work on group projects, I was limited with how many lunches I could request of them. I also intended to interview participants at lunchtime or afterschool, up to three times during the study. This, too, needed reconsideration, as it would take up too much of the students’ time. Therefore, we agreed that I would interview each participant twice, once at the beginning of the study and again at the end; plus, I received permission to request participants attend two focus groups during the middle of the study. Digital video recording was allowed, as long as every participant agreed and had permission from a parent. It was then determined that the majority of my data would be collected by observing students in the classroom.

Once the fieldwork was underway and I started to develop relationships with the participants, while simultaneously experiencing Oak Lane Academy living, I realized it would be an impossible feat to attempt any type of movement activity during the short time allotted for focus groups. After several observations in the drama classroom, watching Grade 7 students shy away from performing in front of each other, I could not imagine how I would be able to engage them in an embodiment process of any significance over two forty-five-minute lunch breaks.47 Furthermore, the Grade 8 students I was observing were not all familiar with each other. I was well aware, from previous work as an arts educator, that building group trust is critical to exploring sensitive topics with young students (Weiss & Lichtenstein, 2008). Trust would take time that I did not have. Furthermore, I would need enough time to introduce the embodiment concept, allow for movement exploration, and

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47 I was not aware until focus groups actually started that I only had a maximum of thirty-five minutes with the students, as they needed time to transition from and to classes before and after the focus group.
debrief the experience. And of course, the students needed to eat. Therefore, I made the
difficult decision to terminate that aspect of the project. I decided I would use focus groups
for small group participant dialogue and sit-down activities. I had hoped I could at least video
record student interactions during the focus groups, but there were a couple of students in
each grade who did not have permission to be documented for that purpose, and so with
respect to the school and parent’s wishes, I let go of the video as a data collection strategy.
The majority of data collected took place in the Grade 7 and 8 classrooms through
observations, which I will describe in depth in the data methods section of this chapter.

In rapid succession, I found myself with a very different project than I had imagined.
This required significant time and reflection on my part to consider the implications of the
changes. However, I also embraced the restructuring of the research design as an opportunity
to learn. Rather than making the students do something specific (embodiment process) to
shed light on gender discourses and their understanding of gender-based violence, I was in a
position to observe what would naturally emerge in social interactions by immersing myself
in the school environment. In a sense my ethnographic lens was sharpened, to capture
constructed and nuanced performances of gender, while also being careful to “resist truth
claims” and creating opportunities for “opening up new questions and interpretations”
(Cairns, 2011, p. 59).

**Data Collection: Participants and Methods**

Before I elaborate on the students and teachers who consented to participate in the
study, and the various ways I collected and organized the data, I will re-articulate the
research questions that were first established in the introduction chapter:
1. What are the meanings of gender discourses in general and gender-based violence in particular, within an elite private school context, that Grade 7 and 8 students convey through their experiences with, perceptions of, and attitudes toward, gender, sexuality, and peer relationships?

2. How are gender discourses embodied and performed by these students?

3. What are the implications for school policies and procedures, curriculum, pedagogy, and the curricular spaces in which these students learn, when understanding how they make meaning of gender-based violence?

Participant Recruitment and Pseudonym Selection

Once I received permission to conduct my study at Oak Lane Academy, administrators Frances Day, Susan Bauer, and Emma Collins went about selecting the appropriate group of students I would be privy to approach as prospective participants. I was guaranteed partial access to one class of Grade 7 students (out of a potential five), who travelled together to all of their subject areas (except for music where they were divided into band instruments and string instruments). While I was informed that the class selected for me was the best choice for the study, I did not receive clarification as to why that was so.⁴⁸ I was also told that the students’ French teacher preferred that I not sit in on her class, physical education would be hectic as it included another Grade 7 class, and we agreed that math

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⁴⁸ I did not question the decision of the school at the time. I assumed this particular class was chosen based on the willingness of teachers to participate in the study. However, the more time I spent in the school getting to know faculty and staff the more I learned about other classes. I was told on a few occasions that there was another Grade 7 class where bullying had been an issue, indicating that I might have benefited from conducting research with that group of students. Perhaps the class I had permission to work with was considered a “good” group of students, or a fair representation of the school.
would likely produce little data of interest. Therefore, I was granted full access to the English, History, drama, visual art, geography, music, and science classes. This was also in part as the teachers for those subjects agreed to participate in the study. In total, there were thirteen Grade 7 participants (eight female; five male) and seven teachers who taught Grade 7 courses.

English teacher Daniel Evans was identified as a possible participant before his students were considered for recruitment, as he was very involved in equity initiatives in the school. Once he agreed to partake in the study, I was welcome to approach his Grade 8 morning English class. Daniel suggested shortly after that, I recruit participants from his afternoon class as well. This also allowed for more observation time. I had hoped to observe other Grade 8 classes besides English, but the logistics of doing so were complicated. Grade 8 students did not travel as a group, but operated on individual schedules. Therefore, Emma and I had considered the possibility that I follow a few participants from Daniel’s class to their other subjects. However, this would conflict with my Grade 7 observations and involve the permission of more Grade 8 teachers. I concluded that I would have more than enough data with what I had secured. Between the two Grade 8 English classes there were nine participants (eight female; one male) in total.

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49 Math is considered a serious subject at Oak Lane Academy. Emma Collins alluded to a classroom with students focused on individual work rather than interacting with one another. Therefore, I agreed to forgo math as a subject to observe students in.

50 Teacher Information Letter and Consent Form (see Appendix B) and Parent/Guardian & Student Information and Consent Form (with video) (see Appendix C).

51 The pairing of researcher with an equity inclined teacher was clearly intentional, to reflect the school’s desire to be perceived as being actively involved in equity work.

52 There was an overrepresentation of female identified participants in the study (in both Grades 7 and 8) compared to males. This was not surprising considering the level of privilege and entitlement the
Participant pseudonyms were discussed during the recruitment phase, as well as during the first and second interviews. I felt it was important that the students have the opportunity of naming themselves to avoid misrepresenting their ethnicity or gender identity, and I wanted to balance the power somewhat in the researcher/participant relationship (Lahman, et al., 2015). With that said, the first names the students were known as at school (all were anglicised birth names or nicknames), did not necessarily represent the ethno-racial diversity I saw. In other words, their first names said very little about how they might have been perceived by others based on phenotype and physical appearances. It was their last names that suggested family ancestry and place of origin, although this too can be misleading. Names can be passed down through generations and between families and names can be changed legally for personal reasons. Colonialism is also responsible for how names have changed over the years, which reflects historical atrocities and the disenfranchisement of many. Therefore, the name(s) a person claims as their own does not necessarily reflect how they might look in appearance or identify from an ethno-racial perspective. For example, just because a student has a Chinese last name does not mean they identify as Chinese. I kept that in mind as pseudonyms were selected for the dissertation.

The naming process was not as simple as I thought it would be. Caroline Li initially asked if she had to pick a “reasonable name” or if she could be Smurfette. Mike Thomas initially named himself after the well-known Canadian politician Mike Duffy. Some students preferred pseudonyms similar to their given names, which did not guarantee the anonymity required of highly vulnerable participants (K. Gallagher, 2008; Hill 2005; Powell, Fitzgerald, male students maintained in comparison to their female peers. Female identified students were more proficient at performing gendered etiquette by being helpful and “nice” as part of their civic duty. According to Petrzela and Mannon (2006), women tend to volunteer as a form of self-sacrifice to be of service to others (unpaid labour that is reminiscent of domestic work) unlike men who tend to only volunteer for the purpose of furthering their careers.
Taylor, & Graham, 2012). Furthermore, a couple of students chose names that implied the opposite gender, which is not an uncommon tactic of young participants (M. Gallagher, 2009). However, this would restrict the analysis process with gender being central to the study. While I thanked the participants for putting thought into their pseudonyms, I requested they select a name that would protect their anonymity (as best as possible), represent the gender they identified with, and was not the name of a known person or character in a show. All chosen pseudonyms were anglicised. Some students did not care what they were called and left it up to me. A few students included last names, but it was not a request. It was only when I started writing chapters for this thesis that I decided to select last names for all of the participants. As their anglicised first name pseudonyms said very little about them other than their gender identity, I wanted to give them more depth as characters in my research narrative from an ethno-racial perspective. As much as was possible was my thinking.

Choosing pseudonyms for the participants’ last names evolved over time. I did this by researching the cultural origin of their birth surname on Google and then found a pseudonym that was supposed to be of the same origin. As many of the surnames were unfamiliar to me, I cannot guarantee that my search was accurate. It is also very possible that the birth surnames I was working with did not represent the students’ ethno-racial identity. As I have already mentioned previously, few students talked about aspects of their identity (e.g., race, class, ethnicity) during interviews and focus groups despite the fact that I asked them how their best friend would describe them or how they wanted me to write about them in my thesis. They found it easy to speak from the perspective of their best friend, but seemed very uncomfortable to speak about themselves. Most students said I could describe them any way I wanted without committing to personal descriptors, which made me uncomfortable from an
ethical standpoint. I did not feel I could adequately depict them in my work without their collaborative input, which has been articulated in articles as an issue by misrepresented study participants (Lahman, et al., 2015). Those who did describe themselves spoke in general terms about their age, the grade they were in, and so forth. However, I wanted to offer more than generic descriptions of these students throughout the thesis. Therefore, it seemed logical to use their pseudonyms strategically (depicting ethno-racial markers with last names), and descriptions of their physique, to invite the reader to make their own conclusions about the participants. In other words, it was my aim to show the reader what I saw (e.g., a student I assumed to be Caucasian or East Asian) by using physical descriptors with their pseudonyms. As I could not show photos of the participants, I hoped that the descriptions and names I provided might give some insight into what the students looked like and the diversity of the school. I am aware that this approach to describing and naming participants can be highly problematic and a limitation of the study as well.

Classroom Observations

Although my original thesis proposal did not account for time-intensive classroom observations, by the end of the four-and-a-half-month study I had documented 112 observation sessions between the various classes. The Grade 7 and 8 English classes, along with the Grade 7 Drama and Visual Art classes, proved to yield the most valuable data. I was able to make curricular connections between what the students were learning and critical aspects of the study. As I will describe in later chapters, the Grade 8 students examined gender stereotypes and assumptions, and healthy and unhealthy relationships through their

53 Grade 7 observations: English 23, Drama 21, Visual Art 14, Music 5, Geography 5, History 4, and Science 4; Grade 8 English observations: morning class 23, afternoon class 18. The Observation Protocol can be found in Appendix D.
media literacy studies and the Shakespeare unit of *Twelfth Night*. Similarly, the Grade 7 students talked about relationships and love during their Shakespeare unit of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Due to the relaxed social atmosphere of the drama and visual art classes where students were predominantly working on independent projects, I witnessed many revealing interactions between students within and across gender identifications. Plus, I overheard numerous private conversations that alluded to sexual curiosity, bodies, popularity, crushes and dating, clothing, food, and many other facets of their lives. Although students were always performing their gender, they appeared animated and overstated in their expressions of masculinity and femininity when they were free to express themselves in the drama/visual art space or when reacting to topics in English that they found amusing or awkward (e.g., gender and bodies).

There were several reasons why I chose to shorten and discontinue observational sessions with some of the Grade 7 subjects, aside from the fact that I felt saturated with data. The science class would have been worth observing for a longer period of time, but it ran concurrently with the most dynamic of the two Grade 8 English classes. Therefore, I was only able to observe four lessons when Daniel Evans was absent or the students were on an overnight trip. The classes I did observe took place in the science lab with students working in mixed-gender groups, which provided some interesting exchanges between students. There were a few valuable moments that occurred while observing the students in their history class as well, but since my schedule was quite full I chose not to continue with this class. The geography class was a bit of an anomaly in that the Grade 7 students behaved disrespectfully towards the teacher in a way that was not evident in other classes. To control the students, the teacher would make them do quiet independent work or put on subject related movies.
Therefore, I pared down my observations by ending my visits to this class as well. Lastly, I chose to discontinue observations in the music class, as the students were divided into one of two groups depending on the instrument they played (strings or band) and were joined by another Grade 7 group of students. The majority of the classes I observed were lessons on theory or of the students playing pieces of music with very little interaction.

My primary role when conducting classroom observations was as a participant observer, although there were times when my positionality would shift to a more active role depending on the class and/or situation. Rosas (2006) distinguishes these two ethnographic roles by explaining that a participant observer, or what she calls a nonparticipant, “filters and interprets reality as [s]he witnesses actions and behaviours,” compared to a participant where “reality is coconstructed with others” (p. 100). Emerson and Pollner (2001) assert that ethnographic practices always involve some degree of observation and participation regardless of the interaction between researcher and those in the field. This was evident in my presence at Oak Lane Academy where I was required to develop and maintain relationships with students, teachers, staff, and school faculty over the course of the study. There was a constant negotiation in my encounters and interactions when visiting the field site, which required “a balance between closeness and distance, between involvement and detachment” (Emerson & Pollner, 2001, p. 240).

In my observation role, I would find a secluded spot at the back or side of the classroom where I could visually see all of the students, but at the same time have enough privacy to type notes on my iPad with the hopes that students were not peering over my shoulder. My specific role as a participant/observer varied the most in the Grade 7 English classroom as the teacher would regularly invite me to offer my thoughts on lesson topics by
calling on me during class. I was also requested to help a group of students practice persuasive speeches. I obliged in those moments, but I always declined when I was offered a few minutes in class to lead a discussion or change the seating arrangement.\footnote{The teacher would sometimes ask me at the start of class if I would like to lead a discussion on a curricular topic, which I was not prepared to do. I was also invited to change the seating arrangement, which alternated boys and girls from desk to desk, to see what would happen when certain students were put together. I was not inclined to manipulate the situation by changing what had already been established in the classroom.} I was invited to facilitate a couple of workshops between the Grade 7 and 8 English classes (described below), which I was given plenty of notice to prepare. The workshops were specific to the course curriculum and my study. Therefore, they seemed appropriate to facilitate and resulted in valuable data.

I was invited on two separate occasions to facilitate workshops in the English classrooms. Daniel Evans asked me early in the study, during the media literacy unit, to explore gender as a social construction with his two classes of Grade 8 students. This involved a class discussion, an interactive activity, and an opportunity for the students to reflect on the activity and ask questions. Although no artefacts resulted from this workshop, I did write detailed notes to express my own experience as a facilitator and how the students responded to various aspects of the workshop, which added to my collection of data.

Towards the end of the study I was invited by teacher Hannah Lewis to explore relationships with her Grade 7 English students, during the Shakespeare unit of \textit{A Midsummer Night’s Dream}. Students were involved in a group activity and reflective dialogue. One set of artefacts was created during this workshop, which was an anonymous letter of advice written by each student in the class to one of two characters in the play. I also made detailed notes of
the workshop experience including the results of the “four corners” activity, which I offer a
detailed account of in Chapter Six.

**Interviews**

Semi-structured individual interviews proved to be a critical aspect of the study, as a
means to develop personal relationships with the participants and provide a private
environment for them to speak freely and uninterrupted about their school experiences
(Merriam, 2009). Students spent the majority of their day in the company of peers, in the
classroom and during breaks, leaving little opportunity to converse with them one-on-one.
Therefore, interviews allowed me the opportunity to witness students at their most
contemplative (Ezzy, 2010; Lichtman, 2013). My perceptions of the students in private were
often quite different than how I observed them performing in public with their friends, which
offered another layer to my analysis. I found through the interview process that I was able to
discover an aspect of the student who was more at ease and willing to be vulnerable when
sharing (Lichtman, 2013).

Moreover, there was a degree of emotion present in the interviews that was not seen
to the same degree in focus groups or classroom observations in the presence of multiple
people. Lichtman (2013) states that the nature of interviews can be an emotional experience
for participants as they are being asked to talk about themselves. Ezzy (2010) affirms,
“emotions are central to the conduct of interviews” (p. 163), which shape how participants
make meaning of the world around them. Students were able to share their frustrations,
embarrassment, and anger, about classmates, their past, or any other lived experience, with
my reassurance that their narratives would be completely confidential. I was also very
conscious about creating a space where the students could talk freely, while I listened
attentively with an open-mind to their personal narratives (Ezzy, 2010; Guion, Diehl, & McDonald, 2001).

The two interviews were scheduled within the first and final few weeks of the study for approximately fifteen minutes each session, which seemed appropriate for the age of the participants. Eleven Grade 7 students (seven female; four male) and eight Grade 8 students (seven female; one male) were granted permission to be interviewed. From the moment the students entered the interview space I mentally noted their words and actions (gender performances), which I took account of until they left. Once they departed, I wrote reflective notes of our experiences together. Lichtman (2013) recommends this observational strategy as a means to record the entire interview experience. She stresses that the physical space used, questions asked, time of day, and so forth, can impact how an interview unfolds. Merriam (2009) concurs with this understanding and further adds, “what you get in an interview is simply the informant’s perception of the phenomenon of interest at that particular point in time” (p. 114).

The interview itself was audio-recorded. This allowed me to create a relaxed and conversational environment where I did not need to take notes while I was speaking, knowing the audio would capture the details for transcribing at a later date. Guion, Diehl, and McDonald (2001), suggest a number of skills and attributes for conducting successful interviews, including “attending fully to what the speaker is saying by focusing wholly on what is being said” (p. 2). They recommend the interviewer paraphrase back to the participant what has been spoken, to confirm they have heard correctly. This includes reflecting back to the participant any emotions that might have been conveyed, to gain greater clarity and understanding of the information being communicated. I knew going into
the interviews that I could not listen attentively, paraphrase, and reflect adequately if I were also taking detailed notes at the same time. Being completely present in the interview required my full attention. Hence, the choice I made to audio record interviews. Furthermore, there are claims that audio recording interviews reduces researcher bias by providing a permanent record of what was and was not said (Breakwell, Hammond, Fife-Schaw, & Smith, 2006). Lichtman (2013) argues bias is always present in qualitative research, but does recommend audio recording as an effective interviewing strategy.

Finding an appropriate setting for the interviews was critical to their success (Lichtman, 2013). The majority of the interviews took place on the main floor of the school, in a spacious conference room with high back rolling chairs that were positioned around a long meeting table. This location seemed to put the students at ease the moment they arrived for their interviews due to the “cool” chairs. Few junior students had access to this space and were compelled to spend a moment twisting and swivelling in their seats once they sat down. They also seemed to appreciate the extra room on the table to spread out their lunches. If the conference room was available, I was able to book an empty classroom. This rendered less enthusiasm as a space but worked for interviews nonetheless. I conducted thirty-nine student interviews in total.

The first set of interview questions were designed to get to know the students, their opinions and perceptions of their male and female peers, what they loved about school, the challenges of being a kid at their age, and so forth. I attempted to ask every student the same questions for comparisons but allowed those who wanted to elaborate on topics that seemed important to them to do so. This is what many qualitative researchers refer to as a

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55 Sample Student Interview One: Questions (see Appendix E) and Sample Student Interview Two: Questions (see Appendix F).
guided or semi-structured interview format (Creswell, 2008; Lichtman, 2013; Merriam, 2009). The questions I prepared for the second interview were formatted similarly to the first. However, I not only developed common questions for everyone to answer, but also individualized questions that were created for each participant. Regarding the latter, I relied on classroom observations and focus group written material that warranted further explanation. Therefore, I directed specific questions at individuals whom I believed could best support my query. However, being that these students were only twelve through fourteen years of age, I was purposeful in clarifying answers I was unsure of while also practicing restraint not to push them to answer questions they were evidently uncomfortable answering. Despite my intentions, I was aware of the power dynamics always present in the research space, particularly with young participants (Eder & Fingerson, 2001; Lahman, 2008; Lichtman, 2013).

Interviewing adolescents and children comes with challenges that differ from interviewing adults (Lichtman, 2013). Lahman (2008) speaks to the issue of children being “othered” in research where the concept of childhood “conceived of by adults is a word or world fraught with stereotypes and polarizations” (p. 282), and further states that childhood is either “romanticized or vilified” (p. 282), which impacts how children and adolescents are viewed (e.g., mature/immature, appropriate/inappropriate, nice/mean). The process of othering occurs in three ways by: (a) the memories adults have of their own childhood, (b) the similar and coinciding nature of adult and child cultures, and (c) the power that exists due to a difference in adult/child size and age (Lahman, 2008). Therefore, I was required to be highly attuned to my own biases and assumptions about childhood when conducting the interviews. Plus, as recommended by Lahman (2008), I wanted the participants to know that
I was not the expert of their lived experiences, but that they were. My hope was to develop meaningful and collaborative relationships.

Despite my best intentions, one of the biggest obstacles of the interview process that remained was the age gap between the participants and myself. I was evidently of similar age to the students’ teachers and parents, which was a challenge to work around (Eder & Fingerson, 2001; Lahman, 2008). No matter how many times I assured the students they could tell me anything, that I had likely heard it before, I would not be offended by the language they used, nor would I be dismayed by their stories, there was always bits of information I could not get the students to share. For instance, in Chapter Five I will talk about the “perverts” of Oak Lane Academy. Although the topic of perverts came up with almost every Grade 7 participant during interviews, collectively they were very hesitant to offer in-depth details of what made a pervert a pervert. This is not surprising considering that many parents find it awkward or troubling to discuss topics related to sex and sexuality with their children, often avoiding it altogether (Christensen, Wright, & Dunn, 2016). In turn, many young people have not had experiences talking comfortably with adults about these topics. They tend to save them for peers. I, therefore, assumed that my age and teacher/parent persona created a barrier to these sensitive conversations.

Students also implied in interviews that adults were out of touch and had little to no idea what kids were going through in 2013. Grade 8 female student, Cora Lin, mentioned that she would talk infrequently with her parents about things like friendships because they were older and likely would not understand how friendships worked for young people. I told her that my children were around her age and their stories of friendships were not that different from my own growing up. She validated my assumptions that adults were out of touch when
she said, “You guys also didn’t have drinking and drugs and stuff.” She was surprised to
learn differently. Jay Han echoed similar sentiments about adults “Last time they knew what
they [kids] were going through was, like, twenty years ago so it’s, like, different now.”

I also conducted four teacher interviews at the end of the school year, which was not
part of the initial research plan. However, Frances Day, Susan Bauer, and Emma Collins
recommended I consider it as an option. They did not expect it to happen, but suggested I
prepare for it early in the research process just in case. As a result, I applied to the University
of Toronto Research Ethics Board (REB) for approval and developed a list of interview
questions. Despite having spent time with several teachers who taught a number of subjects, I
only interviewed the teachers where I conducted the majority of my observations.56 This was
mostly done to gain background information on the history and culture of the school, the
curriculum, the students, and so forth.

**Focus Groups**

Focus groups were always held during the lunch break, which was the only time
during the school day when students had the greatest availability. However, they often used
their break for homework, socializing, or intramural sports. Therefore, I chose to offer food
as an incentive to bring the students together, which is a common focus group practice
(Krueger & Casey, 2015). This decision was also based on the knowledge that these students
were highly motivated by food. I saw a teacher bribe her students with chocolate so they
would listen in class and a Grade 7 boy was known to bring in homemade pies as a class treat
to improve his popularity status. Therefore, large slices of pepperoni and cheese pizza with

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56 I interviewed Daniel Evans (Grade 8 English), Hannah Lewis (Grade 7 English), Frank Avery
(Grade 7 Visual Art), and Edith Tiger (Grade 7 Drama). *Sample Teacher Interview Questions* can be found
in Appendix G.
juice or a soda guaranteed close to full focus group attendance and my own escalating status with the students. The downside of eating during a focus group was the time it took students to settle with their food and the constant sound of munching and slurping on the audio recording, which provided some challenges when transcribing the data. I also had to remind students to throw out their leftovers and/or napkins and cans when the focus group was finished. As a guest in the school, I was very conscious of making sure the classroom I used for my focus groups was as clean when I left, as it was when I arrived. Inevitably there was always a teacher and students coming into the space when the participants and I were walking out.

I offered five focus groups all together between the two grades, with each participant being requested to attend twice. Most students attended unless they were ill, had a project due, or forgot. The focus groups took place in the second and third months of the study, in between the two interviews. Lunch breaks at Oak Lane Academy were only forty-five minutes in length and I had to account for the time it took participants to arrive at the focus group location, serve themselves lunch, and the time they needed to leave for their afternoon schedule. Therefore, most focus groups lasted between thirty and thirty-five minutes. As there were only nine Grade 8 participants (seven female; one male), I choose to keep them together for both focus groups. However, there were twelve Grade 7 participants (seven female; five male) who had permission to attend the focus groups (one female who did not). I attempted the first focus group with all of the students together. With the tight time frame and the activities I wanted to accomplish, it proved to be too difficult with a large

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57 *Student Focus Group Description and Agreement Form* (see Appendix H), *Grade 7 Focus Group Plan 1* (see Appendix I), *Grade 7 Focus Group Plan 2* (see Appendix J), *Grade 8 Focus Group Plan 1* (see Appendix K), and *Grade 8 Focus Group Plan 2* (see Appendix L).
group. Therefore, I chose to separate the students based on their particular gender performance, along male and female categories, for their second focus group, which was much more manageable. It also allowed the students to speak more freely in same gender groups than they had when they were together as one. I learned a great deal about what it meant to be “a boy” and what it meant to be “a girl” in the school when hosting these gender segregated focus groups.

The Grade 7 and 8 groups were quite different from each other dynamically because of how well they did or did not know each other. As the Grade 7 students spent the entire year together as a class, they tended towards being chatty and loud during focus groups. At times I needed to redirect their attention to the discussion. This was required during the first mix-gender focus group, as it was such a large group of people, but particularly with the girls only group. One instance that stands out was when one of the girls brought up the fact that the television show *Pretty Little Liars* was back for another season twenty days after the focus group. The girls erupted enthusiastically about the characters and plotline. I allowed them a few minutes to share their excitement before asking them to refocus. The Grade 8 students were not as well acquainted with each other as they had come from different Grade 7 classes the year before. Therefore, I found them to be much more reserved and shy when speaking together. You could hear a pin drop during the audio recording of the first focus group, except when they were talking. Therefore, I decided to play an icebreaker at the beginning of the second focus group. Each student was invited to help themselves to a box of Smarties. They had to each say one thing about themselves for every Smartie they had in their hand. This activity seemed to help them relax and they were much more vibrant during the discussion that followed.
Regardless of their comfort level, all of the students seemed to take away a new perspective from the focus group experience. At the end of the year when I conducted final interviews, I asked them if they had learned anything from participating in the study. Many students responded that they found the focus groups helpful to see other people’s perspectives on rarely talked about topics and/or they learned something about themselves. For instance, Grade 7 male student Bob Zhou said, “It was just learning to make better friends, just understanding each other more, just knowing other stuff that makes you communicate better, knowing diversity, and those stuff.” In an interview with Grade 8 female student Claire Littleton, when I asked her the question she replied “Well it was interesting to hear everyone’s different opinions about the questions you were asking because I gained a lot of new insight that I wouldn’t have thought of, like, on my own.”

Although I was not able to facilitate movement activities in the focus groups according to my original plan, I did engage students in a number of elicitation strategies, which generated various types of data (Johnson, 2017; Schensul, LeCompte, Nastasi, & Borgatti, 1999). These strategies (e.g., visual imagery, games, writing exercises) were used to generate dialogue related to the participants’ personal experiences and various issues that they were familiar with (Johnson, 2017). For example, at the end of each focus group I had the students fill out an “exit ticket.” An exit ticket consisted of a piece of paper with a few questions on it. To leave for their afternoon class they had to produce their completed “ticket” to receive permission to “exit” out the door. I also had the Grade 8 students work in partners during one focus group to talk about relationships. They were asked to write down their answers to my questions on pieces of paper that I collected. I did the same activity with

58 These elicitation strategies are described in the focus group plans located in the appendices.
the Grade 7 boys and girls, but the slices of pizza and cans of drinks were in the way so I had
them talk about the questions verbally instead. I also took photographs of an activity I
conducted with the Grade 7 students on gender stereotypes during their first focus group. I
was able to capture how they arranged photos of people on a gender continuum. Lastly, I had
the Grade 7 students write male/female characteristics on sticky notes as part of another
activity. I collected all of the sticky notes and created a word document with two columns
(one for men and one for women), where I noted all of their answers.

**Miscellaneous Data Sources**

Hannah Lewis and Daniel Evans (Grade 7 and 8 English teachers, respectively) generously provided me with a number of classroom materials that students received as handouts, as part of their learning. Plus, I was privy to several anonymously written responses and reflections that were produced by Grade 8 students for completing in-class activities, exit tickets, and individual student evaluations of the media literacy unit. Many of these lesson handouts and reflections/responses provided contextual data for the study, whereas others have been detailed in subsequent chapters to support my findings. I also received some subject specific materials from classes other than English. For example, I collected student-made films from the Grade 7 visual art class, which were invaluable when describing the participants in the study, as every student was in at least one film I viewed. Although I had made detailed notes of each participant, the visual representation was helpful. In drama I was offered a copy of the end-of-year play the Grade 7 students performed. Lastly, I attended the final staff meeting of the 2012-2013 school year and received a number of teacher handouts.
I kept a record of my ongoing reflections, questions, and emerging themes. Many of these notes were produced during or after classroom observations, interviews, and focus groups in a field journal. Merriam (2009) describes this as a type of self-analysis performed by the ethnographer as a way to record field experiences, which can include “ideas, fears, mistakes, confusion, and reactions to the experience and can include thoughts about the research methodology itself” (p. 136). While some researchers use technology for this purpose (e.g., recorder on a Smartphone), I chose to create typed notes at the end of my observations and/or handwritten notes in a physical journal. It was my intent to capture every reflective moment and query while it occurred as a frame of reference for developing interview and focus group questions. It also helped me to narrow my focus on particular participants or regular classroom occurrences. Plus, I referred to these notes during the analysis phase of the research to remind me of what I was feeling and experiencing at various points in the study. Analytic memos were also developed for “preliminary analysis and interpretation” (Merriam, 2009, p. 136).

I was constantly observing students outside of the classroom, as I moved through the school. I found myself in a number of discussions with school administrators (Frances Day, Susan Bauer, Emma Collins) and office support that were either planned meetings or happened in passing. I also spent a significant amount of time talking with teachers before, during, and after class, regardless of whether they were part of the study or not. One teacher lived around the corner from my home, so we often found ourselves making the long commute to Oak Lane Academy together. She had worked at the school for over a decade, which enabled her to share invaluable information and stories that I may not have otherwise gained knowledge of. All of these various conversations were beneficial and resulted in
anecdotal notes. Lastly, to gain a broader scope of the school culture I attended school assemblies and I was invited to be a judge for the annual junior persuasive speech finals.

**Data Analysis and Reflexivity**

Feminist poststructuralists do not seek to make sense of the world through a single lens leading to one understanding of truth, but through multiple lenses for the emergence of multiple truths. During the initial phase of the study, I was critically aware of “the problem of making ‘truth claims’ about particular phenomenon” (Fusco, 2008, p. 161) and the importance of rejecting “a single true understanding of the world” (Fusco, 2008, p.163). Numerous qualitative researchers turn to triangulation as part of their analytic process to understand a phenomenon in-depth (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Reminiscent of the triangle with three sides, triangulation is viewed as a “three-pronged approach to collect all the (hidden) data that will get us closer to the truth” (Fusco, 2008, p. 163). While this is considered an effective means for adding breadth, depth, rigor and complexity to a study, it is also limiting for poststructuralist methodologies. This is particularly evident in the way triangulation functions, with the assumption that “a fixed point or object exists that can be triangulated (Fusco, 2008, p. 163). Therefore, I chose to employ crystallization as an alternative to triangulation, to support the data analysis process for this study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Ellingson, 2008; Fusco, 2008).

The crystal is different from the triangle in that it has many different sides, in which to illuminate and reflect numerous perspectives of a phenomenon in question. Ellingson (2008) describes the process of crystallization as multi-genre in that one story is told from different points of view, which includes the mixing of genres and writing styles. This allows data to be expressed in more than one way through a process of interweaving and blending
material together. This approach can make for messy texts and undetermined conclusions (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011), but offers “deep, thickly described, complexly rendered interpretations of meanings about a phenomenon or group” (Ellingson, 2008, p. 10). The point is not to hear a story from different points of view and then try to make out one final conclusion, but to accept each perspective as an aspect of that one story. Ellingson (2008) describes this as pushing the limits of possibility in research and Fusco (2008) imparts crystallization as a method that “might impact a more deep, complex, and thoroughly partial understanding of the social world” (p. 163).

Another principle of crystallization is the inclusion of the reflexive researcher in relation to the research process (Ellingson, 2008). Crystallization calls for the principal investigator to maintain a certain level of self-awareness and introspection. Clearly my subjectivity, my positionality in the study, and the methodological and pedagogical approach I took with the participants, played into how I made meaning of and interpreted the data (Lichterman, 2015). For example, the basis for designing a study to examine school related gender-based violence started as a way to understand my daughter’s experience of sexual harassment during her last year of elementary school as a Grade 8 public school student. As I mother, I had been deeply troubled by the lack of support I received by the teachers and administrators of her school and was shocked by the absence of information available to me to comfort my child through such a traumatic experience. Furthermore, when I started data collection at Oak Lane Academy, my son was in Grade 8 like many of the participants I worked with. While I was learning about their lived experiences, I was also witnessing a similar unfolding with my son. I was reticent to make comparisons between my own children and the participants of the study, but I was fully aware at all times my positionality
as a mother with firsthand knowledge of the age group and what many of the students might be experiencing in their lives.

I also entered the field site with my own experiences, some of which were deep wounds, allowing me another perspective of gendered violence. I had firsthand knowledge of how it felt to be sexually abused as a young child by an adult male friend of the family, to lose my innocence and be immobilized by fear at the age of four. I had been witness to physical violence between lovers, having to testify in court on behalf of the female partner. I had also been a student in school and been teased for being a late bloomer, I had my bra strap pulled and was called a bitch. For years, I had nightmares about returning to school and enduring the hurtful and competitive nature of girls. Being a researcher in a junior/high school surprisingly brought up some of those feeling again despite thinking I was beyond that reality as a grown woman and academic. Gilbert (2016) speaks to the obstacles researchers face when conducting studies in schools as they can remind us of our own lived experiences and contends,

Our experiences are not simply the grounds of insight into schools; they also create a mirage of omnipotence. We may too often think that our experience of growing up in schools and our professional credentials give us special access to a vantage from which we can see schools as they really are; but our understanding of the school as a research site, in a policy, or in our neighbourhood is profoundly shaped by the school and school histories we carry inside of us. (p. 112)

I also brought to the study over twenty years of experience as an educator with a deep passion and commitment to arts-based and anti-oppression education. The sociohistorical context of my own life and how it shaped my perspective of what I was studying needed to be accounted for at every stage of the research design, data collection, and analysis process.
Just as I maintained a record of my ongoing reflections and queries during data collection (e.g., in a field journal) as a self-reflective process (Merriam, 2009), I did something similar during the analysis phase. When I was conducting a close reading and coding of observational data, and interview/focus group transcripts, I would keep track of my feelings and intuitive knowings as they surfaced. This would evolve into notes (in the margins and as analytic memos) to describe what I was experiencing emotionally and intellectually in relation to what I was reading (Saldaña, 2009). Furthermore, it resulted in formulated questions and an exploration of the scholarly literature (Merriam, 2009). This iterative process allowed for new meaning to emerge from all of the data, which included what could be read (observations/transcripts, class documents), listened to (audio-recordings), observed (photographs, video), and sensed (feelings, intuition). From a poststructural perspective, I was looking for “difference rather than similarity, absence rather than presence, and the local rather than the universal” (Kaufmann, 2011, p. 148). Meaning emerged and evolved through my ability to make sense of real events that took place during the study and my responses to them through my own lived experiences.

Another important methodological consideration when working within a feminist poststructuralist framework is that of intersectional analysis. Davis (2008) refers to intersectionality as “the interaction between gender, race and other categories of difference in individual lives, social practices, institutional arrangements, and cultural ideologies and the outcomes of these interactions in terms of power” (p. 68). While this type of analysis is ideal for a broader and more complex understanding of individual experiences central to any phenomenon, I was more than challenged to apply this type of analysis to my research. Despite asking questions that might lead students to talk about their multiple identities, they
rarely did so in interviews or focus groups. Regardless of how much I searched through the data, I came up empty-handed time and again. As I mentioned in Chapter Three, silences around race implied whiteness as critical for elite membership with class being taken for granted. With that said, I have often wondered if my own perception of race and class as a middle-class Caucasian woman somehow misguided my attempts at intersectional analysis. Was there more to the data than I could see? Did I perhaps miss the subtleties offered by students in the way of racial discussions? These types of questions have haunted me, thinking that my own “blindness” to race inhibited my ability to see intersectionality in the data.

Looking back at my past will help explain why I have questioned whether race was unspoken in the data or if my eyes could not see it. When I was a much younger woman, newly married to my husband, a man from India, I often found myself saying and doing things that greatly offended his family. I did not act or speak with the intention to harm, but I was incredibly naïve to the Indian culture and what this family had experienced in immigrating to Canada. I grew up in a predominantly middle-class white community on the West Coast of British Columbia where race and class was rarely talked about. My neighbours, peers at school, teachers, and the government officials of this capital city, all seemed to look like I did. I assumed we were all the same. In school we were taught utopian narratives of Canada, void of any racist historical context. I can relate to Bannerji (2000) in her first encounters of Canada as “an idyllic construction of nature and adventure” (p. 63). It was not until I moved to Toronto as a young adult, thrust into a large diverse urban centre, that I even began to think about diversity. While I loved the city and the people, I was also incredibly ignorant to experiences of “others.” In my naivety, I continued to maintain that we were more alike than different, that hard work could provide success and freedom for all, and
many other ideologies that a privileged, fourth-generation, Canadian-born woman could imagine as real. As the years passed, my naiveté lessened, but I was always self-conscious about offending others as I had my husband’s family. I also struggled to come to terms with Canada as “a set of representations, embodying certain types of political and cultural communities and their operations” (Bannerji, 2000, p. 64). Therefore, as a researcher I was aware of not wanting to interpret participants or the data “incorrectly” or make the “wrong” assumptions. This of course created deep tension as a feminist poststructuralist where there is no “correct” or “right” way to interpret the data. There is no such thing as “truth.”

Assuming that race was unspoken in the data I became quite invested in exploring the minutia of gender to understand school-related gender-based violence in depth. Therefore, I maintained my focus on gender performativity and the ways students would act, walk, talk, and speak (individually and in interaction with others) as part of their gender presentation (Butler, 1990). This included a deeper observance of my own gender performances and embodiment within the ethnographic experience. These observances allowed me to discover normative and regulative practices that pointed to the notion of being “a boy” or “a girl.” I also thought more deeply about my own subjectivity as “woman.” I do acknowledge the limitations in speaking more generally about the gendered performances of students without giving context to their identities. However, I felt I had little choice but to put intersectional analysis to the side with the hope that my work not be viewed as “theoretically misguided, politically irrelevant, or simply fantastical” (Davis, 2008, p. 68).

I maintained an iterative approach, a back and forth cycling between data collection and analysis throughout the duration of the study (Creswell, 2008). Srivastava and Hopwood (2009) explain iteration as a “deeply reflexive process . . . sparking insight and developing
meaning” (p. 77), which requires continuous attention to the data in order to connect with emerging themes, insights, and understandings. To do this a high level of organization and routine was maintained while I was immersed in the ethnographic process. During classroom observations I would keep a running tally of revelations, concepts, and questions that arose, which were typed into a document while I simultaneously took observation notes. Immediately after class I would touch base with the teacher of the lesson I observed to share my thoughts, have my questions answered, and/or see what further understandings might emerge as a result of our conversation. I found talking with the teachers about what I observed, while hearing their perspective, to be particularly illuminating. I would also find myself sitting in a quiet place in the school during my breaks to think through all of the connections I was making. I would look over the data I had collected (e.g., photographs, student exit tickets, observations), write reflections, and note new themes as they emerged. I would also listen to audio-recordings of interviews and focus groups on the long commute home at the end of the day and make notes of important points that stood out to me. This process of organizing, interpreting, and internalizing the raw data would eventually result in extensive coding.

To manage the influx of incoming data, I created folders on my home computer to store word documents, photographs, and audio recordings by grade and method (and academic subject for observations). I scanned every piece of data that was handed to me by students and teachers (exit tickets, course evaluation responses, activity worksheets, etc.), including all of my handwritten notes, which were stored in appropriate folders. I kept updated files of interview questions, focus group activities, workshop plans, and any material
that went with these methods of data collection. I also had a systemized way of labelling data, which made retrieval much simpler when I needed to view certain items.

Once the ethnographic fieldwork was complete, I started the lengthy process of revisiting all of the data by method (e.g., observations, interviews, focus groups) and in order of when it was collected (Saldaña, 2009). First, I transcribed the audio recorded material into word documents, to which I applied preliminary codes using the “track changes” function as I went along. This “First Cycle” round of coding was quick and allowed me to highlight important passages or words in the text before I started identifying recurring themes such as “smart,” “joke,” or “pervert” or even major concepts such as “boy,” “girl” or “gender performance.” I did a similar process with the observational data, but it was a bit messier. I printed a hard copy of every classroom observation on which I wrote lengthy notes (reflections and questions) and used coloured markers to highlight key text and insert codes. From there I uploaded all of my data into the software system NVivo10 to assist with a more complex process of coding.

Although CAQDAS such as NVivo10 can provide many advantages to the analysis process from transcribing audio files, importing data, and coding, it also has its limitations (Basit, 2003). Cope (2014) acknowledges that the extensive time required to operate the software, as well as the visual presentation of material on the computer screen (small print, having to scroll between sections) can create frustration and slow work. As well, it can result in researchers focusing more “on the process of the technique instead of the meaning of the data” (Cope, 2014, p. 322). I personally struggled with the computer program. I found it to be counter intuitive to my natural way of working and chose to discontinue the process. While it was very time consuming, I preferred working with paper, highlighters, coloured sticky
notes, and note pads. I appreciated the creative process and tactile experience of
manipulating the materials by hand as I made meaning of the data. One strategy I used was
filling a large wall in my office with sticky notes to post codes, categories, themes, and
broader concepts. This supported my developing storylines that evolved into chapter content.
I was then able to create “storyboards” by filtered information into chapter sections (e.g.,
quotes, participant descriptions, key theoretical concepts, etc.) Therefore, I printed out
absolutely every piece of data I collected and coded it by hand. I read over each piece of data
countless times during the analysis process to the point that I could precisely identify in the
hundreds of pages of data where a quote by a participant was located or an episode I wanted
to write about could be found and on what date.

