

How Teachers Challenge Gender Stereotypes in the Classroom

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**Abstract**

This research project focuses on the impacts of gender stereotypes on primary school students and the strategies teachers use to ensure that these impacts do not negatively affect student well-being. Recognition of the gender binary starts at a very young age and, from then on, children are exposed to many gendered messages through societal influences such as the media. For the purposes of this study, I conducted semi-structured interviews with three educators in Ontario to find out how they see gender stereotypes being played out in the school community and how they challenge them in the classroom. Data from these interviews was categorized into common themes and analyzed against existing literature on this topic. Findings showed that participants believed a strong commitment by the teacher is necessary in order to successfully challenge gender stereotypes. They also believe it is important that teachers not only generate conversation surrounding the need for gender fluidity and integrate these messages into their regular lessons and curriculum, but that they also create a classroom environment that is safe and supportive of gender exploration and expression.

**Key Words:**

Gender  
Binary  
Fluidity  
Stereotypes  
Strategies  
Conversation  
Safe Space

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## Chapter 1: INTRODUCTION

### 1.0 Purpose of the Research Study

It was like any regular day at the private home daycare where I worked except that there were some new toys – some old clothes for dress up and an IKEA circus tent – and the five children there, one girl and four boys all under the age of two, were ecstatic. Eventually they grew tired of the tent and the boys returned to their toy cars, a regular choice for them, while the girl busied herself with the clothes. I helped her tie a skirt around her waist and she happily proclaimed to me: “I’m getting married!”

People are shaped and moulded by their social environment around them from a young age; in particular children as young as toddlers are exposed to media such as television which has significant effect on their cognitive and physical behaviour (Jusoff and Sahimi, 2009). These influences only intensify when they start going to school and their exposure broadens to interactions with classmates, school material and, arguably the most important relationship in their education, their teachers. Research has shown that “a central explanation for inequalities in gender and achievement lies in gender stereotyping and the cultures of gender differences” (Cushman, 2010, p. 1212). The purpose of this qualitative research was to study how gender norms are perpetuated in the classroom, and to learn how a sample of committed educators work to identify and challenge traditional gender norms and stereotypes. In this study, gender stereotypes are generally defined as societal expectations of someone because of their gender of being either male or female. I was interested in investigating the extent to which gender norms affect the education and interactions of children and how teachers challenge these stereotypes so student achievement and well-being are not affected. This research is important because sexism

persists in schools and society. Helping children recognize this has the potential to foster equity in our classrooms, schools, and broader communities.

### **1.1 Research Topic and Questions**

The central question guiding this research was: How do a sample of primary school teachers identify and challenge traditional gender norms and stereotypes through their teaching?

Subsidiary questions include:

1. What dominant gender stereotypes are these teachers responding to? Where or how do they see these gender stereotypes being reproduced in and through schooling?
2. In what ways do these teachers see gender stereotypes affecting their students? How do they see them affecting their male, female and transgender students similarly or differently?
3. What instructional practices do these teachers use to introduce, address and challenge gender stereotypes to their students? What are their learning goals and how do they know when they have been met?
4. What factors and resources support and challenge these teachers' work in this area?

### **1.2 Background of the Researcher**

My interest in feminism and gender equality was sparked in my first year of undergraduate studies at McGill University. Growing up, I cannot say that I had any experiences that illustrated to me the inequity between the treatment of males and females. I went to the International School of Beijing which may have meant that expatriate issues like identity, culture shock, race and English language learning were more prevalent as educational setbacks than

sexism; indeed in the political world, it seems to me that sexism is not perceived as a pressing issue in the same way as homophobia or racism. To my grade school mind, sexism was an archaic problem that was solved by the suffragettes. I too was unaware of the nuances of this issue.

Introduction to Feminist Studies was the name of the course at McGill where I first realized the subtle workings of society against women. I began to view situations through a feminist lens and came to understand how the simplest actions spoke to a larger, though mostly silent, problem of sexism on a structural and global scale. As a woman, it is infuriating that more people do not acknowledge sexism as a problem. It is an issue that many see as fixed in the western “civilized” world but I would argue that it has just become more subtle. As a beginning teacher, I see it as the role of the educator to ensure that all children not be discriminated against because of their gender and that the future they create is more equitable.

### **1.3 Overview of Research Project**

To respond to these research questions, I conducted a qualitative study using interviews of three teachers on teaching strategies about gender stereotypes and how they can challenge them. In chapter 2, I review the literature on how gender stereotypes permeate the school context. In chapter 3, I elaborate on the research design. In chapter 4, I report my findings and in chapter 5, I discuss these findings and their significance and implications on my practices as a beginning teacher.

## Chapter 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter, I review research in children receive messages of gender stereotypes, and what impacts there may be on them. For example, girls commonly have lower confidence in their math ability because of the stereotype that girls fail at math (Cvencek, Meltzoff and Greenwald, 2011). This is an unnecessary pressure and restriction on their educational, emotional and social growth, and an issue that is too often overlooked because “the *intensity* of bias is diminishing: the most blatant examples of sexism have disappeared...Ironically, many people think the battle has been won” (Blumberg, 2008, p. 353). Specifically, I focus on literature on gender stereotyping in school. I also review research on how teachers can perpetuate or challenge these gender issues, and what preparation is most effective for teachers to do this work.

### 2.0 Sexism and Children

Discrimination, as it pertains to my study, is defined as “harmful actions towards others because of their membership in a particular group” (Fishbein 1996, p.7). For the purpose of this paper, the manifestation of discrimination I focus on is gender grouping. Since discrimination has detrimental effects on children’s education and self-esteem (Cvencek, Meltzoff and Greenwald, 2011), school systems and Ministries of Education often explicitly state that they are committed to diminishing discrimination; this includes the Toronto District School Board’s Code of Conduct which follows the Ontario Human Rights Code prohibiting discrimination (“Code of Conduct,” n.d.). However, outward discrimination against one gender, for example women not having the right to vote, has become less acceptable in society – outright sexism is generally looked down upon. In this way, “discriminatory actions have become increasingly subtle and ambiguous, requiring individuals to make attributions about the motivations of others on the

basis of situational information” (Brown & Bigler, 2004, p. 714). Thus students and adults alike sometimes struggle to recognize sexism unless there are certain signals (Brown & Bigler, 2004). As such, in an academic context, students may not be aware of a teacher’s or another student’s discriminatory behaviour unless there had been prior instances of bias or knowledge of the oppressor’s past tendencies (Brown & Bigler, 2004).

Research has found that students at the elementary school level display “at least some awareness of the lower status of females relative to males” (Brown & Bigler, 2004, p. 716). Before formal schooling, children are exposed to gender identity and stereotyping from interactions with their family, television, movies, books and images; some children spend as much as 30 hours a week watching television (Gosselin, 2007). Brown and Bigler (2004) underscore how children have internalized stereotypes without recognizing their discriminating attributes because, as notable child developmental psychologist Jean Piaget (1964) would explain, they lack the cognitive skill to classify an individual along different disciplines at the same time. For example a child may not perceive a girl who is good at math but faces great challenges from society to be a victim of discrimination because the child does not have the mental capacity to “characterize individuals as a member of both a contextual group (e.g., student) and a stigmatized social group (e.g. girl)” (Brown and Bigler, 2004, p. 716). Whether children have a name for discrimination or not, it is certain that they are aware of differences that lead to discrimination – indeed, infants as young as 10 months “are able to form stereotypic associations between faces of women and men and gender-typed objects” (Martin and Ruble, 2010, p. 355). In addition, Brown and Bigler suggest that girls are more sensitive to when discrimination is happening to girls than when it happens to boys (2004). However, at this age, discrimination is an external perception of other people as victims; the age that children first

become aware and identify themselves as victims is an area that has not been thoroughly researched (Brown & Bigler, 2004). Thus, students may comprehend that gender stereotypes affect other people but they do not realize when they face discrimination themselves. It is important, then, that teachers ensure that their students become aware of the systemic influences of gender stereotypes in society.

