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## Investigating Teachers' Understandings of Gender Equity and Achievement in Postfeminist Times

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Education degree in Education

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INVESTIGATING TEACHERS' UNDERSTANDINGS OF GENDER EQUITY AND  
ACHIEVEMENT IN POSTFEMINIST TIMES

(Thesis Format: Monograph)

By

Katee Van Campen

Graduate Program in Education

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Education

The School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies  
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## **Abstract**

Drawing from feminist post-structuralism and critical social theories, this thesis examines the significance of postfeminist and neo-liberal influences on teachers' perspectives about gender equity and girls' success within the context of Ontario's high-stakes standardized testing policies and their pedagogical experiences in the classroom. The significance of this inquiry is in its capacity to contribute to further theorizing about how teachers are negotiating the changing meaning of gender equity through a neo-liberal and postfeminist lens. It also adds to the growing body of research that investigates the significance of socio-economic background with regards to girls' achievement and participation in school and its erasure from the educational policy agenda. Seven grade nine and grade ten English teachers and literacy consultants in three public school boards across Southwestern Ontario participated in the qualitative study. Using informal semi-structured interviews, they were asked open-ended questions relating to their understandings of gender equity and success, as well as their views towards the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (OSSLT). Findings indicated that despite most of the participants' willingness to disrupt or contradict negative gender stereotypes or assumptions about gender equity, they inevitably 'repositioned' or explained these ideas within the alluring neo-liberal and postfeminist rhetoric of choice and hard work. Conflicting and contradictory perspectives ran throughout the interview data, demonstrating how teachers are capable of agency and that they must be provided with the professional space to reflect on their practices and how they may be complicit in producing harmful and narrow gender constructions.

**Key Words:** achievement, gender equity, postfeminism, neo-liberalism, success, gender, teachers, literacy, failing boys, successful girls

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my mother, Roberta Van Campen, who sowed the seeds of what would turn into a passion for understanding what gender and feminism mean to me. Thank you for being my biggest cheerleader when I needed it the most. I would also like to thank those of my family and friends for their never ending support and believing in me when I did not. I know I could not have completed this journey without the constant reminder from a certain grey and white kitty who likes to sleep on keyboards that it is okay to take a break once in awhile. I would finally like to thank my thesis supervisors, Wayne Martino and Goli Rezai-Rashti, for instilling in me a passion for social justice and providing me with every opportunity to soak up their endless amount of knowledge. I could not have achieved what I did without your feedback and support.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Abstract</b> .....	ii
<b>Acknowledgements</b> .....	iii
<b>Table of Contents</b> .....	iv
<b>List of Tables</b> .....	vi
<b>List of Appendices</b> .....	vii
<b>CHAPTER 1 – Introduction to the Research Problem and Theoretical Framework</b> .....	1
1.1 Introduction: Framing the Research Problem.....	1
1.2 Rational.....	2
1.3 Purpose and Importance.....	3
1.4 Context of Neo-liberalism.....	4
1.5 Context of Postfeminism.....	5
1.6 Theoretical Framework.....	8
1.7 Positioning.....	16
1.8 Conclusion.....	18
<b>CHAPTER 2 – Providing a Context: The Literature Review</b> .....	19
2.1 Introduction.....	19
2.2 Successful Girls, Choice and a Postfeminist Discourse.....	20
2.3 Failing Boys, Class and Social Constructions.....	27
2.4 Gender Equity, Teacher Agency and a Neo-liberal Discourse.....	30
2.5 Conclusion.....	38
<b>CHAPTER 3 – Methodology</b> .....	40
3.1 Introduction.....	40
3.2 Overview of Methodology.....	40
3.3 Data Collection.....	42
3.4 Recruitment and Participants.....	45
3.5 Data Analysis.....	46
3.6 Limitations and Difficulties.....	50
3.6.1 Confidentiality.....	50
3.6.2 Data Triangulation.....	51
3.6.6 Recruitment.....	51
3.7 Conclusion.....	52
<b>CHAPTER 4 – Findings</b> .....	54
4.1 Introduction.....	54
4.2 Participant Profiles.....	54
4.2.1 Ron, W.....	55
4.2.2 Harry, P.....	56
4.2.3 Monica, H.....	56
4.2.4 Rose, A.....	57
4.2.5 Veronica, K.....	58
4.2.6 Emily, M.....	59
4.2.7 Angali, W.....	59

4.3	Data Analysis and Emerging Themes.....	60
4.4	The Intertwining of Neo-Liberalism and Postfeminism.....	61
4.5	Understanding Gender Equity and Success.....	72
4.6	Addressing Gender Equity and Feminism in the Classroom.....	86
4.7	Expectations.....	88
4.8	Literacy and Emotions.....	96
4.9	Girls as Flexible and Boys as Inadaptable.....	105
4.91	Disrupting the Gap: Which Boys and Which Girls?.....	112
4.92	Conclusion.....	116
<b>CHAPTER 5: Conclusion and Implications for Further Study.....</b>		<b>119</b>
5.1	Implications for Future Research.....	123
5.2	Final Thoughts.....	124
<b>REFERENCES.....</b>		<b>126</b>

## List of Tables

Table 1: Summary of Participants.....	54
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## **List of Appendices**

Appendix A: Letter of Information.....	142
Appendix B: Letter of Consent.....	146
Appendix C: Interview Guide.....	147
Appendix D: Western Research Ethics Approval.....	150
Curriculum Vitae.....	151



## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction to the Research Problem and Theoretical Framework

#### 1.1 Introduction: Framing the Research Problem

Results from high-stakes standardized testing regimes, both in Ontario and globally, have fostered a renewed interest in a gender ‘gap talk’ within education (Gillborn, 2008; Martino & Rezai-Rashti, 2013a). Fuelled by globalised neo-liberalism, issues of gender equity and ‘gap talk’ have emerged in two distinct discourses in the public arena: a ‘failing’ boys and a ‘successful’ girls discourse (Ringrose, 2007). Neo-liberalism, which intricately aligns itself with a market-individualist agenda, reinforces the values of competition, economic efficiency, and choice which serve to legitimize the necessity of winners and losers within the education system (Connell, 2013). Despite functioning within a neo-liberal market-driven agenda, Ontario’s education system claims to strive for a design that creates success for *all* and this has resulted in issues surrounding gender equity being placed back on the public policy radar. However, these issues are now occurring in a new era of postfeminism, where it is believed that *all* women have achieved equality within the rhetoric of choice and meritocracy (McRobbie, 2008) and neoconservative and neo-liberal forces are fuelling a recuperative masculinity politics that promotes a narrow notion of masculinity (Lingard & Douglas, 1999; Martino & Rezai-Rashti, 2012).

Based extensively on the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) and the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) literacy results, educational policymakers in Ontario and around the world continue to spend significant amounts of time and resources on addressing what has been deemed a ‘crisis’ surrounding boys’ underachievement, citing the results from these standardized tests as evidence for their claims (Martino & Rezai-

Rashti, 2013a). As a result, there is an important need to produce knowledge about how frontline educators understand and deal with gender equity given the increasing emphasis of a postfeminist and neo-liberal discourse of ‘successful’ girls and ‘failing’ boys. It is for these reasons that I am interested in studying, through qualitative research, how teachers position themselves and negotiate gender equity and to what extent the discourses of neo-liberalism and postfeminism dominate the discussion surrounding gender equity and achievement.

## **1.2 Rationale**

Justification for my research study revolves around a desire to build further knowledge about how a postfeminist discourse functions in Ontario schools. I intend to tease out the implications of teachers’ understandings of gender equity in a postfeminist and neo-liberal era in order to contribute to a conversation about ways to help shape equity policies so that more attention can be devoted to targeting underlying systemic issues that lead to inequities in the first place. The residing belief that issues of gender equity have been made invisible by neo-liberalism’s emphasis on de-regulation and individualism is far too simplistic; rather what needs to be investigated is how gender equity is strategically taken up as a mechanism to sell the politics of neo-liberal educational reforms (McRobbie, 2008). Rationalization for this study comes from a desire to understand on a deeper level how teachers today interact with issues of gender equity within a neo-liberal, accountability-driven climate.

Foucault (1978) highlights how power relations and therefore resistance as we know it are exercised through the everyday interactions between individuals. Through these exchanges, practice is reinterpreted and recreated rather than simply reproduced, allowing the potential for shifts in power relations and a move toward equity (Martin, 2010). I am interested in gaining insight into teachers’ micro interactions with and perceptions of gender equity and literacy

achievement within the power dynamic of a postfeminist context that perceives *all* girls as successful and beyond inequity. As a result, the driving questions for my research study include: how do teachers come to engage or not engage with a neo-liberal and postfeminist narrative of gender equity and success? In addition, how do teachers come to make sense of postfeminism and gender equity within policies of high-stakes standardized testing?

### **1.3 Purpose and Importance**

As high-stakes standardized testing in Ontario has helped to foster a ‘failing’ boys and ‘successful’ girls discourse, with achievement gaps in literacy becoming the new face of educational and social disadvantage (Henry, 2001), my objective is to contribute to an understanding of how teachers, who are impacted directly by these policies of high-stakes standardized testing, engage with gender equity within neo-liberal and postfeminist articulations of success. Examining the ramifications of a postfeminist discourse of girl power in a globalized neo-liberal era is critical in deconstructing the impact of current equity policies and the significance placed on academic excellence as measurement. The relatively high recorded achievement of some girls on standardized tests has been taken to signal that girls as a homogenous group no longer require any specific attention (Pomerantz & Raby, 2011; Ringrose, 2007, 2013; Jackson, Paechter & Renold, 2010; Epstein, Elwood, Jeu & Maw, 1998). Based on reports such as the *PISA 2009: Explaining the Gender Gap in Reading through Reading Engagement and Approaches to Learning*, I was interested in interviewing secondary English teachers who deal directly with the grade ten Ontario literacy test in order to produce knowledge about how they engage with neo-liberal and postfeminist discourses of ‘successful’ girls and ‘failing’ boys. More precisely, I was concerned with examining their responses to the framing of young women as a homogeneous group as having now gained equality, if not superiority, in the

education system (McRobbie, 2008). I was also interested in how teachers' views of gender, whether they are based on social construction, an essential binary, or some alternative, influence their understanding of the 'successful' girls and 'failing' boys discourse.