I also wrote pages and pages of analytic memos summarizing what I was learning, as
I read over the data (Merriam, 2009). According to Rogers (2018) “when you reflect and
write about data analysis and your thinking with the coding process, it increases your critical
thinking and challenges your own assumptions” (p. 890). Therefore, I would create tables of
information when I was writing a chapter about boys and girls, relationships, or games to
recall major points I wanted to include in my writing. Much of this was also coded, which
allowed new insights to emerge as recommended by Saldaña (2009). During meetings with
my supervisor to receive feedback on a chapter I had written, I would request permission to
audio record our conversations. I would then loosely transcribe the audio, highlighting new
emerging insights that developed, and write more analytic memos. Saldaña (2009) urges
“whenever anything related to and significant about the coding or analysis of the data comes
to mind, stop whatever you’re doing and write a memo about it immediately” (p. 33).
From there, I would use coloured sticky notes to reorganize the chapter, merging the old and new ideas together, which often led to exciting revelations. Yet, despite my methodical and detailed approach to data analysis, I also found it to be very messy and complex at the best of times, which is common when approached from a poststructural perspective (Britzman, 2000; St. Pierre & Pillow, 2000). I had many moments of doubt, questioning my interpretation of the data and the story I was attempting to narrate. Yet, I learned that those were often the biggest moments of breakthrough. Locke, Golden-Bidden, and Feldman (2008) assert, “inquiry is initiated when, relative to our beliefs, some positive impingement or surprise generates doubt. Then doubt—experienced as a not knowing—motivates a search for understanding. Living doubt is necessary to energize inquiry” (p. 908). It was a steady process of reflection, retraction, and revelation.

In the last section to follow, before the chapter conclusion, I offer some final thoughts on feminist poststructuralism as it shaped my methodological process. Specifically, I address storytelling within a contextual understanding of knowledge(s) and truth(s). I acknowledge the messiness in which I find myself while celebrating new possibilities that can be imagined.

**Feminist Poststructuralism: Partialities and Fictional Tales**

Britzman (2000) argues that poststructuralist research does not promise a full account or true story of any ethnographic experience or analysis as there is always error that emerges from “the partiality of language of what cannot be said precisely because of what is said, and of the impossible difference within what is said, what is intended, what is signified, what is repressed, what is taken, and what remains” (p. 28). Therefore, poststructuralist theorizing requires a heightened awareness of the ways meanings and practices are privileged or denied.
According to McLaren (2009), discursive practices abide by rules based on how discourses are formed, which controls what can be said, what is to be left unsaid, who has the right to speak, and who must listen. Therefore, it is important to interrogate why certain practices are considered traditional, comprehensible, or acceptable when others are construed as unusual, ambiguous or intolerable. Britzman (2000) argues, “representation is always in crisis, knowledge is constitutive of power, and agency is the constitutive effect” (p. 30). In other words, there is no way to account for any real truth.

I was always aware that in any observation, interview, or focus group I conducted, I was only ever able to capture fragments of these students’ lives based on what caught my attention, and what they were willing to share or not share of themselves. In particular, side conversations about sexuality (e.g., sex talk, sexualized jokes) that took place in the classroom were often done in hushed voices to avoid the ears of adults. In interviews and focus groups, students would allude to classroom “perverts” who watched porn at school and made inappropriate comments. Yet, so much was left unsaid, which was evident in the ways students became uncomfortable (e.g., their body language changed, they stated they were uncomfortable, or they spoke around the topic using generalities to avoid being specific). Despite the extent that hyper-sexualized behaviour and conversations were taking place within peer groups, students were reticent to speak of it otherwise. There were clear discursive practices dictating what could be said and what needed to remain unsaid in peer versus adult company. At Oak Lane Academy dominant discourses prescribed that students engage in sexualized behaviour in private student-only spaces, as explicit performances of desire or curiosity would be unbecoming of smart elite subjects (Chase, 2008).
I am aware that what I claim to have learned through the ethnographic process, and therefore share in the pages of this thesis, are to an extent fictional tales and partial truths (Britzman, 2000; Gore, 1992; Lather, 2004; St. Pierre & Pillow, 2000). At times I found this concept deeply challenging, as I wanted to imagine my interpretation of the data to be somewhat “true.” I was meticulous throughout the analytic process in my quest to tell a compelling story that Oak Lane Academy staff and students would agree with. At many junctures I had to remind myself that my goal was not to get it “right.” Research of this kind can be messy and inaccurate (Fusco, 2008), which can create doubt in the process. However, I realized the point of poststructuralism is to disrupt traditional ways of knowing, or accessing reality, to produce knowledge that is differently formed. Britzman (2000) states, “the ethnographic narrative must somehow acknowledge the differences within and among the stories of experience, how they are told, and what it is that structures the telling and retelling” (p. 32). St. Pierre and Pillow (2000) reinforce this by recognizing poststructural feminists are always working towards that which is “not-yet-thought” through their interest in unconventional discourses where “different statements and different material and political conditions might be possible” (p. 4).

Conclusion

My initial experience as an ethnographer was fraught with challenges to overcome and political agendas to appease. After a long application process, resulting in the research being rejected by three Canadian public-school boards, I found my place at Oak Lane Academy through personal connections. While relieved and excited for the opportunity to conduct my ethnography, it was not without apprehension. My methodological framework and methods for data collection required several adjustments to make them appropriate for
the elite context. This required adding observations, removing mid-research interviews, abolishing an embodiment process involving movement activities, and other changes that required redirection. However, once the dust settled and the details fell into place, I found myself fitting in and feeling a sense of belonging. I experienced a process of becoming as I came to terms with my evolving subjectivity and privilege as a doctoral candidate in an elite private school.

One of the most significant changes was shifting from a movement-based ethnography to one of embodiment. Instead of asking students to engage in activities to explicitly bring gender discourses into their bodies, I observed the embodiment and enactment of these discourses in the everyday occurrences of social interactions and discursive practices. By paying attention to bodies intently, I was able to question the ways gender discourses produced subjectivities and how masculinities and femininities were performed as constitutive of social processes. This also highlighted my own embodiment in the work, which I had not originally taken into consideration as a methodological perspective. I started to look deeper at how the field site shaped my reality and embodiment as research, educator, and mother, some of which I revealed as a reflection of my reflexivity (how I made meaning of and interpreted the data).

This chapter also offered much in terms of data collection from what I did, to how, and for how long. I explained in detail the process for recruiting participants and how they were named. Plus, I detailed classroom observations, interviews, and focus groups as methods of the research design. Finally, I brought attention to my arduous and messy data analysis process. I wrote about giving up on NVivo10 and doing everything manually as the creative process and tactile experience felt more intuitive to my way of processing. This
chapter concluded with final thoughts on feminist poststructuralism as a way of telling stories, knowing they are a somewhat fictional account of reality.

As feminist poststructural methodologies do not lead to a conclusive end point, I had to become comfortable with the “partial truths” (Fusco, 2008, p. 164) about the world of which I studied. Moreover, I fretted about writing a critical account of my findings, while also being respectful of a school and its people who had so graciously welcomed me into their community. In the end, I feel I have been able to write the story I was meant to tell, which is as much as a reflection of Oak Lane Academy as it is about myself. The three analysis chapters to follow illustrate my interpretations of social interactions, processes, and practices that I was privy to witness or be told about firsthand by Oak Lane Academy students. I have done my best to write in a way that tells a compelling story that might invoke pleasure or at the very least be informative (Britzman, 2000).

Chapter Five aims to articulate what it means to be a smart “boy” and “girl” at Oak Lane Academy through the lived experiences of Grade 7 and 8 students. This is critical for understanding how masculinity and femininity is construed in this particular elite space, which creates conditions for school-related gender-based violence to exist and persist. A highlight of this chapter is an illustration of gender as hierarchical, which points to the ways boys and girls are granted access to privileges at the school in different ways. I also write about how students position themselves and each other on the social hierarchy. I share stories about “nerds,” “cool kids,” and “perverts” through the imaginings of the “ideal” Oak Lane Academy subject.
CHAPTER FIVE
ELITE PERFORMANCES:
“DOING” GIRL AND BOY AT OAK LANE ACADEMY

The study of girls and boys in school contexts is certainly not new to empirical research, which has produced an abundance of evidence over the years to describe how gender is constructed and construed on the playground, and in the hallways and classrooms of schools (e.g., Renold, 2005; Thorne, 1993). Although much of this research has been conducted in publicly funded schools with diverse working and middle-class populations, there is also emerging literature to describe students within private elite (day and boarding) educational settings (Angod, 2014; Chase, 2008; Gaztambide-Fernández, 2009a). One of the ways gender dynamics have been studied is by paying special attention to the school environment, and students’ gender, racial and socioeconomic identifications, through a feminist post-structural lens illustrating how they “do” gender within an intersectionality of race and class performances (Bettie, 2003). While my study does not offer an intersectional analysis, for reasons explained in the methodology chapter, feminist post-structuralism has been significant for identifying the tethers of normative masculinities and femininities on subjectivities and the implications they pose for peer relationships.

This chapter aims to illustrate what it means to be a “girl” and what it means to be a “boy” at Oak Lane Academy through the lived experiences of Grade 7 and 8 students. It is critical to lay this foundation in order to convey how understanding what it means to be a girl and a boy directly influences the ways gender-based violence manifests in schools. Yet, this is not to be mistaken for a simplification of gender based on binary notions, biology, or inherent understandings of girl and boy. Rather, I lean on gender as a concept to tell a
broader story of Oak Lane Academy students and “how they understand themselves and how they are perceived by others” (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2009a, p. 161). In Rubén Gaztambide-Fernández’ 2009 book, The Best of the Best, he explains that by viewing gender (and race and class) as socially constructed, rather than a fixed identity of any given person (i.e., their essential selves), we can learn about students based on their “access to the range of meanings available in any given space” (p. 161). In other words, how students identify with, and make meaning of their experiences in a particular place is relative to the ways they identify with their gender (and race and class), and how that aspect of themselves is constructed in that particular space. The (purportedly) meritocratic Oak Lane Academy environment provided specific symbolic materials and opportunities for students, while also placing conditions on their experiences. This allowed for all students to construct gendered identifications within the school in various ways and in particular relationships to the binary categories “male” and “female,” with different results within a context construed as elite. Essentially their gendered performances did allow them to be different from each other, but the more normative their performances of femininity and masculinity, the more likely for gender-based violence to manifest and prevail.

It is my intention to weave evidence of performed femininities and masculinities throughout this chapter to demonstrate the complex ways gender tells a compelling story about the students who walk the halls of Oak Lane Academy. I will illustrate how gender is hierarchical within and across the gender divide and that girls and boys were not granted the same privileges at the school despite the illusion of gender equity and equal distribution of gender in the classrooms. I will also explain how normative gender discourses were produced and reinforced, through implicit expectations placed on girls and boys to think, feel, and
behave in particular ways in this environment, which set the conditions for gender-based violence. Furthermore, these expectations determined the outcome for those who resisted or chose to renegotiate the terms of these norms. In short, in this chapter I show how masculinity and femininity are construed in the particular space of this elite private school and how it sheds light on the dynamics that produce school-related gender-based violence.

Through the evidence presented here, which is my interpretation of what it means to be a girl or boy at Oak Lane Academy, I will describe in detail the social and gendered hierarchies that exist in the school by chronicling the social categories of “nerds,” “cool kids,” and “perverts.” This will illuminate the range of associations available to boys, while reflecting the limitations this placed on girls. This will also help articulate the ease with which the boys experienced school life, which was evident in the amount of space they consumed physically, intellectually, and socially at any given time. The assumed “boys being boys” behaviour essentially diminished the opportunity for girls to have similar school experiences, perpetuating girls to be more constrained in their manner, to work harder and/or be perfect.

Ultimately, I want to clarify that the lessons the students learned about what it means to be a girl and what it means to be a boy at Oak Lane Academy are precisely what created the conditions for gender-based violence to exist and persist. Lastly, I intend to foreshadow later chapters in this thesis related to love and relationships, and the games students’ play with each other, as part of their social and relational experiences, in order to make deeper connections to gender-based school violence.
The Guise of Gender Equity

Before delving into the details of this chapter, it is important to revisit gender equity and gender balanced classrooms as a significant aspect of the operations and image of Oak Lane Academy. Although already described in earlier chapters, I would like to highlight a few points that will assist me in telling the story about what it means to be a girl and a boy in this school. To begin, as an elite private school, Oak Lane Academy is committed to creating an equitable environment where students feel welcome, included, and safe, regardless of their gender identity, perceived identity, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, or racial identity. Furthermore, the school’s objective is to maintain gender equity through their policies, programs, and curriculum, which includes accepting an equal number of girls and boys each year to establish gender-balanced classrooms. The expectation is that girls and boys will do equally well academically and socially because of this structural decision, while also creating a balance of power between genders.

Despite these efforts towards equity, enrolment is based on gender as a binary where students are required to self-identify as either a girl or boy to balance the gender ratio. In other words, being a girl or a boy matters as far as numbers are concerned, situating gender as a consistent and constant force in the school. Although there is a history of a few students over the years pushing the gender binary, as they questioned their gender identity and/or transitioned from one gender to the other, most do not. Instead, they preserve the status quo. The students learn through the process of integrating into the school that there is a particular way to be a girl and a particular way to be a boy, which does not reflect equitable opportunities or experiences for everyone. While this is not the intention of the school per se,
clearly there are implicit ways that gender is socially constructed, embodied, and internalized by students in this space that cannot be quelled by gender equity policies or programs.

Interestingly, I noted the ways students would imply that patriarchy, found in all other areas of life, was not at play in their school because Oak Lane Academy opted for an equal ratio of boys to girls. The sheer numbers alone, of fifty-fifty girls to boys, implied to students that everyone was essentially the same. While they did not say that in those exact words, many students believed that inequality between men and women occurred before feminism or only existed in countries where girls were denied education or where babies were being aborted for being female. Certainly the young students I observed and interviewed had yet to fully realize the patriarchal underbelly that resided in their school, despite the fact that they were engaging with it on a daily basis.

Where there is patriarchy, there is gender inequality, which can be attributed to the formation of gender hierarchies at Oak Lane Academy. Therefore, it should come as little surprise that girls and boys were not granted the same privileges despite efforts by the school towards a different end. Furthermore, the presence of patriarchy established conditions for a particular kind of gender-based violence to thrive at Oak Lane Academy, even though it was not necessarily recognized as such. While gender-based violence exists everywhere, even in a place where students are identified as smart, intelligent, rational, and where gender equity is deemed important, it begins quietly in unseen places. Just as gender is constructed in particular ways, so is violence, which emerges from the lessons girls and boys learn about who they are and their value in the world. Therefore, clarifying what it means to be a girl and what it means to be boy at Oak Lane Academy sets the stage for understanding gender-based school violence.
The “Ideal” Girl and Boy of Oak Lane Academy

To fully articulate what it means to be a “girl” and what it means to be a “boy” at Oak Lane Academy, I will begin by sharing the stories of two students that I came to know intimately over the course of my study. You will become acquainted with Quinn Ma, a Grade 7 female student, and David Funar, a Grade 8 male student. My aim is to highlight the contrasting narratives that describe their subject positions in the school, particularly to reinforce the notion that boys are granted certain privileges over girls, such as taking up the most school space and feeling at ease in their environment. This will allow me to later lead into an analysis of the social and gender hierarchies at Oak Lane Academy by showing evidence of boys taking for granted their positions of power and entitlement, regardless of their popularity status or labels, while simultaneously revealing social and gender constraints experienced by the girls.

Although there is never one girl or one boy who is able to fully represent the gendered ideal belonging to a particular group or place, Quinn and David embodied subjectivities valued by students and staff at Oak Lane Academy in what was imagined as ideal. By selecting Quinn and David, I considered accounts provided by students in interviews that highlighted the importance of being smart, doing well in school academically, being involved in a number of extra-curricular activities inside and outside of the school, having a large circle of friends, being thought of as “nice” or “chill,” and maintaining a social life, to be a successful Oak Lane Academy student. Looking good also had value, where boys and girls were expected to appropriately perform femininity or masculinity through their expression of self: their physical appearance, how they dressed, and the ways they wore their hair. Being able to manage all of these various components of school life with approval from
others (peers, parents, and school faculty) was critical for achieving ideal status. In other words, Quinn and David were able to access particular discourses through various daily social interactions that positioned them as ideal Oak Lane Academy students. They learned about themselves and their social setting through discursive practices that reinforced their belonging and status, which in turn was critical for how they behaved to maintain the ideal (Barrett, 2005).

As illustrated in Chapter Three (theoretical framework), the ideal comes from Weber’s (1987) work on “ideal types.” This does not mean ideal in the sense of being perfect or the best of a person (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2009a). Rather, ideal represents various aspects of Oak Lane Academy students that inform a particular image of the cultural narratives and storylines of the school. Although Quinn and David looked racially different, as it is likely assumed by their last names, their differences in phenotype and physical appearance did not detract from the image of the ideal Oak Lane Academy student. As the school was exceptional at selling a promise to students for a life of privilege when choosing elite education, this required that students enact whiteness (regardless of their biology) as a mark of success that privilege provides. In fact, Quinn and David successfully embodied whiteness as an aspect of their performance of smartness, which reinforced their position as ideal students that others would want to emulate. Therefore, I have chosen to present Quinn and David as narratives to support the concept of the ideal, based on how I came to know them over the course of five months. Rather than just share the qualities that made these two students illustrative “cases,” I wanted to show all sides of their persona, as it was revealed to me in individual interviews, focus groups, and classroom observations.
Quinn Ma: A Narrative of Contradictions

One of the most fascinating participants in my study was Quinn, a highly social and talkative, petite Grade 7 student with silky long ink-black hair, who was never without her cell phone in order to text or take selfies. During interviews she answered all of my questions in great detail, she stayed longer in the interview room than any other participant, and seemed impressed by my study. At our first meeting together, I asked Quinn if she had any questions before we started. She did not but commented that she thought the research project I was doing was “a cool thing.” Quinn said, “I find it quite interesting to observe people’s behaviours and, like, see how people act around each other. I think that’s quite cool . . . it’s kind of like this little research show.” She was the only participant to comment on the particulars of the study or her appreciation of what I was doing. At the time, her words did not reveal any profound understandings of who she was, but I would be reminded of them many times over as I got to know her more intimately. Quinn was an exceptional performer of etiquette and generosity when given the right location and circumstance. Her performance of femininity positioned her as a “nice” respectful girl who knew the “right” things to say and when.

Quinn was always observing those around her as part of her evolving subjectivity. I would catch her studying a group of friends engaged in a private conversation and wait to see what performance of hers would follow. Sometimes she would turn back to her work and let them be; on other occasions she would move into their space to be included with a hug or a touch. There were other moments when Quinn was the centre of attention and she would casually look at those around her to see who was noticing. Quinn also found subtle ways to flirt with boys by intentionally walking in front of their desks on her way across the room or
pretending to ignore their advances while clearly noticing their attempts. Through her keen observations of others, Quinn was able to maneuver with calculated precision within friendship groups and position herself at the top end of the classroom social and gender hierarchies. Although this did not always work to her benefit—sometimes her hugs were ignored or she was not included in trips to buy bubble tea at lunch—she would do whatever it took to be seen in a particular way by others. The discourses available to Quinn often allowed her positioning at the centre of social groups, but not always if others positioned her as an outsider. During our last interview together I asked Quinn if she had learned anything by participating in the study. She replied, “I haven’t learned that much, but I feel I’ve observed more . . . I like to observe things a lot, like, to look at different people’s behaviour, see how to act around people, see what things reflect on each other.” Quinn’s gendered performance revealed she was a bit of a chameleon. She was constantly navigating social situations and gauging how to behave.

Appearances were very important to Quinn, which was evident in many of her interview statements. My favourite question to ask participants, when I was first getting to know them, was how their best friend would describe them. Quinn said she and her friends had described each other before, so she had a ready answer. She was “really well-rounded,” “caring,” “smart,” “hard-working,” and “a teacher’s pet.” She said her friends often asked how she was able to get all of the teachers to love her. I figured it had something to do with her ability to speak confidently with adults, consistently abide by classroom rules, and perform in a respectful and mannerly way. Quinn shared that it was because she was social. She said she loved to socialize regardless of who it was with (teachers, students) and if a friend was hurt she would do everything to help them. “Not trying to boast or say I’m really
good or anything, but my natural behaviour, if somebody gets put down, like there’s a bully, I would stand up immediately, no hesitation.” Yet Quinn was quick to offset these positive comments by stating,

I have mistakes too…but my friends, every time I try talking and saying oh I’m not that great at music or anything, but they always try to counteract me and say I am really good at it, so yah, I guess those are the things my friends would describe me as.

I noticed that Quinn struggled with contradictions that emerged from discourses she was accessing. For example, she identified with discourses of being elite and smart, which contradicted with those of being humble and unpretentious. It was a challenge for her to speak highly of herself in one breath without shifting her subject position to one of deference so as to not attract too much attention or criticism.

I asked Quinn if there would be differences in how her friends described her and how she saw herself. “I think there would be some differences, definitely. I don’t view myself as the perfect person.” Quinn adamantly professed she was not perfect and made mistakes, which was stated numerous times over the course of her first twenty-minute interview. When I asked her, during our second interview, how I could describe her in my dissertation she said, “I’m not trying to boast or anything, but I’m like, I’m a huge perfectionist.” After four minutes of describing all the ways she worked hard, slept little, was involved in music, sports, and extra-curricular activities, and even referred to herself as a procrastinator as she took what little time she had for herself to text a friend or scroll Facebook, she finished with, “So I guess I would describe myself as a really tough perfectionist who’s pretty hard on herself.” I was hoping Quinn might enlighten me on other aspects of her life that pointed towards race or class distinctions but she was mostly focused on discussing her tug-of-war
with perfectionism. Many of Quinn’s lived experiences were contradictory as she negotiated, resisted, and revised her positioning within discourses. It is also important to note that it was likely impossible for Quinn to discuss race or class when her own secured association with whiteness required silence and her class status was taken for granted in the school space.

It was important for Quinn to be liked. She mentioned that no one likes to be excluded and it was important to know how you were being viewed as a friend. I also got the sense in our interviews that she wanted me to like her, too, perhaps as much as the adults and peers in her life did. She was bubbly and positive, while also careful about how she presented herself and her responses. By constantly censoring her answers with “I’m not saying I’m perfect or anything,” or “I’m not trying to be boastful,” I assumed Quinn was attempting to be humble. She was also highly aware that I would be writing about her. When we were outside of the interview space, Quinn often avoided me. In the hallways she would say hello, but if I sat close to her in the classroom she would typically get up and move to another place in the room where I could not overhear her conversations. I noticed on several occasions that if she was not paying attention in class or doing something a teacher might not approve of, she would look around to see if I had noticed. Quinn mentioned that in her previous school, students called her “smartical” and “smarty pants,” whereas at Oak Lane Academy she was labeled the “perfect girl” because she excelled at every single subject. I was not sure what made her more uncomfortable, being seen as perfect or having flaws.

I asked all of the participants to give me one word they felt would describe the essence of who they were, if someone were to meet them for the first time. Quinn thought for a moment and asked if she could use two words, which I agreed to. She declared herself, “imperfectly perfect,” and elaborately justified her reasoning behind the word choices,
I like to use those two words a lot because, like, if even you’re just intelligent or whatever, like everybody’s well rounded, like overall, right? So you can’t just say, oh I’m just intelligent, smart, whatever, nice, kind. So I would say imperfectly perfect, because it describes how you are imperfectly, as in like, everyone makes mistakes, but then perfect also as in you’re yourself, you’re unique whether you major in math, chemistry, science, law, you’re still yourself. So that’s what makes a person perfect. But then you’re also imperfectly perfect because well, no one’s really perfect. So you make [sic], always, ‘cause everyone’s, people always make mistakes too, we make mistakes, so I would describe myself as imperfectly perfect.

David Funar: A Tale of Contentment

David, a self-identified male with floppy short brown hair, of average height, was the only Grade 8 boy who agreed to be a participant for my study (one out of six males in total between the two grades). However, he offered a great deal of insight into life at Oak Lane Academy, particularly as he had attended the school for close to two years, unlike the younger Grade 7 male participants. As well, David was considered popular, well liked, and had a relaxed and easy-going manner, which gave him access to many different groups of people in his grade and in the school as a whole. He was also very forthcoming in our interviews and felt comfortable enough to share a variety of topics, including dating and how the culture of pornography influenced his male peers, which I elaborate on in Chapter Six. David had a confidence and maturity that belied most thirteen-year-old boys I knew, including my own son and his friends who were also in Grade 8 at the time. The discourses available to David allowed him to position himself easily within many social groups, while maintaining a sense of assuredness and ease.
The first question I asked David during our initial interview was, “If your best friend were to describe you, what do you think he or she would say about you?” David thought for a moment and replied, “Depends who you ask. It’s really hard. I don’t exactly have a best friend. I’ve a large group of friends.” I said he could answer the question based on the friends he engaged with and, if it were different with different people, he could explain that and why. David sat perplexed for a moment and told me I had asked him a difficult question. I found it interesting that the question was a challenge to answer considering his numerous relationships, but I also surmised that he might never have considered the opinions of others on his subjectivity. He then commented,

I guess most of them would describe me as spontaneous ‘cause, like, we ended up walking around, and ending [sic] up in very old buildings. Nothing in particular, just doing really weird things. It was my idea to do such, two days ago. Um, I guess, humorous. Almost, like, if I’m comfortable around people I like to make jokes. It’s difficult [answering the question].

My first encounter with David, before our interviews and focus groups together, was in the morning Grade 8 English class. David was hard to miss, as he was often late for school arriving by subway. Subway delays were very common in the city core where Oak Lane Academy was located. David was not the only subway commuter in the class, but he was late more than many other students. He was never apologetic arriving late, but he was never disruptive entering the room either (unlike some boys), and his lateness did not seem to be a reflection on his feelings of school. When I asked David what he loved most about school he replied, “I love the community. I love the people. I love the school system. It’s a lot of work, but I really enjoy it here.”
Like the majority of Oak Lane Academy students, David was successful academically. However, one reason he admitted to doing well in school was that he had stopped playing video games. He said, “Since school started I just stopped, while everyone else just continued.” David confessed that he really needed to do well, as he did absolutely nothing in his first term of Grade 8 and got really bad marks. He remarked that video games had been a major distraction and were highly addictive. In fact, David admitted to logging over 700 hours in just a couple of months on his account for a shooting game. He said, “I didn’t have much of a life.” However, once David stopped playing he was able to study more, significantly improve his marks, and spend more time with his family eating dinner and watching movies. I wondered if David would play video games again in the summer months and he answered, “I don’t miss them. I feel I can live without them.” David enjoyed playing sports like lacrosse and rugby instead. David’s performance of masculinity shifted from an addicted “gamer” with poor academic achievement to a family-oriented brother and son who excelled in school. Although I never found out, I was curious about the transformation that took place in under a year. I can only imagine he was subjected to particular discourses which helped him construct new subject positions that supported his blossoming popular elite status.

Relationships were important to David, which was likely why he had so many friends. He was grateful to be out of Grade 7 where he had to stay in one class for the entire year with the same group of kids whom he said were not, “exactly my kind of people.” David claimed most of his friends were outgoing and his Grade 7 classmates were “very reserved to their studies and very inwards.” I wondered if he had kept friends with any of them in Grade 8 to which he replied, “Yah. I like to keep good relations with everyone. It’s just the people
that I’m very close friends with tend to have those qualities [outgoing].” Many of the friends David considered “close” were people he knew of in Grade 7, but it was not until Grade 8, when he was able to move between classes on his own time schedule, that David was able to meet more like-minded people and create tighter bonds. However, regardless of the type of people David preferred to spend his time with (aside from liking those who were “outgoing” little else was said about them), it was also important to him to be friends with everyone. David performed affability well as a way to maintain his social positioning with many different groups of people in the school. Through a multiplicity of social interactions and discursive practices, David’s subjectivity was shaped in a way that defined him as a reliable friend.

David admitted that friendships could be complicated at times, and there was a lot of drama in his grade. Yet, he seemed to take it all in stride. I wondered if anything really bothered David or if he just let everything roll off of him as a performance of ease. When I asked if he found having friends challenging he responded, “Not necessarily.” He said it was important to know how to “handle, like, situations that do come up because, rumours, you’re never going to stop rumours, they’re always going to happen, it’s just knowing how to handle them . . . that’s probably the most difficult part.” When I asked what he thought of the boys and girls in his grade he said they were cool and a “generally chill grade.” When I asked what he thought was the biggest problem kids had to deal with at his age he said, “I don’t want to sound cliché or anything, but peer pressure is a big part of it. Like doing things they wouldn’t normally do to fit in.” I asked if he felt he fit in and he replied, “I feel like I fit in quite well.” However, when I asked if he ever had to act in a certain way, or change who he was to fit a situation, he said, “Most of the times I feel like I’m myself . . . but, like, I have,
let’s call it a mask, which I wear. My mask is pretty much myself and not myself . . . I like
the mask, the mask is good.” So despite David feeling like he fit into his environment, and
was comfortable with his friends and being himself, he was also aware that his mask was
required to maintain his popular, extroverted, and outgoing school self. I was reminded of the
masks worn at a masquerade ball that allowed the wearer to hide their identity (gender and
race) so they could perform without constraint. In a sense all of the students wore masks so
that others could only see what they wanted them to see. This further points to the unspoken
aspects of race in the space.

For a thirteen-year-old, David was more comfortable talking with me than I had
expected and there was a moment in our interview that solidified this. In fact, it made me feel
like I was accepted into the “in” crowd. These moments of connection affirmed my
positioning as a trusted source. I said, “If somebody were to meet you for the first time and
you were able to give them one word to say, this is who I am, which kind of encapsulates the
essence of David, what would it be?” He responded, “I don’t like David, I prefer Dave.” He
was respectful, yet to the point.

TS: Oh Dave, I’m sorry.

Dave: David is just what my teachers call me.

TS: Thank you for letting me know. I didn’t know that.

Dave: It would be too weird for my teachers to call me Dave.

TS: Too casual?

Dave: No, not too casual. It’s just a name reserved for like . . . people who know
more of who I am.

TS: So I have permission to call you Dave.

Dave: You can call me Dave.
Dave’s answer to my question, one word he would describe himself as, was “fun.” He said it was vague enough that it could have a variety of meanings, but was also tied in with “fun-ness,” which has a good feeling. When I asked him if he had a favourite quote or saying he wanted to be remembered by, he offered one by Will Rogers, “Everything is funny as long as it happens to somebody else.”

**Summary**

Although Quinn and David were both considered smart, popular, and well-liked by many of their peers and adults, as junior students in the school they had already begun to internalize significantly contrasting messages about what it meant to be a girl and a boy at Oak Lane Academy. Gender and elite discourses available to them were different, which resulted in rather opposing subjectivities. David felt free to roam the city streets at lunchtime with friends to explore old buildings and do spontaneous things, he was not apologetic for being late for school in the mornings, he did not find friendships to be overly challenging, he felt he fit in well with his peer group, and he was comfortable talking about his sexuality. David liked to do well in school, but he also liked to have fun. He was at ease in his ability to balance schoolwork and a social life, especially after freeing himself from obsessively playing video games during all of his spare time. “Doing boy” as David did, allowed him a wide berth in which to socialize almost effortlessly with many people in many different situations.

Quinn, on the other hand, was constantly working every angle of her life like a director presiding over performers in a play. Although, I would hasten to say, she was one of the star performers. She was constantly observing those around her to make her next move by saying the right thing or doing what was expected of her. She managed her school
relationships by acting as the best student and best friend, as she wanted to be liked and to be included by everyone. She felt guilty for procrastinating on her homework after a long day at school and spent hours getting her assignments just right, even if it took her past midnight to complete them. Yet, Quinn was constantly pointing out how she made mistakes and was not perfect, insisting she was not being boastful when answering my questions with any kind of self-positivity. Her performance of “girl” was in constant flux between being perfect and flawed.

I remember thinking while listening to David speak that he was very fortunate to feel so relaxed and at ease in his life. At least his performance of being content and relaxed was believable. Whereas, with Quinn, my instincts as a mother stepped in and I was immediately worried about her well-being and the toll perfectionism would have on her as the years progressed. It was in these moments that my subject position shifted from researcher to caring parent (feeling reassured about David and concerned for Quinn), as I performed those two roles on a daily basis in my life. I have often wondered how Quinn has fared since I last saw her and to what degree the pressure for her to excel has increased. Recently, I was in the school paying a visit and I saw David laughing with a group of friends in the hallway. He looked as carefree and happy as I remembered him from the time of my study. I also wonder how Quinn and David might be perceived differently had I known more about their ethno-racial and class identifications as part of an intersectional analysis. Regardless, it is my hope that they were well described based on what they did reveal to me and how I came to know them as individuals.
Establishing the Social and Gender Hierarchy

Adolescents are constantly defining who they are, and negotiating how they fit into their world, with many actively reinventing themselves to fit in with the ideal representation of their school setting and/or peer group (Lesko, 2012; Milner, 2004). As they become more aware of their individuality, they tend to question everything and everyone from their parents and teachers, to knowledge and truths, and aspects of their identities (e.g., gender, class, race) (Milner, 2004). Yet at the same time they are easily influenced by images and ideas that affirm gender discourses as truths that normalize violent sexualized and romantic heteronormative relationships, and enforce hegemonic femininity and masculinity, which impacts how they feel about themselves and others (Chase, 2008; Renold, 2005). The students of Oak Lane Academy were not immune to these dominant ideologies as they were constantly exhibiting gendered behaviour that exposed the culture of their environment and demonstrated their interpretations of the ideal student.

Despite the utopian version that the Grade 7 students painted of Oak Lane Academy (illustrated in earlier chapters), where every student could find an extra-curricular activity to join, a social group to fit into, and were accepted without judgement for being weird, different, or smart, gender and social hierarchies played a primary role in the operations of the school that portrayed a less than blissful picture. This is not surprising as hierarchies are systems of status that are controlled by power. Milner (2004) states, “Status is the sum of the evaluations that are ‘located’ in the minds of other people with whom a person interacts. Status is inherently linked to the process of the social construction of social meaning and evaluations” (p. 29). What I was not clear on at Oak Lane Academy was how race or class was implicated in these hierarchical systems of status that students were positioned in.
The Grade 7 students were only starting to become familiar with the hierarchical structure of their new school and were still coming to terms with its operations. What they were unaware of (including the Grade 8s) was that despite gender equity being staged by the school each year, in the acceptance of an equal number of boys to girls, equality fell short and patriarchy reigned superior. Not only did hierarchies exist within and across the gender binary, but also boys and girls were not granted the same privileges. There were specific ways to be boys and specific ways to be girls at Oak Lane Academy, with the boys and girls learning this differently. Conditions were created allowing certain performances of masculinity, which positioned boys over girls, to be acceptable. The remainder of this chapter is dedicated to illustrating these points.

**Dispelling Nerd Assumptions**

Renold (2005) describes hegemonic masculinity as “boys who actively construct their masculinities or sense of ‘boy-ness’ through what they consider to be culturally exalted forms of masculinity” (p. 67). Although this is common boy behaviour that has been recorded by social scientists for years (McCarry, 2010; Thorne, 1993), the ways boys produce and maintain embodied masculine ideals is unique to their cultural and social context. At Oak Lane Academy, boy was often synonymous with nerd. When I was introduced to the school, during one of my first morning visits, a senior faculty remarked that many of the male students had a reputation for being nerdy. Besides being hardworking and studious, she said it was not uncommon to see some of them sporting glasses and bowl cuts, wearing mismatched sweat shirts and flood pants, with little care for fashion. She mentioned that many of these students had experienced bullying in their previous schools, but were safe
to be themselves at Oak Lane Academy. They were not excluded or teased for being smart, scholarly, or lacking a sense of style.

Milner (2004) describes nerds as socially awkward, completely inept with clothing and personal style, and “openly preoccupied with academic success” (p. 41), who find themselves at the bottom of the social hierarchy. This sentiment is similar to Kinney (1993) who adds that nerds tend not to have a social life with dating or going to parties because of their commitment to their studies. Although this is true of some Oak Lane Academy students, nerds defined in educational literature have typically been observed in public school settings where there is a much wider range of gender and class performances due to a diverse student population. Whereas, at Oak Lane Academy, the students were all considered smart and at the school for the purpose of academic success. Therefore, nerd takes on new meaning in a school full of elite status “nerds.”

Peach Allen, a casually dressed and lightly freckled Grade 8 female student, with colourfully painted fingernails and long curly hair, said casually, “I think we’re all nerds here. A lot of people don’t admit that. I think it’s true.” Nerd labelling was a common occurrence in a place full of smart kids. However, when study participants (boys and girls) were asked to describe their Grade 7 and 8 female peers, nerd was only ever mentioned in relation to boys. The exception was Karen Chen who identified as a nerd (she liked to work hard and study) when I asked her how her best friend would describe her. Kendall (1999), in her analysis of nerds in popular culture, states that nerd is predominantly presented as male and “as not female” (p. 262). Despite the stereotypical feminization of nerds (small, weak, lack of sports ability, little to no sexual experience with girls/women, etc.), nerds remain masculinized because of their “intellect, rejection of sartorial display,” and “lack of
‘feminine’ social and relational skills” (Kendall, 1999, p. 264). The majority of nerd characters enacted in movies and television shows, or described in news articles or online forums, are male. Furthermore, when females are referred to as nerds, they are typically given gender specific terms such as the ‘“female nerd’ or ‘nerdette’” (Kendall, 1999, p. 262) to distinguish them as being feminine and different from men.\(^{59}\)

At Oak Lane Academy being male had everything to do with being smart, which allowed boys to embrace their nerd self rather than reject it, as they might have done in another context. They did not have the feeling of being different or a social outcast for being smart; rather, their intelligence was admired. Vlad Andrews, a self-professed nerd, stated:

We’re either nerds or geeks, which is the same thing, but a nicer way of saying. There’s a small, like, twenty percent that are athletes. Everyone has . . . ninety percent of everyone has had some parent or some type of person taught [sic] them something that they are not supposed to know at that age. My dad taught me advanced particle physics when I was four.

Yet, despite the purported nerd culture at Oak Lane Academy, many of the boys I observed clearly nurtured normative masculine discourses through the ways they interacted with each other and with girls, the ways they positioned themselves in the classroom, and the choice of language they used on a regular basis. I found it to be an interesting juxtaposition between

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\(^{59}\) For interest sake, I did a Google search using the words “nerd,” “female nerd,” and “nerdette,” to see how different the images might be. As I suspected, the majority of images for “nerd” were of relatively unattractive adult males wearing glasses, braces, suspenders, bow ties, and checked shirts with many sitting in front of computers. The “female nerd” search resulted in images of attractive adult women dressed to look like prepubescent girls with pigtails, braids, and tartan mini-skirts. Surprisingly, the “nerdette” images were of skinny, large breasted women, in various states of undress (many of whom were clothed in skimpy superhero bras and underwear). Clearly, male and female “nerds” are not represented equally in popular culture with males most accurately mirroring nerd descriptions found in educational literature.
being a nerd and being hyper-masculine, but at Oak Lane Academy these two elements of “doing boy” were entwined and accepted, albeit, in complex and contradictory ways.

Kendall (1999) claims that the perception of nerd culture started to change dramatically in the 1980’s with the expansion of computer use, to embrace (male) nerds within a framework of hegemonic masculinity. Rather than nerdy males being thought of as oddities in a culture consumed by social conformity, there was a growing respect for their intelligence. As computers became more mainstream and accessible to the average person, it particularly brought out the “nerd” in many men. Therefore, the notion of the smart male nerd who is technologically savvy put him in a new and enviable position of being hireable and having the potential to accrue wealth, a highly masculinized position of economic power. Kendall (1999) states, “The rehabilitated aspects of the nerd primarily include computer use, but also those aspects of nerdy which intersect or comfortably cohabit with the perceived habits and proclivities of white middle-class managerial men in corporate jobs” (p. 265).60

From the perspective of masculinity, this situates men in positions of privilege over the subordination of women, of which the latter are largely invisible within nerd circles. It was this kind of nerd culture that I came to know and understand at Oak Lane Academy.

Consequently, being a smart male/nerd at Oak Lane Academy was in part about embodying a particular masculinity that positioned boys as superior and entitled in a co-educational space. This was especially prevalent with the Grade 8 boys. I noticed on several occasions during my in-class observations that male students would monopolize dialogue or

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60 What is interesting about this quote is how nerds are described as white and middle class, which in some ways does not speak specifically to the students of Oak Lane Academy. Many students would not be assumed white based on their physical appearance. This quote is referring to images of stereotypical looking white males seen in movies and memes. On the other hand, it is a perfectly appropriate quote in that students performed whiteness as part of their elite subjectivity. The idea of a managerial position in a corporate job equates with ideas of privilege, wealth, and success.
exhaustively contest a point on a topic, leaving little room for their female peers to speak. Daniel Evans, the Grade 8 English teacher, commented to certain boys that they were very good at getting the class off topic, to which they would smile in response. This was clearly evident on May 16, 2013, during an English lesson on *Twelfth Night*, when the students were asked to consider if the character Duke Orsino was in an appropriate or inappropriate courtship with the character Olivia. The activity quickly shifted to a conversation about sexual assault and rape, which was instigated by a small group of boys. They questioned the validity of sexual violence if touch was not involved and argued that it was not a man’s responsibility to make sure a woman was okay in a sexual relationship. They asserted that rape was a “gender bias” and “sexist” word that only protected women’s rights (not men’s), and stated that women’s biology (monthly periods) made women more complicated emotionally, which men should not have to comply with, among other points of contention.

Although some of the girls in the class shared their opinion on the topic, for the most part the small group of boys dominated the conversation in a debate with Daniel, while the rest were silenced, until the class ended. As the class was being dismissed, one of the boys said, “This is fun!” while another boy remained after class to debate gender equality with Daniel. The boy missed approximately forty-minutes of his following class while Daniel engaged the argument in the hallway, both trying to convince each other of their position. Daniel clearly stood for gender equality and the safety of women while the boy battled with his own sense of entitlement as an intellectual male who relentlessly argued he was right (I was invited to be in the hallway and witness this conversation).

There were also many moments in class where comments shared by boys were done at the expense of girls, by interrupting them while talking, laughing at inappropriate moments
that made the girls uncomfortable, and offering sexist remarks or jokes. During the rape
debate, Daniel asked a male student to read a “No Means No” poster on the classroom wall.
Considering current statistics that claim approximately one in four women will experience
sexual violence at some point in their lives (SexAssault.ca, 2014), this poster was
predominantly meant for men to grasp. While the boy read the poster in an exaggerated
voice, his friends snickered and made sideline comments that others in the class laughed at.
In another observation, a Grade 8 male student joked, “Men need protection. The Y
chromosome is dying.” I also observed and overheard boys in the Grade 7 class asking girls
about their sexual experiences, the size of their bra, and commented on the weakness of girls
compared to boys.