### **2.1 The “Hidden Curriculum” of Gender and Student Achievement**

Children are exposed to gender norms from a very early age and as such have a concept of discrimination even if they are not cognitively aware of it (Martin and Ruble, 2010). When they are old enough to go to school, their classroom becomes the biggest influence and thus begins their exposure to the hidden curriculum of gender specifically, described as “the set of knowledge that is transmitted through the roles men and women play in the staffing of schools, the way teachers treat male and female students, and the manner in which adults interact with others” (Mustapha, 2013, p. 456). One factor that perpetrates gender norms to students is gender bias in textbooks because, according to a study from 2009, Canadian classrooms rely on textbooks for 70% to 90% of class time (Blumberg, 2008). There is a common trend in textbooks around the world where women are underrepresented in text and in images and when they do make an appearance, they hold stereotypical roles in the household, occupations and attitudes: Women are characterized as accommodating, conformist, nurturing and passive whereas men are impressive, noble and accomplish exciting things (Blumberg, 2008). The effects of sexism on children are real; they can create “deleterious real-world and damaging pedagogical consequences especially for women and girls” because children have been conditioned to see the textbook as an authority (Mustapha, 2013, p.455). While textbooks have been improved slightly,

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gender bias is still prevalent and a reformation of text material is considered a low profile issue because of cost (Blumberg, 2008). Since it is too expensive to completely redo every textbook to reflect a gender neutral perspective, it is up to the teacher to help students interpret that text in a way and to help their students become aware of gender issues.

To be able to do this, it is important that teachers recognize gender norms and be committed to destabilizing them but, unfortunately, it could be possible that many teachers do not perceive the nuances in stereotypes and may even perpetrate the hidden curriculum. One of the most significant relationships a child builds outside of family members is with his or her teacher (Jerome, Hamre and Pinata, 2009). From as early as preschool, though, whether the teacher feels strongly about this or not, the education system seeks to control the comportment of children, by telling them to sit still and raise their hands when they have the answer, for example, under the reason (or excuse) that such physical behaviour is conducive to learning (Martin, 1998, p.496). However, this hidden curriculum genders boys' and girls' bodies: where boys are frequently allowed by teachers to pursue relaxed behaviours, such as calling out the answer, and girls are frequently told to adopt more formal behaviour, like putting their hand up before speaking (Martin, 1998). Gosselin (2007) relays example at a preschool that demonstrates this biased treatment: a group of children lining up to go to recess had to wait while some boys wrestled. The boys were moved to the front of the line and thus "rewarded" for being first outside which "legitimized their behaviour" while the girls were conditioned to feel like they had to wait (Gosselin, 2007). Research has also found that boys sometimes receive more detailed explanations than girls and teachers also call on boys more often (Erden, 2009). In terms of comportment, then, girls grow up to take up as small a space as possible and become "docile bodies" while boys dominant the space they are in – both becoming gendered bodies through

teacher influence (Martin, 1998). Since the role of the teacher is vitally important in shaping gendered bodies, they must be mindful of their personal biases and how that permeates into their teaching methods and everyday instructional practices.

### **2.2 Teacher Philosophy and Gender**

While students may come to school already aware of gender stereotypes, teachers can either perpetuate or disestablish them: teacher philosophy and their verbal and non-verbal communication play a vital role in classroom construction of social gender norms (Gosselin, 2007). The reasons behind a teacher's practice must be deliberate and must come from a place of equity or else students can become negatively impacted. One way of destabilizing gender norms is by allowing students of different genders to work together, particularly in elementary school when children tend to choose friends and playmates based on gender (Gosselin, 2007). To disrupt this trend, teachers can create mixed-gender work groups that "support the formation of dynamic gendered identified as well as promote successful cross-gender working relationships," because this is a valuable way students can "explore other vocabulary, actions and support the co-construction of non-traditional gender roles" (Gosselin, 2007, p.42). Thus a teacher's philosophy of education greatly influences his or her actions which can either reproduce or challenge dominant gender stereotypes.

In debunking gender norms, one must acknowledge the prevalence of female teachers at the primary and junior level and wonder if it has implications on student academic outcome (Bricheno & Thornton, 2002). Male teachers are a minority, the lack of which some have attributed to low male student achievement (Bricheno & Thornton, 2002). Some believe that students need both masculine and feminine energy, which in effect could actually reinforce

gender norms instead of destabilizing them (Cushman, 2010). Recruiting male teacher just to even out the numbers does not seem like the most reasonable solution particularly if they are in fact unsuitable and unqualified candidates. Looking for masculinity in a teacher because it may appeal to a boy's idea of authority feeds into gender stereotypes, as is the idea that boys must be given "hands on stuff" in class by a male teacher to "build rapport" (Cushman, 2010, p.1214). In fact, shortcomings in achievement have more to do with social construction of gender stereotyping rather than having a male role model that embodies masculinity (Cushman, 2010). The idea of children needing both masculinity and femininity, though appealing in its neat packaging, has not been confirmed in scientific research, nor can it reasonably be. It seems that the most important factor in meaningful education is not who teaches the student but the relationship between the student and teacher and the teaching methods used (Cushman, 2010).

### **2.3 The Need for Preservice Preparation**

Most of the literature that I reviewed in this chapter came to the same conclusions concerning how teachers can challenge the perpetuation of gender stereotypes: the need for the issue to be addressed in preservice teacher education. Although many people do believe in gender equality, "gender differences are deeply embedded in societal expectations, underpinning what it means to be a socially accepted person" (Cushman, 2010, p.1213). Teachers are people after all; we are the product of our society and have exposed to gender stereotypes our entire lives (Erden, 2009). Indeed there are many gender notions when it comes to teaching: Maher & Ward (2002) believe because teaching is thought to be natural and easy for women; thus teachers are poorly paid because it is considered women's work. There is also a discrepancy in teacher genders at different levels of education: while there are more female teachers in the lower grades,

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there are more male professors who are respected more than grade school teachers because of their knowledge of a subject matter as opposed to how the material is taught (Maher & Ward, 2002). These gender issues are particular to the teaching world but there are many more that permeate through every facet of society. So before they can stand in front of a classroom and educated others, teachers must recognize their own preconceptions on gender and education. They should consider the “multidimensionality of identity whereby masculinities and femininities are seen as being shaped by such factors as social class, religion, sexuality, age, and ethnicity” (Cushman, 2010, p.1213). They should alter societal notions that care and compassion necessarily equates “soft” (Maher & Ward, 2002, p. 114). After they have become mindful of the subtleties in gender stereotypes as a societal issue, they can consider what teaching methods best reduce the likelihood of perpetrating gender norms.

In short, it is important that pre-service teacher education include consistent opportunity for student teachers to “become aware of how they are moulding their students, their own behaviours and practices in regard to gender stereotyping” (Cushman, 2010 p.1211). As such, a course on gender equity would be useful to teacher candidates everywhere. A vital component of such a course would include opportunities for teachers to become more aware of inequity in education and in society so that “they can provide a bias-free learning environment” (Erden, 2009, p.411) by talking about gender norms and debunking them as much as possible. There is a need for politically informed teachers who inspire their students to think critically about gender stereotypes, their effects on society and what they can do to destabilize them (Maher & Ward, 2002).

## **2.4 Conclusion**

In this chapter, I reviewed literature on how the hidden curriculum of gender in schools can perpetuate gender stereotypes. This is done through representations of textbooks that favor males in authoritative roles over women. Research also shows that teacher interaction with students can also lead to gender stereotypes being perpetuated: for example, in allowing boys to be impulsive and physically. It is important to note that there are many subtle ways in which gender stereotypes are perpetuated. However, with conscious effort, reflection of their own biases and effective pre-service training, teachers can challenge these gender stereotypes and support gender equity in their classroom. This is a relevant point to exploring how to best support teachers in this work.

## Chapter 3: METHODOLOGY

### 3.0 Introduction

This research study, undertaken according to the guidelines of the Masters of Teaching program at the Ontario Institute of Studies in Education (OISE), used qualitative research methods to shed light on teacher-led strategies in challenging gender stereotypes in the classroom. Qualitative research is commonly employed to explore complex topics, yield detailed findings for in-depth understanding and to produce, in essence, a “set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible” (Creswell, 2013, p. 43). The strengths of qualitative research align well with research into this social issue because the stories are told from teachers’ first-hand experiences, give voice to them and validate their efforts. In addition, their narratives reveal teachers’ perspectives on what is happening in classrooms: how they see students being affected by gender stereotypes and what they are doing about it. The course of this study started with a literature review on gender stereotypes in an education context. Then qualitative data was collected through interviews with experienced teachers committed to debunking gender stereotypes in their classroom. The questions posed to all teachers explored the prevalence and impact of gender stereotypes in their classrooms, the strategies they used to combat gender stereotypes with their students, and the effects they observed student learning and social interactions. The interviews reveal insight into the how a classroom that is aware of and challenges gender stereotypes can provide a more positive space to learn.