The importance of that goal lies in its potential to provide insight from frontline educators into the impact of neo-liberal and postfeminist discourses on how success and achievement are being perceived for girls, as well as boys. Teachers' beliefs and behaviours ultimately play a critical role in whether gender inequalities are transformed or re-inscribed through school practices (Keddie, 2010). Equity takes on new meanings through various discourses and as Williams, Jamieson and Hollingworth (2008) and Jackson et al. (2010) identify, the common sense positioning that 'all girls are fine' within the rhetoric of a neo-liberal and postfeminist discourse must be problematized. The overall aim of this research study is to produce knowledge about how teachers are negotiating this changing meaning of gender equity through a neo-liberal and postfeminist lens and to provoke a critical discussion about what gender equity now means and whom it benefits. The goal is to contribute to the growing body of research that looks to highlight questions of 'which boys' and 'which girls' as an educational policy matter. The impact of this research is targeted at frontline educators and policymakers within the Ontario Ministry of Education.

#### **1.4 Context of Neo-liberalism**

The following section offers a brief explanation of neo-liberalism and how it relates to issues of equity and achievement in education. According to Foucault (1972), a discourse can be defined as both power and knowledge, where the power embedded in a discourse comes from the certain kinds of knowledge it creates. On that note, Rizvi and Lingard (2010) define the discourse of neo-liberalism as creating a knowledge of or preference for the minimalist state,

where “the instrumental values of competition, economic efficiency, choice, deregulation and privatization of state functions [are upheld]” (p. 31). Peck and Tickle (2002) go on to associate neo-liberalism with normalizing economic growth as a primary concern, where social welfare is always secondary to a market driven mindset of competition and must be framed in a way that benefits the economy. As a result, social justice ultimately becomes ‘passé’ in neo-liberal forms of government (Davies & Saltmarsh, 2007).

In regards to education, neo-liberalism brings with it tension-filled notions of doing more with less and it achieves this through the promotion and heightened interconnection between worker accountability, performance standardization, provincial testing and standardized curriculum (Singh, Kenway & Apple, 2005). Schools become obligated to meet market concepts of supply and demand, with students becoming consumers who are only capable of being seen as individual ‘autonomous agents’ that are personally responsible for their failure and success (Wilkins, 2012; Clark, 2009). Neo-liberalism works to shape educators’ thinking in a way that intricately entwines achievement and equity in education with producing individuals who are economically productive (Hursh, 2001).

### **1.5 Context of Postfeminism**

The following section offers a brief explanation of postfeminism and how it relates to issues of gender equity and achievement in education. My explanation stems from several scholars who have written about postfeminist culture, particularly as it relates to neo-liberalism. Postfeminism first emerged in the late twentieth century in a number of cultural and political contexts and has since remained a contested notion (Genz & Brabon, 2009). In explaining postfeminist culture, it must first be understood how it aligns and interconnects with neo-liberal ideals of pro-capitalism, where the empowered consumer and economic success have become

one of the main indicators of the status of women within a meritocratic society (McRobbie, 2008). Globalisation and the competitive marketization of world economies have become signifiers of removed gender barriers within education, with ‘successful’ girls becoming the idealized model in the new economy (Clark, 2009; Epstein et al., 1998). Postfeminism is often associated with naturalising or mainstreaming aspects of feminism and positioning it as no longer necessary within the neo-liberal rhetoric of unlimited individual choice, where women have reached parity with men, if not more (Ringrose, 2013; Genz & Brabon, 2009). McRobbie (2008) describes this process as a ‘new sexual contract’, where consent to inequity is not gained through the denial of feminism, but through the belief that it is no longer necessary within the new meritocracy. Neo-liberal ideals of a flexible, hard-working and productive labour force have become discursively entwined with what ‘successful’ girlhood now means (McRobbie, 2008). Through a type of ‘post-feminist masquerade’, the celebration of girls’ independence and financial success comes with it the requirement to overcompensate in feminine and heterosexual performances in order to not upset pre-established patriarchal privilege (McRobbie, 2008). In deconstructing the seductive postfeminist narrative of ‘successful’ girls, it appears to be situated within two overlapping discourses: ‘What about the boys?’ and ‘girl power’ (Ringrose, 2007; Pomerantz & Raby, 2011). The former draws attention to how the ‘feminising’ of the education system in order to help girls has had detrimental effects on boys’ achievement in school, with the latter claiming that girls now have unimpeded power to do and be anything that they desire (Pomerantz & Raby, 2011).

Neo-liberalism is often associated with an anti-feminist backlash, but rather than an anti-feminist affiliation, it should be understood how the discourses of neo-liberalism and postfeminism form a discursive field, where they are mutually reinforcing and intricately

connected (McRobbie, 2004; Ringrose, 2013, 2007). ‘Girl power’ and liberal feminism’s individualistic notions are being strategically taken into account by neo-liberalism as a way to sell the individualizing logic of flexibility and personal effort to do what it takes against the odds (Ringrose, 2013, 2007; McRobbie, 2004; Pomerantz & Raby, 2011). A seductive meta-narrative about girls’ academic and workplace success through choice, hard work and self-efficacy has been formulated into a symbol for achieved equality and renewed social mobility through both neo-liberal and postfeminist discourses (Harris, 2004; McRobbie, 2004, 2009; Ringrose, 2007; Pomerantz & Raby, 2011; Wilkins, 2012). As a result, current neo-liberal educational discourses and policies must be understood as having directly contributed to postfeminist notions of powerful and successful girls (Gonick, Renold, Ringrose & Weems, 2009; Ringrose, 2013), with McRobbie (2008) describing neo-liberalism’s use of girls as exemplars for ‘winning’ as a form of ‘free market feminism’. Liberal and market feminism frame high achieving girls as embodying the ‘improvements’ to the education system brought on by neo-liberal values of competition and academic excellence, allowing these girls to strategically ‘fit’ into the expectations of the institutions of globalized capitalism (McRobbie 2008). Successful girls become positioned as individuals who demonstrate a capacity for flexibility and embody the persona of an active and competitive learner (Wilkins, 2012).

Achievement and assessment have been reformulated into easily measurable commodities, with the visibility of some high performing students being used as evidence of a school’s effectiveness and ability to meet standards in the new corporate culture of education (Wilkins, 2012). The language of ‘growing’ and ‘closing’ gaps purposefully feed into a measurable form of inequity, resulting in a mandatory production of winners and losers that allow the discourses of ‘failing’ boys and ‘successful’ girls to be taken up as common sense

(Gillborn, 2008; Keddie, 2010). As Ringrose (2007, 2013) points out, new research is required in examining the complex and often contradictory effects of a neo-liberal and postfeminist discourse of gender equity in educational policy, especially in regards to the postfeminist equality myth of girls' achievement being a non-issue for educators within policies of standardized testing.

## **1.6 Theoretical Framework**

In this section, I discuss my conceptual framework and how feminist post-structuralism and critical social theories have influenced and shaped the formulation of my research study. Post-structuralism views meanings and power to be in a constant state of change and is concerned with the way in which certain knowledge becomes created, circulated and resisted (Kenway, Willis, Blackmore & Rennie, 1998). Feminist post-structuralism, in particular, is concerned with knowledge that involves gender relations and a desire to challenge inequities occurring within these power relations (Kenway et al., 1998). With that in mind, they draw attention to the instability of language by deconstructing the relations of power that socially construct meaning (Pomerantz & Raby, 2011). As a result, language is always positioned within discourses and is producing rather than reflecting reality, shaping our understandings of ourselves, our subjectivities and providing the possibility for which one acts (Foucault, 1972; Pomerantz & Raby, 2011; Barrett, 2005; St. Pierre, 2000; Paechter, 2001; Weedon, 1997).

By being able to recognize how our understanding of ourselves is produced, the legitimacy of these understandings can be questioned (Barrett, 2005). That legitimacy invokes questions of how language works in different cultural sites and the ways in which discourses produce various subjects (Kelly, 1997; Barrett, 2005). As a result, feminist post-structuralism provides an approach that allows me to examine the ways in which dominant discourses, like



neo-liberalism and postfeminism, confine educators within common sense meanings and ways of being, while also questioning what is assumed to be common sense (Barrett, 2005; Davies, 1990; Kumashiro, 2004). As power is relational, it must be understood how power works through discourses to subversively govern and influence individuals (Foucault, 1979; Weedon, 1997). I believe the language of gender equity and success is neither neutral nor absolute in meaning and that the discourses that construct and work within that language are negotiated by the different actors and networks that work through them.

Discourses are the ways in which specific types of knowledge or ways of thinking come to be seen as common or normalized (Weedon, 1997). It is through their appeal to the normal or natural that they try to deny the possibility of change and the fluidity of social meanings (Weedon, 1997). They are a complex relationship between power and knowledge, where the knowledge they disseminate influences what is considered 'truth' and who can say it (Weedon, 1997). It is through their interactions with individuals and their subjectivities that relations of power are maintained or transformed (Foucault, 1979; Kenway et al., 1998). As Weedon (1997) points out, the "political interests and social implications of any discourse will not be realized without the agency of [the] individuals who are subjectively motivated to reproduce or transform [the] social practices" (p. 93) that these discourses promote. Individuals then must be seen as the site for discursive struggle, where they are capable of resisting and producing alternative versions of meanings that conflict with dominant discourses (Weedon, 1997). Discourses are not 'fixed', but are active and organic as they are moulded and twisted through the interactions with other discourses and individuals (Archer & Francis, 2007). As Foucault (2002) describes, they go through a process of being "repeated, known, forgotten, transformed, utterly erased and hidden" (p. 28).