During one drama class in the spring, I also witnessed the chastising of a girl for
wearing shorts that were too short. The female student was working on a skit with three other
boys. They were sitting, while she was standing. They asked her to turn full circle so together
they could assess the length of her shorts, while commenting to each other about what they
thought. In exasperation she said, “They are not that short!” However, the boys felt perfectly
justified to police the bodies and sexuality of the girls. Boys also policed one another by
shutting down those who did not seem to offer intelligible thoughts and they were not afraid
to call someone out in class if they felt they were right and the other person was wrong.
Being smart was a vehicle for competitive masculine posturing. For many boys, behaviour in
the classroom was about performing in full male bravado that exuded hegemonic masculine
discourses. Male ‘smartness’ was readily used as a way for boys to position themselves
hierarchically in the classroom and in their relationships.
With that in mind, being smart and studious was not necessarily an accurate indicator of being identified as a nerd or geek, as there was a clear male hierarchy in effect that positioned boys in a pecking order. All of the students at Oak Lane Academy were there because they had proven themselves to be “smart.” Maintaining their academic standing was a priority, and an expectation of parents and the school. In one aspect, nerd was a criterion of smartness, and yet the difference between those who embodied the nerd or geek label, and those who did not, had more to do with the range by which they performed normative masculinity. In other words, the difference between those who were labelled an Oak Lane Academy nerd or geek, and those who were not, went beyond academics and smartness, to other aspects of school life, such as being involved in intramural athletics, trying out for sports teams, and balancing school work with socializing. Having friends was not the same as socializing. Rather, socializing included attending parties, dating, playing games of “truth or dare” over the lunch break, or hanging out in large groups in the hallways before or after class. That kind of social interaction was typical of students categorized as jocks, cool kids, and perverts, which also defined Oak Lane Academy boys and were associated with a particular masculinity.

Vlad made clear distinctions between the boys who were considered typical nerds and those who were not, “There are two types for boys. There’s the heavy jock, like I don’t care about anything but sports. And there’s the heavy nerd that doesn’t care about anything but video games. So, there’s two far ends with no in-between.” Vlad, who liked to compare awkward nerds to jocks, deemed athletics a critical point for acquiring social status. As stated earlier, one reason Vlad felt he did not fit into his previous school was because of his inability athletically, compared to that of his peers.
**TS:** If you were to define kind of cool, based on the people you sort of thought fit, how would you define it?

**Vlad:** Kind of like an all-rounder. Like, a) you got in here, and b) you’re actually good at sports. So that’s one of the main things.

**TS:** And would you say being social in a certain way?

**Vlad:** Yes, having a social life. Something I’ve never had (quiet laughter).

Although Vlad felt that all of the students at Oak Lane Academy were either nerds or geeks because they were smart and had been privy to knowledge far beyond their years at a young age, he further distinguished “nerds” into two groups: the heavy video game addicted nerd and the heavy sports addicted jock. The smart male who was into sports was cool because he actually had a social life rather than the boy who spent the majority of his time playing video games. It is worth remembering that David was highly addicted to video games in the first term of Grade 8, his marks suffered (despite being smart), as did his social time with family and friends. Once David stopped playing video games, his marks improved significantly and he created more time in his life for sports and socializing. Therefore, I imagine that Vlad would not consider David the same kind of nerd that he was. It is possible that David would not think of himself as a nerd at all.

Other students provided further clarification on nerds versus ‘other’ boys in the school so that I could better understand the male hierarchy. In an interview with Cora Lin, I inquired how she would define the boys in her grade. Cora was a talkative Grade 8 student who immigrated to Canada from China at the age of three and a half, who said her best friend would describe her as really “hyper,” “friendly,” “upbeat,” “happy,” and that she said “sorry”
too often. Dressed in a casual hoodie and sweatpants, with her long dark hair cascading straight down her back, she replied,

There’s like the boys and then there’s like the maybe, more nerdier boys. And so the more nerdier type, they like studying a lot. You mainly just see them studying. They, like, wear more formal stuff and then, but most of them are just, like, wear casual pants, jeans and things.

Mike Thomas, a slightly chubby Grade 7 student, with short, wavy, sandy brown hair, who often wore a blue and white t-shirt with the name and logo of a bank on its backside, also referred to nerds when talking about boys. Mike had a riotous sense of humour, and an affinity for politics and the economy, hence the self-chosen pseudonym (aka ‘Mike Duffy’). He said his friends would describe him as “a bit too obsessed with money” but an overall good guy.

Some boys like the more conventional things, let’s say, like sports and the traditional stuff. Some people like other things, and I’m going to use the word nerdy, just because I can’t think of anything better, and then there’s the grey area. So I think there’s people from both ends, but then they mix in the grey area.

Even though Vlad willingly referred to himself as a nerd, I could not help feel that a level of deprecation underpinned his sense of self. Most descriptions of nerds were not favourable and he had experienced bullying and exclusion at his previous school because of it. Vlad also demonstrated in a visual art class that he was interested in improving his social status. He was fooling around with Mike who pretended to read his fortune. Mike said to Vlad, “Your social status will stay the same,” to which Vlad exclaimed with disappointment, “Awwww!” Although some boys and girls (such as Peach and Karen) might have loosely considered themselves nerdy, because they were smart, hardworking, and did not measure up
to stereotypical gender discourses experienced in public schools, there were several other ways students preferred to categorize themselves and their peers. Despite nerd being a general term used to describe everyone, in actuality it only applied to a very specific group of boys.

**Summary**

Even though my first introduction to Oak Lane Academy by the school administration was premised on male students being nerds, it quickly became evident that being a nerd was only one of many ways of being a boy. Despite many of the boys arriving at Oak Lane Academy in Grade 7 carrying the nerd label with them from public school, this identity started to shift as they found their place on the social hierarchy at their new school among an entire population of smart “nerds.” Some students were able to shed aspects of their nerd status and move up in social status while others remained the same. Milner (2004) states, “If there is a ‘top,’ there is also a ‘bottom’” (p. 41) and nestled on the bottom rung of the social hierarchy is where you will consistently find the nerds. According to the students I interviewed, the boys who typically “fit” nerd status studied a lot, did not participate in “conventional” or “traditional” boy activities like sports, did not have a social life, stayed home playing video games, and dressed in clothing that, in its casualness, seemed formal. Yet, these nerds also performed a particular type of masculinity (Connell, 2005) that clearly distinguished them from girls and an embodied femininity. Therefore, the girls at Oak Lane Academy were not nerds.

While any student at Oak Lane Academy could *claim* to be a “nerd,” as I have shown, not all nerds were perceived equally. Being smart was only one aspect of who they were that did not automatically equate nerd association. Race and class was implicated in descriptions
of nerdhood as white and middle class, which the students performed. I learned that the nerd
label had different meanings to different people, but what was consistent was how it was
contrasted with normative gender discourses that valued hegemonic masculinity for “doing”
boy correctly. The nerds were rarely the boys on the sports teams, going to parties, dating
girls, dispelling truths about rape, arguing with the teachers, lamenting about men’s rights,
judging girls’ bodies, clothing, and/or sexuality, or making jokes and comments at the
expense of their female peers. In fact, the more the boys performed masculinity that defied
femininity and embraced sexist and misogynistic ideals, the wider the distance between them
and nerd status. Sometimes I wondered if that was the point, for these boys to prove they
were different (not nerds) than what others perceived of them (or had perceived of them in
the past). As I indicated at the beginning of this chapter, the more the students performed
dominant masculinities, the more likely for gender-based violence to exist and persist.
Therefore, it was evident that gender-based violence did occur in a school full of smart
“nerdy” kids, but it rarely included the participation of self-professed male nerds such as
Vlad.

**The Cool Factor**

The most clearly defined categories on the social hierarchy are those on the top and
those on the bottom: the popular cool kids versus the unpopular nerds, which is reported in
countless studies of public schools (Eckert, 1989; Kinney, 1993; & Milner, 2004). I have
clearly articulated that only a specific group of Oak Lane Academy boys are nerds.
Therefore, the following question becomes, who is popular and what does it mean to have the
cool factor? Popularity, which goes hand-in-hand with cool, is a common way adolescents
determine their value socially, which requires fitting into idealized representations of
masculinity and femininity (Adler et al., 1992). According to current research on the subject, attractiveness, athleticism, and aggression, are classic characteristics that define the scope of popularity and those that have access to it (Borch, Hyde, & Cillessen, 2001; Merten, 1997; Thunfors & Cornell, 2008). Eckert (1989) states that it is common for students to be afflicted “by a need to be ‘popular’ in junior high—a need not simply to get to know people, but to confirm their emerging sense of identity through the recognition of others and a sense of place in the social structure (p. 86).” Milner (2004) backs up this claim by affirming that the majority of students model themselves after the popular kids despite not being part of the in-crowd.

At Oak Lane Academy both boys and girls described some of their peers as popular and cool when I asked participants in interviews to describe the students in their class or grade. Cool was both a male and female descriptor, class was assumed but race was completely absent from the conversation. Regardless of the specifics regarding student identities, the stakes of popularity were much higher for girls than for boys. Girls talked about popularity at great length in interviews, comparing themselves to each other and to boys. Unlike boys who fit into several categories on the social hierarchy described through masculinity (e.g., nerds, cool kids, and perverts), girls were predominantly limited to being popular or not popular. The latter referred to by Milner (2004) as “‘normals,’ ‘regulars,’ or ‘average students’” (p. 43). Additionally, it was clear from the outset that being cool and popular was a dynamic status that required particular gender and class performances to maintain. In other words, effort was required to adhere to standards of popularity, particularly for girls who wanted to fit it. I reinforced this point when I described Quinn and David at the beginning of this chapter. They were both popular and well-liked students, but David was
more at ease in his friendship groups compared to Quinn who was always observing people to know how to act appropriately.

I also learned early on in my study that Grade 7 and 8 students had different experiences of cool from one another due to the structuring of the classes by grade. As the Grade 7 students spent the entire year in one class together, how they perceived each other changed when they entered into Grade 8. Overall, the Grade 7 students expressed that they got along with each other, the word “cool” was thrown around a few times to describe others, but there was no mention of popularity in any conversation I had with them. The topic of popularity arose with the Grade 8 students who had the opportunity to meet many new friends during their second year at Oak Lane Academy. They had greater access to their entire grade of peers by rotating through various classes, which allowed for more comparisons to be made between individuals and groups of students. Where the Grade 7 and 8 students were similar in their descriptions of each other was in stating that boys were cool as in “chill” and easier to hang out with. When girls were referred to as cool it often translated into “cold.” More girls than boys had reputations for being mean, rude, or manipulative. I will elaborate on this further, later in this section.

Milner (2004) asserts, “To gain status in any group you have to conform to their norms” (p. 5). At Oak Lane Academy conformity within the popular crowd had everything to do with embodying a smart, but “cool” vibe. It was cool to be smart, but since everyone was smart, there had to be a way to distinguish smart nerd from smart cool. When Peach was in Grade 7 she developed a theory based on thinking through her understanding of nerd, which was in tension with her concept of “cool.”
So, I don’t understand how you’re supposed to be cool if you’re also a nerd. But I actually had a theory last year that a lot of people were kind of nerds at their old school and people maybe made fun of them, or something, so they kind of became extra, like, wanting to be cool. And so when we’re all here together, there’s people that they just still try and be above everyone else you know.

Peach had a difficult time coming to terms with smart kids being cool, as she rationalized that being smart equated being a nerd. Furthermore, she compared Oak Lane Academy to public schools where cool appeared to be very different. “Girls, the cool ones, wear make-up, look pretty, wear fancy clothes, and then the boys are strong and stuff. I don’t know if that’s actually how it works. It’s definitely not what I’ve seen here.” However, she did admit that there could be “different kinds of coolness factors,” from school to school.

My observations revealed that cool at Oak Lane Academy did differ from being cool in many other school spaces. The boys were quite casual in their attire and did not seem overly invested in the enhancement of their bodies through working out and gaining muscle. Girls did not wear make-up, and their clothing was for the most part understated, although popular girls and boys were trendier (clothing and hairstyles) than most other students in the school. However, Oak Lane Academy cool was predominantly about attitude (“being above everyone else”) and intellect with less attention put towards looks. I sensed that there was a fine line between being cool/trendy and smart versus cool/trendy and dumb. Several students talked about being too busy to manage school, sleep, and have a social life. This is not an uncommon statement in the life of an elite private school student (Chase, 2008; Gaztambide-Fernández, 2009a). Therefore, I sensed that if students appeared to spend a lot of time on their wardrobe or hairstyles, their performance of intelligence would be diminished. The
participants I spoke with often compared their private school experiences to their time spent in public school, or compared themselves to public school kids. It was suggested that kids at public school were not very smart and they spent a lot of time having a social life, maintaining their looks, and doing inappropriate things. Therefore, being cool at Oak Lane Academy required students to have a social life and look good to a degree, but not in a way that detracted from their image of being smart. This kind of “othering” allowed these students to position themselves in their school in a way that justified their gendered performances while maintaining their status as intelligent (Cairns, 2013). However, this expectation was less important for boys who could easily stand out with their attitude and intellect alone, whereas girls with too much attitude and smarts were considered bitchy and undesirable.

At Oak Lane Academy most of the students left behind public school where they were not cool, to being accepted into an elite private school because they were smart, which automatically raised the cool bar and their social class status. Therefore, the desire to disassociate from nerd/geek status to one of coolness was part and parcel of reinventing oneself and letting go of the past as illustrated in Chapter Two. However, because nerd status was still an association of being smart, individual students performed their gender and class with the specific intent to be “different” or not to be a nerd (i.e., attitude, clothing and hairstyle choices, socializing, etc.). In interviews, when I asked boys and girls to describe each other, nerd was often the marker upon which they made comparisons to themselves and their peers. The more the distinction (i.e., distance between the two) between nerd and self, the greater it implied their social status had improved while at Oak Lane Academy. Peach further explained the act of being “different” and how this correlated with the “new cool,”
Well a lot of people try and be the centre of attention all the time . . . I guess a lot of people try and be funny and try and be different . . . I notice a lot of times people try and be different is the new cool, but in order to be cool in using the word that kids today, kids use it, it’s kind of the same. So you have to be different, but in being different you’re the same because everyone is trying to be different. I’ve seen a lot of people describe themselves as one personality trait. You know, they’re the same as everybody else in every other way then they take one thing and they’re like, yah, I’m different.

Peach’s explanations about being “different” and the “new cool” prompted me to think about the myriad of ways Oak Lane Academy students navigated their environment and the social hierarchy to reinvent themselves based on the discourses available to them. Working towards and attaining popularity assured students that they were no longer nerds. Being “different” as a way to be cool was about performing a type of normative masculinity and femininity that set them apart from others. For example, the popular boys made lewd comments and jokes, were preoccupied with girls’ bodies, and consumed copious amounts of classroom space. However, for some students like Vlad, despite his wish for a better social life and social status, he was still an awkward nerd who played video games (minus the bullying and exclusion he experienced at his previous school). Vlad did have friends to hang out with and always appeared in my observations to connect to others and the school community in positive ways; however, he did not have the slightest inkling and/or ability to be cooler than he was. For Vlad, popularity and dominant masculinity discourses were not available to him. He did not behave in ways to prove his superiority or that he was “above everyone” like some boys and girls I had observed. Plus, he did not actively perform with the purpose of being different (hairstyle, clothing, attitude, use of trendy language, etc.) so that he would stand out in some way amongst his peers.
Peach made another interesting claim by stating that the more students tried to be different, the more they were the same. This is not surprising, as popularity required conforming to specific norms, making sameness possible. The popular crowd was “made up of people with social ambition and skills” and they “gained membership and coherence through the networking efforts of their members” (Eckert, 1989, p. 86). In other words, there was a type of protocol to follow to be popular. However, these norms were not easy to replicate by just anyone, which was a way to exclude those who did not belong. Milner (1989) asserts that students in high status groups “have an interest in making conformity difficult for outsiders,” which includes norms that are “elaborated and complicated” (p. 5). At Oak Lane Academy, being “different” was about performing gender and class performances in specific ways to delineate the popular kids from the rest of the crowd.

Being cool and popular also included students being mean, rude, and derogatory towards each other. As adolescents have little to no real-life political or economic power, status is one way they can achieve authority and ranking amongst their peers. According to Milner (2004), “because status is relatively inexpansible, if someone moves up, someone else will have to move down. But the reverse is also true; you can move up or stay on the top by putting others down” (p. 6). Popularity is very competitive, as there is only so much space available at top of the social hierarchy. Additionally, life at Oak Lane Academy was competitive because everyone was vying to be the smartest and achieve the highest grades. Therefore, cruel and unjust behaviour was common at Oak Lane Academy. When I asked Bob Zhou, a shy but athletically inclined Grade 7 male student to describe the boys in his class he replied,
**Bob**: Some of them are cocky I guess. I don’t want to mention any names, but some of them think they rule the school or grade or something. Others are just really nice, friendly, and kind, I guess.

**Traci**: So without naming names, when you say they “rule the school,” what does that look like?

**Bob**: It’s kind of just like they act like they know everything and act like they can do everything perfectly. They kind of tease other people.

Milner (2004) further states that “people (especially leaders), often vacillate between being nice and being mean, depending on whether they see the other person as a supporter or a threat” (p. 89). This helps to explain why popular kids at Oak Lane Academy wielded attitudes and intellect to put others down to appear smarter and more sophisticated. Cora spoke candidly about popularity when I asked her to talk generally about the girls in her grade. She said, “there’s my best friends, and there’s like the popular people, and then there’s like the not so popular people.” I asked her to elaborate more on the popular girls,

There’s some popular people who if they think you’re not as popular as them or something, then they’ll just be really, really rude to you and then as soon as they’re with someone who is just as popular they’ll be like ‘oh hey!’ Some of them are really, really nice . . . but a lot of the popular people, like they don’t really talk, they don’t really acknowledge the existence of the people, like, they gossip a lot and like from what I know, basically their conversations are just like, ‘oh hey, did you hear about this person?’ and it’s like, um (laughing) ok-ay.

Mean behaviour was generally not considered the same for boys and girls. While Bob admonished some boys for being “cocky,” most of the girls found the boys as a whole to be “chill.” Despite the fact that boys would silence girls in class or make sexist comments
and/or jokes at their expense, they were still considered easygoing and fun to be with. Yet, the popular girls had a reputation with male and female students as being mean or rude. Girls in general spoke negatively of other girls, regularly comparing them to the easygoing nature of boys. This had an impact on female relationships, which I will elaborate on in Chapter Six. In an interview with Quinn I asked her to describe the difference between the girls and the boys in her class,

Well I’m a girl, right? So, I’m not saying girls are bad but I kind of find it’s easier to hang out with guys than girls because boys, they don’t really care about how you act to them. Even if you’re, even if you’re not nice to them they’ll still think of you as, like, just another nice friend or whatever . . . they’re more, like, chill. But then I find, girls are at times sensitive, myself is kind of included . . . Girls can go really deep if they really want something, and guys too, but then their personality-wise, guys are a bit more chill than girls.

I further questioned Cora if there was a particular way to identify popular people and she mentioned that girls tended to wear modern clothing like chiffon shirts, or tank tops with shirts that hung off their shoulders. The popular kids also had a number of friends, they hung out in large mix-gender groups, and they were dating.

There’s the popular girls and popular guys and they’re basically, they are always mixed together and like if you look at them they’re always like lounging together around and stuff. And like a bunch of people are dating. And they’re like, they hang around with each other. It’s like they’re a lot more close with each and then like . . . a lot of the popular people, they just try to act like they know everybody.
Summary

There was an attitude of being better than others—acting like they knew everything and everyone—that accompanied cool kids at Oak Lane Academy. They were frequently the centre of attention, made efforts to be different in their own right, while also being similar to their friends, and often surrounded themselves with large mixed-gender groups of people. A few girls and boys were starting to date in Grade 7, but it was more common in Grade 8. Dating and having a social life was typical in the cool crowd, while also achieving academic success. While Grade 8 boys, in particular, were described as cool because of their easy-going manner, girls were cool as in cold (i.e., mean). Cora reported of the Grade 8 boys, “The guys, they are so much more easygoing and, like, nice and stuff. And they’re really easy to talk to.” This sentiment was echoed by other girls such as Anne Adamson, a Grade 8 student, with long dark blond hair and a high voice, who loved Disney princess movies, “And then the guys are all like super cool and they’re not as like weird as they were last year.”

Being popular required having a competitive edge, which went hand-in-hand with the nature of the school environment to be the best academically. To remain at the top, students had to work hard to stay there. The more normative their performances of masculinity and femininity, the more likely the students were able to separate themselves from their lesser cool and nerdy peers. This included putting others down by being disrespectful and arrogant, making sexist comments or jokes, and participating in heteronormative practices, which will be expanded on in Chapter Six. However, maintaining the cool factor and popularity status was not the same for girls and boys. Boys were privileged with a level of comfort that allowed them to say, do, and wear what they wanted while still being perceived as easygoing and relaxed. The girls were constantly monitoring how they presented themselves outwardly
and were often evaluated by their peers on the adequacy of their gender and class performances. The stakes of popularity, being cool, and fitting in were particularly challenging for female relationships in ways that did not impact the boys’. As mentioned earlier, what was missing in understanding “cool kids” was how race was implicated. I often wondered if some students were more popular than others based on their ethno-racial identifications and how they fit into particular groups at the school. It was not clear to me from my observations alone and this was not a topic that was ever talked about. Lastly, gender-based violence was more likely to occur within popular circles, as there was an emphasis on boys and girls to enact normative gender performances as a means to fit in and conform for the cool factor.

**Perverts and Misogynist Behaviour**

Hyper-sexualized, heteronormative and heterosexist masculinity is commonly associated with male behaviour, and is even more pronounced during a time of burgeoning sexuality with those entering into adolescence and puberty (Mandel & Shakeshaft, 2000). Renold (2003) asserts that boys “construct their ‘heterosexuality’ through publicly projecting their heterosexual fantasies and desires” (p. 184) by enacting normative masculine discourses that position girls as sexual objects. Mandel and Shakeshaft (2000) suggest that this compulsory and assumed heterosexuality in the middle school years (Grades 6-9) is rife with heterosexist ideologies, which males demonstrate through blatant misogyny. In a study conducted by Mandel and Shakeshaft (2000) they found, “a male’s heterosexual status was core to his masculinity. The more a boy acted or showed, the more masculine he was perceived to be” (p. 90). This was especially true for the Grade 7 boys I observed who were described by a number of their peers (mostly girls and a few boys) as perverted and (at times)
inappropriate. It was very clear during participant interviews that pervert membership was strictly limited to a diverse group of boys, which emphasizes my argument that boys set the terms of the school hierarchies. At the start of the school year only a few boys were described as sexually overt in the ways they objectified their female peers, made lewd sexist comments and/or jokes, and played games with girls at the centre of their attention, but as the year progressed the number of male participants involved increased. Sexualized performances of masculinity created bonds between the younger boys by reinforcing their dominance over girls, while also helping them feel connected to the older and more sexually experienced boys at Oak Lane Academy.

Although perverted behaviour was considered boy behaviour, not all boys participated equally. Some were not at all interested in girls, thinking of them as gross and confusing, which was shared with me in interviews. A few participants described these students as still in the “cootie” phase, which I assumed meant they had not yet entered puberty. Others male students were less robust with their attention towards girls, although they grew in confidence when performing masculinity in particular ways with their peers. Not one student spoke of disinterest in girls by identifying as homosexual or as questioning their sexuality. Nor did any participant gesture towards any other consideration of sexuality other than heterosexuality. I wondered if heterosexism was responsible for the some of the silences around sexuality, as students were striving to fit into their peer group through heteronormative gender expression.

In the Grade 7 class I observed there was one boy in particular who was considered the main pervert and was often mentioned by name during participant interviews. He had a few close friends who laughed at all of his jokes, cheered on his efforts to confront girls, and
also followed his lead in their own pursuit of sexual dominance. There were other boys in the classroom that performed displays of heterosexual masculinity, but their level of performativity was in relation to their social status. My evidence shows that the more popular the boy, the more persistent his sexualized behaviour. This was a similar finding in the research conducted by Mandel and Shakeshaft (2000). In a study investigating social network data that compared youth sexuality with peer acceptance, Kreager and Staff (2009) contend that boys with greater sexual conquests were correlated with increased peer acceptance. This was not the case for girls who risked social exclusion, even if their sexual experiences were considered romantic rather than casual. Where the differences played out with male youth is that those considered socioeconomically disadvantaged received even more peer acceptance than those considered advantaged. Regardless, there is a clear double standard regarding sexual behaviour that separates boys from girls, which helps to explain why perverts were only boys at Oak Lane Academy.

As I mentioned in the previous section, part of being cool was embodying and enacting idealized masculinity and femininity. Therefore, in this Grade 7 class, perverts were not ostracized for their behaviour but rewarded with status and attention. Yet, it was an interesting tension between the Grade 7s being uncomfortable, but also being entertained at the same time. In an interview with Diana Gao and Melanie Song, I learned that “class would be less exciting to be in but a lot less uncomfortable.” They claimed that out of their entire grade, their class was at the centre of everything. Despite the “pervy jokes,” games, or inappropriate conversations, many students admitted these boys were very funny. In other words, pervert behaviour was both accepted as funny and entertaining, but also dismissed as “boys just being perverts” when it was not.
Male curiosity around female bodies and sex was always a hot topic. I easily caught clips of conversations while being present in the drama or visual art classrooms where sexual talk was often shrouded with humour and fun. Renold (2003) references humour, in regards to boys’ overt sexualized behaviour, as a means for “releasing sexual tension” (p. 186). This was evident one afternoon in the visual art class when the students were working on paper art to make “finger sculptures” by using a traced and cut out form of their hand to create scenes. A male student traced and cut out one of his fingers to represent a phallic object. He showed a female student who covered her face in embarrassment. The more attention his finger received, the more he insisted it was just a finger, although he laughed through his insistence. At the same time Quinn had turned one of her fingers into a rocket ship that would not stand straight, but rather hungover limp. The male student pointed out the similarity between her object and his. Between Quinn’s limp rocket and the boy’s phallic finger, there was a great deal of laughter, embarrassment, and joking in class that day. It was a light-hearted game of sorts, between the boys and girls, but with sexually suggestive undertones.

Games were a prominent way that boys explored their blossoming sexuality and pushed the boundaries of appropriateness at school, which I will unpack at great length in Chapter Seven. For example, making up games that involved rating female bodies or creating the perfect girl out of classmates’ body parts was popular. Certain boys were also actively involved in games that enticed girls to make out with them such as ‘truth or dare’ or games where if a girl lost a bet she would have to kiss a boy. Plus, boys made it a game to look up photos of female body parts, ask girls about their sexual experiences, and inquire about their bra sizes. These heterosexual performances of masculinity positioned boys over girls in ways to satisfy their sexual desires both inside and outside of the classroom. Avery Wu was
uncomfortable with this type of behaviour and shared her perspective on the boys she thought were perverts:

**TS:** So what is perverted about the boys in your class? What do you mean by perverted?

**Avery:** They say things that, like, I would never ever, like, well they talk about profanity and stuff, like, they talk about that like they are holding a conversation about the weather.

**TS:** So, like, using swear words?

**Avery:** Yah, and then they, other stuff as well, that’s kind of awkward.

**Traci:** Can you tell me in a way that makes you feel not too awkward? Is it around a particular topic?

**Avery:** Well they love talking about girls.

**TS:** Ah, okay.

**Avery:** Yah, and then for dares they’re just it’s like making out and stuff. It’s kind of awkward.

I rarely heard boys swear or use derogatory language with each other or towards female students, but Avery was not the only person to confirm that it happened regularly. An all-male focus group revealed that being a boy was synonymous with swearing. While using swear words is commonplace in schools, what was deemed highly problematic and seriously inappropriate by David was misogynistic language directed towards girls. David told me he thought the boys in Grade 7 treated the girls “like shit.” In his observations of the boys, they had total disregard for girls and called them “very bad names.” He told me about a boy who called his female friend a “cunt” for no apparent reason, “Yah, just out of random. Like nobody likes him. I don’t know. There’s been, it’s just highly sexualized.” Renold (2003)
calls this behaviour “heterosexualised harassment,” a “form of denigrating girls through sexually abusive and aggressive language, gestures or behaviours” (p. 187). This was where some students drew the line between sexualized behaviour that was acceptable (funny) and unacceptable (rude). However, the line between the two was not always clear, as humour is subjective. Cox (2015) writes about the controversies in stand-up comedy surrounding rape jokes. She describes the contrast between patrons who find them funny and others who are outraged. Her article has suggested that those “who utters the joke and where the irony is targeted make a difference in the degree to which rape is affirmed or assailed” (Cox, 2015, p. 980). Therefore, just because something is presented as a joke and receives a good laugh, does not disqualify it from being a form of gender-based violence.

One of the ways the boys embodied sexualized performances of maleness was through pornography, which was readily available and easy to access on the Internet. In an interview with Bob I asked, “What is the most challenging thing about having friends?” Bob was soft-spoken and struggled to find the right words in response. He said at his previous school his friends “weren’t kind of wrong-ish” and were “just kind of normal people” like he was. Whereas at Oak Lane Academy, “They [boys] want to be . . . perverts? And usually it’s the people who are popular who do that.” I could tell Bob was uncomfortable with saying the word “perverts” by how slowly it came out of his mouth in the form of a question. I asked him if the people he was thinking of said inappropriate things. He agreed and further stated, “Like going on inappropriate websites. And I usually see one or two people in our class always do that.” I was surprised and asked if it happened in the classroom. Bob said, “Yes, on laptops.” At this point I was still unsure what inappropriate material was being viewed on
laptops and Bob clarified it was porn websites. Incredulous, I felt the need to clarify, “On the laptop, in class?” Bob responded, “Or sometimes in the computer room.”

Perverted and misogynist behaviour at Oak Lane Academy was more than just hegemonic and heterosexist masculinity in action but was also about a particular performance of smartness. In the section on nerds, I wrote at length about the ways the Grade 8 boys positioned themselves in the English classroom as superior and entitled in relation to girls. The rape debate provides an excellent example of how the boys dominated the entire class with their misogynist ideas. The debate could have included all members of the class in an intellectually stimulating manner, but because the topic was related to sex, the boys were excited to demonstrate their growing knowledge of the topic. This misogynistic performance of smartness was also a reflection of the competitive environment of Oak Lane Academy. Students were quick to prove themselves among a population of smart kids, particularly the boys who presumed to have an edge over the girls. Further examples like this one will be shared in Chapter Seven in relation to games and game-like behaviour that students played as part of their schooling experiences.

**Summary**

For the Grade 7 students I observed as part of my study, “pervert” was the term they frequently used to describe male peers who demonstrated accepted “inappropriate” behaviour through words and actions. These boys were curious about female bodies and sex, which prompted performances of heterosexuality “to confirm their hegemonic heterosexual masculinity and how such performances, particularly the sexual objectification of women and the sexualized harassment (verbal and physical) of their female classmates, re-instated boys’ heterosexual dominance” (Renold, 2003, p. 187). They made misogynist/sexist comments
and/or jokes, they watched pornography on computers at school, they enticed girls to engage in sexually explicit games inside and outside of the classroom, and they felt entitled to bombard girls with questions about their sexual experiences, bra size, and such. On one hand, perverts made students uncomfortable, while also being considered funny and providing classroom amusement. Pervert behaviour was accepted and downplayed as a “joke,” with perverts maintaining popularity status, rewarding hegemonic masculine performances as being “cool.”

Misogynists, on the other hand, were not regarded highly (this was not a term the students used, but some boys were referred to as being sexist). The line between perverts and misogynists (when there was one) is that the former were trying to be funny (despite being totally inappropriate) and the misogynists were deeply offensive (such as calling a girl a “cunt”). However, those that were considered perverts could also be thought of as misogynists depending on who was describing them. The line between the two was blurred and easy to cross. In the example of the rape debate, the boys arguing with Daniel were slinging sexist remarks and alluding to misogynist ideals. Some students found them hilarious, whereas other classmates (particularly the girls) were silenced. It was difficult to know in the moment what the Grade 8 students really thought of the discussion. Was it accepted as a joke and intellectual strutting, or perceived as disturbing and inappropriate? Performances of masculinity and smartness went hand-in-hand at Oak Lane Academy, downplaying aspects of boy behaviour that was unacceptable. This notion of “boys being boys” provided fertile ground for gender-based violence to evolve.

There was much more to be learned about boys that fell into the category of pervert and misogynist behaviour, but most participants were too uncomfortable to offer details
beyond general labels and descriptions. This was especially true of Grade 7 students if they were required to reference sexual language or explain a sexually explicit game or event for me to understand the deeper meaning of a story. I did my best to reassure them they could tell me anything, but I was at a disadvantage with my age (similar age of their parents and teachers). Plus, some of them did not have the words to articulate what they were learning or experiencing where sexuality was concerned. The Grade 7 students were all at different levels of maturity biologically and emotionally, which impacted how they would talk about sexually explicit information.

The Grade 8 students did not use the term perverted to talk about boys (these participants were all girls except for David), but sexist was thrown around periodically. However, most of them did not take sexist/misogynist behaviour seriously and justified it as a joke. Many of female participants were also quite concerned with popularity status and being liked by boys, so there was pressure to fit in and maintain the status quo. I did speak with the Grade 8s in interviews and one focus group about gender-based violence, but they were challenged to make the connection between gender-based violence and the dominant and heterosexist masculine behaviour of the boys in their grade/classes. I will write more about this topic in my other analysis chapters.

Other Performances of Masculinity

I noticed in my observations that the boys in general were very physical with one another, which is typical of how boys experience masculinity (Thorne, 1993). Physical violence as play was evident in the classroom and the hallways, which allowed boys to convey a sense of strength and toughness (Renold, 2005). It was a test of masculinity to inflict as much pain on another boy and see how much pain the boy on the receiving end
could handle. A combination of laughter and cringing made it difficult to tell where the line of fun and harm started and ended, although the physical game was played repeatedly throughout each week. Between the two grades, although more prominently in Grade 7, I observed antics such as poking, pulling ears, crushing and slapping hands, pounding each other on the back with fists, the repeated kicking of genitals, hitting each other in the face, boys being pushed into desks, and hitting each other with classroom objects such as a book or Canadian flag on a stick. These actions were not only explicit in nature, but they took up a significant amount of space to accomplish. One of the ways boys play is by establishing their territory in the school, which gives them a wide berth to move around, leaving smaller spaces for the girls to inhabit (Adler et al., 1992).

The Grade 7 drama classroom was an open space that allowed boys to spread out and conquer. Although some of the girls, such as Avery and Melanie, enjoyed twirling or leaping to demonstrate their dancing abilities, their use of the space paled in comparison to the boys who would run around in a game of cat and mouse. The boys would leap on each other, roll and tumble across the floor, and wrestle with what seemed to be endless vigour. Although there was less room in other classrooms for physical play, the boys were still able find ways to expand within the space. In the Grade 8 English classroom, boys would lean their chairs on a tilt against a wall, move chairs and desks around to sit with friends, and throw their bags on the floor haphazardly. In one class, a male student took a chair that was beside Peach and moved it to another part of the room. Daniel asked him to return the chair and his body to its original place. The chair did not fit very well in the space available so he started to push and crash the chair into Peach’s desk to make it work, while she looked at him dumbfounded. He
stopped suddenly, realizing the disruption he was creating, apologized, and allowed her to move over so he could sit.

The boys also exhibited other behaviour that garnered a great deal of attention among each other. Although the girls may have been privy to this behaviour (most thought it was gross and/or inappropriate), it was performed for boy audiences. This included passing gas (the louder and smellier the better), pelvic thrusting (as part of drama improvisation or random acts of thrusting in the classroom), shoving colossal amounts of food into their mouths at once (choking on food or showing it all chewed up was most amusing), and fake coughing or shouting out words to be disruptive in class or for attention. On one winter afternoon, when the students were working in the library to complete a history group project, I observed a group of boys laughing as the male pack leader attempted to blow snot out of his nose onto the floor when no one was looking. Eventually he was successful to the disgust and admiration of his friends, demonstrated through laughing, grimacing, and excitement. There were many observations of boys trying to repulse each other for laughs or pushing the limits of classroom appropriateness through rowdy behaviour. These boy performances were either ignored by teachers (if they were done in small doses) or addressed by asking a student to temporarily leave the room by sitting in the hallway. However, for the most part the behaviour seemed accepted as ‘boys being boys,’ leaving the girls without space on the sidelines.

Conclusion

Despite Oak Lane Academy adhering to gender equity policies and gender-balanced classrooms to offer exceptional education to “smart” kids, gender was hierarchical within and across the gender divide with boys being granted status positions that were not available to
girls. I described in detail the social and gender hierarchies that existed in the school (nerds, cool kids, and perverts), highlighting the range of associations available to boys, while reflecting the limitations placed on girls. Whether boys were racing around chasing one another, dominating classroom discussions, proving their intelligence, being perverted talking about girls, rolling into school with mussed hair and sweats, they experienced a sense of entitlement to behave as they pleased because they were boys. Boys did not feel it necessary to apologize for what they said or how they acted, unlike the girls who were more constrained in their manner and afflicted with the need to work hard and/or be perfect. The boys were often absolved of negative conduct with the excuse that it was meant as a joke, and according to the girls, boys were easier to get along with and “chill,” compared to their female peers. There was a competitiveness girls experienced with each other (socially and intellectually), and for the attention of boys (heteronormative conditioning), as the stakes for being liked and fitting in was high.

The juxtaposition of girls versus boys, articulated during interviews, established who was better or worse. In other words, girls and boys were continuously presented as opposites. Considering that patriarchy was constantly at play at Oak Lane Academy, where hegemonic discourses positioned boys as having greater power and privilege than girls, the ways in which girls succumbed to comparisons was not surprising. Furthermore, hegemonic masculinity was constantly reproduced and maintained as a standard of smart male idealism in ways that were particular to elite schools, which was in opposition to the inferior female. The ways in which girls constructed their reality was always in association with male dominance and the internalization of their own subordination. I illustrated in this chapter that the more normative the performances of femininity and masculinity, the more likely for
gender-based violence to exist and persist. Therefore, what it means to be a boy and what it means to be a girl at Oak Lane Academy is critical to this study. You cannot understand gender-based violence without identifying how masculinity and femininity is construed in a particular space.

The next chapter will transition from subjectivity to relationality. I will demonstrate how the embodiment and enactment of masculinity and femininity by Oak Lane Academy boys and girls directly impacts how they navigate peer relationships and understand love. The Shakespearean comedic plays *Twelfth Night* and *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* act as the backbone for the chapter to illustrate friendships, romantic love, dating, the “friend zone,” and promposals, while looking closely at heteronormative relationship ideals and expectations, and patriarchal rules of engagement. The following chapter will also illustrate how students rationalize violence and make connections between their understandings of relationships and being smart.
CHAPTER SIX
EMOTIONAL GIRLS AND RATIONAL BOYS:
NAVIGATING GENDER INEQUITIES IN LOVE AND RELATIONSHIPS

Several Grade 8 students stood in the hallway on the second floor of Oak Lane Academy, waiting for their teacher Daniel Evans to arrive and unlock the classroom door. It was the first period of the day and the last English class of the year in June. The students were huddled together in gender-segregated groups while they waited. Daniel arrived a few minutes before the start of class, opened the door, and instructed the students to set-up the desks into groups of five. He then wrote the agenda on the chalkboard, as he did at the beginning of every lesson. As soon as the students were ready, Daniel handed out a copy of the Healthy Relationship brochure, from the Ontario Coalition of Rape Crisis Centre (n.d.), for each student to read. From my first classroom visit in January, to this last visit in June, I observed Daniel engage the students in dialogue about gender, equity, and relationships. Sharing the brochure on the last day of class was Daniel’s plan for wrapping up the Shakespeare unit of Twelfth Night and reinforcing to the students the importance of maintaining healthy relationships in their lives.

No sooner was the brochure in the hands of the students when the laughing commenced. Isabelle Nazari, a female student with a sultry voice who loved to socialize, asked a boy in her group (known to shout out sexist comments and jokes), “Do you know what a healthy relationship is?” Minutes later Daniel asked the boy to leave the classroom, to take a break from his disruptions. Across the room, Peach Allen and her friends were laughing about the brochure graphics and asked Daniel what one of the characters was doing with its hands. In order to move the lesson along, he replied it was a mystery they would
have to accept. Laughing about the brochure and not taking the topic seriously was not a surprise, as the students often used humour to deflect sensitive classroom dialogue. Thorne (1993) speaks to this type of humour in *Gender Play* as a means to “lighten up” (p. 79) situations where aggression and sex are present in action or conversation. It allows students to deflect from the seriousness of what is actually at stake, such as coming to terms with real gender related violence in relationships. Aside from being the last day of class and there being a restless energy in the room, several students I had interviewed just weeks before, said they were done with these kinds of conversations. They felt there was too much talk about the same thing, which was boring and repetitive. Furthermore, they felt they already knew most of what Daniel was talking about. Despite their shortage of life experiences, intellectually they believed they knew enough because they were smart. I interpreted the students’ laughter as a message to Daniel that his lesson was a joke.

The brochure was divided into three columns with several points for each heading: (a) “What is a healthy relationship?” (b) “Dangerous signs!”(c) “What is abuse?” Daniel had asked the students to discuss in their groups what was missing from the brochure, what they disagreed with, what they did not understand, and to ask any questions they might have. Peach started the conversation by saying she did not agree that jealousy was a dangerous sign in a relationship unless it developed into harassment. Another female student in the class mentioned that trust was not included under healthy relationships. Daniel asked if any group disagreed that trust should be on the brochure, which they did not. With the brochure enlarged under the overhead projector for everyone to see, Daniel wrote trust under healthy relationships and put an asterisk beside jealousy. Jealousy was also listed under emotional
abuse in the “what is abuse?” column and a male student said he did not believe it belonged there either.

Daniel mentioned that jealousy was “a common human emotion,” but he wanted the students to talk about when it could be abusive or unhealthy in a relationship. A female student thought jealousy was problematic if it became controlling, but Claire Littleton, a petite female student with dark curly hair, argued that jealousy was subjective and not an issue unless something bad was occurring such as being cheated on. Daniel asked what would happen if his partner told him he could not talk to another person because it made her jealous. Claire admitted that would be controlling and a problem. The discussion continued for a few minutes longer, but did not veer far from the topic of jealousy, despite the many different points on the brochure. I wondered if students struggled to see jealousy as unhealthy unless it was somehow violent in nature (e.g., harassment, controlling another person), despite the fact that jealousy could be detrimental at a more subtle level.

In a study of middle-school-aged students on levels of aggression and prosocial behaviour in association with jealousy, Culotta and Goldstein (2008) discovered that girls perceived problems in their relationships and experienced jealousy more often than boys. Jealousy perpetuated feeling threatened (being hurt/harmed), which resulted in higher levels of relational aggression towards others (Kraft & Mayeux, 2018). Although, the students had never mentioned jealousy specifically as an issue in friendships with me, girls were forthcoming in interviews about the acute competition between female friends (e.g., comparing marks, wanting to feel included in friendships), which often created fights and social exclusion. I noted how adamantly the girls were, in particular, to discredit jealousy as
an unhealthy aspect of relationships, which I attributed to their idealized versions of
themselves as respectful and kind friends.