### 3.1 Participants

#### *Sampling Criteria and Recruitment*

Three interviewees were recruited based on their commitment to challenging gender stereotypes in their interactions with young children in primary grades. These educators are committed to helping ensure that classrooms do not perpetuate gender stereotypes and that students are aware of the issues surrounding these stereotypes. Participants were sampled through referrals from peers at OISE, from connections made at conferences, and through contacts listed in professional development materials published by school boards and professional associations.

### *Participant Biographies*

Three participants were recruited for semi-structured interviews, and pseudonyms assigned. Kate is an advocate for gender fluidity who works with pre-service teachers to provide further education on LGBTQ issues that may not be covered in their regular training. Valerie and Candice are exemplary teachers of Grade 1 and 2 split and Kindergarten respectively, and work at an alternative school with a strong focus on social justice, especially on gender issues. All three are experienced and committed to bringing gender issues to the forefront in their teaching.

### **3.2 Procedure**

This research study was undertaken at first with a literature review. The purpose was to become familiar with the research surrounding the issues of gender stereotypes and their impact on students, which informed the content of my interview questions. Data collection of this research was then conducted through semi-structured interviews with three teachers. Each participant was interviewed individually, in person, for 30 to 45 minutes. Each interview was recorded digitally on my cellphone and notes were made during the interview to record any

unspoken signals perceived as relevant to this study. The interviews were then transcribed verbatim to ensure that the data would truly reflect the spontaneous answers of the interviewees. A copy of their interview's transcript was given to the interviewee to review.

A list of core questions (Appendix A) was developed before the interview. They were deliberately left as open-ended as possible to ensure that participants could elaborate on their perspectives without being too guided by the language in the question and to minimize feelings of judgement or evaluation (Creswell, 2013). Particularly with the sensitivity of an issue like gender stereotype or discrimination, it is important that participants feel comfortable sharing their experiences. A copy of the questions was given to the interviewees just prior to the interview; they were given a few minutes before the start of the interview to look over the questions so there was time to reflect on them but not enough to formulate prescribed answers. All core questions from the list were posed to each of the interviewees. Other questions were asked based on the individual teacher's expertise in destabilizing gender stereotypes or the age of their students. For example, if their students were not particularly aware of gender stereotyping as a societal issue and the teacher advocated such awareness, he or she would be asked how they went about creating this consciousness in their students.

The three interviews were transcribed later and were analyzed for similarities and differences in themes, strategies and classroom outcomes. Common themes that were key to the research study, for example teaching methods used to destabilize gender stereotypes, were highlighted with a color-code system, grouped, and filed so as to organize the data in an accessible way.

### **3.3 Ethical Review Procedures**

To participate in this research, the interviewees were asked to sign a consent letter (Appendix B). They received the letter with enough time to review and consider whether they were interested in participating. The content of the letter outlines the topic and the purpose of my research, which I also discussed with them verbally. The interviewees were assured of their anonymity and would be referred to by a pseudonym in the study. They were also told in advanced that their interview would be recorded and transcribed. To ensure their utmost comfort with participating, they were given the option of withdrawing from the research at any time. Lastly, the participants were told that they would receive a copy of this research study at its completion.

### **3.4 Limitations**

With a research study of this scope and with a sample size of only three interviews from one school board, I can only highlight some of the work that teachers in the board, in Ontario and in the world are doing to challenge gender discrimination. Additionally, two of the participants were teaching at the same school with a philosophy that aimed to challenge gender stereotypes. These educators were thus not only very specialized and committed to this work, but they had the privilege to work in an (atypical) school climate whereby teaching for gender equity was a priority. For this reason, what these teachers were able to do was facilitated by a range of factors that should not be understood as common. A comparison of this particular school to a school with no such philosophy may yield interesting results on how acceptance and awareness of gender fluidity can affect students' academic and socio-emotional well-being.

The strategies mentioned by the interviewees can only underscore what worked for them and cannot be formed into a comprehensive manual that can be taught to all pre-service teachers

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everywhere. A one-size-fits-all manual is not conducive to sound teaching; a teacher must take into account all the factors that make up a student body, of which gender is only one facet. Revealing the story of how these educators manage to challenge the perpetuation of gender stereotypes and to incorporate gender equity into their teaching validates the good work they have done and is inspiring to me as a beginning teacher.

Another limitation is human bias. Although I tried to make sure that my appearance, questions and tone of voice at the interviews were neutral, I still approached this study as someone deeply committed to gender equity. Like me, the participants' commitment to gender equity may have skewed their focus to only on gender inequalities, disregarding other factors that make up an identity. Thus a holistic account cannot be given on how teachers challenge all the discriminations that a student may face. Nevertheless, my study was focused on how they challenge gender stereotypes, and I make no pretence to adequately addressing these other aspects of identity through this work. Moreover, since "the intent of qualitative research is not to generalize the information... but to elucidate the particular the specific" (Creswell, 2013, p. 157), accepting the voices and opinions of interviewees is the focal point of my study and serves to enrich my practice as a teacher.

## **Chapter 4: RESEARCH FINDINGS**

### **4.0 Introduction**

In this chapter I report the research findings, which were generated from the three interviews I conducted with participating teachers. Following data analysis, I identified the following five themes from the data, which I will report in turn: 1) Teachers' credit their preparedness for challenging traditional gender norms in their classroom teaching to their own interest and initiative, and not to their formal teacher education or development, 2) Despite their practices aimed at challenging traditional gender norms, teachers observed that the prevalence of societal construction and reinforcement of these commonly outweigh their efforts, 3) Teachers observed that school culture and teaching practices reinforce traditional gender norms and stereotypes, 4) From the perspective and experience of participating teachers, the greatest harm caused by the reinforcement of traditional gender norms and stereotypes was to students' socio-emotional well-being, and 5) Teachers prioritized classroom discussions and activities that forefront gender equity to create safe space for self-expression in their instructional approach to challenging traditional gender norms and stereotypes. Under each heading I report sub-themes with relevant data from interviews with my participants to support my analysis.

#### **4.1 Teachers' credit their preparedness for challenging traditional gender norms in their classroom teaching to their own interest and initiative, and not to their formal teacher education or development**

All three participants used the label of feminist to describe their beliefs about gender, and they all relayed that from a young age they were aware of gender inequalities. They felt strong

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societal pressure to fit into prescribed definitions of gender and that there was always a power dynamic that favored males over females. These experiences informed their perspectives on what needed to be changed in society and what needed to be taught in the classroom when it came to the reproduction of traditional gender norms. They attribute these types of experiences, more so than any formal teacher education or professional development they had received, with preparing them to challenge traditional norms and stereotypes through their teaching practice and development of responsive teaching materials.

### *4.1.1 Significance of Personal Experience in Shaping Feminist Views*

For Valerie, a formative experience that shaped her interest and understanding of gender inequity was her mother coming out as a homosexual; in her words:

When I was a kid, my mom came out as a lesbian. I was a 7 years old and it was a different time. There was a lot of homophobia and a lot of fear. I grew up with this tension between things feeling safe at home and things feeling unsafe outside. I was told that I wasn't allowed to talk about it because my mom could lose her job. I remember that silence had an impact on me so as a teacher I was determined to break that silence. So conversations about gay and lesbian families were really important to me and I think what came from that were conversations about gender and how we identify. So for me they are strongly connected.

Kate also pointed to personal experiences as a factor in her commitment to challenging gender stereotypes. Unlike Valerie, these came predominantly later in life for Kate. While Kate was concerned with gender inequity throughout her life, these beliefs were radicalized: More specifically it was when she became a parent that she began to experience the limitations of the gender binary. Here she elaborates on how this experience shaped her awareness and feminist identity:

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A huge part of that identity is already being assigned to a life that is not even born yet... And so, yeah, just the experience of being pregnant and then having the baby and being so thrilled and in love with this life and its potential and then having people ask me the exact same question every time [about the sex of the baby] and then the conversation ending at that point? That's the whole conversation about this amazing life.