Discourses like postfeminism can be perceived as the result of language practices, where a set of beliefs reiterated through daily practices work to frame a specific understanding of how we function in the world (Weedon, 2004; St.Pierre, 2000). Using a feminist post-structural approach, cultural narratives or discourses like neo-liberalism and postfeminism must be seen as defining and establishing “what is truth at particular moments and [that] these truths work to displace other constructions and versions” (Ball, Maguire & Braun, 2012, p. 126; Barrett, 2005). What is true about gender equity and success then is always open to debate and redefinition with shifts in its discursive context (Weedon, 1997). What these terms mean at any particular moment ultimately depends on the intersecting discursive relations they are located within, allowing them to be “open to constant rereading and reinterpretation” (Weedon, 1997; Wilkins, 2012). Understandings of gender, gender equity and success can be seen to be in a constant state of change within the context of intersecting discourses (Weedon, 1997).

With that in mind, Paechter (2001) draws attention to how the effects of language exceed far beyond the purely linguistic and that the discourses in which we function affect how we “behave at a very visceral and physical level” (p. 42). It is for these reasons that my research interests are framed around understanding how teachers are influenced by these ‘successful’ girl truths provided to them within the language of neo-liberal driven policies of high-stakes accountability and standardization. It brings about questions of how educators are drawn into ways of thinking that may be considered neo-liberal and postfeminist (Wilkins, 2012). As a feminist post-structuralist approach constructs language as producing the reality for which one acts and positions language itself as unstable, it provides the opportunity for the validity of multiple meanings and ways of being (St. Pierre, 2000). In light of this, it becomes important to note that I am not interested in discovering an absolute understanding of what gender equity and

success have come to mean through neo-liberal and postfeminist discourses. My aim is to explore constructed and situated knowledge from individual teachers' *personal* perspectives at one point in time, recognizing that this is a process that is constantly negotiated and subject to change. That constructed and situated knowledge is critical when viewing individuals as active agents who are a part of a complex system of compliance and resistance to the dominant discourses that are available (Francis & Archer, 2007). Our constructed knowledge is not immune to discourses and although one inevitably takes up specific subject positions within them, multiple and contradictory subjectivities are simultaneously possible (Davies, 1989; Weedon, 1997). It is important to note though that despite active agency, the ways of 'seeing' that these discourses offer may be consciously or unconsciously taken up or rejected (Kenway et al., 1998). It is because of these complex negotiations that I acknowledge that the information I am gathering from my participants are merely ideas represented at one point in time; a mere glimpse of the negotiations and challenges that exist.

I recognize the subjective world of human experience and therefore am interested in individual stories that supply insight into individual participants' interpretations of the world around them (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011). I believe in order to find insight into a phenomenon, reality must be considered through the ways participants make sense of it (Cohen et al., 2011; Beck, 1979). Post-structuralism draws attention to the importance of individualized, local stories about specific discourses in order to challenge deeply rooted power relations that structure how we think about the world (Paechter, 2001). The changing meanings of gender equity require a continued examination of the micro, everyday struggles of gender justice (Keddie, 2010). It is for these reasons that my aim is not to generalize, but to seek rich and descriptive detail through in-depth qualitative interviews that are knowingly situated in a

specific, individualized context. I believe the phenomenon of neo-liberalism and postfeminism cannot be reduced to a simplistic understanding and so ‘thick descriptions’ are required to grasp the complexity of the situation (Cohen et al., 2011). Using feminist post-structuralism’s concept of discourse as producing the possibility for which one acts and the need to deconstruct the relations of power that socially construct those possibilities, my research is framed around deconstructing what gender equity in education has come to mean through what appears to be the hegemonic language of neo-liberal and postfeminist discourses. In investigating the implications of the hegemonic language that often underpins common sense constructions, it must be considered how gender performances become intertwined with relations of power that situate gender identities as being both fluid and entrenched (Archer & Francis, 2007; Weedon, 1997).

In terms of the scope of my research, I am focused on how the subjectivities that a neo-liberal and postfeminist discourse produces are performed specifically in teachers’ talk, thinking, and practice (St. Pierre, 2000). As the deconstruction of gender norms must be understood within the context of lived experiences (Butler, 2004; Paechter, 2012), I am interested in the mundane and everyday language used to formulate my participants’ understandings of gender equity and success within the confines of neo-liberal and postfeminist rhetoric. The value of such an inquiry is foreground in feminist post-structuralism’s notion that by making visible the structures of neo-liberal and postfeminist discourses and their effects, it becomes possible to recognize them as social constructions and therefore open to the prospect of change and revision to what was once assumed common sense (St. Pierre, 2000; Davies, 2000; Kumashiro, 2004). It is important to note that the power of common sense knowledge comes from its appeal to personal or collective experiences that uphold its notions as natural (Weedon, 1997). The inevitable contradictions it

creates in attempting to fix language as transparent and neutral exposes its susceptibility to change (Weedon, 1997).

St. Pierre (2000) teaches us that by understanding that we have constructed the world as it currently is through language and cultural practices, it no longer remains fixed and becomes open to the possibility of deconstruction and reconstruction. By digging deeply into teachers' perceptions, it provides the possibility for grasping the complexity that is neo-liberalism and postfeminism by exposing the multiplicity in the subject positions they offer (Weedon, 1997). Deconstructing how the language of neo-liberal and postfeminist discourses has shaped teachers' understandings of gender equity can open up the possibility for reconstruction and alternative ways of approaching equity. In viewing language as a system that always exists in historically specific discourses, it can be perceived how it functions within competing discourses and competing ways of giving meaning, thus allowing language itself to be understood as a site for change and political struggle (Weedon, 1997). The significance of exploring how dominant discourses like neo-liberalism and postfeminism produce the possibility for which gender equity is understood is that it will reveal the ways in which relations of power can and must be reorganized before policies promoting equity have the capacity to truly succeed.

In regards to my belief in the need to deconstruct the discourse of postfeminism, I am influenced by a critical feminist framework and position myself alongside feminists such as Jessica Ringrose (2013) and Angela McRobbie (2008) who are critical of postfeminism. In order to provide a basis for my critical thinking surrounding postfeminism, it is important to expand on the contemporary conditions governing the present state of feminist politics. The emergence of a postfeminist discourse in alignment with the rise of the 'failing' boys and 'successful' girls discourses has often been described as anti-feminist and a backlash movement against an older

generation of feminists associated with the left (Genz & Brabon, 2009). Such ‘backlash’ politics have been associated with an emerging competing victim’s syndrome, where boys’ interests are being framed against girls (Lingard, Martino & Mills, 2013; Keddie, 2010). These ‘recuperative masculinity’ politics of boys as the new disadvantaged group in schools have been fueled by the media across the globe (Lingard et al., 2013; Lingard & Douglas, 1999). Through standardized testing, the perspective of gender as something binary and essential is brought forward as a mechanism to normalise a ‘compulsory competitive behaviour’ that justifies the necessity of winners and losers and simplifies understandings of equity and success (Wilkins, 2012).

McRobbie (2008) draws attention to the complexity of such a backlash, highlighting how the vocabulary of postfeminism is strategically entwined with that of neo-liberalism’s seemingly neutral language of ‘choice’, ‘competition’, ‘empowerment’ and ‘personal responsibility’. In McRobbie’s (2008) critical analysis of what femininity has come to mean through a postfeminist lens, she identifies how this neo-liberal language functions to conceal a new form of gender regulation, by limiting the ways in which women are able to see and understand the world they live in. She goes on to critique popular culture as the primary disseminators of that new traditionalism that has led to an ‘undoing of feminism’ within a celebratory discourse of achieved equality within a meritocratic society. I align my critical position of postfeminism with McRobbie’s (2008) critique of the pro-capitalist stance of postfeminism and how its economic-focus and emphasis on individualisation ultimately draw attention and analysis away from inequality. If the neo-liberal, pro-capitalist language of postfeminism is drawing attention away from inequity, it brings about the question of how teachers are making sense of gender equity within a postfeminist narrative of academic success.

Both feminist post-structuralism and critical social theories demand that we recognize our own role in the structural maintenance of social inequalities (St. Pierre, 2000). Critical social theory frames the main task of research to be about social critique and bringing to light inequities caused by oppressive institutions, as well as the restrictions placed on personal agency by various forms of social and political domination (Leonardo, 2004). In achieving this, specific attention is paid to history and the changing nature of knowledge in order to disrupt universal truths (Anyon, 2009). There is a strong push and pull between agency and the implications of discourses (Wilkins, 2012). The level of creativity and manipulation individuals have in moving in and out of discourses must also be noted (Wilkins, 2012). Individuals are ultimately capable of holding multiple positions when it comes to discourses, as they are positioned within and by discourses, as well as how they position themselves and others (Wilkins, 2012).