Daniel changed the course of the lesson to talk one last time with the students about
healthy and unhealthy relationships in the play *Twelfth Night*, specifically about the marriage
between Maria and her husband Sir Toby Belch, an aggressive alcoholic who continually put
her down and called her names like “wench” and “dog.” While most of the groups agreed the
relationship was completely or somewhat unhealthy, an all male group insisted it was
healthy. They said the put downs occurred before the marriage so they were no longer an
issue, Maria could change Sir Toby’s ways as his wife, and so forth. Every point Daniel
suggested they might consider unhealthy, they argued against. I could not help but wonder if
the boys did it on purpose to frustrate Daniel and/or for the fun of another classroom debate.
There was another group that took a stand between healthy and unhealthy. They insisted that
put-downs were not a big deal, as Maria did not tell her husband she was bothered by them.
A perplexed Daniel wanted to know why they did not think the put-downs were a dangerous
sign. The students in the group argued that Daniel was confused, a male student thought the
discussion was funny, and a female student rolled her eyes at Daniel’s insistence. Peach
asserted there was equal power in their marriage. Sir Toby had power over Maria because of
their social roles, but Maria had power over Sir Toby because she was able to get him to fall
in love with her.

This last point by Peach was particularly revealing. For one, the students believed
gender equality was the norm in their school (and within Western culture), which surfaced in
their analysis of Shakespearean characters in comparison to their own lived experiences.
Furthermore, Peach’s argument spoke to the heteronormative relationship ideals and
expectations the students talked about earlier in the Shakespeare unit (shared later in this chapter). Highly influenced by patriarchal ideologies, the students assumed that men were ultimately responsible for asking women out, paying for dates, and making major decisions in relationships, whereas women had a responsibility to embody everything a man would desire in a partner such as being attractive, demure, and nice, so they could fall madly in love. In other words, they believed men and women had equal roles to play in order to come together in a relationship successfully. I also found the talk about put-downs interesting, as it brought to light aspects of male behaviour that was considered normative and acceptable at Oak Lane Academy. It was common for boys to make sexist and/or misogynist comments and jokes about/to girls that were widely accepted as funny. Plus, putting down someone by gossiping about them was rampant at the school, which I will address later in this chapter.

To complete this part of the lesson Daniel referred back to the Healthy Relationships brochure and the dangerous signs. He told the students that he hoped they would remember this discussion on healthy and unhealthy relationships as more than just a theoretical understanding, as they went forward in life into many different relationships. He pointed to each of the danger signs, “jealousy,” “aggression,” “put downs,” and “controlling behaviour” and said, “that goes for friends and family as well.” I noticed while Daniel was speaking, many of the students were talking to each other, completely disconnected from the lesson. It was unlikely they heard the last words Daniel spoke, which felt like a deflated ending to the last class of the school year.

In the previous chapter I set the stage for understanding what it means to be a “boy” and what it means to be a “girl” at Oak Lane Academy through the lived experiences of “smart” Grade 7 and 8 students. I illustrated that gender is hierarchical within and across the
gender divide, and that the girls and boys were not granted the same privileges at the school, despite the illusion of gender equity (policies, programs, curriculum) and the equal distribution of gender in the classrooms. Boys demonstrated their ease in the school through the ways in which they took up copious amounts of space physically, intellectually and socially, compared to the girls who were more constrained. I was able to articulate these differences through a narrative of the “ideal” Oak Lane Academy boy and girl, and a written analysis of the school’s social and gender hierarchies (“nerds,” “cool kids,” and “perverts”). I determined that the particular ways the boys and girls learned to embody and enact gender discourses (unique to this setting) set the conditions for gender-based violence. I concluded that the more normative the performances of masculinity and femininity, the more likely for gender-based violence to manifest and prevail.

This chapter transitions from subjectivity to relationality. I will establish that what it means to be a boy and what it means to be a girl shapes how students embody and enact masculinity and femininity, which directly impacts how they navigate peer relationships and understand love. Using the Shakespearean comedic plays *Twelfth Night* and *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* as the backbone for this chapter, I tell compelling stories of conversations in the English classrooms where the literary themes and characters operated as a springboard for intellectual dialogue and debate, highlighting the ways students understood various relationships across and between genders. Having already opened this chapter with the final Grade 8 English lesson of the year, I will now return to the beginning and work my way through the Grades 7 and 8 lessons as a means to address aspects of friendships, romantic love, dating, the “friend zone,” and promposals. These gendered school relationships will allow me to demonstrate heteronormative ideals and expectations, and patriarchal rules of
engagement that exist and thrive at Oak Lane Academy. I will also show examples throughout this chapter of how students rationalized violence when analysing relationship conflicts in the plays. The chapter will conclude by describing how these Grade 7 and 8 students justified that they would know if a relationship was healthy or unhealthy in their own lives because they were smart, despite lacking the ability to connect on an emotional level. I also state that the various ways students engaged relationally provided a gateway for gender-based violence to occur.

**Gendered Friendship Norms**

You kind of have to, like, find out how to please a lot of people, sometimes, because everybody’s different, right? So, you have to know how to, um, how to, like, make that person happy, but then at the same time you have to make everyone else around you happy, right? I know that people say you have to make yourself happy first, but then if you want to get lots of friends, or whatever, if you want to be popular, you have to know what people look for in a friend and how they treat others so that you can treat them in a similar way, that way you don’t get mad, that person doesn’t get mad at you or start excluding you or whatever, because, I mean, no one likes to be excluded, right? (Quinn Ma Interview, February 19, 2013)

The Grade 7 students filtered into the English classroom on a sunny May morning and sat at their assigned desks ready to begin the first lesson of the literature studies unit on *A Midsummer’s Night Dream*. Their teacher, Hannah Lewis, started the class by bribing them with chocolate in the hopes that they would be able to behave until the end of the week, as she felt they were being too talkative. She then proceeded to hand out a worksheet to each student, listing the three major themes of the play: love, friendship, and illusion vs. reality, clarifying the particulars of the themes with the entire class. This was followed by the
students being divided into three groups, with each group addressing one theme, which took them until the end of the period to complete. In the English class that followed, the students were divided into five groups, with all of the students from the original three groups dispersed into the new ones, so they could review the themes of the play. After the students in the five groups had time to compare their notes, the class talked about them as a whole. Not surprisingly, the majority of the dialogue focused on friendships, which seemed most relevant to the Grade 7 students. Friendships and bonding are critical to the development of adolescent subjectivities and identifications, which was particularly important for these students in their first year at the school (Chase, 2008; Gaztambide-Fernandez, 2009a; Thorne, 1993).

The conversation began with Hannah asking the class what they looked for in a best friend. Several hands shot into the air and Hannah selected a few students to share their answers, which included “supportive,” “loyal,” and “willing to do stupid things with you.” Hannah then inquired what might create a conflict in a friendship. A female student replied that telling a friend something that they then repeated to the whole school was an issue. As the conversation continued, Hannah asked the class a rapid number of questions I found challenging to write down all at once, some of which were answered and others that were not. She also invited me to ask a question and I was curious to know why friendships were so difficult in Grade 7. Avery Wu responded to me by saying it was important to be realistic and careful when speaking with friends. As I listened to her talk, I observed Quinn turn towards Diana Gao with a bug-eyed glance, and both girls managed to stifle their laughter. I assumed they were reacting to what Avery was saying, as Quinn would often roll her eyes when Avery spoke. Following Avery, one of the most popular girls in the class remarked that trust
in a friendship was important, which meant being careful about what was said to people and making sure not to create a web of lies.

During my first round of interviews, which took place well before the Shakespeare unit started, a question I frequently asked participants was, “What is the most challenging thing about having friends?” I also asked many other questions on topics such as fitting in at school and the biggest problem kids deal with, which often prompted the subject of friendships to surface. The brief classroom conversation with Hannah and the students corresponded with much of what had been divulged to me in interviews. For example, I learned that trust, loyalty, caring, and understanding were important characteristics in a friend regardless of gender, but that female friendships were particularly fragile because of the excessive gossiping in the school. Although some boys admitted to engaging in gossip such as Jay Han who said, “No one in our class actually wants anything private,” it was the girls who lamented about gossip the most. Perhaps this was why only female students alluded to gossip during the classroom activity.

Gossip was used as a means to compete socially, which contributed largely to misunderstandings, hurt feelings, and conflict between friends (Milner, 2004). Gossip was most commonly described as a means for fitting in (regardless of social status) and being popular within girl culture. Unlike Oak Lane Academy boys, the girls had few measures for securing their place within the social and gender hierarchies aside from their intellectual ability, which only held so much weight if they wanted to be popular and fit in. Therefore, status was the next level upon which they compared themselves to each other, as a whole female entity, and in their intimate friendship circles. Gossip allowed the girls an avenue to raise their own status and also lower the status of others through their whispers and
storytelling. Furthermore, gossip allowed girls a moment to shine in the centre of attention if they had a juicy story to report. This gossip opportunity could be shared amongst close friends, used to gain entry into a tight clique, create an opportunity to gather the attention of boys, and/or prove they were worthy of popularity.

Milner (2004) states that gossip is “a particularly common and powerful means to inflict small cruelties” (p. 92) upon a person who is not actually present during the conversation. According to his research in public high schools, gossip is rarely a form of praise, but a means to put someone down with the intent to harm, and destabilize and/or lower their social status. This correlates with my findings at Oak Lane Academy. In an interview with Grade 7 student Melanie Song, I asked if she felt the need to act a certain way to fit in and be accepted. She replied, “Kind of. In Grade 7, people are always gossiping and to fit in you have to gossip, too, and talk about stuff that is going on.” Melanie said she did not like gossiping so she preferred to keep to herself or hang out with older students. Keira Sun, a soft-spoken Grade 8 female student, who was also uncomfortable with gossiping, admitted it was necessary for group acceptance, “Sometimes I get really uncomfortable if one of my friends starts talking about my other friends, but to fit in I don’t really say, or agree. Also, I don’t say anything against it.” She reinforced her feelings about gossiping when I asked her what was the biggest problem kids her age had to deal with, “I guess it’s, like, there’s a lot of talking behind people’s backs and stuff. And sometimes it can hurt someone. That’s a problem.”

Managing each other’s emotions and needs was a common challenge, which students commonly referred to as “drama” in their friendship circles. In a conversation with Claire, I asked if there was drama with her friends or in her grade. She exclaimed, “Definitely. I’ve
seen a lot actually . . . At this age I think it’s like people learning how that works in the real world so it’s kind of messy sometimes with each other.” I clarified that Claire was talking about miscommunication between people. She said, “Oh, ya . . . it never really lasts long at this age so usually when stuff like that happens it’s just, ya, it’s bad.” While “drama” was predominantly equated with female friendships, David Funar also referred to drama when I asked him what it was like to be his age, in Grade 8. His response was, “Everyone’s pretty nice. There’s like drama, always.” I asked him to elaborate, “Like, people saying things behind other’s backs and stuff, and then others would get involved and then, like, for misinterpretations.” However, David clarified that drama didn’t impact his relationships very much, which was not the case for many female students I interviewed. He got along well with his close circle of male friends and felt he fit in easily with many of his peers.

Long drawn out fights between girls, that could result in exclusion or the end of close friendships altogether, was a significant consequence of gossip and drama. Female students indicated that maintaining friendships was a challenge especially when girls were intent on hurting each other emotionally. Moving from fun to hurt, when things went astray in a relationship, was a power tactic to maintain control over another person and/or situation. Peach, who professed to have a close-knit group of friends said, “We had a fight one time and it’s still lingering, you know. Girls are very different than boys because we, girls are just more dramatic and we hold onto everything a lot longer.” Claire, who described her friends as “amazing,” admitted that their friendship was not always carefree, “Girls, it can scar them emotionally for a really long time when they fight . . . because girls know how to hurt each other with words. So they do, and they’re like, I’m never going to be friends with you again. It actually happens.”
In describing their own relationship breakdowns, some girls compared their experiences of fighting to that of their male peers, as boys were often used as markers for appropriate/inappropriate behaviour. Peach felt boys were more reasonable than girls, “Boys, they kind of just, like, oh let’s be friends, but then girls are like, oh let’s be friends, but then if you do this, then you’re not my friend.” This sentiment was similar to the opinion Claire held on the state of boy fights, “Usually when boys fight, they, it’s more physical, but then they just make up right away and are friends again.” Quinn claimed that boys were easier to get along with because, even if they were treated badly, they would not hold it against anyone, unlike girls who were much more sensitive. The ease in which boys navigated their world allowed them to experience competition playfully and rarely seemed to strain their relationships with friends (even if someone got hurt). When issues did arise, boys appeared to work through them quickly.

By contrast, the boys did not compare themselves or their relationships to the girls, nor did they talk about fighting with friends. In fact, boys spoke very little about their friendships as a whole. When they did it was typically to answer my question about what their best friend would say about them or in sharing about friends at their previous school. However, Grade 7 student Mike Thomas did share with me about the difficulties of keeping friends. He said, “Making friends isn’t that hard, it’s the keeping the friends. Keeping your promises. The whole thing about it’s easy to get them, you can be nice, but to stay nice is more difficult . . . most important part of friendship is building up to that positive history.” I wondered if Mike had noticed friendships becoming more complicated as the year progressed. He said it was “shifty” when boys and girls got together, “then it gets weird and grey and you can’t look into that.” I asked him to explain his thoughts a bit more, “It’s an
interesting world because it’s the gossip world so things change a lot and people do things not necessarily because they want to but because other people say they should.”

Unfortunately, I was not able to uncover what Mike was referring to specifically when speaking about gossip and kids doing what others tell them to.

One aspect of relationships that was easily observable at Oak Lane Academy was that Grade 7 and 8 students were mostly segregated by gender, a common school occurrence widely documented by sociologists (Renold, 2005; Thorne, 1993). What was less clear was if they also segregated by race within their gendered groups.61 Boys were friends with boys and girls were friends with girls. Therefore, the expectations they had of each other as friends, the rules of engagement they followed to maintain friendships, and the consequences that occurred when their expectations were not met, were very gender specific. This I described to some degree above. When boys and girls did attempt to come together with the intent to be friends, there was often a level of awkwardness and discomfort that filled the space between them, which was described during a Grade 8 English lesson at the end of the media literacy unit on gender stereotypes. Daniel asked the students to talk about how representations of maleness and femaleness in the media impacted their relationships with each other. This quickly led into a dialogue about how difficult it was to be friends with a person of the opposite gender, as there was always speculation by peers that it was more than

61 In the Grade 7 class students segregated by gender, but not by race. This was particularly evident as there was little diversity in this class. Only one female student was considered Caucasian (according to Vlad Andrews in an interview) although there were a few more assumed Caucasian male students. My Grade 8 observations were similar. Students tended to sit with friends of the same gender, but I did not notice any segregation of students by race. However, I was not privy to observing the groups of people they spent time with at lunch. In an interview with Grade 8 student, Keira Sun, she mentioned that there were many cliques in her grade, which had to do with race. She said, “all the Oriental Asian people would stick together and all the Caucasian’s and others would stick together. So it’s a lot like that.” As many of the students were dispersed throughout the building at lunch or left the school property to eat, I struggled to get a full picture of the racial groupings. Keira was the only student who ever mentioned race in this way in interviews.
just a friendship. Heteronormativity flourished at Oak Lane Academy (particularly in the junior grades) with the assumption that possible romantic interests occurred between people with opposite gender identities. Heterosexuality was assumed and reinforced.

Most students declared that it was okay to be with someone of the opposite gender if you were dating, but friendships between girls and boys did not usually work out. Students revealed that talking to a person of the opposite gender could be the start of rumours that they “liked” each other. Claire stated that because kids her age were experimenting with dating, becoming good friends with someone of the opposite gender would only elicit people to make assumptions about the relationship. She also said it would be very awkward to be friends with someone if romantic feelings developed. A male student asserted that if he were to hang out with a girl and be teased because of it, he would eventually develop a crush on her. Later in the term I also read an anonymous comment on a worksheet that said there was always the risk of being called a “slut” if a girl were to spend time with a boy she was not dating. Therefore, students said they preferred to remain segregated by gender unless they were dating. Claire commented, “the lines are more clear that way.” However, a lot of intermingling occurred between boys and girls, which was not about friendship or dating per se that will be described in much greater detail in the following chapter on games.

Summary

The students had concise ideas of what characteristics they looked for in a friend that included qualities of trust and respect. While all students claimed to have friends, making friends and sustaining close relationships was particularly important to girls, which included securing a place of belonging, feeling connected to another person, and being a ‘best’ friend (Thorne, 1993). Yet, girls were highly aware of the fragility of their friendships due to the
gossip culture of the school. While it was reported in interviews that all students gossiped freely, the girls spoke about it, and actively engaged in gossip, more frequently than the boys. Despite wanting ease in their relationships in ways they described the boys, the girls gossiped to attain and maintain friendships, to fit in and feel included, and/or gain popularity status, which created significant drama/fights (hurt feelings, exclusion) in their friendship groups. Fighting amongst girls often led to hurt feelings, long-held grudges, exclusion, and sometimes the end of a friendship altogether. By contrast, boys felt more at ease in their friendships to fight and make-up or gossip privately or publicly regardless of the outcome to others, as they were used to the privileges they acquired for being boys.

Oak Lane Academy friendships were predominantly gender segregated (and possibly racially segregated outside of class). The heteronormative environment of the school dictated that if boys and girls engaged together it was likely because they had feelings (or a curiosity) for the other, rather than a desire to just be friends. The Grade 8 students described the awkwardness and discomfort they felt in attempting to have friends of the opposite gender. They knew their peers would make assumptions that a romantic relationship was starting, they would likely be teased, and most certainly the relationship would be talked about as part of school gossip. However, the students agreed that over time it was inevitable for feelings to develop between boys and girls, making a friendship uncomfortable when it happened. Keeping the gender lines clear, unless they were dating, was the simplest solution at their age. What I found particularly interesting about these conversations is that at no time was there any mention of the possibility that students of the opposite gender might not be interested in each other. In other words, there was no consideration of love interests outside of heterosexuality. In the following section I will move beyond gendered school friendships
where there was a particular way for girls to engage with girls and boys to engage with boys, to explore male and female expectations in heteronormative romantic relationships. I will reference excerpts from Grade 7 and 8 Shakespeare lessons to show how students intellectually described their understanding of love, while also illustrating in parts how they rationalized violence as part of this understanding.

**Romance Versus Reason and Other Intellectualized Expectations**

Why is it impressive if a guy publicizes his interest in a girl, but if a girl does it, it looks desperate (especially when girls are often seen as being more interested in/able to express their feelings)? (Grade 8 student, question written on an exit ticket, May 5, 2013)

For the first time during the four months of my fieldwork, I found myself at the front of the Grade 7 English class. The students had been studying the Shakespearean play *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and I was invited to offer a workshop exploring love in relationships. Rather than be the researcher, I was temporarily the guest teacher. In each corner of the classroom I hung pieces of paper that displayed the words: acceptable, unacceptable, somewhat acceptable, and somewhat unacceptable. On the chalkboard I wrote the names Demetrius and Helena, each with a circle around their names and spokes jutting out from the circles. I explained to the students that we would be looking closely at these two main characters in order to understand the dynamics of their relationship better. The students were well aware that Demetrius was in love with Hermia, who happened to be in love with Lysander. Helena was in love with Demetrius who spurned her unkindly in his quest to be with Hermia. Despite the rejection, Helena continued to pursue Demetrius out of desperation, even suggesting he treat her like a dog, as long as he stayed with her. Using Demetrius and
Helena as the focus of the discussion, I was able to address real life scenarios, while also staying connected to the English curriculum.

I began the workshop by inviting the class to offer descriptions of each character, while I wrote on the chalkboard around their names. I wanted to know how the students viewed the vulnerable Helena versus the aggressive Demetrius. Based on evidence in the play, they suggested that Helena was an emotionally desperate and stubborn woman who was willing to objectify herself for a man. They highlighted Demetrius as an arrogant and stubborn man who treated Helena badly because she annoyed him. I asked the students to consider Helena’s desire to be with Demetrius, despite his ill treatment of her, and whether it was acceptable or not. I requested they imagine it was 2013, not Shakespearean times, when making their decision. They could put themselves in the place of Helena or think of her as a friend. The students were then invited to move to one of the four corners of the room that best represented their choice, and talk with their peers about why they made the decision to be there. If they were unsure of what to choose they could stand in the middle of the room. The activity was further extended by having the students in each corner of the room share their perspective with the entire class.

I chose this feminist-oriented pedagogy for the purpose of interrupting gendered discursive practices “that have in the past permitted inequities in classroom talk about texts to go unexamined and unchanged” (Alvermann, Commeyras, Young, Randall, & Hinson, 1997, p. 74). I wanted to observe how the students’ positionality might shift through the process of this disruption. I was aware of the ways perspectivity could alter how students positioned themselves, and positioned others, as various insights were shared. Alvermann et al. (1997) describe perspectivity as “our ways of knowing and interpreting experiences through
personal histories” (p. 76). Therefore, perspective sharing was critical to the process of altering gender discourses and subject positions.

One male student felt Helena’s pursuit of Demetrius was unacceptable; eight other students felt it was acceptable, and the rest of the class was divided between somewhat acceptable/unacceptable. They supported their reasons on the subject while I noted their responses on the chalkboard. In a later interview with Jay, who found Helena’s behaviour unacceptable, he explained, “Even if you really like somebody you shouldn’t act to hurt them or scare them.” I also spoke with Diana who chose the ‘somewhat’ category and reasoned, “Like, guys and girls are more equal than back then so, yah, um and like, love is love.” From there, I asked the students to imagine the scenario in reverse. I wondered how they would feel if Demetrius was desperately pursuing Helena against her wishes. Would they see the situation the same or differently? The students repeated the exercise with three students standing in the centre of the room unsure, four in the unacceptable corner, eight in acceptable, and the rest of the class situated in somewhat acceptable/unacceptable. With the shifting of bodies that occurred into the different corners of the room, it was clear that the students felt gender was a factor when thinking through what was acceptable or unacceptable in a relationship, and for whom. However, their reasoning was not what I had expected.

With my head deeply immersed in statistics and literature related to gender-based violence, I assumed that the students would suggest Demetrius was wrong for pursuing (or thwarting) Helena with such aggressive emotion. I figured they would see a man as a threat to a woman in this position. Considering these students were in a school committed to gender equity, I also expected that the girls would consider it humiliating for Helena to pursue Demetrius at any cost. I figured they might say that no man was worth begging for. However,
these Grade 7 students were looking at the two scenarios from very different perspectives than I was. Furthermore, the girls and the boys in the class were looking at the scenarios very differently from each other, which offered some insight into how boys and girls navigated relationships at Oak Lane Academy.

Several boys suggested it would be acceptable for Demetrius to be the pursuer, as he was fulfilling his role as a man in a “typical love story,” although it was not acceptable for him to be emotional like Helena. According to the boys, being over-emotional or possessive went “against the code of dating.” A man was supposed to be emotionally strong and able to find love where a woman desired him. One of the boys in the class said it was perfectly acceptable for a woman to act irrationally and emotionally over someone she liked, but a guy needed to “man up” and move on if he was not wanted. In other words, it was perfectly acceptable and expected for Demetrius to pursue Helena, as long as he was able to maintain his composure like a man. These arguments align with past theorizing on adolescent romantic encounters, which suggest that boys enter heterosexual relationships with greater confidence, less emotional engagement, and emerge as powerful performers in comparison to female partners (Giordano, Longmore, & Manning, 2006). According to literature reviewed by Giordano et al. (2006) “girls are socialized to centre attention on personal relationships . . . and romance, boys’ interactions within male peer groups often lead them to define the heterosexual world as another arena in which they can compete and score” (p. 261).

One of the main perspectives, offered exclusively by the Grade 7 girls, was that it was acceptable to pursue another person (regardless if you were a woman or man) if it was for love. It did not matter if you were asked to stop, if the other person did not like you back, or if they treated you somewhat poorly. Love trumped all. The girls stated that Helena loved
Demetrius and continued to pursue him because she was afraid of losing him. Although they were quick to point out that it was not acceptable for a girl to act desperate, be irrational, or want to be hit like a dog in a quest for love, they were smitten by the idea of romantic love and telling a boy he was the one. It is suggested in studies on female adolescents that they are strongly oriented to romantic relationships, which oftentimes results in “fundamental gender inequalities that tend to be reproduced as girls learn to center much time and energy on their romantic attachments” (Giordano et al., 2006, p. 262). Connell (1987) implies that social influences (such as dominant gender discourses) perpetuate gender inequity in relationships, which can have a negative impact on the well-being of those involved. A study conducted by Volpe, Morales-Alemán, and Teitelman (2014), states that while romantic relationships in adolescence can be significant for their personal development, it is also highly implicated in increased health issues such as teen-dating violence. They further suggest that females who experience teen-dating violence are more susceptible to be involved in violent relationships as adults.

In an interview with Caroline Li on the topic of Helena, Demetrius, and the unhealthy state of their relationship she stated,

If someone says that they like you, you shouldn’t be, like, and even if you don’t like them you shouldn’t be disgusted by them. You know? That’s kind of just mean. Like, you should still feel, like, flattered err, be, like, oh, like, thank you. Like, not actually. That’s weird. But, like, you should, like, accept the fact that they like you because that just means, like, that, like, you’re a good person. Right? And, like, you’re a nice person and everything like that.

I found it interesting that Caroline would suggest she should say thank you to someone who liked her even if her feelings were not mutual. She did catch herself and admit that saying
thank you was “weird,” but it spoke to her subsequent statement about being labeled “a good person” and being “nice” if she received male attention. Ringrose and Renold (2010) state that, “Decades of feminist research within sociology, criminology, psychology and education have powerfully illustrated the cultural mandates of ideal/normal femininity as passive, nurturing and accommodating” (p. 584). Whereas normative masculine behaviour dictates boys to be tough, exhibit violent tendencies, and be sexual players (Connell, 2005; Mills, 2001), girls are expected to perform in opposition to their male counterparts with an emphasis on being “nice” (Ringrose & Renold, 2010; Thorne, 1993). This notion of nice positions girls as being supportive and understanding, respectful and forgiving, good listeners, and friendly with everyone. Caroline articulated that it would be mean to ignore a boy’s advances, as her female role dictated she be nice and obliging. However, it is worth pointing out that girls did not necessarily behave in the same way with each other, leading to contradictory female descriptors of girls as being mean (Ringrose, 2006).

It was a classroom divided by gender and relationship ideals with each group arguing their perspective intelligently. The boys in the room were not interested in a theory of love, but about the realities of the legal system and laws concerning harassment. Mike was particularly vocal in stating that love did not matter if someone was being pursued persistently. It was called stalking, which was illegal. Mike stated that the only thing that mattered when considering what was acceptable or unacceptable in these relationship scenarios was whether the law said it was right or wrong. If Helena or Demetrius fell into the category of stalking, despite loving the other, it was unacceptable and crossed the line of appropriate behaviour. In our final interview together at the end of the school year, I asked Mike to reflect on the workshop. He said, “You can’t use love to justify anything. You can’t
use love to justify murder. So, there’s that line and that line is very important.” Yet, the law is not as black and white as Mike would believe it to be, especially in terms of sexual harassment, stalking, or even rape (Barnett, 2008).

Talking about the legal system occurred in the Grade 8 classroom as well, as a means for a small group of boys to rationalize inappropriate (sexually offensive) behaviour, which was briefly described in Chapter Four as “the rape debate.” This conversation evolved out of an analysis of two characters in the play Twelfth Night, when Daniel asked the students to decide if the relationship between Duke Orsino and Olivia was appropriate or inappropriate. It quickly led to comparisons of teen rape cases in the media (e.g., Steubenville rape case), where consent was contested, and then developed into a larger debate on rape and the legal system. A male student claimed, “Rape is a sexist word. It goes against men.” He believed that rape was merely about penile penetration, indicating only men could be blamed for a sexual offense. Daniel insisted men were not solely responsible for rape and that Canadian law states there must be vigorous consent to determine sexual responsibility. Daniel further asserted there was a legal expectation for active and vigorous consent for every sexual act, which did not include silence as a form of consent. This escalated the debate.

A male student asked, “So, if they [girls/women] don’t say anything and they go along with it [sex], they could go to court?” Another boy questioned Daniel’s understanding of Canadian law and a few others disregarded the definition of consent presented to them. They argued a number of scenarios in an attempt to demonstrate the law was unjust to men in particular and empowered women. Another male student claimed women would engage in intercourse just for the sake of suing, “They could earn money that way like legal prostitution.” More discussion ensued to clarify the meaning of consent, but it did not seem
to make an impact. One male student stated adamantly it was not his responsibility to make sure a woman was okay if they were to engage in sex. Daniel felt the boys were getting totally consumed with the legal definition of rape when in fact it was a very complex issue with regards “to real people and real bodies.” Without a doubt, consent is one of the most contested issues regarding rape culture within sociological, legal, and feminist discourses, which is fraught with misinformation and societal myths (Barnett, 2008; Powell, Henry, Flynn, & Henderson, 2013).

Regardless of what Daniel said, the boys were unrelenting until the end of class. It was fascinating to see the parallels between the Grade 7 and Grade 8 classroom conversations, which developed through simple character analyses of heterosexual relationships in two different Shakespearean plays. In both instances the boys intellectualized their understanding of violence in relationships by spouting heterosexist rhetoric, enacting male privilege, and arguing their perspectives within the confines of the law. However, the Grade 8 boys took the conversation one step further with their denial of rape culture, on the basis of reverse discrimination, by arguing that men no longer had equal rights in heterosexual relationships or encounters. I wondered how familiar these students were of men’s rights movements growing in stature across North America that propagate “misogynistic, homophobic, transphobic, phallocentric, and patriarchal” (Allan, 2016, p. 23) discourses. I also connected this Grade 8 debate with a widely publicized rape case involving three Duke University lacrosse players in the spring of 2006. The university maintained its image as an elite institution by framing the incident in terms of “reason versus emotion” (Barnett, 2008, p. 179). Reading the case reminded me of the classroom dialogue and the
ways the elite Oak Lane Academy boys justified their notion of rape through intellectual reasoning with no regard for people involved.

Undoubtedly, rape is an incredibly controversial topic that has historically been depicted “as a no-fault crime for men thought to be overwhelmed with passion when taunted by sexually alluring women,” which has be redefined by feminists over the years “as a deliberate act, a crime of violence and hate, not a crime of passion, in which perpetrators are at fault, not victims” (Barnett, 2008, p. 180). Yet, despite efforts to change the narrative, rape victims continue to be criticized and questioned for their part in the violence. Barnett (2008) claims that one of the reasons this happens is the way the media portrays sex and violence by misconstruing “the complexity of sexual assault with simplistic and inaccurate characterizations of both victim and perpetrator” (p. 181) in what she refers to as “rape myths” (p. 181). Much of the rape discourse spoken of in class was framed around rape myths, which included women seeking attention and women making easy money by suing men for being assaulted. With the hype of the Steubenville rape case (involving high school students) fresh in the minds of the Oak Lane Academy Grade 8 students, who had little to no real knowledge of rape, I could understand how easy it was for them to debate rape discourse devoid of emotion. This seemed particularly plausible given their elite standing as privileged and entitled males who regularly enacted normalized masculinity.

For the conclusion of the Grade 7 workshop, I invited the students to offer their advice to either Helena or Demetrius. It was their choice. I asked: If Helena were your friend, what advice would you give her about her relationship with Demetrius? Or, if Demetrius were your friend, what advice would you give him about his relationship with Helena? The advice could be written in prose or point form and was meant to be anonymous. Twelve
students wrote to Helena and eleven to Demetrius. Much of what was written reiterated the discussion in class, although there was less about love. The following are some examples of written advice by the Grade 7 students (May 21, 2013):

- Helena: “Tone it down a lot. Don’t be overly desperate, still have some dignity PLEASE.”

- Demetrius: “Demetrius you should stop being creepy. You could go to jail. After sue her for discrimination for not going out with you.” This advice was written by “The Guy”

- Helena: “Take it down a notch [sic] & give him some space. You aren’t wrong, but don’t make yourself look desperate. Stop degrading the female stereotype.”

- Demetrius: “Demetrius, slow down, you still have a whole life ahead of you. Unacceptable if you start to stalk her. Know your limits of life. If you go overboard you fall into the abyss of love.”

Looking closely at all of the written pieces of advice (including others not shown here, as there were over twenty in total), I found it compelling that the students speaking directly to Helena were quick to reprimand her for being desperate, too emotional, not having any dignity, and having little common sense. However, the advice offered to Demetrius was to stop being creepy, to not take it so far, know his limits, and stop embarrassing himself. While both characters were admonished for their behaviour, they were not scolded in the same way. The students articulated in the workshop that women were expected to be emotional, but it was unacceptable and a negative attribute for them to be overly emotional. The advice to Helena was focused primarily on her “weakness,” which were her emotions. Additionally, students believed that men were supposed to take charge and be emotionally strong. Therefore, the advice to Demetrius felt like more of a reminder of the strength he needed to
embody as a man, to know his limits and not be creepy. Other general advice given to these two characters included getting over each other, moving on to other people, and to stop being a stalker.

Of the advice shared above, I found the two written to Demetrius to be the most revealing. One student (assumed to be male by the signature “the guy”) was quick to point out that Demetrius could sue Helena for not going out with him. So although the writer is telling Demetrius to stop being creepy, there is also the insistence that Helena should accept the man’s proposal. In other words, Helena is not in a position as a woman to say no and will suffer the consequences if she does by being sued. This made me think of the boys’ stance on rape and their willingness to blame women for being victims of sexual violence and/or turning to the legal system after having sex. In both examples, boys assert their dominance and make clear the inferiority of girls. The other student’s advice (above) warns Demetrius to slow down and know his limits or he could end up falling totally in love. I sense the writer thinks Demetrius is either too young for love or falling in love is not cool for a man to do. Love is for women.

Findings from the study conducted by Volpe et al. (2014), on the perspectives of female adolescents’ romantic relationships, show evidence of four major themes including “male pursuit and social norms on relationship initiation factors” and “relationship conflict through control and abuse” (p. 779). These findings suggest that girls for the most part rely on boys to do the pursuing, which for some resulted in unwelcome and persistent pursuits by boys who would not take no for an answer. Furthermore, “controlling behaviors and physical, psychological, and sexual violence, often bidirectional and intertwined” (Volpe et al., 2014, p. 784) was not uncommon for several of the participants in their relationships. However,
what I found most revealing is that not all of those who experienced violent behaviour in their relationships actually identified it as such. Furthermore, some girls claimed to be in meaningful and important relationships despite also admitting to its violent nature. Volpe et al. (2014) discovered that “adolescent participants of both genders had a difficult time identifying the difference between playing, harassment, and abuse in their romantic relationships” (p. 787).

While the majority of the workshop notes were anonymous, Quinn chose to identify herself by name. I was curious to know more by her advice to Helena, “Sisters before misters,” and was able to inquire about it during our final interview together. She said, “A lot of people think, like, who would you choose? Rather, your best friend or, like, whoever you’re in a relationship with? Like, your boyfriend or girlfriend?” Quinn felt that Helena betrayed her friend Hermia by telling Demetrius that Hermia was going into the woods with Lysander. Helena wanted to see Demetrius one more time to profess her love for him. The only way for Helena to see Demetrius again was to promise him access to Hermia. Quinn said she would be angry if a friend betrayed her trust to get the attention of a boy.

While I understood Quinn’s feelings about betrayal, I thought it was interesting that she raised the topic of having to choose between a best friend and a romantic partner. It seemed an implicit female code of friendship that boys were not to come between girls, although girls were often competing amongst each other for the interests of boys. According to Thorne (1993), “The rituals and desires of heterosexual romance may undermine friendships among young women” (p. 170) and it was not uncommon for girls to lose touch with friends once they had a boyfriend to attend to. Therefore, Quinn’s advice, “Sisters
before misters” seemed to make a larger point about girl behaviour when considering the context of female friendships at Oak Lane Academy.

During this interview I also asked Quinn about love, as she argued in class that pursuing someone for love was justified. However, I furthered my inquiry by asking, “Where is the line drawn between something that is no longer love, when a relationship maybe goes into something that is unhealthy or inappropriate?” Quinn responded, “I might sound crazy, but, like, Helena’s actions with Demetrius aren’t, like, [a] terrible thing to do. I mean she’s acting out of love. Look what happened to Romeo and Juliet. Right?” She said there was no harm in chasing after someone you truly loved, as long as it did not become abusive. She said if Helena started beating Demetrius or throwing rocks at his head “then that is, like, where you draw the line. Because then it gets, you start to get hurt.” I found it interesting that Quinn did not see the emotional harm perpetuated between the characters in the play, where Helena demeaned herself to Demetrius and he in return treated her harshly. Or the fact that Helena continued to pursue Demetrius despite him asking her to stop. Quinn equated harm in relationships with overt violence such as hitting or throwing rocks, but anything less than that was acceptable for love. I also found it fascinating that Helena could have an emotionally complex relationship with Demetrius, but she had to be on her best behaviour as a friend to Hermia. Clearly, there was a double standard when considering appropriate etiquette in female friendships versus heterosexual romantic partnerships.

This workshop revealed the dichotomy between the boys and girls and their conceptions of love and relationships. The girls approached the topic from an emotional perspective that idealized true love, whereas the boys were more concerned with rationalizing the character’s behaviour within the bounds of the law. Mike asserted strongly
that love could not be used to justify any kind of behaviour if the law deemed it inappropriate. However, Caroline was more concerned with being flattered and acting nicely if someone told her they liked her, even if she did not like them in return. Quinn, while in full support of love, also wanted to make it clear that girls should never choose a boy over a best friend. She felt that choosing a “mister” over a “sister” was a friendship betrayal. What I found most intriguing about the results of this workshop was that most of the students did not consider the infatuation/love we discussed in class to be unacceptable unless it crossed a “line” into illegal (stalking) or violent (beating/throwing rocks) behaviour. I sensed that it was easier for the students to intellectualize the problem between the characters rather than consider the emotional implications involved. This was evident in the Grade 8 class as well, particularly during the rape debate.

One of the main reasons I chose to facilitate the Grade 7 workshop as I did, which invited the students to consider character perspectives, was from observing Daniel do the same with his Grade 8 class during their literature unit on *Twelfth Night*. In Chapter Five and in an excerpt above, I shared how a similar activity regarding two characters in the play turned into a debate on rape. I also refer to the play and other activities/lessons in Chapter Seven when illustrating games and game-like behaviour in the classroom. However, before Daniel invited the students to turn to page one of the play, he asked them to spend some time at home answering eight questions on the topic of love and relationships to help them “understand the characters and why they make some of the choices they do” (from 12th Night Opening Reflection worksheet, received on May 5, 2013). These questions were then taken up in class, as part of an activity described below.
Twelfth Night is rich with intrigue, attraction, and love, with significant homoerotic undertones throughout the various acts, leading the story to end with heterosexual unions. To explore these complex themes throughout the reading of the play, Daniel wanted to know more about how his students defined topics such as love, healthy and unhealthy loving relationships, and the expectations of being a man and a woman in these relationships. Students were placed in small groups of three or four and instructed to rotate through eight stations (one question per station), during the course of the seventy-five-minute class. Each group sat at a station and when Daniel gave them the signal they rotated to a new station at the same time. At each station was a piece of paper with a question written at the top. The students were invited to answer the question on the paper, adding to each other’s answers as the groups rotated. While all of the answers to the questions were noteworthy, I was most intrigued by the ones provided by the students for questions six and seven. These two questions were essentially the same, but written gender specifically. To save space I have included the words woman and man together to share the questions as follows, “If a woman/man is attracted to/interested in someone, how is s/he supposed to express her/his interest and/or try to pursue a relationship with them? What kinds of behaviour/comments are advisable/inadvisable? Acceptable or unacceptable?” It is important to note that these questions did not assume heterosexuality in how they were written, but were interpreted that way by the students based on the answers that were collected after the activity.

Collectively, the student responses positioned the man as needing to be hyper-masculine and heterosexual, yet vulnerable and kind at the same time, creating a tension between the naughty bad boy and nice good guy. Although these views were not surprising, I was also struck by the confusing and contradictory expectations placed on boys/men that
would be a challenge for any person to adhere to. There were general characteristics listed to articulate how a man should or should not be with regards to his physique, hygiene, attitude, and behaviour. However, most of the responses implied that a man needed to behave in ways to please a woman by playing the dominant role in the relationship. The notion that men were expected to pursue women and initiate relationships was evident in the various answers and also shared in this revealing quote,

If a girl makes the first move, it reverses the roles, which is not bad but usually does not happen until they are married. Also, if the guy does like the girl, he might feel intimidated because the girl had the guts to ask him out when while he did not.

The following lists were taken from the students’ own words, as written down during the in-class activity in English class, although I divided them into categories.

- **Naughty**: be less emotional, want sex, don’t be a feminist, assume women are weaker, show off “masculinity” and be “manly,” flirt and initiate a physical relationship, be fit and have a six pack, look nice, have good hygiene, have a good personality, and look “pretty hot.”

- **Nice**: charming, make the first move, pay for dates, buy date gifts, do not be clingy (girls need space), do not be a douchebag, be a gentleman, be more mature, be kind, be understanding, never get mad, be considerate, be sensitive, do not be rude, do not be overly sexual or too forward, do not be controlling, make them happy, talk about the other person, no pick-up lines, compliment partner (the word “girls” was crossed out and partner written above it), be polite, protect them.
Regarding the students’ responses to question seven on women, there were three pieces of paper submitted between the two English classes that were insightful in different ways. One had a vertical line drawn through the centre with “advisable” written on the left and “inadvisable” written on the right. This referred to the advisable or inadvisable ways a woman might act, speak, dress, and care for her body. Another sheet had two female figures drawn (including hair and clothing) with arrows pointing towards each one. The figure on the left was labelled “sexy” (she was drawn in a simple dress with an arrow pointing to her face with the label “make up”) and the figure on the right was labelled “slutty” (she was drawn in a tube top and mini-skirt with the label “sleeps around”). The third paper was a combination of the first two with lots of writing and a drawn figure of a woman. The female figure on the third paper had arrows pointing towards her indicating respectable traits (e.g., “subtle flirting,” “subtle and classy,” and “keep him wanting more”). This figure was not labelled as sexy or slutty, yet those terms were referred to elsewhere on the page (“sexy=good; slutty=bad”).

Similar to the ways a man was portrayed in question six, there were also confusing and contradictory expectations placed on women. However, women were described in noticeably harsher terms than men, with an enormous emphasis placed on their looks, being nice, and playing to a man’s desires, particular within the framework of the sexy versus slutty female. The following lists were taken from the students’ own words, as written down during the in-class activity in English class. However, I organized the data into advisable (do), inadvisable (do not), for simplicity sake.