Candice's commitment to feminism stemmed from a connection to social justice and ensuring that, as a teacher, she was able to address important social issues in her classroom. She and Valerie both work at an alternative public school with a focus on promoting social and environmental justice. Thus, in addition to her own values, Candice also credited the professional culture she worked in providing a community of staff and parents who are keenly aware of gender issues and are not afraid to bring their own perspectives to the table. She noted that this made for a very engaging, progressive and educational place for her to work and learn. Candice thus attributed her preparedness to her own values, and to choosing to work in an environment that aligned with these.

### ***4.1.2 Lack of Pre-service Training***

All three participants were vocal about how their pre-service teacher training did not prepare them to tackle the issue of gender stereotypes in the classroom. Both Valerie and Candice remember courses that dealt with ministry policies on social equity that only touched briefly on individual issues. They did not find these classes to be particularly valuable or helpful in challenging sexism. Of her pre-service training, Valerie states:

So I was in a one-year program at OISE. I remember there were four sessions on equity and each session tackled an "ism." That wasn't enough. You can't go deep if you just introduce the issue. So there wasn't enough. I think that everything that I have done, all the curriculum that I have created and all the resources I have created have been on my own.

Kate echoes the sentiment and adds that schools recognize their insufficiency by supplementing optional workshops for pre-service and current teachers to receive more support.

### ***4.1.3 Teacher Resources and Strategies***

All three participants agreed that pre-service training is lacking but, in addition to Professional Development days, many education institutes offer workshops where teachers can receive additional assistance in teaching social justice issues. Kate, who leads a workshop in gender fluidity, acknowledges that many teacher training schools are reaching out to outside expertise to cover what is lacking in their program. The downside to this approach is that these workshops are optional, and usually after school hours, which can make it difficult for students who commute and have obligations to attend. Otherwise, Valerie and Candice both noted publications from The Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario such as *Social Justice Begins With Me, We're Erasing Prejudice for Good* and workshops like *Imagine a World Free from Fear*, are accessible starting points for teachers to learn about challenging gender stereotypes in their classrooms.

### **4.2 Despite their practices aimed at challenging traditional gender norms, teachers observed that the prevalence of societal construction and reinforcement of these commonly outweigh their efforts**

My participants have observed that while students may not be aware of gender stereotyping as a structural concept, they are keenly aware of their own and each other's prescribed gender and the rules that come with it. Despite their school's efforts to promote social

justice, Valerie and Candice have both noticed that their students gravitate towards gendered play in their free time.

### *4.2.1 Choosing Gendered Play*

When asked about the impact of gender stereotyping on students, teachers remarked that gendered play was the most obvious one that they noticed. When given the choice, students not only decided to play with peers of the same gender but their activities were reflective of stereotypes of their gender. For example, Valerie noticed that at recess the boys would choose physical activities such as soccer but the girls would sit in a corner to talk or play cards. Even in imagined play, she saw a difference in subject matter:

I have another group of boys who are very interested in fantasy play but it is all media driven, so super heroes and movies them have seen and TV shows or games, so Pokemon or Transformers. The girls at recess are running around. They are playing imaginary games. They might be horse, they might be babies or unicorns or magicians.

Thus, Valerie pointed out the general differences between the type of imaginative play boys and girls partake in, where the boys choose more combative subject matters.

Candice reflected on her kindergarten classroom in a similar fashion:

Boys often stick with boys and do all those typical boy things, like playing roughly and playing with guns. Girls are much more likely to play with dolls and do that sort of thing. So it comes out in the play all the time and it comes out in the way they treat one another, they unfortunately choose to exclude one another or make fun... Maybe with who they choose to interact with, how they choose to play, how they exclude one another. I think that for them it has the most meaning, you can't play because you are a girl or girls don't play with this and boys don't play with that.

In her observations, Candice noted that choice of activity during play time is regulated by the other students because they “exclude one another or make fun,” when someone chooses outside of what is allowed by the gender binary. Both teachers have noticed that often the students are the ones reinforcing the rules for other students. Candice commented that the other children in the class would ask boys, “why are you using the pink spoon?” or tell girls that, “you can’t play because you are a girl.” Their choices of activities, appearance and behaviours stay within the structured gender binary and when they do not, their classmates may make comments.

### ***4.2.2 Rigidity of Gender Binary***

All three participants brought up the issue of gender binary in their answers to what sort of stereotypes they saw played out in school. They pointed to the constant cuing and reinforcement of the gender binary in societal influences, namely media and voices of authority in students’ lives. Kate, in particular, believes this binary to be the crux of the problem in gender inequity, calling it an “erroneous paradigm”:

Every single person falls into boy or girl so if you look around the school, you can see that everything is framed around this paradigm. Everything from the bathroom doors to the athletic teams and the health textbooks and the curriculum, it’s all organized around this notion that there are boys and girls... If there is so much cuing around the binaries, people will attach all sorts of things to it.

Kate argued that since society constantly splits the population into either male or female with no grey area in between, it becomes natural for people to start assigning meaning to them: thus, stereotypes of how males and females should be are embodied and policed. Consequently, media becomes categorized as for either boys or girls. Both Valarie and Candice gave examples of this view in their interviews. Valerie noted Pokemon and Transformers in the passage above as an influence on the type of fantasy play boys engage in. She also talked about how stores sell

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gendered Halloween costumes which limit the choices of what male or female students can be. Similarly, Candice remarked on how her students can be exposed to gender fluidity at school but will still watch *The Lego Movie* or *Frozen*, which not only present some gendered notions but target either boys or girls. These students will also see gendered clothing in stores that are divided into boys and girls sections. In addition, Kate maintained that the symbols of:

Girls and boys on the bathroom door mean, for all the people in the community, it's triggering that notion of girl is the person who wear dresses, who is concerned with appearance and nurturance, is kind and has a lot of social skills, is passive and then they look at the boy. Like who is the person who goes into this bathroom? It's [these symbols] like a trigger, a constant rehearsal for people of those stereotypes.

The three participants all state the importance of the use of language by adults in the school in framing the gender binary, thus reinforcing its role in society. Getting the class' attention by calling out "boys and girls" is something that many teachers do which has subtle effects on reinforcing the binary. Kate also observed that teachers she has worked with who are very determined to fight gender stereotypes would instinctually say, "Can I get some sturdy boys to move this table." When asked why perceptive adults might be do this, she explained that it is most likely because of "cultural context [where] you're just encouraged to think that way," thus highlighting our deep biases. Similarly, Valarie shared the following observation:

Today we had a scientist in the classroom and I noticed she constantly called on the boys and I was pointing at the girls pointing to remind her. And what happened was the boys were blurting out the answers as boys do tend to be more impulsive as learners, some boys, not all boys. So the girls are sitting with their hands up, waiting for their turn to speak and when the girls were called on, the boys would blurt out the answer. The girls' voices got silenced. So there are some of the stereotypes around what kind of subjects boys excel in and what kind of subjects girls excel in, so boys get encouraged in math and science and girls get praised for

their art and for their behaviour, especially if they are submissive and passive.

Valarie's observation showed an adult, and an authority figure, implying that boys' voices are more important than girls at least in a stereotypically male subject, leading to encouragement of boys in these subjects, in addition to being impulsive and vocal, while girls are implicitly told to be "submissive and passive." This will be explored further in the next section.

### **4.3 Teachers observed that school culture and teaching practices reinforce traditional gender norms and stereotypes**

When asked what differences they observed the impact gender stereotypes had on boys, girls or transgender students, the participants found that boys and girls generally embody the perceived stereotype for their assigned gender. Building on the previous section, participants noticed that the difference in the way gender stereotypes impact girls and boys was that they took on the stereotypes of their gender: namely that boys are more physical and girls are passive and subversive. Boys in Candice's class, whether by nature or nurture, are more active she wondered if "they were conditioned to rough house and that's what they were encouraged to do because the girls do not participate." This is, thus, promoted by students and many other teachers regulating gender binaries. However, participants also noted that teachers would often reprimand students displaying these stereotypes to an excess, if behaviours became destructive.