In order to bring to light these systemic inequities, the common sense language surrounding the discourses of neo-liberalism and postfeminism should be interrogated in order to expose the individual agency and power relations that are not so immediately obvious and therefore often go unexamined (Anyon, 2009). Along with this and my position that people arrive at their own version of reality or truth, crafted by their specific understanding of the world (Patton, 2002), I am interested in teachers' agency in how they engage with and understand gender equity and achievement within what I would perceive to be the hegemonic rhetoric of dominant neo-liberal and postfeminist discourses. Critical social theory provides the possibility for recognizing how "we continually absorb, recreate, and resist the discourses and other forces that flow through and prod us" (Anyon, 2009, p. 14). It provides the possibility for schools to become places for negotiating gender justice rather than just upholding the status quo (Keddie, 2010). By being able to deconstruct how we have currently constructed the world through

language and cultural practices, we can then critique the limitations these discourses provide in understanding gender equity and move toward the possibility of change through resistant counter-discourses; language must be understood as a site for political struggle that is messy and complex (Weedon, 1997).

## **1.7 Positioning**

I position myself within a constructivist paradigm in how I have framed my assumptions and ways of thinking when approaching this research study. I come from a subjectivist viewpoint, where I subscribe to meanings and findings being socially constructed and having multiple meanings and realities, rather than one absolute truth (Lincoln, Lynham & Guba, 2011). I believe in reality being personally determined and as something that is both locally and specifically constructed and co-constructed with others (Lincoln et al., 2011). These constructions are not neutral, but are developed through our lived experiences and the power relations that are exercised in the everyday social interactions with other individuals (Lincoln et al., 2011; Guba, 1990; Foucault, 1978). My aim is not to explain the phenomenon I am studying in completeness, but rather to understand its partiality and to deconstruct it through the in-depth experiences and perceptions of a specific few who interact with it (Lincoln et al., 2011). I do not position myself outside of my research, but rather acknowledge my invested interest and active participation within the study as I immersed myself and interacted with the language and realities of my participants (Lincoln et al., 2011). I was not only examining my participants, but in many ways I was also researching myself as I reflected on my own positions and constructions as a researcher.

In regards to my understandings of gender, I align myself with a social constructivist approach and view biological, binary, homogenous understandings of gender as



counterproductive in working towards gender equity. I follow a framework that perceives sex, gender and sexuality as nonessential and fluid as they are continually produced and socially constructed through discourses and relations of power (Archer & Francis, 2007). I subscribe to the idea that ‘masculinities’ and ‘femininities’ are merely the ways in which we ‘do’ boy or ‘do’ girl (West & Zimmerman, 1987; Paechter, 2012). I subscribe to de Beauvoir’s (2009) idea that “woman is not a fixed reality but a becoming” (p. 46) and Butler’s (1990, 1993) notions of gender being performative and produced through our everyday actions and performances, which become so intrinsic that they appear to become real and normalised. Although stable, these ‘naturalised’ performances are vulnerable to disruption through recognition of performances that counter dominant discourses of gender, highlighting how power relations can be both constraining and productive (Butler, 1990; Foucault, 1980; Archer & Francis, 2007).

As I am influenced by feminist post-structuralism and position myself as a social justice educator, I am interested in how issues of gender equity are understood and negotiated by educators. I identify myself as a high achieving female student who has had to negotiate my own understandings and experiences with a ‘successful’ girls discourse. Based on my experiences as a newly certified Ontario teacher and former public school student, I have become very aware of the central role teachers play in effectively implementing educational reforms and equity. With that in mind, I passionately believe that high-stakes standardized testing is far too narrow to effectively measure issues of equity on its own. Similar to Weedon (1997), I perceive feminism to be political in wanting to disrupt the problematic power relations that exist between women and men in society. I challenge the supposed ‘natural’ and binary differences between men and women and argue that specific girls and boys still face inequitable barriers socially and economically. I believe the high achievement of *some* girls is increasingly being used to fuel a

widespread narrative of success and meritocracy that encourages hegemonic consent to current neo-liberal economic and social structures that continue to perpetuate inequalities.

## **1.8 Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have outlined the research problem and the purpose of my research to produce knowledge about how teachers are negotiating the changing meaning and language of gender equity through a postfeminist and neo-liberal lens. I have provided an outline of the implications of neo-liberal and postfeminist discourses and how the ‘successful’ girls and ‘failing’ boys discourses have emerged within the backdrop of high-stakes standardized testing policies. It was discussed how feminist post-structuralism and critical social theories have informed the formulation of this research and how they provide the tools with which to deconstruct the language of neo-liberal and postfeminist discourses. It was examined how deconstructing these discourses can allow for the possibility of reconstruction and alternative ways of approaching equity. Finally, the chapter ends with an outline of my positioning within the research.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Providing a Context: The Literature Review

#### 2.1 Introduction

This chapter reviews the existing literature that is relevant to the impact of a postfeminist and neo-liberal discourse of ‘successful’ girls and ‘failing’ boys in education and how it informs my research. To date, there has been significant literature conducted in the field related to the implications of ‘failing’ boys and ‘successful’ girls discourses in education, with a predominate number of studies taking place in the United Kingdom and Australia (Ringrose, 2013; Epstein et al., 1998; Millard, 1997; Baker, 2010; Martino, 2001; Martino & Berrill, 2003; Archer & Francis, 2007; Murphy & Elwood, 1998; Martino et al., 2004; Francis & Skelton, 2005; Francis, 2006; Jackson et al., 2010; Kenway et al., 1998; Jackson, 1998; Gill & Tranter, 2012) . The majority of these studies outline the problematic issues associated with homogenous, binary discussions of gender and academic achievement on standardized testing, with an emphasis on the complex barriers that continue to exist for specific boys and girls in terms of class and race. A limited number of studies, especially within a Canadian context, deal directly with teachers’ knowledge and engagement with notions of gender equity within a postfeminist and neo-liberal discourse of ‘successful’ girls, indicating a need for more research to be undertaken in regards to teachers’ firsthand understandings. As a result, my scholarly work aims to fill this empirical gap by building knowledge in this area.

The following themes are identified in the literature review: (a) successful girls, choice and a postfeminist discourse; (b) failing boys, class and social constructions; (c) gender equity, teacher agency and a neo-liberal discourse. This section begins with an exploration of the literature surrounding girls’ negotiations and experiences of femininity and success within a neo-liberal and postfeminis lens. The next part identifies some of the literature surrounding the

implications of a ‘failing’ boys discourse in terms of academic success and class constructions. Last, I conclude with an examination of the literature surrounding teachers’ engagement and capacity for agency with issues of equity through a neo-liberal discourse. It is important to note that I do not position this literature review as exhaustive in covering all possible research that touches broadly on the topic of postfeminism, neo-liberalism, gender equity and boys’ and girls’ education. My selection was strategic and the boundaries of this literature review have been framed by these three sections because of their capacity to shine light on what is already known about the implications of the ‘successful’ girl and ‘failing’ boy discourses in schools. As well, I choose them for their capacity to illustrate what is already known about teacher agency in response to postfeminist and neo-liberal influences.

## **2.2 Successful Girls, Choice and a Postfeminist Discourse**

The first set of literature that informs my study relates to educational research which addresses how postfeminism is impacting our understanding of girls and girlhood today (Gonick, 2004; Ringrose & Walkerdine, 2007, 2008; Baker, 2008, 2010; Pomerantz & Raby, 2011; Ringrose & Renold, 2011; Griffin, 2011; Ringrose, 2007, 2013). There has been significant empirical research that has focused on the deconstruction of the statistical creation of a gender gap that favors girls (Skelton & Francis, 2008; Younger & Warrington, 2007; Ivinson & Murphy, 2007; Gill & Tranter, 2012; Ringrose 2013; Martino & Rezai-Rasthi, 2012, 2013a). Ringrose (2013) in particular breaks contemporary girlhood down into three major constructions: “the academically successful vs. failing girl, the nice vs. the mean and/or aggressive girl, and the virginal innocent vs. the over-sexualized slutty girl” (p. 80). She draws attention to how educational discourses and policies are constantly being framed through competing

representations of girls as either in celebration of being ‘empowered consumers/winners’ or in crisis as ‘victims of sexualized society’ (Ringrose, 2013).

In Ringrose’s (2013) qualitative study of young working class girls and their friendships in the United Kingdom, she draws attention to the problematic narrative of ‘successful’ schoolgirls and explores how ‘average’ girls negotiate normalized postfeminist cultures that often become masked. She focuses on what happens when the ‘ideal’ femininity as non-competitive comes into conflict with the realities of a ‘heterosexualised matrix’ (Butler, 1997) and other aspects of competition within neo-liberal school culture. From her study, Ringrose (2013) brings to light the question: if girls are truly freed from their sexed bodies within a postfeminist society, why does heterosexual desirability and competition remain so central in Western popular culture to the point that it fuels a discourse of ‘moral panic’ over young female hyper-sexualisation?

With that in mind, Ringrose (2013) points to how the conflict over female hyper-sexualisation that is so central to adolescents’ lives is a messy and uncomfortable domain, which might explain why it often fails to make the agenda of educators and policymakers. As the girls in her study negotiate these normalized ‘truths’ of being overly successful, mean, or sexual and resist them, they appear to be left with contradictory narratives that conflict with postfeminist celebrations of the ‘super’ girl. Such findings also echo concerns surrounding a homogeneous view of ‘successful girls’, with some girls, in this case working class white girls, holding low educational aspirations and valuing more highly their sexual identities online. In conclusion, Ringrose (2013) argues that a version of girls as ‘only successful’ and embracing a ‘neo-liberal feminine subjectivity’ is too simplistic and that rather it needs to be reframed as the “successful but mean girl” (p. 40).