- **Advisable (DO):** flirt back when flirted with, be pretty and made up, play games with guys and keep them wanting more, be guy crazy and “head over heels,” have a good
personality, be attractive, have cute animals (puppies/kittens), giggle, be kind and sweet, be gentle, nice, likeable, quiet, and mysterious, wear make-up and a push-up bra, keep him wanting more, do not be too obvious, accentuate curves TNA, laugh at bad jokes, be low maintenance.

- **Inadvisable (DO NOT):** smell bad, degrade self, be slutty, clingy, manipulative, possessive, fish for compliments, take direct action, be forceful, jealous, two-faced, or whiny.

- **And Yet (with all of that said):** “be yourself B tru to u ALWAYS,” be independent, confident, strong, mature, and comfortable.

Despite the presence of gender equity in the school, and the students’ ability to deconstruct gender issues through intellectual dialogue and debate in the English classroom, this activity further revealed the heterosexist, heteronormative and patriarchal ideologies underpinning the Oak Lane Academy student population. Although boys/men and girls/women were each described in confusing and contradictory ways, considering the acceptable and unacceptable traits of each gender, there was a distinct difference between how the students described men compared to women.

Men were essentially glorified for their masculinity, which had few bounds. They were admired for their bad boy image, while simultaneously embraced for being a good guy. Men could be less emotional, have sex, and flaunt a sexy body, and still be considered nice if he paid for dates and took care of his woman. Men maintained control of their environment by making the first move to ask a girl out on a date, cementing their authoritative position for being male. However, women needed to perform femininity in a way that supported their
desirability rather than weaken it. For women, there was a fine line between sexy and slutty, which required them to be attractive, demure, and nice, for the purpose of attracting a man, but not be sexual. Although, some of the students suggested that girls could be “independent, confident, strong, mature, and comfortable,” they were still confined to a particular type of femininity to fit in. Being too independent or confident detracted from their appeal, as much as being labeled “slutty” harmed their reputation. Essentially, the students revealed that acceptable behaviour considered worthy of someone’s interest to form a relationship, required heteronormative performances of masculinity and femininity to attain. The results from this activity are very similar to the ways scholars have been writing for decades on performances of masculinity and femininity (e.g., Butler, 1990; Connell, 1987, 2005; Pascoe, 2005; West & Zimmerman, 1987), adolescent relationship expectations (e.g., Alder et al., 1992; Chase, 2008; Thorne, 1993; Volpe et al., 2014), and patriarchy (e.g., Allen, 2016; Brown et al., 2007).

**Summary**

It was glaringly evident through the various activities explored in the classroom that Grade 7 boys and girls perceived episodes of love and the gender roles they played quite differently from each other. The girls believed in an idealized love of pursuing a partner regardless of the circumstances, whereas the boys abided by the law. Few boys were willing to consider the emotions of the characters in the play, as they preferred to approach the topic of courtship through rational assessment. If the law said an aspect of a relationship was inappropriate or illegal (e.g., stalking or violence) then love had no value. While the girls agreed that violence (e.g., beating/hitting) crossed a “line” of appropriateness, they did not seem to recognize the negative impact of an emotionally harmful relationship. From the
perspective of gender, boys identified as the dominant person in a relationship who made the first move and asked a girl out. Yet, they took their privilege as boys for granted, assuming it was a natural role they played as a man, rather than a construction of patriarchy. In turn, the girls did not seem to recognize that their constrained performance of femininity (to love and be loved, regardless of how they were treated) was directly influenced by their subordination to the boys.

The Grade 8 students explored love and relationships a little differently in the activity shared above that did not require character analysis. Rather, this activity clearly illustrated the prevalence of heteronormativity (and assumed heterosexuality) in the school and the obvious inequities that existed between girls and boys, especially concerning rules of etiquette, hygiene, dating, and performances of class. In particular, the students maintained that men were in a position of power over women on the gender hierarchy. Not only were they expected to make the first move in a relationship, suggesting that women needed to wait to be asked out, but they were also given other allowances that women were not. Men were not body shamed or called names for their sexual behaviour, compared to women who were labeled “sexy” and “slutty.” In fact, men were applauded if they were able to straddle the naughty/nice binary, whereas women were expected to be the single embodiment of demure, submissive and nice. These comparisons restated the bounds by which students adhered to normative gender discourses, which significantly impacted their notion of love and relationships.

In the next section I will transition from an intellectualized understanding of ideals and expectations in heteronormative romantic relationships to describing how they operate in the lives of Grade 7 and 8 students. Through illustrations of dating, the “friend zone,” and
promposals, I will demonstrate the protocols (procedures/system of rules) students abide by when entering into these mix-gendered relationships. I will also show evidence of the established gender hierarchy at Oak Lane Academy and how age and location is relevant to dating norms.

**Protocols for Heteronormative Engagement**

Despite the complex nature of *Twelfth Night* and *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, for young audiences to comprehend, they proved to be valuable resources for exploring aspects of relationships as part of the curriculum. The Grade 7 and 8 students had multiple opportunities to talk about friendships, infatuation, and love, as part of critical character analysis, while also being invited to make comparisons to their own lived experiences and understandings of relationships. Daniel was particularly purposeful in planning his English lessons to deconstruct notions of heteronormativity and to address issues of gender-based violence when it surfaced in classroom dialogue. It was due to these rich in-class conversations that I was able to delve deeper with students outside of the classroom, as they already had a basis of knowledge pertinent to my study.

It was not until the spring that dating started to surface in conversations with research participants. I either asked them about aspects of dating or they brought it up on their own. I assumed they were heterosexual relationships, but it was not clear. It was not stated one way or the other. By that point in the study we were familiar with each other and had developed a comfortable relationship. My inquiry started with Grade 8 student Isabelle. During our interview together I asked her if people in her grade were dating. She said yes, and then, “Well not anymore, like, everyone broke up. So there’s only two couples in our grade now.” I further inquired, “What does it mean to date?” I wondered what dating looked like in her
grade and what people did together. Isabelle replied, “In our friend group, the two people that are dating . . . they go to, like, the movies together or they go to restaurants together, or, like, at lunch they go eat lunch together, or, like, at a party, like, are together.” In a book chapter detailing the romantic relationships of adolescents, Connolly and McIsaac (2011) approximate that between the ages of twelve and fifteen, 25—50% of students will have experienced one romantic relationship. However, they point out there is a difference between dating versus relationships that are considered romantic in nature. Romantic relationships are defined broadly with “three component features—passion, intimacy, and commitment” (Connolly & McIsaac, 2011, p. 181). In discussions with Isabelle and other students on the topic of dating, I was unsure if the relationships they spoke about were considered casual or romantic. However, Connolly and McIsaac (2011) state that middle school adolescents tend to date casually in short increments “for affiliation and passionate feelings” (p. 185). This was the age group of the participants in my study.

I was curious if sex was an aspect of dating at her age, but Isabelle said quickly, “No sex. No.” I shared that I was aware of the differences between students in Grade 8 and Grade 9, and that sex was more common in the high school years. Isabelle agreed. I asked, “So do you typically date within your own grade? I don’t mean you, just in general?” She responded, “Most students stick within our grade. At least at our age, right now.” She then proceeded to tell me about the basement rule “The rule is, here, it’s called the ‘basement rule’ ‘cause, like, Grade 10 to Grade 12, their lockers are in the basement. So if you’re in the basement then you can date people in the basement. That’s the rule.” Similar to the ways students abided by the social hierarchy in their class and/or grade, there was evidently a hierarchy related to the rules of dating. I assumed this had a lot to do with the emotional and sexual maturity of older
students compared to the younger ones when it came to dating and being in a more committed relationship (Connolly & McIsaac, 2011).

Not everyone in Grade 8 was familiar with the basement rule, including Claire and Peach. However, it was Grade 7 friends Melanie and Diana who had heard of the basement rule and brought it up without my prodding. We were on the topic of dating when I asked, “Do people tend to date in their grade or is it okay to go up a grade?” Melanie jumped in with a response, “I know the seniors have this rule that they only date people who are also in the basement with them so, like, Grade 10, 11, and 12.” I acknowledged that I had heard this before, but that not everyone I had spoken with seemed to know the “rule.” Diana said, “I never thought it was a rule, but I just . . .” Melanie interjected, “It’s kind of like a . . .” At the same time they both said, “thing.” I echoed in response, “Oh, it’s just a thing. Okay. Interesting. Which means you have to be in what grade to be in the basement?” The girls confirmed Grades 10 through 12, and then Diana added, “Which I think is okay.” Melanie piped in that she had a “buddy” in Grade 12 who was dating a Grade 10. Diana exclaimed, “It’s so cute!”

Melanie continued, “Relating back to your question. When you’re younger, dating, it’s more often in your grade, but for me, I hang out with a lot of other grades. Right? And so I dated a Grade 8.” Diana agreed, “Yah. It just depends who you are comfortable with because I think Grade 8s are kind of scary too.” Melanie interrupted, “But I’m really comfortable with them. I’m friends with them and know almost all of them.” I reflected for a moment on everything they shared and then responded that I felt a one-year difference between people was reasonable at their age, but there was a big difference between Grade 7

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62 Every student in Grade 7 was placed with a “buddy” in Grade 12 who acted as a mentor and a friend for the entire school year.
and 9. Melanie agreed, “It matters a lot because you’re still maturing at that age. The
difference for me this year and me last year is different worlds.”

I was curious what dating looked like in Grade 7 and Melanie responded, “It differs
for every different person. For me, I know some people they, like, make-out and stuff and,
like, they consider that dating.” I confirmed that she was talking about students in Grade 7,
which she was. Diana exclaimed, “Ew!” and then asked, Who?” Melanie whispered in
Diana’s ear so I could not hear. Diana nodded her head to acknowledge Melanie, who
proceeded to enlighten me on Grade 7 dating norms,

I don’t really consider that dating, we just hold hands and talk and walk
around and stuff . . . For me, when I was dating, I really liked the person and
he really liked me too and we just talked about everything. And, like, I
considered that dating. I had strong feelings about him and he had strong
feelings about me. We could talk about anything and we just hung out a lot.

I missed the opportunity to ask Melanie why she did not consider making-out dating,
but felt holding hands and being together was. I wondered if the couples she was talking
about only came together to explore their relationships sexually or if there was more
involvement beyond the physical attraction. Regardless, I got the sense that Melanie was not
ready for more than holding hands and Diana was clearly repulsed by kissing. There were
other students in Grade 7 who were not even remotely interested in romantic relationships. I
had a conversation with Grade 7 student Ella Yang who when asked to describe boys in her
class said, “I don’t tolerate them . . . They’re, like, all weird. Like, weird in a bad way.”
When I asked what she meant by weird when talking about boys, she laughed and said,
“Like, ew, ew, ew, ew . . . I don’t like them. Well, some of them are okay. But some of them
are, like, ugh.” Grade 7 student Vlad Andrews had a similar sentiment about girls, “I don’t
understand them. They’re creepy. . . . They’re really weird.” I asked if he could explain what he meant by creepy and weird, but he could not.

In another interview with David he shared a little bit about what relationships were like in Grade 8, “I found, like, through this year everyone’s wanting to become more and more like the Grade 9s and the Grade 10s above us, which, like, aren’t exactly the most innocent of people. The Grade 9s especially.” I asked if David could explain what he meant by that and he hesitated, “I don’t feel safe discussing their matters. I think that’s supposed to be for them.” I told David I could guess what he was referring to and moved on from the subject. He did reveal that some of his friends were dating and I learned from Claire that dating in Grade 8 was very common. She said there was some dating in Grade 7, but more so in her grade. I sensed from these discussions that dating started slowly at Oak Lane Academy and increased with each passing year. Each grade looked up to the students ahead of them, as examples for dating rules and ways to experiment sexually. While Grade 9 students were not in the basement, they were reported to be “less than innocent.” It is possible that they were modeling the older students while trying to distinguish themselves from the junior grades. Connolly and McIsaac (2011) outline two stages older adolescents experience in relationships, which include “stable relationships in which older adolescents’ needs for intimacy are met alongside those of sexuality and affiliation,” as well as “committed relationships in which young adults are more about to be caretakers for all of their partner’s emotional needs” (p. 185 [emphasis in original]).

For those who were not interested in dating (either at all or with a particular person), there was the “friend zone.” I was observing an early morning Grade 8 English class at the end of May, listening to the students talk about two characters in Twelfth Night, when it first
came up. Through twists in the story the male character, Malvolio, fell in love with the female character, Olivia. Despite Malvolio’s attempts at love, Olivia was not interested in reciprocating. A male student in the class said that Malvolio was in the “friend zone,” which prompted Daniel to question the meaning of the term. The student said it was like keeping someone in your back pocket. Keira, who was in the class, said it was a way to reject someone and let them know you were only interested in being friends by saying, “Oh, you’re such a good friend.” Peach, who was also in attendance that morning, offered similar sentiments to Keira. When Claire and I met for an interview, shortly after that class, I asked her to clarify the meaning of the term so that I understood it correctly. She was in the English class the morning of the discussion and said that everyone in her grade was familiar with the term,

So, um, what happens, it’s usually if a guy likes a girl and then the girl doesn’t like him back, like in a romantic way, and then she says ‘oh we should just stay friends’ and then that’s called the friend zone, as she’s put him as a friend and not anything more. And then, um, like they just stay friends and that’s, sort of, like, known as a guy’s worst nightmare, sort of. People sort of joke about it, but, yah.

I assumed from Claire’s description that the “friend zone” was gendered and heterosexual. Boys made the first move and girls put boys in the friend zone. I did not ask if the reverse was possible.

A day after my interview with Claire, I sat down with Peach, who asserted that the friend zone was not meant to be a joke, “but it’s funny when people use it.” She said it was difficult to explain, but “if somebody’s acting as if they are putting someone else in the friend zone then it’s just kind of funny. I don’t know why it’s funny, it’s just funny.”
wondered if the girls enjoyed rejecting boys they did not “like” (putting them in the friend zone), as it was an opportunity afforded them to be in a position of power that happened rarely. Although it was expected for boys to make the first move, the girls seemed to have full control to say yes or no. Furthermore, if a girl spurned a boy, I imagine he would receive a lot of teasing from his male friends for not being man enough to get a girl, which might in turn make the entire situation “funny” to those watching. Oak Lane Academy students were familiar with turning embarrassing or hurtful moments into jokes, which I will talk about in greater detail in Chapter Seven.

One story that complicates the norms of dating (boys make the first move) and the friend zone (girls say no) is that of “promposals;” an annual event through which boys select girls as dates for the prom. Susan Bauer, the school Vice-Principal was actively trying to resolve the matter while I was at Oak Lane Academy conducting my research. The problem Susan had with the long-standing tradition was that the decision-making power was solely in the hands of the senior boys. She explained to me that the senior boys created a private Facebook page listing every student by gender that would be attending the prom. One-by-one, each boy was matched with a girl until every student had a date. How this was actually accomplished eluded me, but I am sure there was a great deal of male competition to determine who would be put together, starting at the top of the social hierarchy and moving down. Once the pairing was complete, the boys would go about asking their respective dates to the big event. As the school offered an equal enrolment of boys and girls, this pairing was made possible. Susan spoke to some of the boys involved in the process in an effort to dismantle the promposal practice, but to no avail. She argued that attendees should be allowed to bring whomever they wanted to the prom, which might include attending with
friends or flying solo. She insisted that not all boys or girls needed or wanted a date; plus, mix-gender coupling did not take into consideration the students who identified as gay or lesbian. Furthermore, she vehemently opposed the way the boys chose a girl, as one would claim a prize, without the girl having a choice in the matter.

The boys argued in return that they were being inclusive, and that by pairing every boy and girl together, no one was left without having someone to attend the prom with. However, what the boys failed to recognize was that the practice denied the girls power or agency to make their own decisions and whether to support or oppose promposals. Rather, the boys set the standards for a particular hegemonic masculinity that legitimized heteronormativity and maintained patriarchal practices with little concern for the girls at all. Their actions reinforced their entitlement as boys at Oak Lane Academy, while substantiating the limitations placed on girls. With that said, I did not hear reports of girls countering the tradition by suggesting other options or asking to veto promposals altogether. This is not surprising, as girls were accustomed to deferring to boys and going along with their actions and/or behaviour regardless of the impact to their own well-being. Furthermore, this example of prom illustrates the pervasiveness of male superiority that permeated all of the grades and affirms the hierarchy to which the boys and girls of Oak Lane Academy were subjected.

What makes the story of prom complicated is the idea of the friend zone. Although I never asked the question, in retrospect I wondered if any of the girls said no when their suitors came calling. If a girl did say no, I was curious what would happen. Was the friend zone appropriate for a one-time date to the prom or only used by a girl to reject a boy who “liked” her? After all, promposals were a school tradition established by boys who typically set the rules. Going against the norm and disrupting the natural flow of events could result in
detrimental consequences for girls, who were already in a position of inferiority. It made me believe that girls would have little choice in the matter to accept the date they were assigned to and make the best of their night.

**Summary**

Throughout all of my discussions with Grade 7 and 8 students, it became clear that there were particular protocols in place for dating at Oak Lane Academy regarding age and location. Dating in the younger grades started slowly and increased with each passing year, as did sexual experimentation. There was some making out in Grade 7, although holding hands, hanging out together, and talking was more common. At the Grade 8 level more students were reported to be dating, with some keenly observing the behaviour of older students, although no one was said to be having sex. Regarding the hierarchical dating rules of the school, students mostly dated peers in their own grade. It was only in the senior years (Grades 10–12), when students found themselves with their lockers in the basement, that they were allowed to date someone more than a year older or younger than they were. Those that succeeded in dating had the opportunity to play out or resist a number of gender expectations placed on them, as social constructs of society.

The heteronormative environment of the school dictated that dating was assumed to be with the opposite gender. Boys practiced the art of asking a girl out and she either accepted or put him in the “friend zone,” which was described as “a guy’s worst nightmare.” Girls who described the friend zone said it was thought to be funny or a joke. I assumed it was funny for girls as they were in a rare position of power to refuse a boy and it was funny for boys to see a male peer go down in flames. Lastly, I introduced promposals as a way to complicate the idea of boys making the first move and girls accepting or rejecting a date.
Promposals were an annual event set up by senior boys to include everyone in the dating process for the one-night event. I questioned whether girls had any agency in saying no to a potential suitor when asked to the prom, as they certainly had none in the selection process.

In the following and final section, I will discuss how students rationalized their smartness as correlation to knowing better than to be involved in unhealthy situations. They believed that being academically smart gave them a perspective on relationships and love that less intelligent people at other schools lacked.

**Being Smart Equals Knowing Better**

A theme that surfaced a number of times through the ways students spoke, but was rarely stated directly, was that they knew better because they were smart. Better as in, they would know if they were in an unhealthy romantic relationship, they would know if gender-based violence was happening in their school, or they would know how to handle a situation of harassment or abuse. Because they were smart, and could intellectually articulate how they imagined a situation to be, they were convinced that they would know exactly what to do or how to avoid a situation altogether. The students were very good at intellectual debate and rationalizing episodes of violence in relationships that they could not comprehend on an emotional level. However, rather than admit they did not understand it, they would articulate all the knowledge they had to support their argument.

The first time a Grade 8 student alluded to smartness and knowing better was during an English class discussion on female gender stereotypes. Daniel asked the students what would happen to women who did not conform to the norms of femininity. There were several comments from boys and girls such as a woman would not be attractive to men, she would
not get a boyfriend, she would not have female friends, and she would be rejected or judged. A female student said she did not think it was as bad as her classmates were making it out to be, “most people are not ideal . . . smarter people don’t judge.”

Alessa Popov, a Grade 8 female student, offered a similar sentiment during our final interview together at the end of the school year. We were talking about current school-related gender-based violence statistics, which she found to be quite surprising. She said she had seen things in television shows and could imagine it happening at one of her old schools, but not at Oak Lane Academy, “That’s why I like it here so much better, ‘cause people are so much, like, ‘cause like it doesn’t really happen here.” Alessa then commented on the look of the school as a possible indicator for violence, but asserted the people made the difference between violence occurring or not, “this building itself is kind of sketchier and like not as new . . . and, like, you would expect stuff like that to happen here, but, like, when you actually look into it, like, it’s all about the people.” Prodding a little more I inquired, “And why do you think that wouldn’t happen here as much?”

I don’t know, I just guess, like, stereotypically if you are smarter, which is what you’re supposed to be to come here, you’re also supposed to be, like, it’s also kind of related to being more mature, like, being like taught differently and like, also because here, like, people, like, have their freedom . . . but at the same time they have to realize they have their responsibilities, and like most of them do. And, like, that’s why it won’t, like, they kind of, they kind of know about the real world a little more.

Alessa equated being smart with knowing more about the “real world.” She also correlated run-down schools with violence, like the public schools she had attended before enrolling at Oak Lane Academy. However, to make sense of it in her mind she dismissed the appearance
of the school as an issue because the school was full of smart kids who could not possibly be responsible for violence.

Talk about “others,” as in other schools (i.e., public) and other students (i.e., in other schools who were not as smart), was always on the tips of tongues and inserted into conversations when possible. As mentioned in Chapter Two, students were more than willing to share negative stories about their previous school experiences in comparison to Oak Lane Academy. This “othering” through a comparative narrative not only provided the students with a sense of belonging in their new school, but also served to reflect their “cultural values and identities” (Borrero, Yeh, Cruz, & Suda, 2012, p. 3) as smart elite students. Kumashiro (2000) describes the “other” within a frame of oppression and the ways students are “Othered, or in some way oppressed, in and by mainstream society” (p. 26). This might be gender-based (e.g., unequal treatment of gender non-conforming students) or racially instigated (e.g., lack of attention by teachers towards students of colour). While there was othering at Oak Lane Academy that occurred between students (particularly along gender lines) the type of othering articulating time and again in classroom conversations, interviews, and focus groups was always in relation to the less than intelligent “other” of the public-school system. Cairns (2013) affirms that young people are constantly constructing their subjectivities in opposition to those who are located somewhere else. At Oak Lane Academy it was the elite versus the ordinary. The smart versus the unintelligible other.

Similar to Alessa who seemed to think being smart equalled knowing more about the real world, so did David. This was particularly evident on the topic of pornography and sexual violence. It was not my intention to talk about pornography, but in my second interview with David at the end of the school year, he raised a point about social media and
pornography having an impact on how boys treated girls. This stemmed from a previous focus group conversation that David participated in, where we discussed gender-based violence at length. During that talk I had been open about my daughter’s Grade 8 experience of gendered violence. When the focus group was over I asked all of the participants to fill out an exit ticket. One of the questions I asked on the ticket was, “Do you think topics of gender stereotypes/assumptions, relationships, and gender-based violence should be discussed at school? Please explain your answer.” David’s response was, “I feel that for the average school, where children aren’t as educated regarding this topic, there would be value in these discussions due to the amount of gender-based violent acts that take place.” I wanted David to explain what he meant by “average schools.” He said he was not specifically referring to public schools, but “the majority of schools” that were between having “pristine environments” and the “worst schools” where you find “a happy medium.” I asked David if he felt Oak Lane Academy was a pristine school without problems. He said no, but that the bullying was almost non-existent and that there was a place for everyone. I found it interesting that David assumed many other schools except for his had episodes of gender-based violence and that students in “average schools” were not as educated about topic of gender and sexuality. Other than his claim that everyone at Oak Lane Academy belonged, there was no substantive evidence for his argument except for a desire to believe his own words.

As our conversation continued, David said, “I think that social media and, like, the porn that kids are watching, really has an impact on that [gender-based violence], ‘cause they have this idea of love and romance that’s not really what it is.” I asked David, “Do you know of kids that watch porn?” I made sure David knew he did not have to answer the question if it
made him feel uncomfortable, but he assured me he was fine and replied, “Oh yah, I do.” I was aware that watching porn in Grade 8 was very common from stories my children had told me of their peers, and David concurred, “Yah, it’s really common.” I had also read an article in the local paper just before my interview with David that stated porn was becoming an example of sex and relationships for young people, particularly boys. I said to David, “They watch porn and it’s kind of giving them an idea of, this is what a relationship is like.” He added onto my thought,

Mm-mm. And then when they get into that relationship they obviously want more than the girl wants and then stuff ends bad [sic]. They really have to realize that porn is just to make your natural human instincts, like, aroused. It’s not, like, an accurate representation of what sex is or what an actual relationship is like . . . they really don’t realize that, they think that that’s what sex is supposed to be.

At this point in our conversation I felt as if David was talking about ‘other’ boys, such as boys at “average” schools or boys researched for the local newspaper article, but not necessarily him or the boys he knew who watched porn. I asked him if he felt his peers had mixed-up ideas about relationships with girls and his response was, “Yah, no. They don’t think like that . . . they know it’s just for, yah.” I then asked him who was thinking like that and queried if it was ‘other’ boys, like people he did not know. He said,

I think maybe people who, maybe don’t talk about it. And, like, aren’t exposed to, like, these types of discussions with, like, their, I don’t know, parents or people. They think that that’s what sex is supposed to be, that’s how a relationship should be, like right away and stuff.

I did not ask if David and all of his porn watching friends had talked about it with an adult, which is why they “knew” it was just for arousal. However, as our interview continued I got
the sense that these boys were not talking about porn with anyone, but each other. David admitted that schools failed to talk to kids about sex and that “it would be the most awkward thing in the world to talk to your parents about.” In this conversation with David he had placed himself and his male friends in opposition to “other” boys who could not possibly be as knowledgeable as they were. It required a certain level of intelligence to realize that pornography was not a representation of real relationships but merely for the purpose of sexual pleasure.

Students also implied they were smart when it came to the curriculum Daniel Evans was teaching. In a Grade 8 focus group I asked the participants how they felt about the conversations occurring in the classroom related to gender, sexuality, and violence. David responded first and alluded to the rape debate, “I kind of feel that everyone is kind of aware of these acts and these sexual assaults.” He further explained he did not think it was “redundant” to talk about rape, but an entire lesson on the topic was too much. A few other students agreed. David continued, “I think in the environment like we have here everyone is pretty much aware of it, but in schools where that activity happens I think it’s something really important to invest in and educate children about.” Peach felt that the dialogue occurring in English was better suited in sex education class, as it was part of the curriculum, although most Grade 7 and 8 students informed me those conversations were not happening. Cora insisted that a little talk in English was acceptable, “but after we keep talking about it then, like, it kind of loses it, you lose interest in it.” The problem with situating all teaching about gender, sexuality and/or consent (as in the rape debate) in health class is that it gets lost in the curriculum. According to Gilbert (2018) who writes about consent in sex education “the curriculum document is not a lesson plan but a set of guidelines” (p. 274). In other
words, teachers get to pick and choose what they want to teach within the guidelines, which leads to many topics going untouched.

Many of the students believed that gender-based violence did not exist at Oak Lane Academy because they were in a school full of smart kids. However, they assumed gender-based violence was based on the descriptions I offered of my daughter’s experience, the examples shared in English class, or their understanding of violence against women in developing countries. They purported to have awareness of these issues, making their school a safe space. Furthermore, students believed that gender equality was responsible for safety. David said, “If you think of just how students are accepted, it’s an equal number of boys and girls, so it starts the pathway for equality for both genders.” In other words, when the enrolment numbers of boys to girls is the same, equality must exist, as one gender cannot overpower the other. Yet the students were unable to make connections to the subtleties of violence, in which heterosexist, heteronormative and patriarchal ideologies were responsible for gender inequality in their school. Even though sexual assault may not have occurred, it did not mean gender-based violence was not present and thriving in many other ways indicated in the chapters of this thesis.

Conclusion

In Gender Play (1993), Thorne argues, “It is during the transition from “child” to “teen” that girls start negotiating the forces of adult femininity, a set of structures and meanings that more fully inscribe their subordination on the basis of gender,” which is “based on accommodating to the desires and interests of men” (p. 170). In an English class discussion on the prevalence of sexism in Western culture, a female student admitted,
Girls start to reinforce being more docile and feminine at a certain age so that boys don’t think they are butch. Girls and boys are quite equal until thirteen, fourteen. Boys keep thinking they are awesome, but girls start to downplay themselves and want to seem more, girly, more feminine, more self-conscious, or [not] seem like they are bragging. (February 11, 2013, observation notes)

Although I contend that boys and girls do not experience gender equality at any age, this assertion encapsulates a major theme of this chapter. Grade 7 and 8 Oak Lane Academy students were in the process of learning how to embody and enact masculinity and femininity, which influenced how they navigated relationships with each other and understood love. Despite the illusion of gender equality in the school, heteronormative and patriarchal ideologies largely contributed to the entitlement and superiority the boys felt in comparison to the limitations placed on girls.

These ideologies also influenced how boys and girls experienced same gender friendships, which had different expectations, rules, and consequences for how they evolved. While students desired comparable qualities in a good friend regardless of their gender, this is where the similarities seemed to end. Boys were generally at ease in their friendships with other boys, unlike girls who were aware of the tenuous nature of their friendships due to the gossip culture of Oak Lane Academy. Although all students were reported to gossip, the girls were consumed by it the most. Gossip allowed girls to compete for their place on the social hierarchy if popularity was important to them, but also compete for status within their smaller female friendship groups. Yet this led to fighting among friends, which created hurt feeling, exclusion, and at times the end of a relationship. Boys were much less consumed by drama and fights in their relationships, and were able to resolve issues quickly if they arose.
Boys were used to being privileged for being boys, whereas girls had to work hard at their friendships to make them last.

In matters of dating and love, there were several discrepancies between boys and girls. The Grade 7 students were divided by gender when thinking through relationship scenarios explored in the classroom. Girls were enthralled by the idea of love, regardless of the emotional implications of an unhealthy relationship. Whereas boys approached the subject from a rational perspective, relying on the law to determine if a relationship was appropriate or not. The only aspect they seemed to fully agree on was that overtly aggressive violence in a relationship crossed the “line” and should not be tolerated. The Grade 8 students explored aspects of love through the lens of gender, by indicating advisable/inadvisable ways for men/women to be in relationships. They overwhelmingly communicated the contradictory expectations placed on boys and girls in how they were expected/allowed to behave in heterosexual relationships. Boys were praised for their unbounded performances of hegemonic masculinity, while girls were shackled to nice and submissive performances of femininity to avoid being labeled a “slut.” Yet, the commonality shared by all of the students was that gender equality was a dominant ideology and they were too smart to let themselves be pawns of violence.

The next chapter will highlight the implicit and explicit ways Grade 7 and 8 students engaged in “play” through games and game-like behaviour, which took place inside and outside of the classroom. These games were at times student-centred and teacher-driven for the purpose of connecting to the curriculum and to support learning. However, many games took place outside of the adult gaze and in the private spaces of the school. I will explain how various aspects of these games were produced and reproduced through gender discourses,
which were reinforced by social interactions and discursive practices. I will also illustrate how masculinities and femininities were constructed and performed as part of the game process. Lastly, throughout the chapter, I will make direct connections to these games and game-like behaviour in order to show evidence of gender-based violence that was always present in the school environment.
CHAPTER SEVEN

IT’S ALL FUN AND GAMES UNTIL SOMEONE GETS HURT,
THEN IT’S ONLY A JOKE

“Play” is a fragile definition; participants have to continually signal the boundary that distinguishes play from not-play, and play and humor easily slide in and out of other, more ‘serious’ meanings. This ambiguity creates tension, since one is never sure in what direction it will swing; a tease may move from playful to irritating to malicious and back again . . . Aggression and sex are the dangerous desires in school, as elsewhere in the world, and these are the messages that often lurk with the lightened frames of play and humor. (Thorne, 1993, p. 79)

Debate was a regular occurrence at Oak Lane Academy, both inside and outside of the classroom. It afforded students an intellectual challenge, while also providing opportunities for them to have fun. Therefore, it was not surprising that a debate would surface in a private group page on Facebook for students to engage with during their private time away from school. Typically, these kinds of community forums are unknown to the school, or to parents, and take place unnoticed. However, a senior female Oak Lane Academy student flagged this politically driven Facebook group to school administration because of its blatant racist and misogynist ranting about Zionists, communists, gypsies, abortion clinics, feminism, and rape culture. I first learned about the Facebook group through Susan Bauer, the school vice-principal, who was deeply concerned by the content being written online. I was later invited to sit in on the end-of-year school staff meeting where the issue was shared with the entire collective of school faculty and staff.

Approximately forty to fifty Oak Lane Academy students were members of this group with four or five major contributors, some of whom were in the younger grades. At the time, the Steubenville rape trial guilty verdict was all over the news and some of the male students
in the Facebook group had strong opinions about feminism and men’s rights. In other words, they believed that the boys on trial did not deserve a guilty verdict. I was struck by how similar this was to the rape debate that took place in the Grade 8 English class and wondered if it could be the same boys having this debate online. In the classroom they also argued that feminism had empowered women and diminished the rights of men, stripping away at gender equality.

Susan spent approximately one week combing through the contents of the material written in the forum and contacted a number of parents to come into the school to speak with her. She was not interested in punishing the students, but creating an educative dialogue where they could learn about the impact of their ideas and beliefs. She was also committed to building a strong school equity policy and recognized that social media was an integral part of how students conducted their lives. So although the Facebook group was not necessarily done on school property, and was a private affair, it was made of up Oak Lane Academy students and reflected incredibly offensive and discriminatory perspectives. Susan had plans to share the information with parents at the following fall general meeting so they were aware of how social media sites, such as Facebook, might be used by their children. She was also committed to educating parents on the vision of equity at the school.

There were many interesting reactions to the Facebook situation. One of the boys, whose parents were called into the school, was very angry with Susan. He vehemently argued that the online forum was none of her business, as it had nothing to do with school life. Regardless of her explanations for getting involved, he was not willing to hear her. In the staff meeting, teachers were asked to discuss in small groups if they were surprised or not surprised that this kind of dialogue was happening with Oak Lane Academy students. While
some teachers were not surprised, many others justified the students’ behaviour as the fault of parents, media influence, their naiveté (age), their intelligence (they were smart/cool enough to be able to make sexist/racist comments, and so they did), and their ability to debate (perhaps the whole thing was just a fun debate, but they really did not believe the side they were taking). I found the finger pointing towards “others” both fascinating and disturbing as the teachers demonstrated their resistance at looking deeper at the roots of sexism in their school. Yet, this was not the first time I’d witnessed this act of displaced responsibility. The younger students I observed did it too. Ahmed (2015) argues “too often sexism is identified as either in the past tense (as what we dealt with, what we have to overcome) or as elsewhere (as a problem ‘other cultures’ have yet to deal with). Sexism is present” (p. 5, [emphasis in original]).

The most impactful moment that occurred in the staff meeting, which reinforced the seriousness of the situation, was when a senior female student stood up and spoke. She was the one who first brought the Facebook group to Susan’s attention. She revealed that she had experienced abuse in the school by a male student during her time at Oak Lane Academy and that the attitudes and ideas reflected by the boys online represented an aspect of the school culture she lived with. Emotionally, she stated that the problem was that men were not taught not to rape. She believed the onus was left up to women not to be raped. This is a critique of many safe school initiatives particularly targeted at adolescents and young adults (Smiler & Plante, 2013). Therefore, more education was needed to keep girls safe and guide boys. Jackson Katz, an American educator and scholar, would agree with the sentiments offered by this senior Oak Lane Academy student. In the early 1990s he founded Mentors in Violence Prevention with the purpose of shifting violence against women from being a women’s issue
to a men’s issue by helping men get a deeper understanding of how hegemonic masculinity influences violent tendencies (Katz, 1995). He believes that the deconstruction of gender norms must be at the heart of any violence prevention program. Although the program has evolved significantly in the past twenty-five years, where people of all gender identities are included in violence education, normative masculinity still remains central to the teachings of violence prevention (Katz, Heisterkamp, & Fleming, 2011).

In Chapter Five, I provided a contextual framework for understanding what it means to be a boy and what it means to be a girl at Oak Lane Academy through the lived experiences of “smart” Grades 7 and 8 students. I illustrated the particular ways normative gender discourses were embodied and enacted by students that were unique to this school environment, which demonstrated a hierarchy within and across the gender divide. I also substantiated that girls and boys were not granted the same privileges at Oak Lane Academy despite the illusion of gender equity in the school (policies, programs, curriculum) and the equal distribution of boys and girls in the classrooms. Lastly, I explained that the ways masculinity and femininity are construed at Oak Lane Academy sets the conditions for gender-based violence.

Chapter Six transitioned from subjectivity to relationality. I re-articulated that what it means to be a boy and what it means to be a girl determines how students embody and enact masculinity and femininity, which directly impacts how they navigate peer relationships and understand love. By using the Shakespearean plays *Twelfth Night* and *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* as the backbone for the chapter, I was able to show how literary themes and characters operated as a springboard for intellectual dialogue and debate, to emphasize the ways students understood various relationships between girls, boys, and girls and boys. I was
able to address aspects of friendships, romantic love, dating, the “friend zone,” and proposals to demonstrate heteronormative ideals and expectations, and patriarchal rules of engagement that exist and thrive at Oak Lane Academy. I also illustrated how students rationalized violence and made connections between their understanding of relationships and being smart. I concluded by stating that the various ways students engaged relationally provided a gateway for gender-based violence to occur.

This chapter will illustrate games and game-like behaviour as part of the ways students experience Oak Lane Academy by looking at the implicit and explicit ways the Grade 7 and 8 students engaged in “play.” While there were games with curricular content for learning purposes, which were student-centred and teacher-driven, many games took place in the hidden crevices of school spaces where adults were absent and youth positioned themselves as autonomous decision-makers. This chapter will explore games that take place both inside and outside of the classroom, and show evidence of how various types of games and game-like behaviour provide opportunities for students to make connections with peers, develop and test the boundaries of relationships, and reinforce the gender and social hierarchies within specific classes and their grade level. I will explain how various aspects of these games are produced and reproduced through gender discourses, specifically addressing masculinities and femininities that are always being performed, and make direct connections to these games and the manifestation of gender-based violence.

**Definition: (Social) Games and Game-Like Behaviour**

My initial entry point into thinking through a conceptual framework for games and game-like behaviour was by reading the Google dictionary definition online (2015, July 7). It referred to games as “a form of play,” which could be “competitive” in nature and played
“according to rules and decided by skill, strength, or luck.” Furthermore, it mentioned games as “a person’s performance in a game; a person’s standard or method of play.” While this definition is not nearly comprehensive enough for the purposes of this chapter, it did provide a starting point, just as Thorne (1993) investigated the meaning of the word “play” in the “Compact Oxford English Dictionary” (p. 4) for her book Gender Play. It was from the dictionary source that Thorne was able to make greater meaning of her data and form the major themes articulated in her book. Admittedly, it was the simplistic definition of “games” (specifically of play and performance), which I discovered on Google that led me to consider Thorne’s concept of “play” for my own work. Therefore, I will refer to games and play interchangeably throughout this chapter. I will also speak of game-like behaviour.

There are two major themes in Gender Play (Thorne, 1993) that are highly relevant to my study and support thinking through the idea of games in the school environment. First, gender (“categories,” “identities,” “divisions,” “groups,” and “meanings”) is a social construction that is constantly being “produced, actively and collaboratively, in every day life” (p. 4). It is a social process (or game) that is experienced on a daily basis by “players” (Goffman, 1969) or “actors” (Ortner, 1996), through the ways they engage (or play) with one another in various encounters, interactions, and activities. This socialization does not happen passively, anymore than being a boy or girl is who we are, based on essentialist perspectives (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2009a; Grosz, 1990). Rather, gender construction is an active and social practice of “doing,” which West and Zimmerman (1987) describe as “a complex of socially guided perceptual, interactional, and micropolitical activities that cast particular pursuits as expressions of masculine and feminine ‘natures’” (p. 126).
This brings me to the second theme illustrated in *Gender Play* (1993). Thorne emphasizes “doing” gender as a “performance, or scripted action,” which “can be used to understand shared practices that enact, and sometimes challenge, varied gender arrangements and meanings” (p. 5). Chase (2008) similarly compares the construction of gender to “a theatrical performance or the playing of a game” (p. 7), and affirms, “students act and present themselves to others in an attempt to guide and control the impressions others form of them” (p. 7) just as they might play a game of chess with strategic moves. This comparison of gender construction/performance and the playing of a game are derived from Goffman’s (1969) idea of strategic interaction, which addresses the calculative and game-like ways players operate in various life situations. Therefore, “doing” gender (gender as socially constructed) can be considered game-like in nature and is realized through performance or an act of play (Ahmed & Swan, 2006; Butler, 1990,1993; West & Zimmerman, 1987).

I also found it very helpful to lean on Ortner’s (1996) explanation of “serious games” (p. 12), which explains the complexity of going through life as a social actor (individual) with agency that is mobilized (or immobilized) by levels of power. She calls the games “serious” so as to not confuse the idea of “games” as fun and light-hearted activities. Rather, Ortner (1996) defines a game as follows:

Social life is culturally organized and constructed, in terms of defining categories of actors, rules and goals of the games, and so forth; that social life is precisely social, consisting of webs of relationship and interaction between multiple, shiftingly interrelated subject positions, none of which can be extracted as autonomous “agents”; and yet at the same time there is “agency,” that is actors play with skill, intention, wit, knowledge, intelligence. (p. 12)

She goes further to state that the idea of a game as “serious” relates to how “power and inequality pervade the games of life in multiple ways” (Ortner, 1996, p. 12). Although there
may be enjoyment and playfulness in the process of life games, there are often sobering consequences for how these games are ultimately played and the impact they have on people. For example, this could relate specifically to the ways non-conforming males, or those who identify as females, are pawns of patriarchy. Ortner (1996) refers to the repression of female agency specifically as being regulated by “a hegemonically masculinist (if not “male dominant”) social order” (p. 16). Therefore, the ways in which gender is constructed and performed in any given context (e.g., Oak Lane Academy) sets the conditions for how people play socially. This game-like process of socialization says a great deal about the sociocultural state of the school and the persistence of gender-based violence. Those who enacted boyhood continuously operated with the purpose of maintaining power and status, with each other and at the expense of those who performed girlhood, which was often the underlying motivation for many of the games and game-like behaviour observed.

Speaking directly about school spaces, it is important to note that these gendered game/game-like experiences (encounters, interactions, activities), can also be thought of as ritualistic in nature. Chase (2008) writes that the students in her study would “debate, construct, and revise their expressions of masculinity and femininity” (p. 7) through daily rituals (games). This was similar to Thorne’s (1993) account of school rituals where boys and girls would chase one another on the playground, or the boys would pull the girls bra straps, as part of their regular gendered play. Therefore, I could surmise that gender construction in and of itself is a ritualistic occurrence. The more gender is performed in particularly ways, the more it is internalized, and is assumed to be a natural state of being (Butler, 1988, 1990). Game playing is how boys and girls “do” gender, as part of their daily rituals at school.
There were many game/game-like rituals at Oak Lane Academy that played a role in how students constructed their identifications (as smart/elite subjects), which helped them to feel connected to their environment and created bonds with each other. These rituals ranged from school organized afterschool pep rallies or the annual whole school persuasive speech competition, to student-initiated lunchtime games of truth or dare or boys asking girls their bra size. In this chapter, I will primarily highlight rituals that Gaztambide-Fernández (2009a) refers to as “organic,” which took place “beyond the gaze of adult authority” (p. 151), although I will share some that included teacher involvement. While it may seem like a stretch at times to think of my examples of games as rituals (depending on their regularity), it is the implicit ways that masculinity and femininity were continuously mobilized as part of game playing and game-like behaviour that makes it ritualized. In other words, the games I write about were constructed and produced with masculinity and femininity as the driving force of the ritual. Therefore, it is important to recognize the implicit nature of gender construction and performance in the everyday social processes of schooling, as that is a critical link to gender-based violence. Many of the games and game-like behaviour I describe are not explicitly violent, but illustrate implicit (symbolic) violence that is reinforced by daily school routines and discursive practices which regulate student behaviour and permit discriminatory treatment of those who resist (Bourdieu, 2001; Leach et. al., 2014).