#### ***4.3.1 Teachers Contribute to Boys and Girls Embodying the Stereotypes of Their Gender***

Participants commented on how they have observed teachers unwittingly contribute to students embodying stereotypes through the way they praise and police students. Participants have already commented on how common classroom practices, such as getting student attention

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by calling out “boys and girls,” can implicitly reinforce the idea of the gender binary. Teachers can imply certain gender stereotypes in their actions and the meanings of their words. In the above passage, Valarie explained how the visiting scientist seemed to value male voices over female, encouraging boys to be vocal, impulsive and physical while girls are subtly told to wait, be passive, and keep ideas private. Valarie connected this to the stereotypical qualities of girls, versus boys, who are often praised for their dresses, hairstyles and appearance. In her words:

I haven't heard this at our school but when we praise kids we are also reinforcing messages. So when we praise kids for being clever or for solving a problem or we praise kids for a new dress or for the way that they look, we are reinforcing these ideas that a girl's role is to look nice and a boy's role is to be clever.

She further cautioned that, “if we reinforce the message that girls are objects, then we give permission to people to treat women like objects with can be painful,” and that there could great repercussions for how students are praised. Thus, gender specific praise strengthens certain gendered messages that may or may not be true for all people. This leads students to embody these stereotypes: boys have been observed to become more physical and girls more introverted in their actions. Like Candice, who noted that only the boys liked to rough house, Valarie agreed that, stereotypically, boys are more physical in their play and, in contrast, girls are more subtle in the way they police other girls who overstep gender binaries. She explained that “if a girl goes into the washroom with a short haircut, it's the other girls who are going to respond or react. We have had incidents of bullying behaviour in the washrooms because they are unsupervised.” Boys may act out their aggressions in a more direct and outward fashion – because they have been conditioned to be vocal – but girls, who have been told constantly to keep issues private, tend to police away from supervision.

### *4.3.2 Teachers Target Students Based on Gender Stereotypes*

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The notion that teachers target students based on the gender stereotypes they have been encouraged to embody is more prevalent for boys than girls because their physical behaviour is less conducive to proper learning environment. As Valerie described:

Boys really get targeted for their behaviour. Maybe target is not the right word but I think boys get this message that they should be sitting still, that they should be conforming to the institutionalized rules of behaviour that might not work for them. So I find that boys are called out a lot more for their impulsive behaviour. And I think that the messaging is that boys are rough and I think that reinforces our response to conflict.

Even though teachers are trying to negate boys' impulsivity and physical behaviours, they are still reinforcing the stereotype that boys are more impulsive and physical, at least, than girls.

Candice also talked about having to monitor the boys for their wrestling but the girls, though there are physical occurrences, required less attention in this respect. Thus, because teachers have the bias that boys are more physical, they may call boys out for behaviour that are physical like fidgeting or movement.

Often, a teacher's first instinct is to maintain control in the classroom by suppressing physical outbursts from students, and when more outbursts come from boys, we fall into the unfortunate role of perpetuating gender stereotypes. Valarie, Candice and Kate remind us that being reflective of our own biases and practice is crucial to challenging gender stereotypes.

**4.4 From the perspective and experience of participating teachers, the greatest harm caused by the reinforcement of traditional gender norms and stereotypes was to students' socio-emotional well-being**

Participants were asked about specific areas, including self-esteem and academic achievement, where they perceive that students were impacted by gender stereotypes. Participants were also asked to differentiate between the effects on girls, boys and transgender students. Candice had previously pointed out that students were aware of and enacted some gender stereotypes but could not comment on how they affected her kindergarten students' academically or personally as they have not yet reached a reflective developmental stage where these emotions can be expressed. Valerie and Kate were able to comment more on this area and both pointed to loss of sense of belonging and limiting one's potential as major issues caused by gender stereotypes.

### ***4.4.1 Loss of Sense of Belonging***

Valerie and Kate both discussed the impact of gender stereotypes on self-esteem manifesting in students feeling as if they do not belong in their community, which in turn affect how students develop both academically and personally. Valerie makes a point first from the perspective of the students who police others. Because society in general does not allow for gender fluidity, these students may choose to police those who do not fall into the gender binary in order to feel a sense of belonging. She explains:

[Students] are working through it and a large part of it is the sense of belonging; I'm beginning to feel that it's a huge piece of how we feel about ourselves, how we feel in a group, and if we don't feel secure in our place in the group we make different choices, so we might do something that we might not normally do just to feel part of a group. It's tricky.

Valerie believes that having a validated sense of belonging is crucial to student well-being. Gender stereotypes can either help or hinder children from feeling like they belong:

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I think when we are reinforcing a message that feels true and reflects how we feel about ourselves, we feel good. If boys are getting praised for being a good athlete and you are a good athlete then you are going to feel good about yourself because you are fitting into the definitions of what it means to be male. If you are a boy and not a good athlete then you may start to feel like something is wrong with you and that's a terrible way to feel. If you are a girl who doesn't like to wear dresses or doesn't look pretty and all you hear are comments about how people look you're gonna start to feel like something is wrong with you if you're trying to measure up to set of expectation that don't fit for you.

She acknowledged that some gender stereotypes could ring true for some children and when they do, these children feel validated. They belong to a certain group and are told they are normal.

However, the opposite is true as well: if they step outside of the gender box, students will feel as though they are not supported in becoming who they are. This is aggravated even further when the sense of not belonging or alienation comes from outright punishment by the rest of society.

Kate explained:

People [who] are crossing or violating stereotypes are being punished by other young people, by their teachers also – like the whole system is punishing them for that behaviour and trying to herd them back into these comfort zones that we can understand about what it means to be a man or woman, or girl or boy.

Having a supported sense of belonging is a vital part in ensuring the well-being of young people trying to figure out their identity. However, those who do not stay within the stereotypes are quickly ushered back through punishment. Otherwise students may simply choose not to fully express themselves for fear of being ostracized.

### ***4.4.2 Limiting Potential***

Valerie and Kate both discussed how the pressures of gender stereotyping limit student potential beyond just academics. Kate saw it from a youth empowerment perspective, noting that:

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The more we impose on humans what they should be less they can actualize or realize themselves. The impact is that it slows us all down, that it prevents us from being who we are to constantly mediate what other people are telling us what we are. It limits and defines even just these categories of girl or boy.

Kate explained it by underlining that children cannot even begin to explore their interests or identities if they feel like they will be punished for it. Valerie expressed the same sentiments, highlighting the emotions students may experience:

Mentally it can be frustrating to think that no one sees you for who you are; if no one is encouraging you to step outside of a box then you might feel trapped or oppressed and unable to discover your full potential.

Not only are students suffering because they are being limited in self-expression and discovering their true selves, the surrounding community or society as a whole can feel the negative effects of limiting one's potential. Kate believed that:

From a community perspective, it is hurting everybody not only because now some people in the community are really suffering but also because limiting potential is limiting everyone. It erodes the social fabric.

Thus, limiting potential is a major impact of gender stereotypes on students which has effects not only on the individuals but on the communities as a whole.

### ***4.4.3 Omissions***

While Valerie and Kate both made insightful observations on student socio-emotional states due to gender stereotyping, they were unable to talk about academic impact beyond the implied inability to learn in a hostile environment. They were also unable to speak to any differences in the impacts on girls and boys beyond the pressure to embody gender stereotypes illustrated in the previous section.

Of note here as well is how little the participants could speak about the effects of transgender students. Despite being asked directly about how gender stereotypes affect girls, boys and transgender youth, only Kate commented on how challenging gender binary results in punishment that would make transgender youth experience more aggression: “So I mean for those young people it just means a more violent life which is associated with all sorts of outcomes like higher levels of self-harm.”

### **4.5 Teachers prioritized classroom discussions and activities that forefront gender equity to create safe space for self-expression in their instructional approach to challenging traditional gender norms and stereotypes**

When asked about how they challenge gender stereotypes in the classroom, participants answered thoughtfully on strategies that have worked for them. All three stressed the need for constant conversation about gender and lessons that speak to students on a level that they can understand.