Walkerdine, Lucey and Melody's (2001) longitudinal study in England on adolescent girls from both working class and middle-class backgrounds echoed similar concerns in regards to how an emphasis on only gendered achievement on standardized-testing can mask how high performance is based on the superior achievement of very specific girls. They highlight from their findings just how much class and cultural capital still shape educational outcomes for both girls and boys and how the concepts of 'success' and 'failure' contribute to the anxieties of middle and lower class girls. In regards to class and cultural capital, Marsh (2010) also illustrates in her examination of data from a number of projects that have focused on children's use of new technologies and digital literacy in England, that the emphasis currently placed on boys' underachievement in literacy has caused an oversight in the inconsistencies that also exist for some girls across home and school literacy practices. Watson (2011) emphasizes from her qualitative case study of an English classroom in Ontario how homogeneous perspectives of gender that exclude other issues, such as class, can facilitate 'quick-fix solutions' which lead to contradictions and ineffective literacy reforms. Hey (2010) in her analysis of classed discourses and how knowledge claims are made in girlhood studies, draws attention to how upper and lower class girls have many different routes to agency within the context of a postfeminist world. She argues that the pathways of lower class girls are often explained away as mere examples of a bad attitude or a lack of aspiration.

In Clark's (2009) case study of six young girls in England, she explores their transition to secondary school and the role extracurricular activities play in their constructions of success. Her findings stress how high achieving middle-class girls were more likely to place just as much emphasis on extracurricular activities as they did on high grades. They also appeared to pay a high price for this 'well-rounded' success, as they were more likely to accept the high levels of

extreme anxiety and self-harm that came with the requirement for perfectionism in all aspects of their lives. Clark's (2009) findings accentuate how constructions of the 'successful' girls discourse are not only being based on some girls' high achievement on standardized tests, but also on their capacity to be the ideal 'well-rounded' student when it comes to participating in extracurricular activities. The problematic issues associated with class becoming invisible within the postfeminist presumption of 'all girls as successful' outlined in the previous literature works to inform my own study because it highlights the complexity associated with the factors that continue to shape educational outcomes for girls. If the notion of all girls as successful is false within a postfeminist era, it raises the question of teachers' understanding of gender equity and achievement given the complexity of intersecting inequalities. Using qualitative interviews to examine in-depth how teachers are negotiating these understandings may address this.

In Jackson et al.'s (2010) overview of contemporary girls and their education, they draw attention to how a double or conflicting consciousness that emerges in girls when negotiating the complexity of combining femininity with success appears to have intensified under a neo-liberal discourse of unlimited choice and competition. They associate this intensification with neo-liberalism's demand for a very specific 'ideal' femininity that is associated with girls being more flexible and adaptable. Wardman, Gottschall, Drew, Hutchesson and Saltmarsh (2013) in their analysis of the promotional material for twelve Australian private girls' schools, describe the idea of a 'natural' or 'ideal' femininity as contributing to the stereotype of males as naturally empowered and a cautioning of women against becoming over empowered. As the literature reveals, the ramifications of the 'successful girls' discourse appears to emerge in the form of a contradictory or conflicting consciousness among girls as they challenge and consent to these dominant discourses that can be counterproductive toward gender equity.

In Pomerantz and Raby's (2011) qualitative study using six semi-structured interviews, they examined how high achieving girls engage or do not engage in postfeminist narratives of academic success and what they have to say about their experiences of being 'smart' in Ontario secondary schools. From their study, they explored how self-identified academically 'successful' girls were able to not only recognize gender inequality in their schools, but also how they felt that they would have to be better than boys to have the same opportunities. Simultaneously, these girls also revealed that they openly consented to the belief propagated at school and within the media that their successes and failures were merely the result of their inherent skills and hard work, and tended not to identify any structural or institutional factors that might impact on their achievement and participation in the education system. Pomerantz and Raby (2011) associate this contradictory consciousness with the difficulty of coming to terms with structural inequities that cannot be easily overcome. As a result, these girls internalized gender inequity as a personal problem for which they could not seek help, rather than a systemic and institutional one. Their findings highlight how in a postfeminist era where it is assumed that women 'have it all', girls appear to be struggling to perform what a 'smart girl' identity demands. It is Pomerantz and Raby's (2011) study specifically that I have formed and situated my research questions around, as they have provided valuable insight into what it means for girls today in Ontario to engage with a postfeminist narrative of academic success. Although their work and others have documented girls' experiences, my review of the relevant literature reveals that the question of how teachers are potentially contributing to these girls' understandings based on their own engagement and negotiation of gender equity within a postfeminist narrative of academic success has not been fully addressed.



The idea of a contradictory or conflicting consciousness emerging within neo-liberal and postfeminist discourses is also echoed by the study conducted by Looker and Magee (2000), which indicated a type of 'gender disposition' emerging when it comes to gender equity in the workplace. In their longitudinal study of 1200 young people in Central and Eastern Canada, girls appeared to express a similar or higher expectation than boys for attaining highly paid and skilled careers. Along with high career expectations, a higher percentage of girls also expressed a desire to have families. Interestingly, that desire for a family came along with the assumed understanding that they would have to take up primary childcare responsibilities, with 80% speculating that it would mean they would have to leave their jobs behind.

The emergence of a contradictory consciousness in young women when it comes to equality of opportunity in employment choice was also echoed in Erwin's (1997) study of women in their first year of their undergraduate degree at a large Canadian University. From her quantitative findings, she indicates that although these young women strongly believed in women's rights and equal opportunity in both the workplace and education, they assumed the traditional understanding that their careers would have to become secondary to motherhood. Similar to Pomerantz and Raby's (2011) study, the women tended to frame these issues as personal struggles, rather than linking them to shared structural inequities. As a consequence of assuming to live in a true meritocracy, it appears these girls were unable to identify the gendered barriers and structural pressures that still existed and influenced their choices, for example striking a family and workplace balance. In Baker's (2008) discursive analysis of choice, she argues that the upholding of choice as a symbol of equity within neo-liberalism and postfeminism fosters hegemonic consent at a 'psychological level' that works to regulate women. From an Australian context, she questions just how dramatic the lives of young women

have changed as a result of the influence of neo-liberal and postfeminist discourses. Using qualitative, semi-structured interviews with young women, she investigates the concept of ‘choice’ and its role in overstating women’s success and masking social inequalities. Her results revealed young women in the study comprehending domestic violence and unequal domestic work as matters of ‘choice’, while simultaneously recognizing that they did not live up to the expectations of free and empowered individuals promoted through neo-liberalism. Baker (2008) identifies the rhetoric of choice inherent in a neo-liberal imaginary as strategic in causing a more covert subordination of girls and women within a framework of continued commitment to equality. She highlights how the notion of ‘girl power’ is being popularized in order to establish the presumption that women have broken the glass ceiling and are ‘free’ from inequitable barriers. Baker (2008) argues that young women and girls of Western democracies are being strategically hailed as the ‘success stories’ of today and are being positioned as the winners in both education and the workforce under a neo-liberal era. From her research, Baker (2008) draws attention to the emphasis placed on individual behavior and agency by young women, as well as choice being used to denote a willingness to consent to one’s situation, even when being disadvantaged.

Baker’s (2008) research is useful in informing my own study because it establishes the negative implications associated with the language of choice and girls’ success promoted through neo-liberal and postfeminist discourses. If the rhetoric of neo-liberal choice is affecting or influencing how girls make sense of their successes or failures, it raises the question of how such language affects how frontline educators are engaging with issues of gender equity and achievement. As statistical data produced through standardized testing have helped to fuel a ‘successful girls’ discourse, there is a need to explore on a deeper level, using qualitative

interviews, how teachers are engaging with the language of a postfeminist narrative of academic success and the potential implications this can have for issues of gender equity in education.

### **2.3 Failing Boys, Class and Social Constructions**

In this section I will discuss some of the literature surrounding the ‘failing’ boys discourse in order to establish its interconnection to ‘successful’ girls within postfeminism. Debates about boys and achievement have emerged in terms of several dominant discourses within the public arena: the ‘poor boys’ discourse, the ‘failing schools’ discourse, and the ‘boys will be boys’ discourse (Epstein et al., 1998). Francis (2006) points out how the ‘boys will be boys’ discourse has been superseded by the ‘failing’ boys discourse brought in under neo-liberalism’s promotion of meritocracy and the responsible, hardworking, flexible individual. As Francis (2006) highlights from her research in England, the ‘boys will be boys’ and the ‘poor boys’ discourses position boys as needing help and attention. Within the ‘failing’ boys discourse though emphasized in a neo-liberal era, certain groups of boys, specifically working class white and black boys, are beginning to be made problematic for their apparent failure to take responsibility for their own achievement.

Epstein et al.’s (1998) examination into ‘failing’ boys draws attention to how much sociocultural factors contribute in determining ‘which boys’ and ‘which girls’ are achieving. They identify the underachievement of boys at school to be “a strongly classed and racialized phenomenon” (p. 11). In analyzing the ‘failing’ boys discourse, Jackson (1998) highlights how the increasing visibility of boys’ educational failure is connected to the problematic policies of high-stakes standardized testing, specifically in regards to literacy. Previous understandings of gender equity and social justice have been replaced by the language of school effectiveness, standardization and performance promoted through a neo-liberal agenda (Arnot et al., 1996). As

Epstein et al. (1998) point out though, the problem with using academic performance on standardized literacy tests to measure achieved equity is that it is not automatically translatable into economic advantage in the world of work, with men continuing to earn more than woman with similar literacy skills. If this is the case, it leaves open the question of how teachers are negotiating the value placed on literacy achievement in determining gender equity in and out of school.