For clarity sake, in this chapter, I refer to games as a type of activity that has been named (e.g., truth or dare) or was an illustrated/observed encounter among students (organized or impromptu), which demonstrated a type of play-based engagement. These games typically included rules and strategies that were assumed or developed on the spot, and were rudimentary to complex in nature. Furthermore, these games included elements of
fun (humour) and/or hurt, which was highly subjective from the perspectives of the player(s) involved. Game-like behaviour, however, denotes students’ gender performances and the ways gender discourses were enacted/enabled with the purpose to entice, control, manipulate, and/or resist others or the environment. For all intents and purposes, game-like behaviour was present in every encounter, interaction, and/or activity as the fact that students were always in the process of performing and enforcing their gender.

**Games, Games, and More Games!**

There were many ways that Grade 7 and 8 students played games, or engaged in game-like behaviour, in and outside of the classroom, as part of daily school life. In this section I will offer select examples to elaborate on various types of games that I have divided into four specific categories. Each category will illustrate to some degree the impact performances of hegemonic masculinity had on the overall Oak Lane Academy environment and the girls’ experiences of school. There will also be ample evidence to demonstrate that heterosexism, heteronormativity and patriarchy were building blocks in the production of these games and game-like behaviour, which created conditions for gender-based violence to manifest and persist.

1. **Teacher directed classroom games and dialogue**: I will share how Daniel Evans, the Grade 8 English teacher, invited his students to play a game (also referred to as a classroom activity), as part of the learning process of a specific subject matter. I will elaborate on how students turned classroom dialogue into a game through sexist and misogynist jokes, comments, and intellectual debate.
2. **Classroom games “to be seen”:** I will illustrate through my observational data how students engaged in game-like behaviour in the classroom with the specific purpose “to be seen.” These nuanced masculine and feminine performances occurred between teacher directed instruction such as during free time or independent work sessions.

3. **Games inside and outside of the classroom:** I will give evidence of specific games that students played both in and out of the classroom that I either witnessed or was told about during participant interviews. These games were often named (e.g., lists of best/worst people), were ongoing throughout the year (rituals), were escalating (regularity of play), and/or evolving (changing of rules) over time. I will illustrate how female bodies were always at the centre of boys’ attention.

4. **Games in private spaces:** I will elaborate on games that were only played outside of the classroom that I came to know about through the study participants or school administration. These games were not classroom friendly and involved sexual exploration (physical touch), which emerged when boys were involved.

What all of these “games” have in common is a curiosity about, and/or exploration of, changing bodies (specifically girls’ bodies), sexual knowledge, and sexuality (performances of masculinity and femininity). Moreover, these games instigated complex emotions in individuals and mobilized power dynamics between people. Furthermore, these games provide additional evidence of what it means to be a boy or a girl at Oak Lane Academy through the ways the Grade 7 and 8 students found themselves in social situations. These examples will re-establish the gender hierarchy at Oak Lane Academy that was described in Chapter Five, particularly with reference to boys and their performances of masculinity. I
will also reinforce the idea that being male at Oak Lane Academy was about embodying a particular masculinity that positioned boys as superior and entitled in an elite co-educational space.

**Teacher-Directed Classroom Games and Dialogue**

My very first observation at Oak Lane Academy took place in the Grade 8 English classroom with Daniel Evans, a passionate advocate of equity issues who was very involved in teacher and student run committees that addressed race, gender, and sexuality. He also had a reputation for integrating these topics into the English curriculum to encourage his students to make connections to their lived experiences, which has already been illustrated at several points throughout this thesis. As mentioned in the methodology chapter, when I met Daniel for the first time, he explained that he agreed to participate in my study so that he could learn how to make more of an impact with his students on gender issues, as he believed he could do better. He viewed his participation as professional development and looked forward to my insights and findings. Furthermore, Daniel made a point to explore new territory in his lessons to see how the students would react and what I would think. It was a win-win for the both of us. When I started my fieldwork, Daniel was in the middle of a Media Literacy unit on propaganda techniques and gender stereotypes and assumptions in advertising. The day of my first observation he chose to engage the students in an inquiry-based activity to deconstruct notions of gender in everyday life, by exploring “maleness and femaleness” and how advertisements specifically target women and men.

Daniel asked the students to imagine aliens from Planet Zeltron coming down to earth to visit their classroom. These aliens had no concept of gender and would need to know how to pass as women and men before stepping out into the world. It was the task of the students
to provide the aliens with that information. Daniel passed out green sticky notes to the boys and pink sticky notes to the girls while he asked, “What would they need to do . . . to look like, behave, what sort of ideas should I want, not want . . .?” The students were instructed to write gender traits on the sticky notes to tell the aliens how to be a “typical” and “desirable” woman and man. The male students with green sticky notes were to give the aliens suggestions on being female, and the female students with pink sticky notes were to give the aliens suggestions on being male. While Daniel explained the activity, male students started shouting out words like “beer!” and one stood up and joked, to no one in particular, that he wanted to use the pink sticky notes.

The relatively quiet and uneventful morning quickly escalated to a ruckus of boys shouting out ideas at each other across the room and laughing loudly, while the girls talked and laughed quietly with friends in small groups. Once the students had a couple of traits written on a sticky note they were allowed to attach the notes to the chalkboard in one of two boxed categories labelled “girl” and “boy.” As various students walked up to the board they laughed, looked over at their friends, and tried to hide the words on their sticky note before placing it quickly on the board and skittering away. One male student had his sticky note ripped up by a male peer, which created a din of laughter and shouting. The boy had to request another sticky note. Daniel commented on how much longer the activity took than he had expected and asked the students to notice how uncomfortable they had become. He noticed laughing, joking, and “strange, hilarious, awkward conversations.” As the last of the sticky notes were put on the chalkboard, Daniel informed the class that they would read the girl and boy gender traits and then discuss what was missing. A male student said loudly for
the class to hear that they should Google the perfect definition of both genders and a boy close by exclaimed, “We’ll have so much porno!”

Daniel invited a male student to stand at the chalkboard and read the list of traits for boys, which was met with a chorus of “ooooohhhhhhhh!” by his male peers. The boy struggled to read the sticky notes through his laughter, particularly when reading traits such as “no skirts or dresses,” “looks like a man,” “male sex organs,” and “have a penis.” The students laughed with him and one boy was asked by Daniel to leave the class to “take a break.” A female student was then invited to read the list of traits for girls. As she read she acted out some of the traits including “girly higher voice” (in a high voice) and agreed with the statement that girls “do not make sense.” There was laughter particularly at girls having “breasts,” “boobs,” “big tits”, and “T and A.” When the lists were complete Daniel commented on the awkwardness of the activity, “all sorts of embarrassment and shyness around bodies and bits” and wondered why it was so strange and uncomfortable for the students to talk about. As they offered explanations for their overt reactions to the activity (e.g., adults—teacher and researcher—in the room, many did not talk with their parents about bodies or sex), the class settled into a quiet state of reflection until the end of the lesson.

Unfortunately, what seemed to go unnoticed was the fact that the female student had to read aloud incredibly sexualized and sexist descriptions of the female body from the perspective of the males in the room. While the majority of students laughed at the awkwardness of the moment, as if it were a funny joke, symbolic violence was clearly present in the classroom space (Bourdieu, 2001). Yet, considering that “sexism” is becoming “identified as passé, as old-fashioned, dated” (Ahmed, 2015, p. 6), it was rendered invisible and non-existent.
From the outset this activity seemed simple enough, to have students describe to
genderless aliens from Planet Zeltron what it means to be a “typical” and “desirable” man or
woman. Daniel imagined it taking approximately five-minutes with little fuss; yet, the
activity quickly exploded into pandemonium. Laughter and shouting by the boys, and
whispers and giggles by the girls, showed evidence of the sheer awkwardness and
embarrassment they felt in the moment. What was meant to be an activity about gender was
interpreted as one about bodies and sex. The boys dominated the trajectory of the lesson
through their heightened energy, the words, comments, and jokes they threw out randomly
for the whole class to hear, and their highly sexualized and somewhat demeaning accounts of
girls. Male students leaned heavily on female body parts to describe girls (“vaginas,”
“breasts,” “boobs,” “big tits,” “T & A”), whereas female students only used “male sexual
body parts” and “have a penis” to describe boys.

It was interesting that Daniel called on the boys to describe the girls, and the girls to
describe the boys, a tactic which may have instigated the level of awkwardness and sexually
charged energy in the room. It certainly provided an opportunity for the boys to “assault”
their female peers through sexist joking and demeaning characterization. Daniel also
requested that the students talk about gender from the perspective of “typical” and
“desirable,” words with distinctly different meanings. The word desirable elicits thoughts of
sexual arousal, unlike typical, which is about distinct gender qualities. Therefore, this might
have contributed to the students’ emphasis on bodies and sex in the activity. It could also be
that many of these male students were entering into, or were in the throes of, puberty, which
added to the liveliness in the room. They were given permission to talk in class about a
subject that was of great interest to them. Furthermore, this was not a commonly occurring
classroom conversation, as talk about bodies and sex was typically reserved for the private spaces of students’ lives away from the listening ears of adults. I imagine there was a level of shock to be talking about bodies in English class. Regardless, the display of normative masculinity performed by the male students was my first insight into what it meant to be a boy at Oak Lane Academy—being loud in general, wanting to be heard across the space, and monopolizing class time with offensive and sexist jokes and comments. In turn, I gained insight into what it meant to be a girl, as they sat in small friendship groups whispering, talking softly, and quietly laughing with one another. I was also able to glean some understanding of how the boys viewed the girls, as confusing (“not make sense”), emotionally sensitive (“caring” and “thoughtful”), and caretakers (“able to raise a family”), but mostly as sexualized bodies to be objectified and laughed about. This “game” was revealing and acted as a springboard for thinking about gender-based violence in the school. It also demonstrated heterosexism at play.

With that said, Daniel’s intention to disrupt gender discourses in the English classroom as a feminist pedagogical practice is to be commended. Teachers rarely attempt to interrupt the status quo by engaging students in talk that has the power to reveal social inequities through curricular texts (Alvermann et al., 1997). Yet, studies show that schools have a responsibility to address issues such as (hetero)sexism, oppression, and discrimination to create spaces that are equitable, inclusive, and safe for their collective student body (Falconer et al., 2008; Kumashiro, 2000; Safe Schools Action Team, 2008). Where the problem lies is in how these pedagogical endeavours play out, especially if (hetero)sexism (for example) is (re)produced or escalated due to ill-prepared or misinformed teaching. While Daniel was a highly experienced educator with significant knowledge in equity and anti-
oppression education, there was always the risk of unintended learning outcomes and the construction of implicit violence as a result (McLaren, 2009).

Later in the term the Grade 8 English curriculum transitioned from Media Literacy to Literature Studies with the reading of the play *Twelfth Night*. In Chapter Six, I shared insights on students’ perceptions, attitudes, and experiences, of love and relationships, which were expressed during the course of this literature unit. Here, I now want to elaborate on the ways boys “played” intellectually in the classroom when opportunities arose to talk specifically about bodies, sex, relationships, sexual violations, and acts of betrayal. Part of this “play” was simply about throwing out sexist jokes or comments to the class, and in one instance a full debate ensued. I was never quite sure if the boys were looking for a reaction from their peers, testing Daniel’s authority (how far could they push the boundaries), and/or if they fully believed that what they were saying or arguing about was true. However, it further reinforced the sense of entitlement the boys had to speak and act as they pleased in the classroom, with little to no consequence.

When the unit first started, Daniel spent much of class time helping the students to get to know the various characters in *Twelfth Night*. During a discussion about love, Daniel reminded the class that the character Viola (in disguise as Cesario) knew she wanted to marry Duke Orsino, after only working for him for three days. Daniel asked the class, “What does it suggest about Viola that she liked Orsino in three days?” A male student replied, “She’s kind of slutty. It’s okay to say that in this class.” Daniel responded that perhaps Viola was “fickle” and moved on with the lesson. This student was in fact referring to an activity in Media Literacy, a couple of months earlier, when Daniel gave the students permission to name words that were used towards women and men because of their gender identity, perceived
gender, sexual orientation, or perceived sexual orientation. He had stressed that the words he was looking for were extremely hurtful, homophobic, and hypersexual, which required the students to use the “highest level of maturity” when sharing. These words are also referred to as sexist “slurs,” which Croom (2013) describes as “terms that are typically used to derogate certain groups members and are largely considered among the most taboo and offensive of all linguistic expressions” (p. 178). Regardless of the earlier lesson on language appropriateness, this male student felt that calling girls slutty was acceptable in the context of the class. Perhaps he liked how it sounded rolling off of his tongue and the attention he received in speaking the slur in the classroom. According to Pascoe’s (2007) research on masculinities in high school, labeling a girl a slut was the worst possible name she could be called. Moreover, slut shaming is a common way for some boys to perform normative masculinity and assert themselves in positions of power (Pascoe, 2007).

In another observation Daniel asked the students to analyse the line, “The parts that fortune hath bestow’d upon him,” to talk about the meaning of “parts” in relation to Duke Orsino’s love for Olivia. A male student replied by saying Duke Orsino liked Oliva because she was “hot” and not because of her wealth or status. Peach Allen, clearly unimpressed, made a comment about the boy looking like a wimp who could not talk to people, by calling a girl “hot.” Daniel wanted to know if girls could be called wimps and a male student said they were called “pussy,” which caused much laughter among his peers. This label was similarly degrading to girls as “slut,” although constructed with a different meaning. This boy then proceeded to claim that love was just a biochemical function of the brain and explained how the brain worked to make sexual activity happen. He tried to lead the conversation towards talking about orgasms when Daniel asked him (and a couple of other
boys who were urging him on), to “play ball” for fifteen-minutes (code for stay focused), as they were “too good at getting the class off track.”

By the end of the lesson Daniel had asked the boy to leave the class twice to “take a break,” as he was more interested in having fun and being a disturbance. I found it interesting how love had been boiled down to an intellectual understanding with a scientific explanation, merely for the purpose of talking about sex. The boys were savvy in their ability to create distractions through their quick intellect and wit. Furthermore, I was surprised that calling girls “pussy” was passed over as a joke and pondered the implications of this for the girls in the room. I also wondered if Daniel felt it was easier to ignore the repetitive sexism rather than give it more attention and take away from the lesson. Research indicates, “assertive responses to sexism are rare” (Mallett, Ford, & Woodzicka, 2006, p. 274) giving the impression that they are funny and/or acceptable. Furthermore, in a study on humour and sexism, Mallett et al. (2006) discovered that sexist remarks, posed as jokes, were more likely to be tolerated. The questions I wanted answered was, how could these types of derogatory jokes and comments be adequately addressed within the context of the classroom without (re)producing (hetero)sexist ideologies and power relations? How was it possible to stress that sexism is absolutely not a joke despite the fact that “individuals are encouraged and rewarded for participating in sexist culture” (Ahmed, 2015, p. 9).

In Chapters Five and Six, I mentioned the classroom debate on rape, which grew from a dialogue on the appropriateness and inappropriateness of Duke Orsino’s relationship with Olivia. The students were analysing how Olivia had on numerous occasions thwarted Orsino by saying she was not interested in his pursuit of her. Daniel stressed to the students that “no means no” and Orsino’s behaviour could be considered sexual harassment. A male student
could not understand how it could be considered sexual harassment when there was no touching involved. He made a snide comment by asking if saying “Hi” or winking at a girl could be construed as harassment, which was followed by another male student who claimed to have a problem with the word “rape.” David Funar, who was in this English class, asserted that rape jokes were not funny and questioned the other boys on why they found the word rape problematic. Daniel further stated that by joking about the subject made the idea of rape “natural and normal and not a big deal.” While David and Daniel made strong points, the reality is that rape humour is rampant in popular culture that many adolescents are exposed to. For one, it is prevalent in stand-up comedy where it is considered both acceptable and funny by many groups of people (Cox, 2015). According to Kotthoff (2006), sexually explicit jokes (found in all cultures) are largely targeted towards women, which are at the basis of rape jokes. Olin (2016) states, “multiple studies have shown that people who display a relative preference for jokes targeting women are also more likely to identify the jokes as sexist and to endorse sexist attitudes” (p. 340).

While it was an extremely intense dialogue about a very sensitive subject, I could not help but feel it was mostly a game for the boys who participated most aggressively. Despite the fact that one boy said, “that was fun” when the class was over, it was the way the boys handled themselves throughout the discussion, with joking, laughing, and dominating the conversation, that led me to believe it was a way to get Daniel riled up, and take over the trajectory of the lesson. They had been able to sway classroom conversations in small spurts in the past, as I’ve shared in earlier examples, and they were aware of how important it was to Daniel to make his point with them that rape was not a “joke.” They knew he was a strong advocate of gender equity, as he had many posters on his classroom wall to reflect this, and
several of his lessons addressed equity head on. Therefore, these boys seemed to take great
pleasure engaging in the rape debate in full force. The more the boys pushed against Daniel’s
points, the more he pushed back, which spurred on the boys’ fun. This took up approximately
function to assert individual identity or to create a particular class personality” (p. 83), which
is partially responsible for how student performances evolve in the classroom. They assert
that each classroom has its own unique “personality,” which includes “a particularly style of
humor” (Norrick & Klein, 2008, p. 85). In some classrooms, there is a “class clown” who
purposefully disrupts lessons through the use of humour (appropriate or otherwise) as a
response to the teacher and/or to be heard by the whole class. While performances of humour
are common, in the Grade 8 English class the “humour” went beyond typical disruptions to
perpetuating patriarchal and misogynist ideologies. While the boys who instigated the fun
were having a grand time, Daniel was growing insistent on a specific view of rape that he felt
they needed to acknowledge.

There were many complex layers to this observation when examined through the
games framework. For one, it included players (Daniel and the boys) who were intent on
“winning” the rape debate, which required that they rely on their intellect to compete
effectively. Daniel used his position of power as the adult and teacher in the situation, to
demonstrate his greater life experience, knowledge on the topic of rape, and emotional
understanding of what people experience at the hands of a sexual offender. The boys, on the
other hand, used their power in numbers to create quick arguments and throw out
inappropriate jokes, with the attempt to push Daniel into a corner and force him to give up
altogether. Ultimately, they were at a stalemate by the end of class, as neither side was
willing to concede. Daniel wanted to make an impact on the boys’ lives by helping them understand that not every topic was debateable, and the boys were not willing to listen to Daniel’s reasoning. I have wondered since, in reflecting on this debate, how the conversation might have unfolded had Daniel been a female teacher. Would the students have engaged in this type of dialogue at all, and if so, how? Would a female teacher have engaged the conversation for the entire length of the class to prove a point or moved on? Despite the fact that Daniel held a position of power in the classroom, as he was the teacher, he was also a white gender-identified man. Gender dynamics certainly played a role in the way the conversation was initiated and engaged.

As this debate happened in the classroom, it did not just affect those directly in conversation. There were many students who sat in silence for the majority of the debate, either listening or checked out. I observed students looking down at their desks or doodling on paper, without making an attempt to raise their hands and contribute to the dialogue. Some females did offer comments such as Keira Sun who boldly told a male student he had a narrow view of rape and that men could be raped anally. Peach wondered how rape could be proven without a witness. However, I questioned how safe the environment felt for female students to engage in this debate at all, as the main group of boys involved were forceful in their opinions and not particularly interested in hearing thoughts that differed from their own. Furthermore, the boys made many offhanded comments about women that were derogatory and offensive, such as blaming feminism for men’s lack of rights. While many students did not agree with the stance the boys were taking (such as David who spoke up at the beginning of the lesson), as the debate escalated fewer students engaged or provided opposition. In a focus group later in the year with students from this class, participants informed me that the
debate felt totally irrelevant to *Twelfth Night* and was just an opportunity for the boys to debate for the sake of arguing. No one raised the point that it was also done in jest.

In this final observation I would like to share how students took a situation in *Twelfth Night* and put it into the context of their own lives. To summarize the scene, three characters named Maria, Sir Andrew, and Sir Toby played a prank on an ornery character named Malvolio, convincing him that Olivia, the mistress of the house for whom he worked, was in love with him. They forged a love letter from Olivia to Malvolio, who in turn started acting in adoring ways towards her. Olivia thought Malvolio was acting crazy and had him locked up to the delight of Maria, Sir Andrew, and Sir Toby. Daniel wanted to know if anyone felt sorry for Malvolio. Two students said no, including David, who felt Malvolio “had it coming” because he was ruining everyone else’s mood. However, Isabelle Nazari said she felt sorry for Malvolio, “because I’d feel horrible in the same situation. It kind of depends how long he’s there, and the condition that he’s in. The fact that he’s saying he’s abused suggests that it’s pretty bad, he’s being tortured.” Daniel pointed out to the class that things that were originally planned as jokes can quickly become unfunny and wondered if anyone had noticed that in their own lives; no one responded. The students were either not listening, they did not have an example (harm can easily be rendered invisible when positioned in the frame of humour), or they were too uncomfortable to strike a conversation on the implications of jokes that were not actually funny when people’s emotions were at stake.

It was the example involving these characters that prompted me to start thinking in more depth about the games people play as part of the ways they engage socially with others. According to Mackie (1990) “joking is a frequently used means of negotiating the tensions and emotions that underlie the conventional order of everyday life” (p. 14). The prank
played on Malvolio can easily be compared to pranks students might play on each other for
the purpose of amusement and fun. Certainly, the students in Daniel’s class had moments
where they wanted to have fun by joking and debating, regardless of the impact it had on the
rest of the class. Yet, what is “fun” is relative to whomever is on the receiving end. Certainly,
not all jokes are considered funny (Cox, 2015; Mackie, 1990; Olin, 2016). David felt
Malvolio “had it coming” because he was being annoying. Despite the fact that Malvolio was
duped, locked up, and humiliated as a result, the prank was deemed acceptable by David
because Malvolio had a difficult personality. In other words, David’s message was if you
bother me, hurt me, you are different, or there is something about you I do not like, it gives
me the right to put you in your place and call it a joke. Mackie (1990) argues that because
humour is “playful” (p. 15), any harm that comes from joking can easily be retracted with
statements that imply it was just a joke.

Much of the misogynist male behaviour I observed at Oak Lane Academy was
justified as a joke. However, Isabelle was able to imagine how it would feel if she were the
one in Malvolio’s place. Her ability to empathize and have compassion for another person
despite their wrong doings, allowed her to conclude that the prank was wrong. To some
extent, this is not surprising, as girls in general are conditioned to think about others and be
“nice,” as I tried to show in Chapter Six (Ringrose & Renold, 2010; Thorne, 1993). That is
not to say that girls could not be hurtful to one another and play games with the purpose to
harm, but their nice girl/mean girl conditioning created an internal conflict in a way that was
different from the male students. What I feel is clear, is that humour operates as a social
function and “different forms of joking fulfill different needs and functions for different
people in different situations” (Kotthoff, 2006, p. 10).
Summary

The opportunity to observe students’ “natural” performances of femininity and masculinity, while at the same time noting how they negotiated, redefined, and/or resisted ideas, attitudes, and assumptions of gender discourses was revealing. The ways students performed their gender in class, and/or contributed to a lesson, was greatly impacted by their comfort level or interest of a particular topic discussed. This was particularly evident during lessons where there was an opening (teacher-guided or student-initiated) to talk about bodies or sex, which was always instigated by boys. Displays of hegemonic masculinity positioned girls as subjects to be objectified, laughed about, or put down. A character in a play could be called “slutty,” a girl could be referred to as a “pussy,” and boys could blame feminism for the demise of men’s rights with little to no consequence for their discriminatory attitude or behaviour (Allan, 2016; Pascoe, 2007).

While the examples I have shared may not qualify as gender-based violence by traditional definitions as described in the introduction of this thesis, I argue there was an element of (gendered) intellectual and symbolic violence taking place in the classroom during all of the episodes described above with some more pronounced than others (Bourdieu, 2001; Leach et al., 201). The boys’ behaviour in particular perpetuated ideologies and attitudes about gender that situated them in positions of power over girls, while also reinforcing their privileged and entitled subjectivity. Clearly, girls were silenced numerous times in the academic space, as were some boys who did not perform masculinity aggressively (or normatively). The jokes and comments thrown out casually were sexist in nature with misogynist undertones. While these jokes and comments were not said directly to the girls, they were about the girls. Yet, on many occasions the boys and the girls laughed at
the jokes in unison, finding humour in something deeply degrading and harmful (Kotthoff, 2006; Mackie, 1990). These kinds of encounters, which could be argued as subtle and boys being boys, set the stage for an escalated and injurious gender-based violence to take place (Herr & Anderson, 2003; Leach et al., 2014). I will talk further, towards the end of the chapter, about the ways students justified most “inappropriate” or sexual behaviour (words and actions) as a joke. In the next section I will share more observations in the classroom. However, the following excerpts will demonstrate game-like behaviour between students during the spaces in class when teachers were not directly instructing lessons or during independent work periods.

Classroom Games “To Be Seen”

At various times throughout a lesson, during the quiet (and sometimes loud) spaces between teacher directed instruction (free time or independent work sessions), students took opportunities to connect with their peers. Through the passing of notes, going to the washroom in pairs to gossip, whispering to a friend about weekend plans, flirting with boys or girls close by, or listening to music together on headphones concealed beneath their hoodies, girls and boys were constantly connecting as part the socializing process. It was during this time in space that I was able to observe game-like behaviour (nuanced performances of masculinity and femininity), which helped me to gather information on the ways boys and girls engaged with each other to further understand what it meant to be a boy and what it meant to be a girl at Oak Lane Academy. Because the students were in the learning environment with a teacher in close proximity, much of their behaviour was subtle and only meaningful to the discerning eye. Yet, their performances of masculinities and femininities spoke volumes about gendered attitudes and expectations, while also opening a
door into the private spaces of their relationships that I was not privy to outside of the classroom.

Quinn Ma was an expert at the subtle game of flirting, particularly with a boy I will refer to as Ray Si. Ray had a boisterous disposition and was more interested in what was going on around him than in what was being taught. He loved to glance around the room to see who was looking his way, in order to offer a mischievous smile in return. Ray was energized by attention and gleaned much of it through his sexualized jokes and comments. Quinn and Ray often played a game of cat and mouse where one of them would attempt to draw the other in. Ray’s attempts were more overt compared to Quinn’s covert actions. If Quinn were to walk by Ray’s desk, he might try to hug her or trip her as a way to get her attention. Quinn would sometimes give him a sly smirk or laugh at his attempts, but most times she would do her best to ignore him. Yet, she usually had to go out of her way to pass by his desk to drop something into the garbage can, to go to a friend’s desk, or out of the classroom door for a washroom break. She would purposely walk by his desk, head held high, sometimes giving him a swing of her hair, dodge his touch, and leave him starring at her back as she passed on by.

It was almost daily that I observed Quinn practice these somewhat distant, yet flirtatious performances, as part of her evolving feminine subjectivity. These displays of performativity demonstrated the ways Quinn asserted her power over Ray, in gaining his attention by walking by his desk, but giving him little notice in response. Discursive practices, dictating appropriate social interactions between girls and boy, informed Quinn of her need to be strategic in her behaviour. Currie, Kelly, and Pomerantz (2009) maintain that it is acceptable for a girl to attract a boy’s attention, but not to be seen as pursuing him. In
fact, their extensive research in girlhood suggests, “girls who actively used their sexuality to attract boys were likely to be severely sanctioned” (Currie et al., 2009, p. 87). Quinn who claimed to be an expert observer of people, had a sense of how gender discourses operated in her social context, which allowed her to understand the right and wrong ways she could use her sexuality to get Ray to notice her.

In another example, Quinn was seen talking and giggling with a female friend in the classroom, before moving back to her desk. Rather than sit down, she perched on her knees so she was elevated on her seat. Quinn often positioned her body on her chair to be in full view of others. She would perch and then look around to see who was looking at her. Quinn waited a moment at her desk and then closed the laptop in front of her. She walked towards the laptop cart, passing Jay Han, to whom she motioned without a word and a flick of her finger, to move his chair in. Quinn had no interest in Jay or time for his antics. She exchanged the laptop in her hands for a new one on the cart. Rather than take the new laptop back to her desk, she put it on an empty desk where a group of boys sat. Jay looked intently at what she was doing and she gave him a cold stare. With her index finger to her lips, she told him to “shhhhh,” and then proceeded to engage flirtatiously with another male student close by while she started up her new laptop. After a few minutes of chatting she moved back to talk and giggle with her girlfriend across the room.

Aside from honing her flirting practices, Quinn was also asserting agency through a process of “doing” girl, which Currie et al. (2009) describe as “the conscious, self-directed actions of girls – to what girls say and do to accomplish girlhood” (p. 103). This was seen in how Quinn chose to walk across the room to gain the attention of Ray or in how she exchanged a working computer for another in order to stop and talk to a boy. However,
agency does not refer to an independent self, removed from influencing factors. Rather, “poststructural subjects are constantly shifting and can change positioning within discourses, but cannot be agents outside of the discourses that produce them” (Barrett, 2005, p. 87). In other words, the way Quinn accomplished girlhood required particular performances of femininity, dictated by gender discourses available to her. This included responding to the heteronormative social order for the purpose of accommodating the whims and desires of boys if she wanted to maintain her popular status and be seen (Currie et al., 2009; Renold, 2004).

There was another interesting observation in History class that included Quinn and a group of girls. The students were working on group projects so the entire class time was dedicated to planning and research. Quinn sat with Karen Chen at the front of the class in desks side-by-side, with other students clustered together around the room. Behind Quinn and to her left sat three girls, Caroline Li, Diana Gao, and another female I will refer to as Safia Aamin. Quinn was good friends with Safia, who was also one of the more popular girls in the class, and had a tendency to ignore and/or exclude people at will. Quinn did not like to be excluded, a classic power tactic used by girls to manipulate popularity status by creating in and out groups (as discussed in Alder et al., 1992; Milner, 2004). Safia would look through people standing in front of her, as if they were not there, trying to say something to her, and she would turn and walk away from them in mid-sentence. She would laugh and smile with her friends in one moment and then in the next look with disdain at someone not in her friend group. Safia did not hang out with just anyone in the class. She also had a habit of calling her female friends, “woman!” Safia wielded agency in social circles, when possible, as a means
to project her power in relationships (as discussed in B. Davies, 1993; Thunfors & Cornell, 2008).

Within minutes of group work commencing, Quinn placed her computer on the unoccupied desk behind her so she could face the rest of the class and have a better view to look around. Karen hesitated for a moment and then turned around as well, continuing her search on the computer, seemingly oblivious to the students around her. Quinn played on her phone for a few minutes, looked around the room at the various groups working, flipped her hair, and then went back to work. She would briefly look to observe Caroline, Diana, and Safia, as they were getting louder and more excited as they worked. Restless, Quinn got up from her desk to walk over to the garbage can at the back corner of the room, purposely passing two male students on her way. On the return to her seat she passed the boys again and stopped to admonish what they were doing, shaking her head, “Common, seriously?” Quinn sat down, shared her grapes with Karen, listened to music on her smartphone, and went back to work, all the while keeping tabs on the various groups interacting in the room.

Excited chatter increased from where Caroline, Diana, and Safia worked together and Diana gathered Safia in a warm embrace. Quinn looked up to take in the commotion, observing the hug. Although it was difficult to read her facial expression, she was not smiling and did not look pleased. The three girls continued to raise their volume until they were jumping out of their seats and squealing with delight about a game they wanted to create for their project, called the “Game of Life.” William Romano, the History teacher, gave the girls the green light to proceed and they were thrilled, letting out more shouts of joy. Quinn looked over again and seemed annoyed. After several more loud shrieks, Quinn was able to catch Caroline’s attention and ask her what game they were planning. Dismissively, Caroline gave
her the briefest of answers and looked away. Quinn gave Caroline a look of disdain and mouthed sarcastically, “O-kay.” Despite these girls being Quinn’s friends, she was temporarily positioned outside of the action and was clearly not happy about it.

As lunch was approaching, the noise level in the class was growing, not just with the three girls working on their game. Quinn, who continued to look over at Caroline, Diana, and Safia, finally told them they were being too loud, “I can’t even hear what I am listening to!” but was ignored. Quinn maintained her composure and I wondered if she was pleased for telling them how she felt or pretending it did not matter. She stretched out her legs onto the chair Karen was no longer occupying and turned back to her computer. After a few minutes, Karen returned to her seat and without saying a word sat her bum on the small edge unoccupied by Quinn’s legs. She may have felt uncomfortable, but she did not ask Quinn to shift and Quinn did not offer. They worked like this until the class ended. I wondered if this small gesture by Quinn, of taking up more space than Karen, was an attempt at gaining power when she felt none with Safia and the other girls. The behaviour exhibited by the girls in negotiating social power also reflected a mean-spiritedness that seemed to accompany these observations when popularity and status was at stake (Currie et al., 2009; Ringrose & Renold, 2010).

It was important for Quinn to feel in control; hence, not moving her legs to create space for Karen. Quinn was also intent to maintain her popularity status and did not like to feel excluded in any situation. Therefore, she was skilled at observing those around her and making calculated moves to be positioned at the centre of attention, without being overtly obvious in her attempts. However, if Quinn felt threatened (e.g., being excluded/ignored) she would find ways to raise her presence in the classroom. Numerous observations of Quinn in
particular, led to me to think of this gendered and game-like behaviour as the need “to be seen.” Once I identified this theme in Quinn’s daily conduct, I started to notice it with other students as well.

The ways students behaved with the purpose of being seen were often quite different from each other. Many boys commanded attention, like Ray, who would reach out to hug or trip Quinn. There was playfulness and ease in his actions that appeared to be unrehearsed moment to moment. Whereas Quinn was more strategic in her approach by walking by Ray’s desk pretending not to notice him, knowing full well she was being seen as she passed by, or exchanging a laptop at the laptop cart to have a moment to chat with a boy, or sitting backwards in her desk to keep tabs on her peers. There was a level of preparation before executing her performance. I also observed how Jay would get out of his desk when he was bored and shout out words like “yerp” or “blueberry” to get noticed, or he would stare at another person intently waiting to see what reaction he would receive. While he did not invade their space physically, he certainly demanded they notice him through his intense gaze. His actions were usually spontaneous and “impulsive,” a word he used to describe himself in one of our interviews together. Jay mentioned to me in an interview that he thought the girls in his class were mean because they often ignored him, indicating his attempts to be seen were futile, despite how much he tried. These displays of masculinity, performed with the intent of being seen, looked very similar to sociological accounts of boys written in studies over the years (e.g., Renold, 2005; Thorne, 1993).

Caroline was excellent at ignoring girls or boys when she chose not to be disturbed, as she did with Quinn in History. In another example, one afternoon in visual art class, Avery Wu called out to Caroline over and over again, with no response. I doubt it was because
Caroline could not hear Avery call, as the room was not that large. It was not until Avery went to stand beside Caroline to speak with her that she received any attention. Caroline liked to be in charge and was often telling people what to do in organized groups. Therefore, I hypothesized that her need to be seen was also about a need to be in control. Ignoring others was like a purposeful performance of disregard. This was similar to the way Safia operated in the classroom. She maintained her popularity status by controlling whom she would be seen with, or whom she would be seen talking to, and ignoring others, as I mentioned in sections above.

Bob Zhou also ignored people when he was busy working. However, he was a bit of an anomaly, as I did not typically see boys ignore others as the girls did. He said he felt misunderstood by his peers and was viewed by others as annoying, when in fact, he thought of himself as cool. I suspected that Bob ignored others to be seen as hardworking and intelligent, as he struggled with not being the smartest person in his class like he was all through elementary school. In many ways, Bob defied performances of masculinity at Oak Lane Academy, as he was shy, soft-spoken, and took up significantly less space than many of his male peers. He wanted to be taken seriously in his work, but also be seen as a cool person. Yet, Bob found himself negotiating what Renold (2004) terms “non-hegemonic masculinities,” which “often involves inhabiting a marginalized and often painful position within a system of gender relations that carries a host of derogatory labels for boys who dare to deviate from a normative masculinity” (p. 248). While he stated in an interview how much he liked Oak Lane Academy, had a group of good friends and felt that he belonged, he also knew he was different than some of the more popular boys. This was particularly evident when he discussed how some of his peers would watch pornography in class on school
computers, which he thought was “perverted” and not normal. That conversation was highlighted in Chapter Five.

Avery also wanted to be seen, but almost to the point of desperation (the need to be liked). She would flit around the room to get the attention of female friends (mostly to receive a hug or an encouraging smile) and on occasion her advances would be ignored. Regardless, Avery was always expressing her emotions through her body. Even if she were on task at her desk doing independent work, it was evident how Avery was feeling about her efforts. On one particular afternoon, Avery was editing a film project in the computer room for a visual arts assignment. She was required to take footage that her group had video recorded earlier in the week and splice sections together with sound and music to tell a plausible story. Avery would lean towards the computer for a closer look, then gasp for air and cover her mouth with her hands. She talked to her computer screen and pretended to cry. Other students sitting near her asked if she was okay and she responded that ‘it’ (I am not sure what ‘it’ was, the film footage or her interpretation of the story through editing) was making her emotional. Their questioning did not seem to be so much out of concern for her, rather than responding to her elaborate self-expression. As her work proceeded, Avery played incessantly with the strings on her hoodie, while leaning towards the computer and away from it again. I knew she was finally pleased with her editing skills when she leaned her face within inches of the computer screen and smiled, which was followed by laughter and the snapping of her fingers up, down, and side-to-side.

Being seen in the Grade 8 English class was similar to the ways Grade 7 students performed for the purpose of being seen. Several of the boys stood up to talk with friends, leaned their chairs on walls, talked loudly or yelled out jokes, as a means for attention. It was
easy to capture boys in action and get a sense of their mood. They tended to live in the moment and lacked awareness for others who might not appreciate their enthusiasm. The girls required a much closer look and sometimes I would spend a lesson just observing one or two girls to get a sense of whom they were. Overall, they were quieter and more reserved in the classroom compared to the boys, unless they were being carefree and having fun. My time with this group was limited to twice per week so I did not become as familiar with them as I did with the Grade 7 students. Also, it should be noted that the Grade 8 students did not know each other very well either. The Grade 8 English class was a combination of students from the five Grade 7 classes formed the year before. Therefore, I was aware that the boys in general were more comfortable inserting themselves into a new group of people than the girls were, which was apparent by the way they acted. Although there were always boys or girls who were either quieter or more boisterous in nature compared to their same-gender peers.

**Summary**

This game-like behaviour of needing “to be seen” was a common (and somewhat competitive) way that the students interacted with each other. While none of this behaviour is particularly outrageous in any way, it serves as an example of how the male and female students operated (performed) differently within a classroom environment. Whether those enacting “boy” were engaging with the teacher, the class as a whole, or individuals, they were collectively more at ease being loud or demanding the attention they desired. Many were unapologetic for their behaviour and filled as much space verbally or physically as they saw fit. Their performance of masculinity was for the most part playful, unrehearsed, and in the moment. Whereas those performing “girl” tended to be more covert in their actions, taking more deliberate measures to get noticed by vying for attention through ignoring others
or performing calculated moves. For the girls, being seen was also about maintaining control in an environment where they had little (Currie et al., 2009; Renold, 2005).

Within the context of needing to be seen, the students were also bound by the social and gender hierarchy. Boys, such as Ray, did as they pleased with little thought of consequence for their actions. Ray was considered a pervert, but at the same time popular and funny. Bob, on the other hand, felt misunderstood by his peers much of the time because he would ignore people when he was hard at work, despite thinking he was a pretty cool person. Bob was not as popular and therefore, less overt in his behaviour. Jay was also considered less popular, which was evident in the ways many of the girls ignored him, but he still chose to demand attention by being loud and staring at people. Regardless of whether a male student was considered popular or not, he was, for the most part, given a wider berth to do as he pleased. However, the same was not true of girls. I found that the more popular the girls were, the more strategic and controlled they were around their peers. Being seen was about raising the stakes to maintain their popularity status. Whereas, in the case with Avery, she wore her heart on her sleeve to be seen in order to be liked. She was more reactive than calculated and she was often excluded or rejected by other girls for not having more self-control. Ultimately, boys were much more at ease about being seen than girls were, but the girls needed to be seen to survive.

From the perspective of gender-based violence, this game-like behaviour hints to the explicit and implicit gendered ways that students operated at Oak Lane Academy. Boys tended to be more explicit in their performances of masculinity by reaching out to touch or trip someone, shout out loud, take up space in the classroom and so forth. Their actions and/or words were not always welcome by girls, but they continued to test the boundaries of
relationships. The casualness with which boys operated also affirmed their sense of entitlement compared to their female peers. The girls’ behaviour of femininity was more implicit in the ways they regulated themselves by thinking before acting and maintaining a sense of self-control. They also performed to be liked, by boys (flirting, acting coy, going out of their way to get a boy’s attention) and girls (getting hugs, inserting themselves into a group), which demonstrated the manner in which they were compromising or manipulating their relationships and environment to fit in. While these examples were not violent in nature, they reveal aspects of masculinity and femininity that attribute to unhealthy and inappropriate interactions. While there were always variations within and across the male and female spectrum, Oak Lane Academy students adhered to discursive practices that predominantly maintained the gender binary in place.

The leap from this kind of play to what is described in the next section is not far. Games inside and outside of classrooms goes beyond flirting, yelping, and ignoring others “to be seen,” to types of play that pushed boundaries and put girls in uncomfortable situations. Boys took considerable liberties to feed their sexual desires, clearly violating the girls’ personal space and objectifying them because of their gender.

**Games Inside and Outside of Classrooms**

There were many games that students played, which manifested in private conversations, both in and out of the classroom space. These games did not involve physical touch, but rather relied on the imagination and the gaze of the male and female eye, to play. For example, there was the compiling of lists: the three least liked boys and the three top favourite boys in their grade, which several girls would engage in and write down on pieces of paper, or in the hidden crevices of schoolbooks. They would whisper their lists to friends,
or share them out loud with whomever would listen. The lists would be refined and changed as the year progressed. Different boys would lose or earn a spot on a list, from the perspective of the girls, based on the boys’ worthiness or lack thereof. Performing girl also included doodling the names of the best dating couples in their school, naming the boys they “liked,” or male celebrities they had crushes on.