#### ***4.5.1 General Practices in the Classroom***

All participants emphasized that their practices in challenging gender stereotypes had to be a constant part of their teaching presentation. Like they had stated before, the language that the teachers used in the classroom in addressing students did not reinforce the binary. Instead of addressing her class, “Boys and Girls,” Valerie suggested that she would try using animal names because her students enjoy it. She is also considering using the pronoun “they” instead of “he” or “she” when writing report card comments.

Another practice mentioned by all three participants is ensuring that their classrooms engage in conversations around gender equity, especially if something comes up to do with

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gender stereotypes and must be addressed. Candice has weekly meetings where students can talk about issues they have had during the week, which includes any gender stereotype issues that they have faced. She explained:

We have a Friday meeting and if there are problems throughout the week we put it on our agenda and talk about it and come up with solutions. Sometimes the solutions are effective, sometimes they are not, cuz they are four. But when the kids come up with the problems, if they were to say so and so won't let me play because I am a girl, then I think it might be more meaningful and the best way to skirt around the whole teacher setting up the binary. They are just saying how it is, what the reality is.

This allowed her kindergarten students to bring up gender issues they themselves were concerned with, making it a far more authentic experience. They also came up with the solutions to their issues but Candice wondered if the students are just going through the motions since they know, “the rhetoric of there's no such thing as a boy toy and a girl toy. They know what the right answer is.” This begs the question of whether social justice can be assessed like an academic subject; more discussion will come later in this section.

Valerie's take on conversation is more organic. While she too believes in the importance of co-constructing learning goals for gender bending discussions with specific strategies that I will go into more detail later, she would rather address gender issues as soon as she notices them:

I think it is the adults who set the tone because I have had experiences of reading a picture and coming across a stereotypical moment but I can immediately respond to it and develop those critical thinking skills in the way I choose to respond.

While planning insightful lessons on gender equity is important, being able to immediately address and rectify the issue is also crucial to challenging gender stereotypes.

Likewise, Kate spoke about the importance of authentic conversation. She too believes in organic conversation initiated by the students and gave an example of a how student conversation led to an all-gender bathroom:

One day one kid took a sticky note and drew pants and stuck it on the dress on the female sign and I think someone else took a stick note and wrote a comment about what that meant to them and the door filled with all these notes about what this means to us. And the conversation is the most valuable thing when they say, “oh I never thought about that. In every single public space it is reinforced that girls were dresses and boys do not.”

However, students may not be as forthcoming with their issues and opinions when they do not know whether figures of authority will be supportive; thus Kate stressed the need for a space where students feel comfortable and supported in raising these concerns.

### ***4.5.2 Embedding Gender Lessons in Curriculum***

As experienced educators, the participants understood the need to tie teaching to the curriculum. Valerie found that “in order to get teachers to buy into it, you need to show how it connects to the report card.” Thus, she suggests strategies that challenge gender stereotypes while covering curriculum expectations. One strategy that both she and Candice have found useful is integrating the arts: reading picture books, doing art, singing songs, role playing and so on have been effective ways of engaging students. By drawing from activities that students are familiar with and enjoy, teachers will be able to create a comfortable way into conversations that are sensitive or difficult to broach. Another casual way is make a poll of where everyone plays during free time or recess, and then creating a way of displaying the data and connecting it to the math curriculum. Valerie has used this method before in her classroom and has used it in as an avenue into discussions surrounding student perception of gendered activities. She would then segued into a conversation about there being no such thing as a boy game or a girl game. From

there, she would encourage each student to try a new activity. The next time students get free time, she would document the data again of who chooses to play at which activity center, and from there she would consolidate the discussion about gender.

On the other end of the spectrum, Kate sees the flaws in the current curriculum. She commented on the curriculum becoming bloated and more demanding than before, leaving “less opportunity for the real stuff of a community.” She would consider an “overhaul” of the curriculum to be a good idea because the current one completely ignores important issues to do with gender, including the fact that “LGBTQ folk are absent.”

### ***4.5.3 Building an Awareness of Gender***

When asked about when an appropriate age was to introduce the concepts of “gender” and “gender stereotyping,” all participants agreed on the importance starting from the early ages.

Valerie asserted that from a young age:

I think that all students are aware of gender. They may not know the word gender but they certainly know “boy” and “girl.” They may not know the word “stereotype” but we’ve been working on this for a few years so now they know stereotypes is a set of assumptions or a set of ideas that may or may not be true. It was interesting because they did not understand the word “gender” or “stereotype” but they certainly knew there were rules for girls and boys.

Talking about gender stereotypes from the primary level or as soon as students start school will ensure that they have an early awareness of the concept and the messages. However, Candice struggled with the right way of approaching the idea of gender binary. In her words:

We wanted to avoid the whole thing of, “Here’s a gender stereotype: you know how boys like this and girls like? Everyone know that? No, no that doesn’t exist.” We wanted to avoid setting the binary so we could break it down? So instead we did lessons on like, do you know the book Spork? And we did lessons on colors,

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different colors, and how you can like any color, and how there is no such thing as a boy color or girl color but we didn't actually say that. They were great lessons, but we left it feeling like maybe they were too vague. They've learned a little from it but also they are still making fun of each other for being girls and boys and hadn't quite made the connection. So we really struggle with, basically how harmful it is to set up the binary. By telling them, being really direct are you reinforcing it? But by being too vague, do they actually know what we are talking about. I still don't know the answer and this is something we are continuing to struggle with.

Nevertheless, Valarie suggested starting with lessons that have to do with sorting items like toys, costumes, clothes and belongings, into loot bags or collections for girls or boys, in other words into "gender boxes," because these are relevant subject matters for children. To extend the activity, she has the kids stand inside a box that represents their gender:

There are times when the gender box feels good: I'm a girl and I like the color. But there are times when I can step out of the box: I'm a girl who also likes to get dirty in the mud. It's ok to identify with a gender stereotype because it might be true, it might feel good. But I think the goal is to create enough space so if you don't fit into that set of expectations that's ok too.

Similarly she also likes to do an activity with baby dolls:

A powerful activity with baby dolls and talk about well does the baby know if it's a boy or a girl, and does it matter. I think the conversation begins with what does a baby need, all babies need love, they need to be fed, they need to change their diapers. Pass around the baby and let kids hold the baby and think about if the baby knows if it's a boy or a girl. How do we tell the world if it's a boy or a girl.

This activity captures the idea of blending the gender binary, looking for similarities instead of differences.

Despite her push and commitment to challenging gender stereotypes in the classroom, Valarie thinks the approach should be different at the primary level than at the junior level and

higher. At the primary level, she intends to empower her students in order to build up their confidence. Then, at the junior level, she can introduce the harder-hitting issues:

I've been thinking about this. It's hard to feel empowered when you hear the message that because you are a girl, you are going to have all these barriers and obstacles to overcome and I think in the younger grades, we really want to empower kids to feel confident and to take those risks and to understand who they are. And we want that in the junior grades too but junior kids can handle some of those heavier conversations so I've been thinking because conversations about gender equity is very important but I'm not sure I want to have those conversations at the primary or early primary grades. It's the same with stories around privilege and power and racism.

In the end, Valarie and the other two participants all emphasize the need for a safe environment.

#### ***4.5.4 Creating A Safe Space for Self-Expression***

All three participants used similar language for the one thing they thought was of utmost value to challenging gender stereotypes: this was to create safe space for students to explore, question and discover themselves. Kate emphasized the need to create a comfortable environment where young people can voice concerns or can express themselves without feeling threatened; she sees teachers as “partners with young people on their learning journey. There will be natural questioning of binary and gender stereotypes.” Valarie’s contribution to the idea of creating safe space is to create empathy with all her students. She wants them to empathize with their peers who may have experienced bullying:

You tap into their sense of empathy and how does it feel when people laugh at you. Because I think what is also hard for young kids is try to think outside of themselves, to think about how their actions can cause someone else to feel but you want kids to do that. So how do you do that? You ask them to think about a time they were laughed at and to identify the feelings that they felt. And you ask them to think about a time when they laughed at someone else. So you start to build up empathy and you also recognise the honesty in it.