A significant amount of research points to how the social constructions of masculinity as ‘resistant and rebellious’ are continually reinforced through the education system (Keddie, 2005; Martino, Lingard & Mills, 2004; Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2005; Skelton, 2001; Francis, 2006). As mentioned previously, gender gap talk is superseding class disadvantage in various ways and becoming entwined with specific constructions of ‘failing’ boys. In Francis and Skelton’s (2005) research, they argue how the underachievement of ‘failing’ boys, which is predominantly made up by the working class, is being framed as their own individual responsibility. As a result, that individualism is being used to mask more fundamental inequities that negatively impact achievement in schools, such as inequities between ethnicity and social class (Francis & Skelton, 2005). In their analysis of the various explanations of gendered achievement, they critique more thoroughly the reframing of boys’ underachievement as issues of ‘personalized learning’. Although focusing on the individual has merit, it can also serve to place responsibility for any ‘failure’ onto individuals, rather than recognizing all of the systemic structural factors that impact achievement (Francis & Skelton, 2005). With that in mind, Francis and Skelton (2005) highlight how boys’ underachievement must be understood within the context of neo-liberalism’s ‘benchmark of success’, where ‘failure’ can never exist without something to juxtapose it to. Based on Francis and Skelton’s (2005) analysis, the question of

how teachers' are negotiating gender equity if it is framed within both an individualized and gender-as-difference approach is left unanswered.

Similar to Francis and Skelton (2005), Gillborn (2008) also points to the complexity with which class inequities are presented within the 'failing' boys' crisis in his analysis of how current education policy maintains racism in the UK education system. Using critical race theory, he argues how an overemphasis on the scale of class inequalities particularly benefits *white* boys, as class inequalities are the most pronounced there, resulting in a particular obsession with white boys' achievement. Gillborn's (2008) analysis is important in pointing out the complexity in how the 'failing' boys discourse functions and the problematic issues associated with a homogenous approach to boys' achievement that benefits some boys and not others.

In Martino et al.'s (2004) case study of an Australian junior secondary high school, they examined through semi-structured interviews the implications of teacher threshold knowledge on the implementation of a 'boy friendly' curriculum. Their findings revealed that what teachers considered to be 'good' teaching practices for boys was underscored by specific normalizing assumptions about the ways *all* boys naturally learn. Through specific gendered binaries, a particular kind of masculinity appeared to be reinforced around assumptions of passive femininity and active masculinity. From their research, they draw attention to the need for policies to be built around the knowledge of gender as a social construction and to understand the impact that this can have on both boys' and girls' schooling experiences. Martino et al.'s (2004) study is influential in informing my own research study, because it draws attention to the importance of teachers' threshold knowledge about gender in how they engage with issues of gender equity and achievement, especially within a neo-liberal and postfeminist era. As well, their findings highlight how intricately related the 'failing' boys and 'successful' girl discourses

are, as imposing gender binaries reinforced through neo-liberalism pin the success of one gender against the other, drawing attention away from other social inequalities.

#### **2.4 Gender Equity, Teacher Agency and a Neo-liberal Discourse**

In the two last sections I synthesized literature on how the notions of ‘failing’ boys and ‘successful’ girls that have emerged out of neo-liberal and postfeminist discourses have impacted student education. I argued that these implications have left open the question of how teachers are engaging with these ideas. In this final section I review significant studies related to teachers’ engagement with issues of gender equity and their potential agency within educational policy.

In terms of how ‘gendered success’ is determined, Jackson (2010) in her mixed methods study using questionnaires and semi-structured interviews from six diverse secondary schools in the north of England explores ‘laddishness’ among year nine students. Her findings regarding how girls were able to balance academic and social ‘success’ indicated the importance placed on class in facilitating this successful balancing of social and academic worlds. The importance of class was highlighted by the admiration documented by teachers in her study about their female students’ ability to balance the demands of social and academia life in an apparently effortless way, with most of those students coming from upper or middle-class backgrounds. In the case of the girls in her study, it appears that within a postfeminist world their success is not necessarily being attributed to or associated with their brilliance, but rather their hard work, which is also seen as finite and limited (Jackson, 2010). The complexity of the association of girls’ success with the language of hard work used by teachers is documented by Jackson (2010) throughout her analysis of the dominant ‘uncool to work’ discourse. She found that despite academic success being accepted and admired, overtly working hard to attain it was considered ‘uncool’ and wielded less admiration. Jackson’s (2010) findings are useful in informing my own study

because she draws attention to how teachers' understandings of successful girls can contribute to misconstrued perceptions of equity and achievement.

In Archer and Francis' (2007) quantitative research into teachers' constructions of British-Chinese boys and girls and how they connect to societal constructions of masculinity and femininity, they found their participants to be unanimous in their belief that boys and girls learn differently. Despite taking this position, the explanations of these differences varied from biological to socially constructed. Similar to Archer et al.'s (2003) study that found ambitious young Black Caribbean women being influenced by their teachers to not seek higher education, Archer and Francis (2007) found that teachers' lowered expectations of achievement for minority students negatively impacted these students' performance and enjoyment of school. Along with this, they also highlight the importance of recognizing how sexuality still remains central to constructions of femininity within educational discourses. They argue that it must be understood how ideas of hyper-masculinity and hyper-femininity are bound up in specifically classed discourses around sexuality and they point out how working class femininities are being associated with "pathologised hyper-sexualities that operate as markers of their otherness" (p. 64). Their research demonstrates the importance of examining the unconscious positioning and biases teachers hold toward various inequities and how these have been constructed in order to support alternative mechanisms for how teachers think about gender and visible minority students (Archer & Francis, 2007).

In examining the literature surrounding teachers' engagement with issues of gender equity, it became apparent how the emergence of a contradictory consciousness goes beyond just the views of adolescent girls and also becomes apparent in school administrators. In Taylor's (1995) qualitative study of female school administrators in Ontario, her participants simultaneously

admitted that the education system creates barriers against women, while openly accepting that these barriers could be brought down based on how hard individual women, like themselves, work. From her findings, Taylor (1995) highlights how gender equity must be understood within the context that it is constantly being negotiated by the actors involved, as they take up anti-hegemonic positions and simultaneously consent to them. Taylor's (1995) study indicates that teachers are also struggling to negotiate their engagement with what gender equity and achievement have come to mean in a postfeminist era. As a result, it leaves open the need to tease out these implications further, especially as policies and resources for literacy continue to be based on the problematic notion of *all* boys as failures and *all* girls as successful.

As previously mentioned, educational policies have in many ways helped to direct how teachers and students engage in a neo-liberal and postfeminist narrative of academic success. In terms of literacy initiatives in Ontario, Martino and Rezai-Rashti (2012) have drawn attention to how teachers are directly involved and brought into the 'failing' boys and 'successful' girls discourses with their research on policy documents like *Me Read? No Way* and *Me Read? And How!*. Based on EQAO testing results, the Ontario Ministry of Education has directly funded teacher inquiry and research into improving boys' literacy skills with the production of these documents (Martino & Rezai-Rashti, 2012). As Martino and Rezai-Rashti (2012) highlight though, many of these strategies require educators to approach boys as specifically gendered subjects, promoting harmful stereotypical and homogeneous views about how all boys and girls learn, fueling a 'recuperative masculinity' agenda. The *Me Read? And How!* document specifically states how the funded research was intended as a mechanism to actively build knowledge among teachers and administrators for literacy strategies that support *all* boys' success (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009; Martino & Rezai-Rashti, 2012).



In connection to strategies developed to improve boys' literacy, Martino and Rezai-Rashti (2010) also explore through interviews with two Caribbean teachers in Toronto, Ontario, the problematic issues associated with recruiting male teachers as role models in elementary schools to improve boys' literacy outcomes. They highlight how the strategy of more male role models has come to be linked to the problematic notion of boys' underachievement being related to the 'feminization' of school, with certain male teachers being favored as able to bring 'masculinity' back into boys' literacy. Martino and Rezai-Rashti's (2010, 2013b) research in fact shows how young people relate to quality pedagogies and strong relationships over the gender of the teacher and that the idea of gendered modeling can detract from other structural factors that impact both boys' and girls' learning.

It is often argued that the language of neo-liberalism works to shape educators' thinking in a way that intricately connects the sole purpose of education to be about producing individuals who are economically productive (Hursh, 2001). Based on Easthope and Easthope's (2000) qualitative study on the effects of neo-liberal educational reforms on teachers' work in Australia's state of Tasmania, they define the move to link education directly to economic goals as having resulted in an instrumental shift in the nature of the teaching profession and how equity is approached. They highlight how teachers' responses to the discourse of neo-liberalism is ultimately shaped by their personally defined professional identity and that teachers must ultimately be understood as active agents who are capable of interpreting and negotiating discourses based on their world experiences. In Gaskell and Levin's (2012) analysis of the history of reform in urban schools in Canada, they highlight how investment in teachers' professional knowledge and expertise is central to achieving more equitable and socially just outcomes across the education system. Such investment is critical as Coulter (2007) points out

the increasing number of classroom teachers who complain of the difficulty in taking time away from the standardized curriculum to focus on issues of equity. Despite the constraints a neo-liberal discourse places on how educators function, the question of agency Easthope and Easthope (2000) bring up is critical in shaping my own study because it provides the possibility for teachers to actively question and negotiate how neo-liberalism and postfeminism construct gender equity and achievement in schools.

In connection to teachers' capacity to question and engage with gender equity, Kenway, Willis, Blackmore and Rennie's (1998) case study research in Australia investigates the question of how teachers are addressing gender equity issues in their schools and how this reflects current policy documents. Using a mixed methods approach, they provide a glimpse 'from below' into how gender equity reform is manifested in the everyday life of schools and what it means to various teachers and students. From their findings, they highlight how teachers who were focused on gender reform were able to work through conflicting discourses in their efforts to reform not only the meaning of masculinity and femininity, but also success, knowledge, and responsibility. In regards to popular meanings of gender and gender equity, they discovered how outdated knowledge was sometimes misused to bring about ineffective policy changes, such as single-sex classes, which fostered problematic understandings about gender relations. From these findings, they stress the significance of "the knowledge teachers don't know they teach" (p. 201) and how much of that unconscious knowledge is used to construct understandings about gender for students. The documented resistance from some teachers in the study to openly engage in issues of gender equity in their schools appeared to arise from the intensification of teachers' work and the tension caused by a heightened sense of accountability. As a result, Kenway et al. (1998) suggest that responsibility for gender equity reform must involve a sense of obligation,

culpability, and community support. These findings have helped to shape my own research, because they reveal the complexity that occurs between gender equity policies and the “micro-physics of power in schools” (p. 205). Their work also demonstrates how teachers’ understandings of gender equity matter in how they approach equity policies, leaving open the question of how teachers today in Ontario are constructing the changing meaning of gender equity within a neo-liberal and postfeminist era.