Performing boyhood also included generating lists. One particular game a few boys created was the “ideal” girl, based on their version of the best girl body parts. To do so, they would gaze at all of the girls in their class and grade to rate her legs, hips, waist, breasts, face, and so forth, until they put together their image of the most sexually appealing girl. Diana, a female student who was the most physically developed girl in her class, with an hourglass shape, found it incredibly embarrassing to be named the best breasts for the ideal Grade 7 girl (how she came to know this was not shared with me). So much, that she even found it difficult to share the story with me in an interview. She said, “I was kind of scarred by that . . . you know?” I asked, “It was your body part used? A lot of your parts or a particular part?” I could tell by the way she crossed her arms over her chest, in a protective embrace, that her breasts were the topic of conversation. She said, “A particular part.” I gently pointed to my own and asked, “This part right here?” With embarrassment she said, “Yes.” Diana clearly felt violated by her breasts being a source of entertainment and pleasure for the boys, as part of their daily game playing.

While girls engaged in many types of games that revolved around the interest and adoration of boys, they tended to be played amongst each other with little harm to the boys’ emotional well-being. Boys were not usually privy to the girls’ games and if they were, they took little heed. Vlad Andrews, the self-professed nerd and video game addict, said the girls
in his class constantly talked about “random guys they find on the Internet and if they are
cute or not.” He found it very “awkward” and “strange” that the girls would ask him if he
thought a guy was cute and asked me rhetorically, “Why would I care?” Yet, the same could
not be said of the ways boys liked to play with girls as the centre of their attention. In fact,
most of the games the boys played were for the direct purpose of involving girls, by drawing
them into uncomfortable conversations. Questioning girls about their clothing, bodies, and
private sexual lives were games that were most prevalent with boys towards girls. While the
girls I interviewed were able to give me many examples of these conversations, they
happened enough times in the classroom that I was able to capture snippets in action if I were
sitting close enough to hear. The benefit of being an ethnographer in the classroom for a
number of months is that I was either invisible to the students or they became incredibly
comfortable talking in my presence, as I sat quietly listening and taking notes.

Boys in Grade 7 were consistently labelled perverted by their words and action, with
an unlimited repertoire of “pervy” jokes, comments, and questions. Caroline stated, “There’s
those guys that sit in the back corner of the classroom . . . they can be fun and they’re
definitely funny, but sometimes it gets out of hand.” Whenever humour was discussed, there
was always a fine line drawn between what was considered funny and not funny (Thorne,
1993). I mentioned to Caroline that on several occasions I had heard dialogue of a sexual
nature. She responded, “It’s, like, insane. Some of the things the boys ask girls about or talk
about is absurd.” I asked if she could provide me with an example, which she did with
irritation fuelling her story. She was very unhappy with the seating arrangement in History
class because she had to sit beside a boy who had a reputation for being a pervert. He
constantly quizzed her about people she might want to make out with by throwing out
random names of boys in their grade or the grade above them. Caroline replied “no” to every name he listed. She exclaimed, “And then it’s like, gosh Caroline, you’re so prude. I feel prude is so overused with guys. They just call all girls prude. We’re still like twelve and thirteen. It’s not exactly prude.” I then asked her what would happen if she said yes to someone he named and she responded, “He’d be like, oh my God! And he’d yell in front of the class. Oh my God Caroline, you’d make out with so and so? And it would be terrible.”

While name-calling was not frequently reported at Oak Lane Academy, it tended to take place between a boy and a girl. Although research shows that girls can regulate each other through slut discourse (Currie et al., 2009) and boys through fag discourse (Pascoe, 2007), those kinds of slurs were never shared with me. In the boy only focus group, I asked if students called each other “fags” and they said no. David mentioned a Grade 7 boy calling his female friend a “cunt” and I heard that boys liked to swear. However, name-calling did not seem to be rampant at Oak Lane Academy as a general rule across genders.

Caroline also shared how boys would get her attention by saying her bra was showing when it was not. She said to me, “But it’s, like, not showing. Like, and I know that it’s not showing. I’m not just lying. But it’s like, really terrible. Like, they, like, single you out about it and then it just kind of makes me angry.” Caroline also shared that if the boys were not pointing out that a girl’s bra was showing, they were asking a girl what size bra she was wearing. Caroline asked, “Why would someone need to know this? And why would someone, like, even dare ask? You know?” In this interview we also talked about a conversation I had overheard between her and Mike Thomas, in drama class, where he was asking if she was fully through puberty. He was telling her about a twelve-year-old girl who had had sex and gotten pregnant as a result. Caroline said that was an interesting
conversation with Mike. She thought of him as a friend, but he was becoming more and more inappropriate. She said, “Most of the guys in my class just like got progressively more perverted over the year.”

What was interesting about this conversation is that Caroline interpreted the sexualized questioning by these particular boys as being perverted. In fact, at times they were even considered funny (as described above). However, at no point did she consider the encounters as sexual harassment or inappropriate sexual behaviour (Falconer et al., 2008; Leach et al., 2014). Part of the problem with school-related gender-based violence is that it is often not recognized as such because of how it is disguised by humour or justified by dominant gender discourses. Teachers and/or students make light of serious infractions that in actuality require interventions. Unfortunately, this type of masculine behaviour is often accepted as normal, which in turn makes the violence invisible (Bourdieu, 2001; Herr & Anderson, 2003).

Of all of the Grade 7 girls I interviewed, Caroline was best able to articulate in detail the sexualized culture of her class. Despite her claim to love school for the friends she had made and the incredible opportunities bestowed upon her to learn academically, Caroline was irate with make-out interrogations and being baited about her bra showing. She felt powerless in the exchanges and was particularly frustrated for being called a prude. She felt prude was completely over-used as a put down. This was partly because she was just entering her teen years, and it seemed perfectly acceptable that she would say no to making-out with boys, and also because her private desires were only hers to know. She was aware that regardless of how she answered the question about which person she would, or would not, make out with, it resulted in her being degraded. She was either called a prude for saying no, or put on
display for the whole class to hear, if she had said yes. This humiliation was similar to being
told her bra was showing. Attention was drawn to her body in a way that made her very
uncomfortable, simply because she was biologically ready to wear a bra. Although a bra is
only a piece of structured fabric, the fact that it is a garment specifically produced for breasts,
made it a symbol of Caroline’s sexuality. The level of male perversion that pervaded
Caroline’s Grade 7 class baffled her, and she was becoming increasingly aware of how that
impacted her life. Yet, contrary to her frustration, she also found the boys funny.

Another game “perverted” boys liked to play was to look up “inappropriate stuff” in
books and on the Internet. This topic first came up with Vlad when I asked him in an
interview to describe his class as a whole. He said, “In some parts a high degree of
inappropriateness.” I asked him to explain this further, and he named a boy in the class and
then said, “Awkward references to terms no one’s ever heard of, but when you look them up
they’re extremely inappropriate.” I wondered what that could be and Vlad continued, “Like,
random diseases no one’s ever heard of and then you look it up and you see this, like, most
horrifying picture you’ve ever seen.” When I asked him later in the interview to describe the
boys in his class, this topic resurfaced. Vlad, who was embarrassed to describe exactly what
his male peers were looking at, said it was mostly to do with girls. He said, “Stuff I’d rather
not mention.” I asked him to clarify “inappropriate.” He said, “Diseases, pictures, strange
acronyms.” With some gentle prodding I asked if he could give me a general sense of what
the “stuff” might be about, as I did not want to embarrass him. He responded with, “Private
parts, should I say?” I wondered if the private parts were of girls, boys, or both. He affirmed,
“Both.” I asked if boys had changed from the fall (to February when I was interviewing him)
and he said, “Definitely.” I wondered why that was the case and he replied, “We got to know
each other. Less awkward silences.” I found it interesting that the more comfortable the boys grew to be with each other, the more inclined they were to act inappropriately.

In Pascoe’s (2007) study of adolescent masculinities and sexualities she reports, “boys needed to ensure their masculinity by talking about sex in a way that was perceived by other boys as authentic” (p. 101). In other words, boys bonded over sex talk as a practice of compulsory heterosexuality. This involved telling sexist jokes, sharing stories of sexual conquests, relaying desires and fantasies related to sexual encounters, and so forth, all for the purpose of boys confirming their knowledge of sex with each other. Furthermore, these stories of bravado “serve as the crux of a heterosexual performance designed to bolster a boy’s claim on heterosexuality” (Pascoe, 2007, p. 103). While Vlad and his peers were young compared to the males described in the study, they were in the process of developing attitudes and knowledge around sex and their own sexuality.

Oak Lane Academy boys also had fun turning everything into a sexual joke. In Chapter Five I described how a simple visual art exercise called “finger sculptures” became a joke about fingers representing everything phallic. The jokes were not made for the boys, but to garner the attention of the girls. Despite the girls’ obvious embarrassment (e.g. covering their faces), they laughed at every joke during the lesson. I also expressed earlier in this chapter how easily the boys in the Grade 8 English class could turn aspects of their lesson into a sexual joke or comment. They thought they were being funny offering bold statements in class, while at the same time taking the lesson off course. Much of what was considered amusing by boys was sexualized and directed at girls.
Summary

Being on the receiving end of sexualized games (jokes, comments, and/or questions) versus being the person to initiate them, provided different experiences for those involved. From the data I gathered, many girls generated enjoyment from making their lists and liked to play games related to talking and thinking about boys. Several of the boys also gained pleasure from the games they played that involved talking and thinking about girls. The difference between the ways girls and boys had fun was that the girls did not typically involve the boys in the types of games they played; whereas, the boys clearly drew the girls into their world of curiosity and desire. The fine line between fun and harm was always apparent as the girls moved between laughing to embarrassment and exasperation.

These particular games reinforced the heterosexist and heteronormative practices that took place at Oak Lane Academy, where girls and boys idealized and fantasized about the other. Furthermore, the gender hierarchy remained steadfast in the ways that the boys maintained their position of power, by using their privilege as males to question the girls on their bra sizes, point out their bra straps were showing, ask if they had finished puberty, inquire who they would make-out with, and make jokes and comments at the expense of females and their bodies. Yet, despite the agitation Caroline felt by the boys in her class, she also admitted they could be funny. Even though the girls were embarrassed in visual arts class by the phallic jokes, they laughed. The conditions were such that the boys could play the games they wanted to play, the way they wanted to, and even if it was considered highly inappropriate and/or perverted, or it caused harm and frustration, there was a level of acceptance and justification that it was all just a joke. In other words, this type of behaviour became normalized. With that said, not all students (regardless of their gender) were
interested in talking about sex, engaging in romantic thoughts, making lists about boys or girls, watching pornography, or asking girls sexually suggestive questions. However, several of the participants I interviewed reinforced heteronormative and patriarchal practices at Oak Lane Academy.

Despite the veil of humour that shielded much of the boys’ behaviour, as I illustrated in many of the examples in this section (and in the first section on teacher directed classroom games and dialogue), gender-based violence was evidently in action. Physical touch was not apparent, but explicit acts of violence were prevalent through the ways that boys continually objectified girls’ bodies and dominated their personal space. Whether girls were being judged by their body parts as being the “best,” they were being checked out to see if their bras were showing, they were being questioned repeatedly about their private sexual thoughts, or they were the brunt of jokes and sexualized comments, girls were put in a position on a daily basis to thwart the assault of patriarchy and male power. This male dominance was also present in the private spaces of the school where games were played. In the following section I will illustrate how games became sexualized when boys were involved, as the boys seemed to dictate the nature and rules of engagement in private spaces as well.

**Games in Private Spaces**

There were games that were only played outside of the classroom, in private school spaces, where kissing and touching were involved. Students were often very shy to reveal to me the details of any activity that included sexual exploration, so I was privy to little information about how these games actually worked. Although, from the bits of information I was told during interviews or focus groups, I assumed these games were heterosexual in nature. I was not told where in the school the students played these games, how many people
played at any given time, how often in a week the games were played, and so forth. I was also aware of the possibility that there were more examples of games beyond the two I came to know about: truth or dare, and betting. However, nothing more came to light in our interviews or focus groups together.

The first study participant to talk about these games was Avery. During our initial interview together, I asked her to describe the boys in her class, whom she labelled as perverted. It was from that moment that our conversation took a trajectory towards games, as she explained how a simple game of truth or dare between female friends became about making out with boys. She told me of how she and two of her friends would get together to play truth or dare at the beginning of the year,

We just did dares where we would look really stupid, but it wouldn’t interfere with anyone else. Like, even if something bad happened it was just between the three of us, so it wasn’t that bad. But then once everyone else started doing it, their dares and truths were getting really, really extreme. So I was just, like, oh my God people.

Avery was shocked by the change in the way the game was played and expressed that that would never have happened at her old school. She also said people were “swearing in their daily talk, like, they’re like, swear, swear, swear,” which she spoke of in the same breath as she spoke about kids her age making out. I asked if she believed making out and swearing had anything to do with getting older because she was in a high school with students up to Grade 12. At first she said, “I don’t think so,” but then she recognized her old school only went up to Grade 6 where the kids were “all clean.” She remembered she had friends who went to elementary schools that went up to Grade 8, where swearing was supposedly prevalent, so she conceded age might be a factor. I asked Avery if there were any dares she
had heard about that made her really uncomfortable. She replied, “Um, not really because I
stopped playing with them.” I inquired if people were still playing truth or dare. Avery
responded, “Well I know some people from my class and other classes, they were betting and
then if you lose a bet you have to kiss someone. And that’s really, like, and I was like, we’re
in Grade 7 people!” I further asked, “So it feels for you, like, you just don’t want to have
anything to do with that?” She exclaimed, “Not yet!”

In a conversation with Caroline on the topic of boys and girls, I asked if she had
noticed any “interesting dynamics happening” between them. She laughed and asked me to
clarify my question. I mentioned that getting older might create changes in friendships
between boys and girls, where there might be expectations and it might feel awkward to be
together. She said,

Yah, it’s weird, ‘cause it’s like, it’s like, okay, if you walk into a game with
like truth or dare with like a bunch of people in Grade 7. If it’s a dare or even
a truth it’s probably going to involve someone of the opposite gender and it
doesn’t usually result in anything good . . . like, other than that, like, guys and
girls, we’re way past the cooties phase, you know. We still talk and we’re
friends, but we’re not quite there yet.

Avery and Caroline alluded to the ways engagement between boys and girls had
changed over the course of Grade 7 (and was dramatically different from their experiences of
Grade 6), where the desire to explore each other sexually was increasing. Playing games,
such as truth or dare and betting, allowed students to physically touch the other in a relatively
safe way—it was in a group environment and not one-on-one, it took place at school (perhaps
elsewhere, but that was not discussed), and it was a choice to play or not (according to Avery
who stopped altogether as she was uncomfortable). However, I was led to believe in the
subtle ways Avery and Caroline talked about the games, that when the boys became involved, the way the games were played changed. Truth or dare was no longer about doing “stupid things,” but about being provocative. The boys involved were keen to touch girls, whereas not all girls were ready to be touched. In hindsight I wondered if only certain boys and girls were invited to play the games that involved kissing. When I was young, similar games were only played by the cool kids, which I did not have the opportunity to ask Oak Lane Academy students about.

**Summary**

Games played by students in private spaces, away from the watchful eyes of adults, allowed boys and girls to explore their sexuality and boldly express their thoughts without censorship. There was no adult present to dissuade the students from making out, by arguing they were too young. They were free to explore and experience their world as they pleased, until there was a consequence for doing so. From the perspective of gender-based violence, the kissing games themselves were not inappropriate or violent in nature, but they are telling as to the influences boys have on the ways games are played. Avery and Caroline did not seem quite ready for that kind of play; although it is possible they had female peers who were. It would have been problematic if any girl or boy were forced to play despite being uncomfortable, or if the game went beyond kissing to other forms of touch that those students did not agree to.

When I introduced the four categories of games and game-like behaviour, earlier in this chapter, I articulated that the thread binding them together was a curiosity about, and/or exploration of, changing bodies, sexual knowledge, and sexuality. The other commonality to be explored is the element of fun and humour, which was prevalent in every scenario.
Despite the girls feeling violated, humiliated, embarrassed, frustrated, and/or silenced on many occasions, many also found humour in the boys’ jokes, comments, and behaviour. As I indicated in Chapter Six, girls regularly deferred to their male peers and were quick to shrug off inappropriateness as typical boy behaviour. Girls often defended boys as just having fun or making a joke even after recounting a story that clearly disturbed them. Boys and girls equally justified everything as a joke when games or game-like behaviour was questioned (e.g., by me/a teacher) as inappropriate or violent. In the final section of this chapter I will delve into these student justifications.

**It’s Just a Joke and Other Justifications**

“It’s just a joke” was a common response students used to describe words and/or actions of a misogynistic, sexist, and/or violent nature. Whether they were describing stereotypical jokes, persistent and unwelcome male attention, sexist comments about girls’ bodies, debates on rape culture, or the latest YouTube video demeaning women, speaking about it as funny seemed to be used to deflect any responsibility for, or understanding of, the underlying problem. Thorne (1993) states, “Kids use the frame of play (‘we’re only playing’; ‘it’s all in fun’) as a guise for often serious, gender related messages about sexuality and aggression” (p. 5). Research indicates that adolescents “may experience violence as ‘fun’ at school, and may not see a reason to prevent violence if it brings them joy on some level” (Kerbs & Jolley, 2007, p. 13). There is ample documentation on the effects of school violence on students, but less is known about what they actually experience from the perspective of pleasure and violence. While I did not ask my participants if they found hurting others enjoyable at some level, I did get a sense that saying something was a joke was the easiest way to justify incidents spoken about in our interviews. Students would defend
them as jokes before I had a chance to ask a question, or as a way to stop a conversation. Examples of this will follow.

Earlier in this chapter I illustrated several examples of sexualized and/or aggressive game playing where students were straddling the line between fun and hurt. In the Grade 8 classroom, boys in particular, enjoyed distracting Daniel so they could talk about bodies or sex. They would throw out sexist comments or jokes with the purpose of getting a laugh and/or getting the class off course. While it was initially fun for many, which was indicated by supportive laughter, it often went too far to the side of hurt. As I pointed out earlier, the comments and jokes were often at the expense of girls. The rape debate was particularly problematic. The main boys spurring the dialogue along did so at the expense of the lesson and the other students in the class. While they were having fun arguing their points back and forth with Daniel, others were either checked out, irritated, or uncomfortable. The debate did not last five minutes, but was close to an hour. The main boys involved were highly satisfied with their success to use up class time, showing zero awareness or concern regarding the impact they had on others.

I also demonstrated in this chapter how games for fun became games about hurt with the Grade 7 students. This was most prevalent when students talked about the perverted boys. In one breath, Caroline talked about some of the boys in her class as being funny and then, in the next breath, she stated that they were getting out of hand and becoming increasingly inappropriate as the year progressed. She was definitely not having fun when they were asking her whom she would make out with, inquiring about her bra size, or telling her that her bra was showing. In fact, Caroline was angry for being accosted and put on display. Avery was also on the verge of anger from feeling incredulous, when she shared how a fun
game of truth or dare between girlfriends had become uncomfortable once the boys joined. She was not willing to play the game once making out was the norm. Despite Diana justifying a perverted boy’s behaviour by saying “He just does it as a joke,” she also stated clearly that she was “scarred” by having her breasts be chosen for the game of creating the ideal girl.

Clearly these boys and girls had different ideas of fun, but there was also a general confusion between what was funny, a joke, and the difference between harmless and harmful play. Despite the moments where obvious hurt was caused in or out of the classroom, there were more examples of students justifying inappropriate game playing, dialogue, or comments as just a joke. Claire Littleton, a grade 8 female student, did not seem at all concerned by sexist remarks or inappropriate behaviour, despite it happening on a regular basis. She was sure that it was only meant as a joke, it was not a big deal, and she and her friends would laugh it off. She felt that if a joke or comment got out of hand it could easily be stopped or she would not associate with that person as much. It then came as little surprise when I asked Claire if the boys in her grade were for the most part respectful towards the girls and she replied, “Definitely!” These incidents of violence were normalized to the point that they could be laughed off and not taken seriously. In that sense, heterosexist behaviour was accepted and dismissed as no big deal.

In a second interview with Claire in the spring, we spoke about a boy who had had a crush on her, but she did not feel the same way in return. She said he had been persistent and annoying and that it was awkward, but also funny. I asked, “Okay, so that didn’t make you feel uncomfortable?” Claire responded, “No, it was just, like, funny. I didn’t know if he was joking or not.” I told Claire that I had had many conversations with other students who had
expressed discomfort with an incident or situation, but still justified it as a joke. I wondered if it was easier to say something was a joke because they did not know how to handle what they were really feeling. I explained that there was a fine line between funny and not funny. Claire strongly defended her position, “It was funny.”

Claire was adamant that her encounter with the boy who had a crush on her was funny even though she initially described him as annoying and awkward. This was similar to her insistence that boys were respectful and that sexist comments and behaviour were merely a joke. Claire was not willing and/or able to see the degree of the boys’ degradation towards girls or how their construction of masculinity controlled the school environment. What I found most interesting is that Claire would not even consider the boys’ behaviour as anything other than amusing, dismissing my questions and prodding. However, considering that “violence has become associated with ‘normalized’ forms of masculinity,” (Mills, 2001, p. 2) it would be difficult for Claire to see it any other way. Furthermore, sexism is often treated as past tense in school culture (Ahmed, 2015). Part of the reason for this is that girls have been subjected to strong messages of girl power by the media and celebrities (e.g., Beyoncé) that they live in a world of gender equality where feminism is in the past (Pomerantz, Raby, & Stefanik, 2013). However, this is highly problematic as this thinking makes “outcries of gender injustice appear not just unfounded but implausible” (Pomerantz et al., 2013, p. 186). This was evident in my narrative of Claire and her response to sexist jokes and awkward crushes.

Isabelle agreed with Claire that most students in Grade 8 got along, but she had a different perspective on jokes and the difference between fun and hurt.
• TS: Do you ever hear comments of people using sexist words, crossing the line in how they interact?

• Isabelle: They cross the line, but they don’t know they are crossing the line. Like they say it and they just say it as a joke. They say something like, “oh, ha, ha, ha.” Like, oh I’m so funny. Right? Like, they think it’s okay what they are saying, but then it’s really not.

• TS: So a lot of time it’s presented as a joke?

• Isabelle: Yah. It’s always presented as a joke.

Rather than accept the joke at face value, Isabelle was able to entertain the idea that the person crossing the line was not aware they were doing it, or was making excuses for their behaviour by saying it was just a joke. What may have supported Isabelle’s opinion was her participation in the grade 8 English class that discussed gender stereotypes and equity on a regular basis. Before the class, she admitted to thinking stereotypes or sexism was not a big deal, but once she was aware of how they impacted others, it gave her more insight. Disrupting gender discourses in the classroom supported her deepened understanding of oppression and discrimination (Alvermann et al., 1997; Kumashiro, 2000). Isabelle recalled a lesson when Daniel told the class that one in four women in North American would be sexually assaulted at some point in their lives. The awareness of this statistic made her realize that stereotypes/sexism should never be thought of as a joke and should be taken seriously. I asked her if she heard her peers joke about girls or gay people and she said it happened all of the time. I wanted to know if she found any of the jokes funny or thought of them differently now, “No. When they make them I’m always the person that goes, no don’t say that, that’s not okay you shouldn’t be saying that. They’ll go well it’s just a joke. Like no, that’s not a
joke. Some people it’s, like, affects them seriously.” I was unsure if she actually spoke those words to her peers or was saying she did, specifically for my benefit.

Claire and Isabelle were two of six Grade 8 students who joined me for a focus group discussion that directly addressed gender-based violence. I started by showing them two music videos that represented violence against women through aggression and humour. The first video was *Eat You Alive* by Limp Bizkit (LimpBizkitVEVO, 2003), which showed a frightened woman sitting on a chair while the lead singer of the band aggressively shouted lyrics at her through a megaphone. At one point he holds up a garden hose spouting water at her while singing,

> Hey you, Mrs. too-good-to-look-my-way and that's cool you want nothing at all to do with me. But I want you, ain’t nothing wrong with wanting you cause I’m a man and I can think what the hell I want, you got that straight.

I followed that with *Gentleman* by Psy (Officialpsy, 2013) who gyrated and danced throughout the entire music video while playing pranks on women. He turned up the speed on a treadmill causing a woman to fly off and hurt herself, he pushed a cup of coffee into a woman’s face, he farted into his hand and then shoved it under a woman’s nose, and pulled a chair out from under a woman about to sit down. This was all done to the lyrics, “Damn girl! You’re so freakin’ sexy” and “I’m a, mother father gentleman.”

Once the videos played in their entirety I asked the students what they thought of them. The Limp Bizkit video was ten years old, but the *Gentleman* video by Psy had gone viral that spring with 400 million views on YouTube. Peach thought Psy was just playing. She thought his pranks were mean, but “not that mean” compared to *Eat You Alive* that “just kind of screams that that guy is kind of a rapist.” David said, “I think that Psy was doing it as
a joke, so the irony of the song being called Gentleman was saying I’m a gentleman like a jerk, like an ass.” Isabelle felt that the girl in the Eat you Alive video clearly did not want to be there, but “the Psy one at least he’s making a joke. Like that’s bad too, but this [Limp Bizkit] is like a lot worse because it’s a lot more serious. The Psy one he’s trying to be funny.” What I found fascinating about this discussion was that the explicit nature of violence in the Limp Bizkit video was obvious to the students. The setting of the video was dark and angry, with a woman being assaulted by harsh lyrics by a raging singer. The singer was compared to a rapist and the video described as serious. Yet, the video by Psy was easily justified as a joke and that Psy was only trying to be funny, despite the fact that he demeaned women, violated their space, and also hurt them physically. In comparison, one video looked worse than the other when in reality both were sexist and aggressive towards women.

It occurred to me that the students’ reactions to the videos spoke volumes about their comfort and acceptance of particular enactments of masculinity. The distinction between the two characters—the assailant versus the prankster—was critical to understanding how the students were able to rationalize certain forms of violence. In other words, they could justify implicit or symbolic violence versus explicit aggression. They were not familiar with aggressive male behaviour like the character in the Limp Bizkit video, which made them ill at ease. The violence was obvious and unacceptable. However, the students regularly witnessed boy behaviour similar to the prankster, which I captured daily in my observation notes. These “funny” performances of masculinity were so normalized that the violence and degradation towards the girls became invisible (Herr & Anderson, 2003). Therefore it makes perfect sense that the students would perceive the two videos to be dissimilar in their representation of violence against women.
Time and again, Oak Lane Academy students justified their level of smartness academically with that of the real world, as I articulated in detail in Chapter Six. They concluded that they could navigate relationships and social circles effectively because they were smart and responsible, which meant they knew better than to inflict violence on another person or be victimized. However, although they had the intellectual mind to justify their actions or attitudes (or someone else’s) as a joke, they lacked the emotional capacity to understand the ways they were already producing and experiencing gender-based violence in their school. Therefore, it was easy for them to justify that what they were saying was just a joke, as if being smart made it acceptable. Intelligence was held in high esteem at Oak Lane Academy as a critical aspect of the students’ class and gender performances, which allowed a great deal of inappropriate behaviour to be accepted as normal and to flourish without consequence.

Daniel was very aware of the ways gender played out at Oak Lane Academy, although it was rarely named. He attempted over the years to include discussions with his students on topics such as gender equity, stereotypes, heterosexism, and homophobia, but was still grappling with how to be effective in his approach. The school provided anti-bullying assemblies to combat issues of power and violence but they had little impact. This is because most of these types of assemblies miss the mark on what is actually the root of problem, which I will discuss in further detail in the concluding chapter to follow. Peach spoke for many students when she said, “And it just turned into this joke, kind of. Like, oh it’s another anti-bullying assembly. Like, what are they going to teach us now? And it became a joke, kind of. It lost the message.” It was interesting that Peach found attempts at preventing violence a joke, just as the countless incidents that took place in the school were
justified as a joke. The students used their intelligence to construct an image of an elite school they could idealize where everyone who had membership got along and had a good time. Accepting anything less than that might bring the walls crashing down around them.

**Conclusion**

There were implicit and explicit ways that Grade 7 and 8 students learned to play games and engage in game-like behaviour that took place inside and outside of the classroom, as a way to connect with peers, develop and test the boundaries of relationships, and reinforce the gender and social hierarchies within their grade and/or class. While some “play” was student-centred and/or teacher-driven, other types of play took place in the private spaces of the school where adults were absent and students created agency for themselves as autonomous decision-makers. Regardless, the embodiment and performance of normative gender discourses were at the centre of these games and game-like behaviour, which set the conditions for gender-based violence to manifest and persist. Displays of hegemonic masculinity were consistently present in the space of games, positioning girls as subjects to be objectified, joked about, or humiliated. This reinforced the boys’ sense of entitlement and superiority in the school, with little if any consequences for their behaviour, which perpetuated the subordination of girls.

For the most part, games and game-like behaviour were heterosexist and/or heteronormative in nature with the opposite gender involved in some aspect of play. However, girls did not always engage boys directly in their game playing (e.g., making private lists about their top favourite boys), unlike the boys who specifically sought out female targets as their source of fun. Male students maintained their position of power on the gender hierarchy by accosting girls with questions such as their bra size and sexual
experiences, or making jokes and comments at their expense, which the girls were often rendered helpless to stop. While some became angry or frustrated, most rationalized this harmful and violent behaviour as a joke. Performances of masculinity were often perceived as playful, light-hearted, and fun, which normalized violent male behaviour as acceptable that was easily dismissed as “boys being boys.”

The final chapter of the dissertation will reflect on how my daughter’s personal experience of school-related gender-based violence in her Grade 8 year materialized into a politically driven ethnographic experience. I start by reviewing the research questions, which leads into a summary of the four key findings of the study and their implications on school policies and procedures, pedagogy, and the curricular spaces in which students learn. Furthermore, I offer three specific recommendations for future research while also reflecting on what I learned from conducting this study. I share the limitations I had to overcome as part of the ethnographic process, which in many ways strengthened the research design. This chapter ends with final reflections of the study on school-related gender-based violence as I ask the question, “Now what?!”
CHAPTER EIGHT
COMING TO TERMS WITH SCHOOL-RELATED GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE:
NOW WHAT?! 

Gender-based violence (GBV) is a global phenomenon that knows no geographical, cultural, social, economic, ethnic, or other boundaries. It occurs across all societies and represents a brutal violation of human rights, the worst manifestation of gender-based discrimination and a major obstacle to the achievement of gender equality. It is tolerated and sustained by social institutions, including the school, the very place where we expect our children to be safe and protected. It is a serious obstacle to the right to education and learning, with implications for the ways that people understand and enact their social lives and exercise their citizenship. (Leach et al., 2014, p. 1)

This dissertation emerged from a personal plight that developed into a politically relevant and critically important study on school-related gender-based violence. In the time that has passed since this project commenced, school violence continues to destabilize and fracture educational spaces that are intended for equitable, inclusive, and safe teaching and learning experiences. By investigating how Grade 7 and 8 Oak Lane Academy students made meaning of gender-based violence, and how those meanings were constructed through performances of embodied gender discourses, I have attempted to comprehend the implications of these findings for school policies and procedures, curriculum, pedagogy, and the curricular spaces in which students learn. This final concluding chapter will delve into these implications by reflecting on key findings that emerged throughout the study, as I come to terms with school-related gender-based violence and ask the question, “Now what?!”

While research projects traditionally conclude with recommendations for future considerations and empirical possibilities, I feel a heightened sense of responsibility to offer final thoughts on this topic, bearing in mind the scope of the problem. Knowing that students
are being harmed physically, psychologically, and/or sexually on a daily basis (in and around schools), from seemingly minor infractions to violations of their human rights, my desire to actively pursue this work on a larger scale beyond the doctoral study is at the forefront of my mind. Furthermore, it is my intention to urge others (school stakeholders, community members, government partners, etc.) to do the same in some capacity. The proverb, “it takes a village to raise a child” has never felt more relevant as when considering the consequences of violence in schools.

In the five months I spent at Oak Lane Academy, I was fortunate to receive full access to a number of Grade 7 and 8 classrooms where I could observe various curricular subjects being taught, including pedagogical approaches to teaching and learning by a number of highly experienced educators. I also took notice of how Oak Lane Academy students interacted with and were shaped by the hidden curriculum, which was constructed in and outside of the classroom in a multitude of ways. These observations, coupled with individual interviews and focus groups, enabled me to question normative ideologies and assumptions, make sense of existing school knowledge(s) and truths, and weave data into stories “to reveal the cultural knowledge working in a particular place and time as it is lived through the subjectivities of its inhabitants” (Britzman, 2000, p. 27). This will be revealed as I summarize what I learned throughout the study. In composing my thoughts towards the end of this chapter, I will divulge methodological limitations that I encountered as part of the ethnographic experience, share what I would do differently now that this study is completed, and highlight recommendations for future research that is required in taking up such challenging work.
In the section that follows, I will address four key themes that frame the study as a whole. I argue that in order to effectively address school-related gender-based violence, one must understand the patriarchal and (hetero)sexist nature of schools, which produce and reproduce gender discourses that enforce what it means to be a “boy” and what it means to be a “girl.” I illustrate how discursive practices and social interactions construct particular performances of masculinity and femininity that place implicit expectations on students to think, feel, and behave in ways that create ideal conditions for gender-based violence to manifest. I also contend that it is important to understand how symbolic violence is mobilized by the hidden curriculum where gender inequality and (hetero)sexism emerge as unintended learning outcomes for students. I highlight humour and “play” as a distractive tactic for implicit violence to exist and persist in school spaces. Furthermore, I assert that disrupting dominant gender discourses through the curriculum is pedagogically challenging work for teachers. Students are not automatically enlightened by new ways of thinking, or willing to interrupt their own normative assumptions, but rather go through a process of resistance that may or may not lead to reenvisioning heteronormative and patriarchal ideologies. Lastly, I emphasize bullying discourse as a safe school initiative failure as it does not address root causes of violence. Anti-bullying directives are overused to the point that they are exhausted and provide absolutely no insight into how gender relations operate to maintain gender-based violence.

**Key Ethnographic Findings**

From the very beginning of this study I was curious about what it meant to be a “boy” and what it meant to be a “girl” within the context of Oak Lane Academy. With an admissions process that separates incoming students into gender categories of boy and girl
for the purpose of creating gender balanced classrooms, placing expectations on these
students to claim a specific and defined gender identity was critical to this process.
Therefore, gender played a pivotal role in the structure of Oak Lane Academy in how
students took up their positions as boy or girl as part of their smart and elite subjectivity. In
the process of establishing Oak Lane Academy membership, students were constantly
making meaning of their environment through social interactions and discursive practices
produced by available discourses (Barrett, 2005; Butler, 1997; St. Pierre, 2000). The cultural
narratives of the school reinforced differences across and within the gender divide that
elevated the position of male identified students to one of privilege compared to those who
identified as female. This was apparent in how the gender and social hierarchy of the school
operated. Those who enacted “boy” through varied performances of masculinity learned that
their attitudes and actions were often accepted and justified as “normal,” regardless if they
were being disruptive or (hetero)sexist in nature. Whereas, the students who enacted “girl,”
through performances of femininity, embodied expectations of constraint, obedience, and
perfection that diminished their own privilege and entitlement as elite equals. Understanding
the heteronormative and patriarchal ideologies embedded in the cultural narratives of the
school was essential for acknowledging how conditions were established for gender-based
violence to manifest.

Despite Oak Lane Academy boasting gender-balanced classrooms to offer equal
learning opportunities for all students, gender inequality was rooted in place. An aspect of the
problem was that students correlated equal numbers of boys and girls with equal treatment.
For the most part, they assumed that sexism was an issue of the past or happened in places
other than their school (Ahmed, 2015). With the rise of pop culture Girl Power narratives that
support ideologies that girls can be whomever they want to be and have it all, girls are becoming caught between their imagined reality and the actuality of their everyday lived experiences of inequality (Pomerantz et al., 2013). Furthermore, several of the boys I observed at Oak Lane Academy were threatened by the perceived uprising of female empowerment. This was apparent during the rape debate with Daniel Evans and his Grade 8 English class. A group of male students demanded greater rights for men, which they felt had been diminished due to feminism. They could not see the privileges they were granted just for being boys. This is not an uncommon occurrence, which is evident in the emergence of the men’s rights movement across North America (Allan, 2015). Although sexism and patriarchy operated freely at Oak Lane Academy, many of the students could not see it because of the contradictory storylines they told themselves to be true. Dominant gender discourses produced and reproduced variations of these “truths,” making the school fertile ground for gender-based violence to grow.

This in itself could not manifest without the support of the hidden curriculum, which operated as a mechanism for maintaining dominant gender discourses. I questioned what students were learning and how, outside of the official curriculum, by paying particular attention to the unintended outcomes that materialized from the schooling process (McLaren, 2009). (Hetero)sexism and gender inequality was a direct result of the hidden curriculum where Oak Lane Academy boys were granted greater power and privilege over their female peers. This was demonstrated time and again in how they received preferential treatment such as being able to occupy significant amounts of space verbally and physically. It was through interacting with and being shaped by the hidden curriculum that boyhood was understood as a performance of hegemonic masculinity. It was an embodied understanding
that loud, unruly, and sexist behaviour were just boys being boys (Renold, 2005; Thorne, 1993). It was accepted, excused, and in some ways encouraged. The more these performances of masculinity were enabled in the classroom, the more reinforced the gender norms became. Many teachers and students bolstered these gender discourses through their own beliefs, behaviour, and attitudes that supported hegemonic and patriarchal norms. The more these discourses were imposed on student subjectivities, the more gender inequality and sexism became embedded in the milieu of the school. Gender-based violence was then able to assume its place, deeply entrenched in the shadows of the hidden curriculum as a symbolic presence.

Symbolic (or implicit) violence is able to remain invisible within the hidden curriculum, as it is quiet, subtle, and rarely recognized in the realm of larger systemic violence (Bourdieu, 2001; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Herr & Anderson, 2003). Rather, symbolic violence is a function of dominance that relies on social inequality to function (Scott, 2012). It is typically taken for granted as normal and is easily justified and rationalized. This is the type of violence that supports “common” or “natural” behaviour that separates and opposes boys and girls. It is what allows comments like “boys will be boys” to be uttered and believed. There were two distinct ways this occurred at Oak Lane Academy, which tended to happen simultaneously. One was through the ways students engaged in “play,” which I also refer to as games and game-like behaviour in the thesis. The second was through humour, which was embedded in the game playing itself.

Games and game-like behaviour were illustrated and observed through organized and impromptu encounters among students. There were a number of games that were teacher-directed and student-centred, as well as those that were more “organic” and took place away
from adult authority (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2009a). Some of the games I regard as ritualistic were constructed and produced with masculinity and femininity at the helm of the ritual. This included boys telling sexist jokes and asking girls inappropriate questions about their sexuality. Regardless of the game or game-like behaviour, symbolic violence was always present and reinforced by daily school routines and discursive practices. Humour was often interjected into these encounters and situations to deflect responsibility from mouthing sexist or misogynist attitudes or bias. It allowed for the “joke” to be received with greater ease and the dominant messages of patriarchy to be laughed at and ignored (Kotthoff, 2006; Mackie, 1990; Mallett et al., 2006). Even though boys tended to do the joking as a display of their masculinity, both boys and girls interpreted the jokes as funny regardless of their derogatory attack on females. While there is a place for humour in the classroom as a means to build classroom community and increase student engagement, students need to learn the difference between joking for fun versus joking to hurt. Fun and games can be a positive classroom experience, but when someone gets hurt it is never a joke.

With the hidden curriculum responsible for maintaining dominant gender discourses, which reinforces (hetero)sexism and gender inequality, it is reasonable to assume school-related gender-based violence would develop and evolve. However, before the study commenced I would have imagined a strong school equity protocol would rectify this issue to an extent. Yet, even though Oak Lane Academy was fully committed to gender equity through its policies, programs, and curricular opportunities, (hetero)sexism and gender inequality continued to be produced and reproduced along with the construction of violence. What I learned through the ethnographic process is that just because actions are put in place to create an equitable, inclusive, and safe community does not mean it actually happens.
Violence is nourished by normative masculinity and patriarchal ideologies, which can only be reversed when gender discourses are addressed directly. It is not enough to attend to issues of equity without paying attention to the hidden curriculum and the way it operates in the school context. This has implications for how schools construct equity policies and procedures if their goal is to produce equitable learning and teaching spaces where all students receive equal opportunities for success. This is not just the responsibility of one teacher or a group of administrators, but the whole school.

The *2008 Safe Schools Action Team Report* (Safe Schools Action Team, 2008) suggests that the most effective way to create an inclusive school culture and support students in developing respectful and healthy relationships is through the school curriculum. Students spend much of their childhood in schools where there should be ample opportunities for them to develop the emotions, knowledge and critical thinking skills required to practice healthy attitudes throughout their lives, regarding gender and sexuality. This includes exposing students to new ideas and texts that disrupt gender discourses, allowing for questioning of knowledge and truths, and supporting learning by attending to culturally responsive and relevant pedagogy (McCready, Montemurro, & Rivière, 2011; Reid & Swartz, 2011). However, from what I observed at Oak Lane Academy this is pedagogically challenging work to attempt and maintain. It was definitely not being embraced by large numbers of teachers on a regular basis, and in many classrooms, it was not happening at all.

I had the distinct pleasure of sitting in Daniel Evans Grade 8 English class for a total of five months, which included forty-one observations during that time. I watched as he attempted to change the classroom discourse by bringing in feminist perspectives to teach lessons on media literacy and literature studies. Despite his best intentions to “enlighten” his
students on topics related to gender-based violence, I also observed resistance and push back by some of the students who did their best to maintain patriarchal and heteronormative ideologies. According to Barrett (2005) “it is not enough to introduce students or teachers to counter-hegemonic discourses and assume they will adopt them” (p. 87). Furthermore, some students questioned the validity of these teachings in English class when they felt it needed to be sequestered to health classes only (if taught at all). There also seemed to be some resistance from other school staff who deemed Daniel as a bit of a rogue. In an elite merit-based private school where learning was considered serious work, Daniel was not teaching the curriculum traditionally. What he was teaching included a very specific agenda.

When I first started this study, Daniel had mentioned his ongoing struggle to balance anti-discriminatory work with the curriculum, which explained his willingness to work in partnership with me. As a matter of praxis, it was an ongoing process that Daniel was committed to continuing. On a regular basis we reflected on his pedagogical challenges, I shared insights gathered from the ethnographic observations, and we were often left pondering what could be done differently. Daniel also requested insight from his students at times to find out how they were being impacted by the lessons he chose to teach. Some saw the value (to an extent) and others claimed to be well educated in gender stereotypes and assumptions, healthy relationships, and issues of discrimination and violence. In other words, they did not need Daniel to teach them more of what they already knew. As the students identified with being smart they often used their intelligence as a means to justify knowing more than they did. From an intellectual perspective, Oak Lane Academy students could argue and debate many topics, but they often floundered at connecting on an emotional level (e.g., the realities of rape). Despite the daily effort Daniel put into offering his students
opportunities to disrupt gender discourses and think critically about social inequality, there was still significant resistance by the students to engage in these teachings. Plus, there were lessons he facilitated that unintentionally reinforced dominant discourses more than they disrupted them.