Lastly, Valarie saw the role of the teacher not only as the person who facilitated and provided a safe space but someone who protects students from harsh realities:

So part of the work we do is if kids are going to come to school wearing a dress or a tie, we have to prepare them for the fact that other people are going to comment. They might ask you questions: why are you wearing a tie? And you have to be prepared to say, "I am wearing a tie because I like to wear ties." So you can't just be naive and say, "sure go to school wearing a dress, everything will be fine." You have to say, "when you're wearing a dress, other people might ask you why, or they might laugh at you and how are you going to respond to that." We want to honor what the kid needs but protecting them also means preparing them for the homophobic, sexist world that we live in where people are going to give you a hard time especially since you are challenging everything they know to be true and people hold onto those roles because it gives them some comfort and not everybody likes to be challenged.

Part of the work to do with gender equity or homophobia is about providing the tools to respond to confrontation and it is the teacher's responsibility to ensure that students are prepared.

### ***4.5.5 Assessment and Markers of Success***

All three participants had a difficult time finding a suitable answer when asked for assessment tools or markers of success for their gender equity lessons. Valarie admitted that she had never thought about what success would look like from a social justice level and that she had only assessed students on the curriculum expectations that her lesson intersected with (for example, on reading comprehension if a picture book is part of the activity). She acknowledged that it would be a difficult process to fairly judge each student on something so sensitive but seemed interested in developing assessment tools. Similarly, Candice did not have assessment methods in place to gauge student improvement in understanding and expressing gender equity. She did, however, mention that her students have begun to use gender equitable language. If

these notions are introduced in kindergarten, imagine what gender equitable beliefs can be instilled in students.

### **4.6 Conclusion**

In this chapter, I reported the research findings and supporting quotes from the research participants. I learned that dedication to challenging gender stereotypes in the classroom starts from within and each teacher must develop their own resources because they are not readily available. Nevertheless, my interview participants have provided valuable strategies that will help any teacher who wish to address these issues. But, most importantly, it is about creating a safe space to talk about these issues and to allow students the freedom to explore their own gender expression. Next, in Chapter 5, I discuss the significance of these findings in the context of the literature reviewed in Chapter 2. I explain how the findings contribute to this existing body of educational research and identify areas for further research these findings provoke, and I articulate recommendations for various stakeholders of the education system.

## **Chapter 5: DISCUSSION**

### **5.0 Introduction**

As a female, a feminist and a Masters of Teaching student, I found the process of conducting this research to be invaluable and enlightening. Sexism and gender stereotyping is present in many facets of society and schools are no exception. However, the advantage schools have that other public spaces do not is a faculty of dedicated teachers who can be there to correct, debunk and challenge these harmful stereotypes. The exemplary educators that I had the privilege to speak with revealed personal events that led to present-day teaching philosophies to challenge gender stereotypes and create safe spaces for gender fluidity. In this chapter, I discuss the research findings in the context of the existing literature and scholarship (chapter 2), analyze the implications of the finding for the teaching and research community and for me personally as a beginning teacher, articulate recommendations, and identify areas for further research.

### **5.1 Discussion**

Mustapha (2010) stated that the hidden curriculum is communicated in the patterns and ways teachers treat male and female students: teachers can shape and gender students by influencing them to act in a gender stereotypical way. However, the opposite can be true too if teachers are acutely aware of gender dynamics and the harmful effects of gender stereotypes. Something Valerie said resonated with me: she describes her role as “setting the tone,” where her role as an enlightened teacher is not only about creating a classroom environment that only reproduces neutral messages because no such thing exists. It is, however, about taking advantage of the opportunities when inequalities are presented in the classroom. For participating teachers in this study, these opportunities arise, for example, when students police what others can and

cannot do because of gender stereotypes; when visiting scientists call on boys more than girls; when picture books and other school resources present a clear generalization; and so on. While the hidden curriculum has the potential to re-inscribe such inequities, paying attention to it also gives it the potential to be transformative. The practices described by Candice, Kate, and Valerie are a model for how this work can be done.

### *5.1.1 Gender Fluidity*

I came to this research project from a gender binary perspective and had not realized the extent that looking at how gender stereotypes of males and females in schools would be so closely connected with LGBTQ issues. Interestingly, when reviewing the literature in the early phases of the research study, I came across little attention to the notion of the gender spectrum. Instead, the literature I reviewed spoke primarily about gender as a binary. Reflexively, I see that my own understanding of gender informed my search terms. Nevertheless, all three of my research participants were vocal in expressing the need to understand that gender binary is an outdated model.

Speaking with these teachers, and in particular with Kate, has opened my eyes to how thinking within a gender binary can be harmful. Throughout her interview, Kate stressed the need for the gender binary paradigm to change. She saw the binary as the main factor in attributing power to one gender and causing transgender people to experience more violence. Valerie and Candice both taught at the same alternative school that fosters awareness and acceptance of all genders. Their accounts of their teaching elucidated the extent that they understood gender stereotypes as being intricately linked with LGBTQ rights. This matters because most people still see gender as a binary – that you are either male or female – and, as

such, awareness and education on gender fluidity needs to become a focus in on gender equity education.

### *5.1.2 The Need for Safe Space*

The most salient message from all three interview participants is that the teacher has every responsibility to speak up against gender stereotypes and, more importantly, to create a safe space for students to explore and express their gender. Because the gender binary does not apply to everyone, students need to feel supported and part of the community in order to feel comfortable; thus creating an accepting space for all in the classroom is vital. Martin and Ruble's (2010) research states that children can recognize the genders "male" and "female" from a very young age due to societal influences; this is something that Valerie, Kate and Candice find to be true with young students they work with and which they find to be concerning for gender fluidity. Candice's students would police the sort of colors their classmates were wearing or choosing that were counter to traditional gender norms. Valerie commented on her grade 1 and 2 students sorting toys into "girl" piles and "boy" piles. All three interview participants asserted that their students understood stereotypes even though they may not have a name for them or the vocabulary to describe them. Thus, an environment that allows for the stereotypes to exist can be intimidating for students who do not adhere to gender stereotypes. For this reason, it is important that teachers challenge these types of behaviours from students in order to create safer and more accepting spaces. All three participants agreed that having conversations about gender stereotypes was a crucial first step. Because of the significance of the gender spectrum (and not only gender binary) it is important that research and scholarship on challenging traditional gender norms in school integrate more attention to the notion of safe space to respond to the potential harms experienced by students who do not identify with this binary. In other words,

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challenging traditional gender norms in school should not only focus on inequity between “males” and “females”, but in terms of the representation and legitimization of identity.

### *5.1.3 Setting the Tone*

As mentioned, it is neither possible nor realistic to create a classroom environment void of gender stereotypes. Blumberg (2008) found that school resources often depict males and females in traditional gender roles and though Valarie assured that her school consciously curates against these stereotypes, they can still be brought into your classroom through the kinds of toy children play, the kinds of clothes they wear or even the sort of images are on their backpacks. It is important for teachers, then, to develop their own awareness surrounding these social cues, address these issues that lead to gender stereotypes, and set a gender equitable tone in their classrooms. As Gosselin’s (2007) research states, teachers’ philosophies of education, as well as the way they communicate both verbally and non-verbally, are significant factors in the construction of gender norms in their classrooms.

The first step to becoming sensitive to these, often subtle, social cues that reinforce the gender binary is to be aware of ones’ own biases. Both Cushman (2010) and Erden (2009) emphasize that teachers are human with human biases. Valarie, Kate, and Candice are able to do good work challenging gender stereotypes because they developed their own awareness of gender inequity and have put in the effort to implement strategies and lessons that challenge these issues. Their strategies, discussed later in this chapter, give beginning teachers an advantageous starting point.

## **5.2 Implications for a Beginning Teacher**

## CHALLENGING GENDER STEREOTYPES

This research paper has strengthened my belief that it is necessary to bring gender equity to the forefront of the classroom. Kate mentioned that sometimes teachers feel like the curriculum they have to cover leaves little time for important community bonding and building activities. The conversation piece in challenging gender stereotypes is obviously valuable and conducive to building a safe and communicative classroom, but there are a lot of other strategies (as listed in the previous chapter) that can actually cover many curriculum strands. For example:

- 1) Linking lessons that challenge traditional gender norms and stereotypes to the Language Arts curriculum through reading, writing and speaking. Picture books were recommended by Valerie and Candice as a useful method to introduce or reinforce messages to students in a method that they are familiar with.
- 2) Conversations about where students choose to play during free time and whether it reflects their views of supposed “boy games” and “girl games” can be valuable. This data can be tallied and organized, covering expectations from the Math curriculum.
- 3) Dramatic representations of gender issues can help channel students’ empathy and delve deeper into the emotional toll these issues can have.
- 4) Looking at the animal kingdom for examples of how their way of living may differ from traditional gender stereotypes as a starting point to conversations that challenge these norms.