In Keddie’s (2010) study focusing on two Anglo-Australian feminist educators, she examined the possibility of feminist reforms within the current ‘crisis’ of boys’ underachievement and the emphasis placed on boy-focused equity. Using qualitative interviews, she explored these self-identified feminist educators and their experiences facilitating the professional development of teachers in reference to Queensland, Australia’s *Success for Boys* project. Her participants’ experiences revealed the significance and power of deeply rooted personal emotions that gender equity reform can ignite and how those emotions and positioning, if recognized, can function as a resource for action and change. Her research revealed the critical importance of providing professional opportunities for teachers to express their thoughts surrounding gender issues, in particular having the ‘language and permission’ to speak about feminism without fear of being seen to focus too much on girls. Her findings also indicated how her participants themselves felt censored by an anti-feminist sentiment in some schools, expressing how some teachers perceived feminism as political and that they should remain neutral. Some participants expressed hostility towards the idea of exploring issues of gender equity in the classroom because it was believed to not be their job or place to do so. Keddie’s findings (2010) suggest that teachers’ political and personal beliefs about their professional practice must be challenged if progressive gender reform is to be successful, especially when a

high level of skepticism and resistance is held towards gender and gender equity being issues of concern. Her findings illuminate how the ‘failing’ boys and ‘successful’ girls discourse have transformed gender equity in education, making it difficult to provide space to explore feminist concerns. It is for these reasons that I wish to explore, in an Ontario context and using feminist post-structuralism as a theoretical lens, exactly how teachers who deal directly with the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (OSSLT) that influences policies surrounding gender inequity are engaging with feminism within the language of neo-liberalism and postfeminism.

In connection to teachers’ engagement with equity policies, Gill and Tranter’s (2012) qualitative research into the perceived question of how girls are faring in the current educational climate reveals how ‘policy-driven gender-as-difference’ approaches can have negative implications in masking continuing educational inequities. Using semi-structured interview data from teachers and students in three disadvantaged, urban fringe Australian high schools, they highlight how the boys’ crisis movement has served to re-position gender difference at the centre of the struggle for gender equality. As a result of this re-positioning, they draw attention to the need to re-think how gender is understood. With that in mind, they discuss the barriers to rethinking gender outside of a categorical approach, with current policies being built around easily measurable and quantifiable outcomes, for example with standardized testing. From their findings, they indicate how both teachers and students were unable to see gender as relational and constructed, and rather perceived it as a given, binary category to which outcomes could be measured. They also demonstrated how the use of the words ‘choice’ and ‘individual’ served to mask how these students’ agency was bound by the “structural dispositions of class and gender constraining the range of opportunities they recognized as possible” (p. 9). Ultimately, boys’ underachievement appeared to mask some girls’ struggles, where girls were “relatively

positioned as more likely to succeed despite overwhelming class disadvantage” (p. 14). Gill and Tranter’s (2012) Australian study is particularly influential in shaping my research because it demonstrates the problematic issues associated with teachers engaging with equity through a categorical approach to gender and the need for a social constructivist approach that sees “gender as multidimensional” (p. 16). Their work evokes the question of how teachers in Ontario are dealing with gender equity within ‘policy-driven gender-as-difference’ approaches similar to their Australian counterparts.

These ideas about how policy influences teachers is echoed in Ball et al.’s (2012) long-term qualitative study of four ‘ordinary’ secondary schools in the United Kingdom. In the study, they examined how different schools and individual actors interpret and enact policy within multiple policy demands given the resources provided to them. In regards to understanding the policy process, Ball et al. (2012) highlight the complexity inherent within this, as the process is built upon interpretations and translations. As the teaching practice is complex and unstable, it leaves policy open to erosion through interpretation. Ball et al. (2012) argue that this erosion can become especially complicated as policy texts are often constructed within the framework of the ideal scenario for all possible schools. From their study, they identify how much teachers’ interests and values, both personal and institutional, as well as their context and history impact how ‘institutional priorities’ are transformed by frontline educators into practice. Ball et al. (2012) draw attention to the level of professional conflict that teachers now have to manage through the ‘raising standards agenda’, as policies of accountability come to contradict with principles of social justice. Ball et al.’s (2012) study also reveals how teachers must be understood as being positioned differently in relation to a policy, as competencies and responsibilities vary. As a result, teachers are subjected differently and react differently to

discourses and their related policies. Ball et al.'s (2012) study demonstrates how key policy issues of achievement and behaviour tend to be based on the production of the 'good student' discourse that ties heavily into the language of neo-liberalism and postfeminism. It involves the underlying belief that if students have high academic expectations, believe in themselves and behave well, success is always attainable (Ball et al., 2012).

The studies discussed in this section have contributed in shaping my own study because they have provided knowledge and insight into the level of agency teachers are capable of possessing within dominant discourses and the room that exists for them to resist and reinterpret neo-liberal and postfeminist imaginaries. They have also highlighted how neo-liberal policies of accountability have impacted teachers' perceptions of equity issues. My search results in this area have revealed a gap in studies that deal directly with examining how Ontario teachers are engaging with gender equity within the backdrop of standardized literacy testing and a postfeminist narrative of girls' academic success. I wish to fill this gap by exploring in-depth how some Ontario teachers come to make sense of postfeminism within policies of high-stakes standardized testing that are perceived as a measure for gender equity.

## **2.5 Conclusion**

The studies reviewed in this chapter have revealed the complexity involved in understanding gender equity and achievement in neo-liberal and postfeminist times, particularly as it relates to the 'failing' boys and 'successful' girls discourses. Such research in the field highlights and supports the need for further research into how frontline educators are negotiating these complex and contradictory discourses, particularly in literacy achievement. As the aim of my study is to understand in-depth how teachers are engaging with neo-liberalism and postfeminism, as well as negotiating the changing meanings of gender equity in Ontario, the

following strands of literature were reviewed: (a) successful girls, choice and a postfeminist discourse; (b) failing boys, class and social constructions (c) gender equity, teacher agency and a neo-liberal discourse.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **Methodology**

#### **3.1 Introduction**

This chapter provides an overview of the methodology used in my research, as well as a rationale for my choices surrounding it. First, I explore the importance behind qualitative inquiry as a basis for justifying my methodological approach to investigating teachers' perceptions and engagement with gender equity and postfeminist articulations of success. Next, I lay out my roadmap for data collection through qualitative interviews, as well as my process for recruitment. After that I discuss my process for qualitative analysis using a coding system. Finally, I describe to some extent the limitations and difficulties I faced throughout the process and how I dealt with them.

#### **3.2 Overview of Methodology**

I have chosen a qualitative approach as the most appropriate methodology by which to conduct my study because of its potential to provide in-depth understandings of the attitudes and intentions that lie beneath the surface of the phenomenon I am studying (Cohen et al., 2011). The essence of traditional qualitative inquiry is ultimately about trying to understand people, not just concepts, and what it is that people are saying or thinking about a phenomenon through their own words and stories (Patton, 2002). Qualitative interviewing, more specifically, allows a researcher to enter into someone else's perspective and gather rich insight into how they view their world through their terminology and complex perceptions and experiences (Patton, 2002). These interviews become a very personal and vulnerable place to share one's intimate thoughts with another person. In order to carry out such research, I had to demonstrate respect for those



who were willing to let me into their world and I had to ultimately believe that the thoughts and experiences of those I was interviewing were valuable (Patton, 2002).

Qualitative methodology is often about examining the *how* behind the processes by which behaviours and outcomes emerge (Cohen et al., 2011). As a result, qualitative interviews align very well with my investigation into *how* teachers come to understand and engage or not engage with gender equity and a postfeminist narrative of academic success. Qualitative research places a high value on information-rich cases and involves in-depth understandings of human experience (Patton, 2002), with smaller sample sizes adding “depth, detail, and meaning at a very personal level” (Patton, 2002). As a result, the small and purposeful sampling size for my study is justified, because of my purpose in exploring the perspectives and understandings of a specific few in order to gain in-depth understanding of the phenomenon in question. Ultimately, I am interested in acquiring unique, non-standardized, personalized information about how individual English teachers engage or do not engage with neo-liberal and postfeminist discourses and how they personally come to make sense of gender equity within policies of high-stakes standardized testing and literacy. With this in mind, a qualitative methodology is appropriate because of my interest in representing the phenomenon both fairly and fully, rather than generalizing the results (Cohen et al., 2011). My desire to use qualitative interviews to gain insight into how teachers are engaging with and understanding gender equity and post-feminist articulations of achievement is reasonable within my overall desire to produce knowledge about a number of teachers' various perspectives as set against my own understanding of a broader neo-liberal and post-feminist policy context. It is my knowledge of the policy context that serves as a backdrop to my research and informs my qualitative inquiry.