What I learned from working closely with Daniel and observing his classes is that this pedagogical work is an ongoing struggle that requires a long-term commitment. It also necessitates a fine balance between attending to the curriculum as intended (e.g., historicizing Shakespeare) and deconstructing knowledge from different perspectives (e.g., analysing characters in the play based on theories of gender relations). As education continues to evolve and gender discourses change, so will the cultural narratives of the school. This requires acknowledging that there is always flux in teaching and learning. Therefore, the work required to construct and reinforce gender equity and effectively address school-related gender-based violence is never complete.

This brings me to the fourth key finding of the study, which looks at bullying discourses as safe school initiative failures. After elaborating on the other contributions of the study, I feel it is particularly relevant to talk about bullying discourses. For one, school-related gender-based violence is typically conflated with bullying discourses that are deeply embedded in the school culture. Second, school-specific initiatives for bullying are positioned as viable solutions to school-related gender-based violence. However, bullying discourses do not address root causes of violence such as patriarchy and (hetero)sexism. This poses a significant problem when considering the implications of gender-based violence in schools and how to effectively address it.
Bullying surfaced a number of times in conversations with students during interviews. While they claimed they had never experienced bullying at Oak Lane Academy, they could not say the same of their time at previous schools. To be more specific, these students experienced bullying in the public-school system. Regardless, talk of bullying was prevalent both at Oak Lane Academy and their previous schools. They were regularly exposed to assemblies on bullying preventions and interventions, invited to created skits on bullying scenarios, and produced colourful posters with anti-bullying slogans. Some of the participants in my study stated clearly that preventative measures for bullying was a joke (e.g., whole school assemblies and disciplinary measures to reprimand “bullies” were mentioned in particular). They felt that nothing was learned and nothing changed. Kids still continued to bully other kids. While the participants in my study were well versed in bullying language, not surprisingly they had little to no knowledge of gender-based violence. Furthermore, how they understood bullying discourses and described examples of bullying behaviour proved to be inconsistent from one student to another. Despite these students being schooled on bullying prevention for years, not one student could succinctly articulate a deeper meaning of the problem outside of generalized harm.

What is problematic about calling gender-based violence “bullying” is that it negates naming forms of discrimination and human rights violations that are at the root of the problem (Leach et al., 2014). Brown et al. (2007) argue that the word bullying is essentially a polite way to avoid talking about topics such as (hetero)sexism, racism, and homophobia. Although it may be appropriate to use the term bullying with young children to maintain simplistic language (although I would ultimately argue against it), it does not serve a purpose for adolescents who must acknowledge the realities of gendered violence as oppressive,
discriminatory, and in many cases, criminal. To label gender-based violence as bullying puts the entire problem in the precarious position of being treated with *one-size-fits-all* remedies (Brown et al., 2007).

As already mentioned, many schools hold anti-bullying assemblies, teachers rally students into creating slogan filled posters such as ‘bullying stops here,’ or a language arts class may be dedicated to writing stories about why bullying is bad. Yet through these activities little is actually learned about “how gendered behavior varies with social context or how intersections of race, class, or sexual identity impact gendered experiences” (Brown et al., 2007, p. 1266). In its overuse, the word bullying has become completely non-specific to any type of harm, seemingly directionless in its resolve. Essentially, bullying as a general term sanitizes and depoliticizes the “isms” without deeper investigation of the problem. Just as a Band-Aid over a wound cannot heal infection on its own, nor can bullying strategies prevent or reduce the suffering inflicted by school-related gender-based violence alone. Only when the source of violence is uncovered, is there a starting point for healing and change (Herr & Anderson, 2003). In failing to address root causes and maintaining gendered violence as bullying, schools play a critical role in reproducing and sustaining school-related gender-based violence.

After my time spent at Oak Lane Academy and reflecting on what I learned throughout the study, I have come to a few conclusions. I believe that bullying discourses need to be eliminated, or at the very least deconstructed and reimagined. Regardless, I advocate that they be severed in association from gender-based violence. Rather than have students sit through one more boring assembly or poster project, they need opportunities to explore topics related to their social identities (such as gender, race, and sexuality) through
the curriculum. School-related gender-based violence is a school issue that requires an educative response. Critical inquiry and reflective dialogue can support the emergence of new discourses, which over time can support positive change (AAUW Educational Foundation, 2004; Rands, 2009; RTI International, 2015). Despite the challenges of doing this pedagogical work with students, it remains a worthy endeavour. I also conclude that more attention needs to be paid towards what is happening in classrooms. I continue to question how the hidden curriculum works as a mechanism to reinforce dominant gender discourses and construct symbolic violence, in what ways humour is used to deflect inappropriate beliefs, assumptions, and attitudes about others, and what it means to be a “boy” or a “girl” in other school spaces.

From an ethnographic perspective, I wonder how an intersectional analysis can serve future research by delving deeply into investigations of gender, race, class, and sexuality to reveal underlying root causes of school-related gender-based violence in order to lessen the impact of harm. Lastly, I acknowledge that I continue to have more questions than answers at the close of a feminist poststructural ethnography, where there is no final truth or conclusive ending. This is work that is messy at best, “a contested and fictive geography” (Britzman, 2000, p. 28). Despite feeling doubtful at times during the analytic process and desiring greater clarity of “truth” as a storyteller, I have found this theoretical perspective to be enlightening. This approach to research and analysis lends to disrupting normative ways of thinking and doing that provide opportunities for brazen discoveries and possibilities for political change in education. This is most certainly what is needed to provoke deeper understandings of gender-based violence to create equitable, inclusive and safer schooling experiences for generations to come.
Limitations of the Ethnographic Experience

There were several limitations that I encountered in the course of conducting this study at Oak Lane Academy, which emerged at the onset. Due to the academic rigour and time constraints of the daily school schedule, I was requested to adapt my original research design (developed for a public-school environment) to something more appropriate for an elite private school context. Rather than facilitate collaborative movement-based learning opportunities in connection with the curriculum, I was encouraged to conduct classroom observations. I was given permission to conduct two interviews with each participant rather than three, as well as a total of two focus groups. As the lunch breaks were so short, I was unable to conduct movement-based activities during focus group gatherings and needed to shift the attention to sit down elicitation strategies. Furthermore, not enough students granted permission for the use of digital video recording during focus groups so that method of observation needed to be terminated.

Another limitation of the study included a pre-selected Grade 7 class (out of five possible classes), including the teachers responsible for these students. I was unaware as to why this specific class was chosen for the study compared to the others. Furthermore, there were subjects that I was not invited to sit in on including French and math. As well, there were scheduling conflicts between the Grade 8 English classes and Grade 7 science, which meant I had to forgo one for the other. I was also limited to observing Grade 8 students in English class only as they did not travel to their curricular subjects as a group, but individually. Logistically, it was too challenging to follow each Grade 8 participant to their various classes (which would require signed consent forms from other teachers) while also maintaining an observational schedule with the Grade 7 students. Furthermore, there were
several more female students who volunteered to be participants than males. This was particularly glaring with the Grade 8 participants in which only one male offered to join the study compared to seven females. Lastly, a major limitation of the study was its lack of intersectional analysis, although I was able to consider more concisely why silences around race and class were consistent in the data. This limitation enabled me to see more precisely how successful Oak Lane Academy was at selling “whiteness” as part of their promise to students for a life of privilege, status, and wealth when choosing elite education. While I had to forgo an intersectional analysis, I was able to explain why race remained unspeakable and class was taken for granted.

While these limitations were at times daunting to navigate, in retrospect they strengthened my research “muscles” by pushing me to explore new possibilities as an ethnographer. I learned to embrace discomfort and allow moments to unfold in ways I did not expect. For one, I experienced rejection numerous times with the public-school boards, which helped me to understand the realities of studying a highly sensitive and contentious topic in schools. This in turn led me to an alternative field site, which I had not anticipated. While I had no intention or interest in initially conducting research in an elite private school, the perspective I gained from the experience was invaluable. As an educator and researcher, I feel a greater sense of well roundedness in having had the opportunity to study students that differed from my previous educational experiences. The knowledge I gained from this ethnographic process will only enhance my future endeavours regardless of the educational context I find myself in.
A Return to Reflexivity: What I Would Do Differently

As I traversed the highs and lows of the ethnographic journey, from beginning to end, I kept returning to thoughts of what I would do differently if I were to begin again. The adage ‘if I knew then what I know now’ had passed my lips numerous times. For one, I would change the way I asked students questions in interviews and focus groups with less emphasis on “boys” and “girls.” While it was important to distinguish what it meant to be a boy and what it meant to be a girl at Oak Lane Academy, I would also have investigated these gender identities in various ways. For example, how might students define “boy” or “girl?” In what ways is one distinguished from the other and how might these conceptions of gender be overlapping or contradictory? I would also attend to questions about sexuality by asking directly, what is it? What is sexuality? Gilbert (2010) asks, “What new conversations, policies, curricula, and controversies would be possible if sex education became less about sex and more about sexuality?” (p. 233). For example, how might students define masculinity or femininity in general and in relation to their own subjectivity? This follows the research conducted by Mandel and Shakeshaft (2000) on heterosexism in middle schools, which allowed for a deeper understanding of masculinities and femininities, and demonstrated how students felt pressured to conform to heterosexual ideals. I would also be more explicit in dialogue with students about dating rituals, the “friend zone” and other relationship conversations by disrupting heterosexual norms. It is likely that students spoke with friends in private spaces about gender and sexuality in ways that evoked curiosity or questioning outside of the norm.

Another aspect of the study I would change was my approach to intersectional analysis. Rather than leave the silences as they were, I would find ways to make the invisible
visible. For example, I could have facilitated an activity in a focus group that directly encouraged students to talk about their social identities. *The Power Flower* (Thomas, n.d.) is a popular exercise that invites participants to fill in the petals of the flower by identifying their race, ethnicity, language, religion, and so forth. In other words, each petal has a label (e.g., race, class, gender, etc.) that guides participants in thinking about their dominant social identities. While this is a very sensitive activity to facilitate, students can always refuse to participate or only fill out what they feel comfortable sharing. Furthermore, I would have asked more direct questions in interviews about race. For example, how might students describe themselves from an ethno-racial perspective? Was race implicated in social status (e.g., popularity) or how students developed friendships (e.g., racially segregated cliques).

With that said, I acknowledge that research is a process. Learning occurs by doing. I can now take what I have learned from this experience and apply it to future research opportunities.

**Recommendations for Future Study**

With a topic as critically important and narrowly understood as school-related gender-based violence, there are many possible recommendations for pursuing this topic further. Based on the research I conducted at Oak Lane Academy, I have narrowed the list down to a few that feel most relevant in a politically tumultuous time. As I write this, Ontario has a newly elected Progressive Conservative premier with a majority government that promises to rescind the current Health and Physical Education Curriculum (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2015b). Trailed by controversy since its inception, this document addresses topics such as gender-based violence (e.g., homophobia, sexist slurs, sexual harassment, inappropriate sexual behaviour), healthy relationships (e.g., friendships and dating), sexual health (e.g., understanding gender identity, gender expression and sexual orientation;
awareness and acceptance of gender identity and sexual orientation), and consent (specifically related to sexual encounters). Many of these topics have the potential of being removed from the curriculum in favour of more sanitized and social conservative curricula, which could place an even greater emphasis on teachers and schools to address school-related gender-based violence in other ways with little support to do so.

To begin, I recommend looking at different school contexts. While it could be interesting to compare Oak Lane Academy with other elite private schools, I am most interested in researching within the public-school system. Based on the challenges I had seeking permission in three public school boards at the beginning of this study, I can assume that school-related gender-based violence is not a widely granted research topic in school boards across Ontario. With that said, it would be valuable to conduct a cross-Canada ethnography by comparing schools in a variety of regions (urban and rural) in different provinces (small and large). I am highly aware that each school context is unique with specific gender, race, and class distinctions among them. This type of comparative study could support deeper understanding of school-related gender-based violence in ways that were impossible at Oak Lane Academy. I would also attempt intersectional analysis in future research studies.

Secondly, I recommend conducting a study with teachers as my research focused specifically on students. I would be very interested to investigate how teachers are approaching topics related to gender discourses and gender-based violence pedagogically (if at all). In what ways might teachers implement the health curriculum into their teaching or create anti-sexism opportunities in connection to other aspects of the curriculum? Furthermore, what controversies and/or problems might arise in doing this work? It would
also be insightful to explore teacher’s understandings of gender-based violence and how they themselves experience it in their lives. Lastly, I recommend future research with other age groups, specifically primary and junior students (Kindergarten to Grade 6). This age group is underrepresented in studies related to gender-based violence, but they could provide significant insight into evolving gender relations and their understanding of gender discourses. It would be interesting to observe a continuum of age groups starting at Kindergarten through to Grade 6 to grasp developmental stages in relation to emerging violence.

**Final Thoughts**

Critical and thoughtful dialogue must be had at the Ministry of Education, board and school levels in order to address and eliminate school-related gender-based violence effectively. Top-down approaches that regulate policies and procedures, curriculum and pedagogy are not working effectively, nor are anti-bullying measures and initiatives that ignore human rights issues, oppression, and the socio-historical context of schools (Herr & Anderson, 2003; Leach et al., 2014). Instead more energy is required at the grassroots level (in teacher training, in the classroom with students, parent seminars, etc.) to support equitable classrooms and schools where all students can feel accepted and welcome. This requires understanding the patriarchal and (hetero)sexist nature of schools, which produce and reproduce normative gender discourses. Therefore, it is critical to make sense of the hidden curriculum and the unintended learning outcomes for students, acknowledge the presence of symbolic violence (including humour) and its link to social and gender inequalities, and provide pedagogical and curricular support to teachers so they can confidently tackle these issues in the classroom.
Essential to students’ well-being is a violent-free learning environment that supports students in their physical, cognitive and emotional development, while also preparing them for life as responsible adults who value non-violence, non-discrimination, gender equality, tolerance and respect for others (Pinheiro, 2006). It is not enough for students to understand how gender-based violence is defined or what to do in an abusive situation, but they must also be encouraged to “to examine constructed self-images in relation to how one has learned to perceive others” (Boler, 1999, p. 177).

As I bring this study and dissertation to a close I cannot help but to reflect on the past and why I began this study in the first place. To think, it all began one evening in September when my daughter, Rachel, told me she was being sexually harassed at school. So much has occurred since that night. My daughter has grown and graduated from the public-school system. She has healed and gone on to experience healthy and loving relationships. For a time she was deeply traumatized by her experience, but now she sees it as a gift. Through her experience, I have been able to shed light on an epidemic that no student should have to endure. This includes speaking regularly to teacher candidates about her case and the key findings of the study. Rachel feels that something positive emerged from her worst nightmare as an adolescent. As a mother who felt powerless, and as an educator who is deeply passionate to create change, this research project provided healing and purpose in my own life. What I know to be true is that there is no excuse for any child of any age to be sexually, verbally or physically harmed at school. Yet, school-related gender-based violence continues. As I step into the future as a seasoned educational researcher and teacher educator, with a deep desire to contribute to the end of school-related gender-based violence, I ask myself the question, “Now what?!”
REFERENCES


Ontario Ministry of Education. (2013a). *Bullying we can all help stop it: A guide for parents of elementary and secondary school students.* Toronto, Ontario, Canada: Queen’s Printer for Ontario.


Appendix A

Administrator Information Letter and Consent Form

Dear Principal __________________,

My name is Traci Scheepstra and I am a PhD Candidate at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto (OISE/UT). I have over two decades of teaching experience, in a variety of educational settings, with learners of all ages. My work focuses on curriculum, pedagogy and research in the fields of arts-based education, restorative justice practices, character education, bullying initiatives and gender-based violence. Currently I work in the teacher education program at OISE/UT, where I support teacher candidates in their journey to become primary and junior educators.

I am conducting a study entitled, Gender-Based Violence in Middle Schools: Heterosexism, Gender Performance and a Process of Embodiment. The purpose of this research is to examine how Grade 7 and 8 students understand healthy relationships versus unhealthy ones. Specifically, I aim to examine how they make meaning of gender-based violence. It is my hope that this study will help to better understand gender-related student relationships and how they can be improved in new ways. I would like to invite Grade 7 and 8 students in your school to participate in this study.

If you consent to your school being used as a research site, with the involvement of Grade 7 and 8 students, I will conduct one or two 10-15 minute individual interviews with each participant at the beginning and/or end of the study, plus a total of two focus groups per participant during the middle of the study. I will also conduct observations in the classrooms where the participating students learn. As well, I may interview teachers involved in this study. The data collected for this study will be used for research purposes only. I do not foresee any risks or discomfort to your Grade 7 and 8 students or teachers participating in this research.

Voluntary Participation and Withdrawal from the Study: Your school as a research site, and your teachers’ and Grade 7 and 8 students’ participation in the study, are completely voluntary. Should you agree to your school being used as a research site, with the involvement of Grade 7 and 8 students, you will have the right to withdraw the school from the study at any time prior to publication or the dissemination of research findings without consequence. As well, any parent/guardian may withdraw their child from the study or the participant or teacher themselves may withdraw from the study at any time prior to publication or the dissemination of research findings without consequence. In the case of a teacher, parent/guardian or student withdrawal, data collected on their behalf will be deleted. Your decision, or a teacher, parent/guardian or participant’s decision to withdraw from the study, will not influence the nature of your/their relationship with the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University or Toronto (OISE/UT).
Confidentiality: You will not be asked to provide any personal information, nor will you be interviewed at any point during the study. Any conversation that may occur between you and Traci Scheepstra will be treated as anecdotal and held in confidence. No data will be collected on your behalf at any time during the study and you will not be referred to in any reports, findings or in the researcher’s dissertation. All identifying information regarding the school will be masked and a pseudonym will be used to ensure anonymity.

The confidentiality of the teachers and Grade 7 and 8 students who participate in the study will be fully protected to the extent permitted by law; however, confidentiality might be breached if a student indicates being harmed by someone, or their intention to cause serious harm to themselves or someone else. In that case, I will speak with you about my concerns and abide by protocol set out by Oak Lane Academy.

Your teachers (if interviewed) and students will be referred to in writing or research presentations by a pseudonym. In digital video recordings of focus groups, participants’ faces will be blurred and any other discernable feature(s) blocked, should any parts of the video be shown for research purposes (doctoral defense only). Voices in digital video recordings will be altered or music will be dubbed over the voices (if dialogue is not important to the video clip). My computer and an external hard drive will be used for storing electronic files, which will be encrypted and password protected. All hardcopy files will be stored in a locked cabinet in my home office. After five years data will be destroyed, except for audio recordings of your student’s interview, which will be deleted as soon as they have been transcribed. At the end of the study you will be presented with a report of significant findings to be shared with the teachers, parents/guardians and students at your school. The report will ensure participant confidentiality, be presented at a middle-school readability level, and an extra copy will be provided for your school library.

Questions About the Research: I would be pleased to speak with you further if you have any questions about the research in general or about your role in the study. Please contact Traci Scheepstra, PhD Candidate, at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto (OISE/UT), 252 Bloor Street, Toronto, ON, M5S 1V6, by telephone [number], or by email [address]. This research has been reviewed and approved for compliance with the Office of Research Ethics at the University of Toronto.

Thank you greatly for your consideration of this study.

Sincerely,

[Signature]

Traci Scheepstra
PhD Candidate, Department of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto (OISE/UT)
Legal Rights and Signatures:

I ________________, consent for my school to be used as a research site and for Grade 7 and 8 students (and possibly teachers to be interviewed) to participate in the study conducted by Traci Scheepstra. I have understood the nature of this project and wish for my school to participate. I am not waiving any of my legal rights by signing this form. My signature below indicates my consent.

Participant Signature ____________________ Date ____________________

Researcher Signature ____________________ Date ____________________
Appendix B
Teacher Information Letter and Consent Form

Dear Dr/Ms/Mrs/Mr __________________,

My name is Traci Scheepstra and I am a PhD Candidate at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto (OISE/UT). I have over two decades of teaching experience, in a variety of educational settings, with learners of all ages. My work focuses on curriculum, pedagogy and research in the fields of arts-based education, restorative justice practices, character education, bullying initiatives and gender-based violence. Currently I work in the teacher education program at OISE/UT, where I support teacher candidates in their journey to become primary and junior educators.

I am conducting a study entitled, Gender-Based Violence in Middle Schools: Heterosexism, Gender Performance and a Process of Embodiment. On a daily basis countless middle school students are confronted with incidents of gender-based violence, which includes, but is not exclusive to, sexual harassment, homophobia, transphobia, emotional abuse, and inappropriate sexual behaviour. Despite current awareness of this phenomenon, Ministry of Education policies to promote safety, and a range of school specific initiatives for bullying prevention and intervention, gender-based violence continues to convene in the hidden spaces of schools, often ravaging the lives of those it affects. The purpose of this research is to examine how Grade 7 and 8 students understand healthy relationships versus unhealthy ones. Specifically, I aim to examine how they make meaning of gender-based violence. It is my hope that this study will help to better understand gender-related student relationships and how they can be improved in new ways. I would like to conduct observations of your students in your class while you are teaching.

I will observe the participants in the classrooms for approximately two to three hours, three to four days each week, during the course of the study. The exact days/time I will spend conducting observations in your classroom will be dependent on when the students are in your care and when I am in the school. We can set up a schedule in advance so you will know when to expect me. When I am in your class, I will sit quietly at the back or side of the room, and take notes on a laptop or in a notepad. I do not foresee any risks or discomfort from my presence in your classroom.

You are not the focus of the study, although I may ask to interview you. If you are interviewed, a pseudonym will be used to protect your anonymity. Any informal conversation that may occur between you and me will be treated as anecdotal and held in confidence. If you are not interviewed for the study, you will not be referred to in any reports, findings or in the researcher’s dissertation.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You may withdraw from the study at any time prior to publication or the dissemination of research findings without consequence. If you withdraw from the study, any data collected on your behalf (i.e. interview) will be deleted. Your decision to withdraw from the study will not influence the nature of your
relationship with the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto (OISE/UT).

I would be pleased to speak with you further if you have any questions about the research in general or about your role in the study. Please contact Traci Scheepstra, PhD Candidate, at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto (OISE/UT), 252 Bloor Street, Toronto, ON, M5S 1V6, by telephone [number], or by email [address]. This research has been reviewed and approved for compliance with the Office of Research Ethics at the University of Toronto and your school Principal.

Thank you greatly for your consideration of this study.

Sincerely,

[Signature]

Traci Scheepstra
PhD Candidate, Department of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto (OISE/UT)

**Legal Rights and Signatures:**

I ________________________________, consent to Traci Scheepstra conducting observations in my classroom while I am teaching. I have understood the nature of this project and wish to participate. I am not waiving any of my legal rights by signing this form. My signature below indicates my consent.

**Interview**

________ I consent to participate in an interview as part of this study.

________ I do NOT consent to participate in an interview as part of this study.

Participant Signature _________________________________ Date ____________________

Researcher Signature _________________________________ Date ____________________
Appendix C
Parent/Guardian & Student Information and Consent Form (with Video)

Dear Parent/Guardian and Student,

My name is Traci Scheepstra and I am a PhD Candidate at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto (OISE/UT). I have twenty years of teaching experience with elementary school-aged children as a visiting artist in schools and as the former owner of a creative arts centre. I have also conducted research in elementary schools related to arts-education, restorative justice practices, character education, and bullying initiatives where I have worked closely with students and teachers. Currently I work in the teacher education program at OISE/UT.

I am conducting a study that looks at how Grade 7 and 8 students understand healthy relationships versus unhealthy ones. Having close friendships and getting along with others is important to most students. However, many children feel unsafe or that they do not belong at school. Particularly problematic at this age is gender-based violence, which affects both boys and girls. This might include the spreading of rumours, homophobic comments and inappropriate touching. It is my hope that this research project will help to better understand student relationships and how they can be improved in new ways. I would like your child to participate in this study.

I will be in your child’s school for four to six months, conducting observations, audio recorded individual interviews and video recorded focus groups. Observations will take place in your child’s classroom. I am interested in observing how students interact and communicate with each other. Only students who are participants in the study will be the focus of classroom observations, although I will be observing the climate of the classroom as a whole. I will also be conducting one or two 10-15 minute interviews with each participant at the beginning of the study and/or at the end. These interviews will take place outside of class time during lunch or afterschool. In addition, I will invite small groups of students to participate in focus groups at lunch or afterschool. Your child will be asked to participate in two of these focus groups for 40-minutes each time. Each focus group will explore a theme related to the study. The data collected for this study will be used for research purposes only, which includes research presentations and/or publications. I do not foresee any risks or discomfort to your child if s/he participates in this research.

**Voluntary Participation and Withdrawal from the Study:** Your child’s participation in this study is completely voluntary. If your child participates in the study, you may withdraw your child at any time (and your child may withdraw at any time) before I leave the school at the end of the study. This means that any information your child has shared during an interview or focus group will be destroyed. I will also remove any information from my observation notes that are specific to your child.
Confidentiality: If your child participates in the study, her/his confidentiality will be fully protected to the extent permitted by law; however, confidentiality might be breached if a student indicates being harmed by someone, or their intention to cause serious harm to themselves or someone else. Your child will be referred to, in writing or research presentations, by a different name. In video recordings, your child’s face will be blurred and her/his voice will be altered or dubbed over with music, should any parts of the video be shown for research purposes (doctoral defense only). My computer and an external hard drive will be used for storing electronic files, which will be encrypted and password protected. All hardcopy files will be stored in a locked cabinet in my home office. After five years all data will be destroyed, except for audio recordings of your child’s interviews, which will be deleted as soon as they have been transcribed. No one will have access to this information other than Traci Scheepstra. When the study is complete a report will be available to interested parents/guardians and students in the school library.

Questions About the Research: If you have any questions about the research in general or about your child’s role in the study, please feel free to contact Traci Scheepstra, PhD Candidate, at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto (OISE/UT), 252 Bloor Street, Toronto, ON, M5S 1V6, by telephone [number], or by email [address]. This research has been reviewed and approved for compliance with the Office of Research Ethics at the University of Toronto and Principal R. Evans.

Thank you greatly for your consideration of this study.

Sincerely,

[Signature]

Traci Scheepstra
PhD Candidate, Department of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto (OISE/UT)

Check Here
General Consent
_____ I give permission for my child to participate in the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto (OISE/UT) study conducted by Traci Scheepstra
_____ I do NOT give permission for my child to participate in the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto (OISE/UT) study conducted by Traci Scheepstra

Interviews
_____ I give permission for my child to participate in two 10-15 minute interviews outside of class time during lunch or afterschool at the beginning of the study and at the end

  My child’s preferred interview time is:
  ☐ lunch
  ☐ afterschool

_____ I do NOT give permission for my child to participate in interviews
Focus Groups
____ I give permission for my child to participate in two 40-minute focus groups at lunch or afterschool.
   My child’s preferred focus group time is:
   ☐ lunch
   ☐ afterschool
____ I do NOT give permission for my child to participate in focus groups

Digital Video Recording
____ I give permission for my child to be video recorded for research purposes only
____ I do NOT give permission for my child to be video recorded, which I understand will be ensured by the researcher

Signature of parent/guardian ______________________________ Date ________________
Signature of student ______________________________________ Date ________________

Please return this form to your child’s teacher by February 1, 2013
Appendix D
Observation Protocol

School
Date
Location
Start Time
End Time

Preliminary Observations
Who is involved (i.e. students, teachers, staff, administrator, etc.)
Research context (e.g. physical space, timing, set-up, etc.)
School/classroom routine/event (e.g. class schedule, assembly, etc.)
Description Commentary (e.g. who is involved, what is happening, etc.)

Post Observation Questions
What topics are relevant to this observation/event?
How did student interaction/communication inform the study?
General observations and analytic commentaries
Researcher questions, comments, insights for follow-up
Appendix E

Sample Student Interview One:

Questions

The purpose of this interview is to get to know the participants individually—to introduce myself and have each of them introduce themselves—in order to begin building trust. This interview will take place in a quiet location outside of the classroom where confidentiality can be assured. After asking the participants their permission to record the interview, I will begin by thanking them for participating in the study. I will then reassure them that anything they tell me during the interviews, or during any other part of the research (e.g. focus groups, impromptu conversations), will be confidential. I will explain what I mean by confidentiality (e.g. protecting their anonymity completely).

1. Do you have any questions regarding what this research project is about?
2. If your best friend were to describe you, what do you think s/he would say? Would you describe yourself in the same way? If not, how would you describe yourself differently?
3. How would you describe the other students in your class? For example, can you tell me about the boys? Can you tell me about the girls?
4. What do you love most about school? What do you least like about school?
5. How would you define bullying?
6. Have you ever experienced bullying at school? Can you share an example?
7. What do you think is the biggest problem kids have to deal with at your age?
8. What is most challenging about having friends?
9. Do you feel you fit in?
10. Do you feel you have to act a certain way at school to fit in or be accepted?
11. If someone were to meet you for the first time, what is one word that would best describe who you are?
Appendix F

Sample Student Interview Two:

Questions

This second and final interview will take place within a month after the study is complete. This interview will take place in a quiet location outside of the classroom where confidentiality can be assured and I will ask for permission to audio record the interview. I will begin the interview by thanking the participants for their participation in this study and remind them that anything they share with me is confidential. The questions listed below are only suggestions, as I do not have data to refer to at this time. Also, I will invite the participants to propose questions in advance of this interview, of which I cannot anticipate.

1. As you know I will be writing about this study and sharing it with several people at the university and others who may want to read about it. I will not be using your real name to protect your anonymity. Therefore I was wondering what you would like me to call you in my dissertation?

2. How would you like me to describe you in the dissertation so the people reading will know a little bit about you?

3. What do you feel you learned (if anything) from participating in this project, particularly during the two focus groups? Please explain.

4. Is there anything that you think/feel differently about now, that you would not have thought about before participating in this study? (I will give an example from my own experience, being part of the study)

5. Do you feel there should be more discussion in school about relationships, particularly how to develop healthy relationship, gender stereotypes, etc.?

6. What did you think about the discussion in English class re: Helena and Demetrius (Gr7 Only)?

7. Have you heard the term GBV? What does it mean? (Gr7 Only)

8. Do you have a favourite quote or saying to be remembered by?
Appendix G
Sample Teacher Interview Questions

1. Did you have any expectations about what might happen by allowing me into your classroom this year?
2. Did it heighten your awareness of gender issues and student relationships by having my presence in your classroom on a regular basis?
3. How do you see gender being negotiated in your class?
4. How would you describe the students in your class and their relationships with each other: girl/girl, boy/boy, and girl/boy?
5. What do you think is the potential of your subject (English, Drama, etc.) for learning about issues related to gender and sexuality?
6. How could these topics be integrated into the curriculum?
Appendix H
Student Focus Group Description and Agreement Form

Dear Participants,

Thank you for your continued participation in my research project. This part of the research is called a focus group, which means we will be working in small groups together outside of the classroom. You are only being asked to participate in a focus group twice during the lunch break for a total of 40-minutes each time. These focus groups will be audio recorded.

The focus group will begin with a brief review of the focus group code of conduct. For the main part of the focus group we will explore a theme related to the study on how students understand healthy relationships versus unhealthy ones. The focus group will conclude with an exit ticket that will require you to write a short response to three questions.

At any point, you may choose to stop participating in the focus group. If you have questions or concerns about the focus group I will be available to speak with you about it during recess or the lunch break.

Please remember, participating in a focus group is confidential. What you and your peers share in the group must stay with the group. There might be an exception to the confidentiality agreement if you share with me that someone is harming you, or if you indicate you are causing serious harm to yourself or someone else.

By writing your name below, you acknowledge that you understand the details involved in your participation in this focus group. You understand that you may stop participating in this project at any time, and that all focus group conversations are confidential. You agree to respect your peers privacy and confidentiality through your participation in this focus group.

Your name ____________________________ Date ________________
Appendix I
Grade 7 Focus Group Plan (1)

Welcome: (5-min; 12:35-12:45pm)
- Invite students to get a slice of pizza and a drink
- Students sit in a circle

1. Ask permission to audio record focus group
2. Have all students sign confidentiality form
3. Review Focus Group Code of Conduct
4. Begin focus group no later than 12:45pm

Focus Group Code of Conduct
- Speak with respect: Please do not put down other people’s thoughts/opinions
- Listen with respect: Please do not interrupt others while they are speaking
- Respect confidentiality: What is said in the focus group stays in the focus group
- Please do not talk about other students (in the focus group or not) that is of a personal nature

Activity 1: Keeping it “Real” (10-min; 12:45-1:00)

1. Begin with a brief discussion on the meaning of the term stereotype (Dictionary definition: a widely held but fixed and oversimplified image or idea of a particular type of person or thing).
2. Show students two pieces of poster board with the following written on them:
   a. A “real” girl/woman acts like…is interested in…likes
   b. A “real” boy/man acts like…is interested in…likes
3. Hand out coloured post-it notes to pairs of students (one colour/gender)
   a. Think-pair-share: students work in partners to come up with ideas that represent what a “real” girl/woman/boy/man acts like…is interested in…likes
   b. Post-it notes are put on poster boards in gender categories
   c. As a group look at all of the ideas written on the post-it notes
   d. Where do these messages come from? (Write answers on chalk board)
   e. Refer to their answers as gender stereotypes
   f. Discuss with participants how people are categorized/put in boxes, that no one fits perfectly in these boxes, and that the stereotypes in the boxes are not about being inherently male or female – they are just a list of interests, likes, dislikes, and behaviours
   g. Ask participants what kinds of names someone might be called if they do not conform to the stereotypes in the boxes. What might a girl/woman be called? What might a boy/man be called? What else might happen to a person who does not conform to a set of stereotypes? What might someone become angry or
uncomfortable if a girl or a boy doesn’t act or behave in a culturally acceptable way? (Write answers on chalkboard)
h. Explain that it takes a great deal of courage for someone to step outside of the boxes.

Activity 2: On the Continuum (15-min; 1:00-1:15)

1. Place students in 3 groups: 1 all male, 1 all female, 1 mix-gender
2. Hand out a continuum per group and a variety of pre-selected photos
3. Have participants lay the continuum on a table. As a group the participants are invited to work together to place each photo on the continuum. Not all photos have to be placed on the continuum; however, there must be an explanation if a photo is placed off the continuum
4. Whole Group Discussion:
   a. Begin with students circulating to look at each others’ continuums
   b. Was this a difficult or simple task? Were there disagreements/negotiations for where photos should be placed? Why or why not?
   c. What is similar/different about how the photos were placed in each group?
   d. Do all photos fit on the continuum? If not, which ones were off the continuum and why?
   e. Discuss photos that made students laugh, were confusing, etc.
   f. Which people in the photos are most at risk of being bullied, excluded, victimized, and so forth? Why? Where were they placed on the continuum?
   g. Is life easier and/or harder for people who do fit in the boxes?
   h. What words could be used to best describe the people in the photos?

Exit Ticket (5-min; 1:15-1:18)

If you could change anything about your gender for one day, would you? If yes, what would it be and why? If not, why would you not change anything?

*Have students sign their names

MATERIALS NEEDED:
- Pizza and drinks
- Napkins
- Confidentiality form
- Audio recorder
- Coloured post-it notes
- 3 continuum
- 3 envelops of photos
- Exit ticket per student
- Pens/pencils
Appendix J
Grade 7 Focus Group Plan (2)

Welcome: (5-min; 12:40-12:45pm)
- Invite students to get a slice of pizza and a drink
- Students sit in a circle

1. Ask permission to audio record focus group
2. Remind students of confidentiality form
3. Review Focus Group Code of Conduct
4. Begin focus group no later than 12:45pm

Focus Group Code of Conduct
- Speak with respect: Please do not put down other people’s thoughts/opinions
- Listen with respect: Please do not interrupt others while they are speaking
- Respect confidentiality: What is said in the focus group stays in the focus group
- Please do not talk about other students (in the focus group or not) that is of a personal nature

Activity 1: Icebreaker (5-min; 12:45-12:50) Pass It Around
- Have the participants sit in a circle and pass around a box of smarties. Invite each participant to take “as much as they need”
- Once every participant has smarties in their hands they will be instructed to count how many they have. The number of smarties equals how many pieces of information they have to share with the group

Activity 2: Relationships (10-min; 12:50-1:10)
1. Divide students into small groups of 2 or 3. Give each group a piece of chart paper and markers.
2. Invite each group to answer the following three questions:
   a. What is a relationship? (E.g. what does the word “relationship” mean)
   b. Who are relationships with? (E.g. friend at school, parent, teacher)
   c. What does a relationship look like, sound like, and feel like? (E.g. kind, violent, fearful, loving, trusting, safe…)
3. Large group discussion to share the answers to the questions. Is there anything missing?
4. Share that there are two types of relationships: healthy and unhealthy
5. Large group discussion on the following questions:
   a. Why do people engage in relationships?
   b. Does a healthy relationship mean people get along all of the time?
   c. What does it mean when a relationship is unhealthy?
   d. How do boys engage in unhealthy relationships with girls? Boys with boys? Girls with girls?
e. What kind of language might be used to let you know someone is engaging in an unhealthy relationship?
f. How else might you know a relationship is unhealthy?
g. What does it mean to be a boy/man? How do you feel you are supposed to behave?
h. How does being a boy/man affect your relationships?

6. Share a few photos, quotes and video selections for a group discussion. What story is being told?
   a. Photo of girls gossiping behind someone’s back
   b. Hurtful graffiti written all over a girls locker
   c. Photo of rape victim being carried by boys – Quote: “It isn’t rape because you don’t know if she wanted it or not.” (From public online video of Steubenville, OH rape)

Exit Ticket (5-min; 1:10-1:15)
1. If you could change one relationship in your life to be healthier, who would it be with and why?
2. What is something you think I should know more about so that I can better understand relationships of students your age?
3. What is one thought, idea, and/or question you will take away with you today?
   **Have students sign their names

Materials
- Pizza and drinks
- Napkins
- Confidentiality form
- Audio recorder
- Smarties
- Markers
- Photos
- Exit ticket per student
- Pens/pencils
Appendix K
Grade 8 Focus Group Plan (1)

Welcome: (5-min; 12:00-12:05pm)

- Invite students to get a slice of pizza and a drink
- Students sit in a circle

- Ask permission to audio record focus group
- Have all students sign confidentiality form
- Review Focus Group Code of Conduct
- Begin focus group no later than 12:45pm

Focus Group Code of Conduct
- Speak with respect: Please do not put down other people’s thoughts/opinions
- Listen with respect: Please do not interrupt others while they are speaking
- Respect confidentiality: What is said in the focus group stays in the focus group
- Please do not talk about other students (in the focus group or not) that is of a personal nature

Activity 1: Relationships (10-min; 12:10-12:25)
1. Divide students into small groups of 3 or 4. Give each group a piece of chart paper and markers.
2. Invite each group to answer the following three questions:
   a. What is a relationship? (E.g. what does the word “relationship” mean)
   b. Who are relationships with? (E.g. friend at school, parent, teacher)
   c. What does a relationship look like, sound like, and feel like? (E.g. kind, violent, fearful, loving, trusting, safe...)
3. Large group discussion to share the answers to the questions. Is there anything missing?
4. Share that there are two types of relationships: healthy and unhealthy
5. Large group discussion on the following questions:
   a. Why do people engage in relationships?
   b. Does a healthy relationship mean people get along all of the time?
   c. What does it mean when a relationship is unhealthy?
   d. How does an unhealthy relationship begin?
   e. What can unhealthy relationships lead to?
   f. What can you do if you find yourself in an unhealthy relationship?
   g. What would you do if you knew a friend was in an unhealthy relationship? Who could you talk to?
6. Share a few photos, quotes and video selections for a group discussion. What story is being told?
   a. Photo of girls gossiping behind someone’s back
   b. Hurtful graffiti written all over a girls locker
c. Photo of rape victim being carried by boys – Quote: “It isn’t rape because you don’t know if she wanted it or not.” (From public online video of Steubenville, OH rape)

Exit Ticket (5-min; 12:30-12:35)
1. If you could change one relationship in your life to be healthier, who would it be with and why?
2. What is something you think I should know more about so that I can better understand relationships of students your age?
3. What is one thought, idea, and/or question you will take away with you today?
   *Have students sign their names

MATERIALS
- Pizza and drinks
- Napkins
- Confidentiality form
- Audio recorder
- Paper
- Marker
- Photos, quotes
- Exit ticket per student
- Pens/pencils
Appendix L
Grade 8 Focus Group Plan (2)

1. **Icebreaker**: Each student takes as many Smarties as desired. The number of Smarties in hand represents the number of things the student needs to tell the group about themselves.

2. **Review**: Briefly remind the students of all of the subjects covered in English class this winter/spring (gender stereotypes/ assumptions, relationships (appropriate/ inappropriate), sexual harassment, and rape.

3. **Video Viewing**: Show the students two music videos – *Gentlemen* by Psy and *Eat You Alive* by Limp Bizkit. After watching both video invite the students to talk about their impressions of the videos. They can compare and contrast.

4. **Introduce**: the term gender-based violence. Are the students familiar with this term/ have they heard of it before?

5. **Questions**:
   - Handout the TDSB definition of GBV and read it together as a group
   - Ask students what it means?
   - Which people might it be speaking to/ about?
   - Do they agree/ disagree with some/ all of it?
   - Are there questions or points that need clarifying?

6. **Share**: statistics and ask students if this is similar/ different than their experiences in/ out of school
   - 81% of students will encounter some kind of sexual harassment (including sexual jokes, comments, gestures or threats) throughout their school lives, beginning as early as the 6th grade, with 27% of students experiencing it frequently
   - 91.5% of students who identify as LGBGT reported hearing homophobic comments daily and repeatedly, plus many of those students were threatened with violence or were physically assaulted
   - In Canada: approximately 54% of young women under 16 have experienced some form of unwelcome sexual attention and 24% have been raped or coerced into sex
   - 77% of transgender people have seriously considered suicide; 43% have attempted suicide
   - Transgender youth at highest risk for committing suicide because of feelings of isolation and shame associated with gender identity
Exit Ticket:
1. Have you, or someone you know, experienced any type of gender-based violence (e.g. dating violence, harassment, inappropriate touch, etc.)? Yes/ No. If you feel comfortable, please explain.
2. If yes, did you or someone you know report the incident and/or get support? Yes/No. If you feel comfortable please explain.
3. Do you think topics of gender stereotypes/ assumptions, relationships, and gender-based violence should be discussed at school? Please explain your answer.
4. Is there something you feel should be talked about in school that is not?

MATERIALS
- Pizza and drinks
- Napkins
- Confidentiality form
- Audio recorder
- Computer
- Music videos
- GBV Definition
- Exit Ticket