In my own practice, I would set up community meetings at regular times, like the Friday meetings that Candice has adopted for her class. While these meetings are times when students can voice any of their concerns, I would also take time to hold discussions on gender equity issues; for example, what they common gender stereotypes they see in cartoons and how that makes them feel. These structured conversations will hopefully be thought-provoking and build

awareness of how social cuing affects our way of viewing gender. It may be overwhelming for a beginning teacher to tackle these issues along with duty of teaching the curriculum, but I hope to focus my attention on creating a classroom environment that can explore social justice issues.

While there is no prescribed, step-by-step method of how to effectively challenge gender stereotypes with any given group of children, the strategies highlighted by Valerie, Kate, and Candice are a valuable start for any teacher who wants to try them out in their classroom.

### **5.3 Recommendations**

The most glaring implication of this study for the education community is the need for pre-service training to emphasize, clarify and even teach these views on gender equity. Cushman (2010) highlights the importance of such training to allow teachers to become aware and reflective on their own gender stereotypes and biases. However, as all three research participants pointed out, pre-service training often does not give teacher candidates enough to even break through their own bias, let alone to equip them with the tools to challenge traditional gender norms and stereotypes. All three participants personally identified as feminists outside of experiences in pre-service training, which they believed was a stronger force informing their commitment to challenging gender stereotypes with their students. While personal experiences that influence our views may be hard to recreate in pre-service training, creating a sense of urgency and empathy by analysing specific case studies on sexism can lead to developing sensitivity towards gender equity. Thus a recommendation to the education community is to dedicate more hours, in a more hard-hitting manner and with more direct, usable strategies for beginning teachers to understand the need for gender equity to be addressed and to have specific strategies, lesson plans or ideas to do so. Such opportunities can help prepare beginning teachers

to feel as though they have the resources to address situations that can at times be difficult or sensitive.

Another recommendation would be for these courses in pre-service training to focus on debunking the gender binary in favor of a fluid view of the gender spectrum. Before this research, I had not encountered a gender model that was not binary and without this research, I would still be thinking of gender in binary terms. Thus, it is important that a pre-service teacher training course on gender equity shed light on the need for gender fluidity.

An additional recommendation would be for teacher education and in-service leadership to facilitate opportunities for teachers to connect with similarly thinking teachers because these alliances can strengthen the good work they can do. Finally, a further recommendation is for the creation of an accessible teacher-directed resource database whereby teachers can share lesson plans on gender stereotypes.

### **5.4 Areas for Further Research**

The findings from this research point to several further areas for future research. These include consideration of the following questions:

- How can teachers be educated to avoid allowing binary gender stereotypes to affect transgender students, both socio-emotionally and academically?
- How can the ability to challenge traditional gender stereotypes be transferred to challenge transgender stereotypes?
- How do the dynamics of sexuality accentuate gender stereotypes? What can teachers do to mitigate this particular cause?

- How do teachers take into account cultural differences that perpetuate gender stereotypes and challenge them in a respectful manner?

### **5.5 Conclusion**

Two years ago, I began thinking about what I wanted to focus on in my research paper and decided on a topic that may not be conventional. The research problem I chose to study was how teachers can challenge gender stereotypes in the classroom because I thought it was an important issue to bring to the forefront. Gender stereotyping is so prevalent it may sometimes be accepted as the truth. I do not think there are many professional teachers who would deny the importance of gender equity but I believe that there are subtle gendered biases that people possess. Like Kate commented in her interview, it is a part of our cultural cuing to constantly rehearse this gender binary. Through the course of this research, I have become so much more aware of my own biases, what actions come from them and how they could come across to my students. I now notice that I often find myself praising my female students' choice of clothing more than on my male students' because I associate fashion with females. Perhaps this is true for some of my female students, but it reiterates what Valarie has said about valuing females for their appearance.

The school community is a major part of a student's life. It is also be a major factor in the perpetuation of gender stereotypes because it is a public forum governed by societal rules and norms. Developing an awareness of our own biases as educators and as people is key but it is a process. I still have work to do in ensuring that my teaching practice is gender equitable but thanks to what I learned from Valerie, Kate and Candice, I feel more equipped to identify and challenge traditional gender norms and stereotypes in my classroom.

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APPENDICES

**Appendix A**

Letter of Consent for Interview



Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

I am a graduate student at OISE, University of Toronto, and am currently enrolled as a Master of Teaching candidate. I am studying gender stereotypes in the classroom for the purposes of a graduate research project. I think that your knowledge and experience will provide insights into this topic.

I am writing a report on this study as a requirement of the Master of Teaching Program. My course instructor who is providing support for the research process this year is Mary Lynn Tessaro. My research supervisor is Angela MacDonald-Vemic. The purpose of this requirement is to allow us to become familiar with a variety of ways to do research. My research data collection consists of 40 minute interview that will be tape-recorded. I would be grateful if you would allow me to interview you at a place and time convenient to you, outside of school time.

The contents of this interview will be used for my research project, which will include a final research paper, as well as informal presentations to my classmates and/or potentially at a research conference or publication. I will not use your name or anything else that might identify you in my written work, oral presentations, or publications. This information remains confidential. The only people who will have access to my assignment work will be my research supervisor and my course instructor. You are free to change your mind at any time, and to withdraw even after you have consented to participate. You may decline to answer any specific questions. I will destroy the tape recording after the paper has been presented and/or published which may take up to five years after the data has been collected. There are no known risks or benefits to you for assisting in the project, and I will share with you a copy of my notes to ensure accuracy.

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

Yours sincerely,

Researcher name: Dawn Lo  
Phone number, email:

Research Supervisor's Name: Angela MacDonald-Vemic  
Phone number:

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### Consent Form

I acknowledge that the topic of this interview has been explained to me and that any questions that I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I can withdraw at any time without penalty.

I have read the letter provided to me by Dawn Lo and agree to participate in interviews for the purposes described.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Name (printed): \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## **Appendix B**

### Interview Questions

#### Section 1: Background Information

1. How many years have you been teaching for? Which grade(s)?
2. How long at this particular grade level? Have you always taught at this school or at other schools as well?
3. You are here today because you indicated that you are committed to challenging gender stereotypes through your teaching. Can you tell me how you developed this interest?
4. Did you receive any pre-service training on teaching gender studies or gender issues? What do you remember learning?
5. Did you study related topics in your previous undergraduate experience?

#### Section 2: Beliefs and Values

6. What dominant gender stereotypes do you most commonly see being reinforced in schools and classrooms?
7. How are these typically reinforced? (i.e. through books, practices, sorting etc.)
8. Who is reinforcing these?
9. How do gender stereotypes affect the students? Do you observe any differences between the effects on your male and female (and/or transgendered) students?
10. What do you believe are the social, academic or emotional consequences of gender stereotypes on students?
11. In your opinion, whose responsibility is it to talk with students about gender stereotypes and their effects?

#### Section 3: Teaching Practices

12. How aware do you think your students are of gender stereotypes before you have the opportunity to challenge them through your teaching?
13. Do you believe that there is a more and less appropriate age to do this work?
14. How do you begin introducing this topic to students?
15. Where in the curriculum do you locate these opportunities for learning?
16. What are your learning goals when doing this work (i.e. what do you want students to know and be able to do)?
17. What opportunities for learning do you create for students to meet those goals? Can you give me an example of a lesson that you did with your students?
18. What instructional strategies and practices do you use when doing this work?
19. How do you know that students have met the learning goals? What indicators of learning do you look for? What success criteria do you establish?

## CHALLENGING GENDER STEREOTYPES

20. How do students respond to these opportunities for learning?
21. What range of factors and resources support you to do this work?
22. What range of challenges do you encounter doing this work? How do you respond to those challenges? Where do you require more support, and in what form?