### **3.3 Data Collection**

All of the data collected for this study conformed to the University of Western Ontario's ethical review standards and requirements (See Appendix D). Data was not collected through school boards; therefore ethical review from school boards was not required and was not obtained. As my qualitative study involved personal and sensitive information, issues of confidentiality and privacy of the participants were of the utmost importance. A letter of information (See Appendix A) was distributed through email to all participants prior to any interviews. A signed letter of consent (see Appendix B) was obtained from all participants and kept in a secured locked cabinet. Preceding the interviews with participants I went over the purpose of the study, the approximate time needed to complete the interview, and the intention for using the results of the interviews. I informed participants that all information collected from their interviews would be confidential and stored in a locked cabinet. Pseudonyms would be used to hide the participants' identities, geographical locations, their schools and the school boards they work for. All participants consented to the interviews being audio-recorded and the possibility of direct quotations from their interviews being used in the reporting of the final findings. I explained to participants that involvement in this study was entirely voluntary and that they could decline to answer any questions or withdraw from the study at any time with no impact on their employment status, although none did. In regards to validity, as well as ethical considerations, participants were provided a full copy of their transcript through e-mail after being interviewed and were invited to review it and make any alterations they wished. Three reviewed their transcript, four declined by not responding to the e-mail, and one requested minor alterations. All participants were interested in and provided with a summarized copy of the final report upon completion.

To carry out the proposed research, I conducted informal, in-depth semi-structured interviews. The period of data collection lasted from November 2013 until December 2013. During this period of time, I conducted a total of seven interviews in three different school boards. The interviews were conducted in a mutually agreed upon location that was quiet and where we could be alone, with the exception of minor interruptions during one interview. The majority occurred in teachers' classrooms, with two occurring in offices, one in a public library and another in a staff room. I provided coffee or tea for each participant if they desired. Each interview ranged from one hour to one hour and thirty minutes. The total amount of interview time recorded for all participants was approximately nine hours and thirty minutes. All of the interviews were conducted face-to-face using a semi-structured interview guide (See Appendix C for interview guideline questions). Patton (2002) identifies the benefits of using an interview guide as helping to "make interviewing a number of different people more systematic and comprehensive by delimiting in advance the issues to be explored" (p. 343). Although a semi-structured guide narrows down the topics to be discussed, the sequencing and wording of the questions remain flexible and provide the interviewer with the possibility to explore and probe the various issues that come up, creating a more fluid conversational style (Patton, 2002). The more fluid the conversation, the more likely unprompted and unexpected answers will emerge from the interview (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009). It is important to note that the more flexibility the interviewer exercises, the more likely it is for the analysis to become more complex as comparability of the responses becomes more difficult to identify (Cohen et al., 2011). Following Patton's (2002) suggestions surrounding qualitative questioning, open-ended and indirect questions were used during each interview, with probes being used to pursue particular topics and issues as required. These types of questions provided a platform for which participants

could respond more openly and in a way that accurately and authentically represented their perspectives about the world they were discussing (Patton, 2002): a fundamental principal of qualitative interviewing (Patton, 2002).

Following Patton's (2002) assertion that qualitative interviews are about seeing someone else's world through their own terminology and perceptions, I made sure within my questioning to have each participant clarify and explain in their own words various terms such as success, achievement, gender equity, choice, hard work, successful girls, failing boys and so forth. Clarifying such terminology made me realize the truth behind the idea that before a researcher can begin to enter a participants' world, they have to be willing to "learn their categories for rendering explicable and coherent the flux of raw reality" (Lofland, 1971, p.7).

Applying all of these tools in practice allowed me to explore my research questions, because they provided the flexibility required for my participants to indirectly explore, in their own personalized words, how they understand gender equity and engage in neo-liberal and postfeminist articulations of success. As well, with the interviews being informal, it provided the opportunity to build a comfortable rapport with most of my participants that allowed me to go more in-depth with their answers. With that in mind, I feel that it was still important that the interviews were at least semi-structured, because it provided me the power to direct participants' answers to the topics I wanted them to engage with within the limited amount of time we had, while still granting them the necessary freedom to take the conversation where they desired. By constructing such an environment, it created a platform for participants to respond in a way that accurately represented their perspectives about the world they were discussing (Patton, 2001) and was ultimately where I felt that I found the richest information.

### 3.4 Recruitment and Participants

I started my data collection with a purposeful, non-probability sampling strategy made up of grade nine and grade ten English teachers, as well as literacy consultants across various public school boards in Ontario. I chose this sampling frame as my population of interest because of my curiosity in how the high-stakes standardized grade ten literacy test has, in particular, fuelled the failing boys' and successful girls' discourses in Ontario. That curiosity is also compounded with the emergence of policies and resources aimed at improving achievement on this test, such as the *Me Read? No Way* document. Patton (2002) identifies the strength and logic behind purposeful sampling to be in the selection of 'information-rich cases', as they allow for a great deal of in-depth learning about issues pertaining to the purpose of the inquiry. I chose to focus on this specific group because of their potential to provide rich data on how teachers who deal directly with grade nine and grade ten literacy come to make sense of postfeminist articulations of success within the backdrop of high-stakes standardized testing policies. Although I followed a specific sampling criterion, my participants still varied somewhat in several aspects such as gender, teacher experience and school boards. These variances allowed for rich and unique perspectives within my purposeful sampling frame and although my sampling was not evenly diverse across gender, race, class, teaching experience and sexuality, my desire to understand in-depth only a few individuals' experiences of the phenomenon in question justify those included. More detailed profiles of each participant will be included in the following chapter.

In order to locate information-rich participants within this purposeful sampling frame I used snowballing as a key strategy. Snowballing was an effective strategy for my research because it provided me with the opportunity to reach a wider selection of information-rich cases that I otherwise would not have had access to while working within my limited network. I did

not cold call any potential participants, but had acquaintances and participants pass on my letter of information to possible participants who then contacted me through e-mail. As the name indicates, by asking people I knew who had access to individuals in my sampling frame to refer people, the snowball, as Patton (2002) puts it, got bigger and bigger as new cases emerged and eventually converged into a few key information-rich cases. I was seeking between six to ten participants and stopped actively recruiting after a total of seven were interviewed, because I felt I had reached saturation and had an adequate amount of information-rich cases and data to explore my research questions. Each participant was provided with a ten-dollar gift card to either Starbucks or Tim Hortons to compensate them for their time and as a thank you. Only one participant refused the gift card.

### **3.5 Data Analysis**

When approaching data analysis, Patton (2002) makes note that there is no clear distinction between when data collection ends and data analysis truly begins. From my experiences through this process, I have come to understand qualitative data analysis to be something that does not fit nicely into a box; it is an emerging process that tugs and pulls while categories begin to fluidly unfold. Patton (2002) marks transcribing as an important first step into the process of data analysis and that it allows you to “more deeply immerse yourself in the data” (p. 381). With this in mind, I chose this pathway and transcribed my own interviews immediately after they were conducted to provide myself with the opportunity to reflect and clarify on what ideas and thoughts were already taking hold in my mind. I transcribed each interview verbatim with every awkward “umm” and “uhh” accounted for. Raw, verbatim transcriptions of our conversations was critical for my analysis, because it revealed from the participants a “depth of emotion, the ways they have organized their world, their thoughts about what is happening, their

experiences, and their basic perceptions” (Patton, 2002, p. 21). I was reminded of the importance and necessity of raw, in the moment thoughts and data when a common pattern among my participants emerged when I asked them about their teaching philosophy. The most noticeable was with Rose’s remark “[laughs] Umm I can’t even tell you what it says on my resume” and Veronica’s “I don’t know what my teaching philosophy is right now. I have a whole... statement...I haven’t had to say this in a long time”. These in the moment thoughts act as a window into who we are, not who we prescribe to project and without these in the moment reflections, one cannot grasp the true nature of the phenomenon under study.

As long periods of time between initial data collection and analysis can result in the loss of emerging insights (Patton, 2002), I chose to fully immerse myself in them without delay. After each interview, I wrote down my immediate interpretations and reflected on them before conducting the next interview. My reflections and informal analysis in some ways informed my data collection, because I was able to take these interpretations and reflections and guide my next interview in a more effective and efficient way as I learned the dynamics of qualitative interviewing.

Although immersing oneself in the data right away is an important first step, it cannot be without ordered reason and an intended purpose. Approaching immersion with a “progressive focus” (Cohen et al., 2011) that aims to immediately develop some form of “manageable classification or coding scheme” (Patton, 2002, p. 463) is critical in avoiding what Cohen et al. (2011) describe as ‘data overload’ common in qualitative studies. Reminding myself of my purpose while reading through the transcripts the first time was especially critical in keeping at bay my feelings of becoming overwhelmed by the sheer amount of data I had before me and the question of whether I could find meaning within it. Throughout both the initial interviews and

the formal analysis of the transcripts, I continuously developed my 'pattern recognition' ability and began to generate categories for coding. More specifically, I employed an inductive analysis process of the transcripts in order to bring to life the patterns, themes or categories that potentially existed in the mountain of data (Patton, 2002). Patton (2002) associates inductive analysis with "discovering patterns, themes and categories in one's data. Findings emerge out of the data, through the analyst's interactions with the data" (p. 453). Deductive analysis on the other hand involves analyzing the data according to an existing framework (Patton, 2002).

Although analysis began as soon as the data was collected, it was only when I began to go over each completed transcript, immersing myself more and more within the words and language of my participants, that various classification systems really came to life before my eyes. These classification systems became most noticeable when I employed a cross-case analysis (Patton, 2002), for example by grouping together answers or responses from each teacher to the same or similar questions used in the interview guide. Keeping that deep immersion in mind, Patton (2002) draws attention to how these patterns and themes arise through *interaction* with the data, which reminded me of what my privilege and role is as researcher: someone who is actively creating and not just passively reporting. I had to recognize that I do not exist as a neutral being, removed from the implications and effects of qualitative analysis. Although I may identify my ultimate goal as a qualitative researcher to be about providing knowledge of how the world works, I cannot ignore the fundamental reality that I am also making sense of my own relationship to the world (Richardson, 2000). I cannot deny my own investment, and through the process of analysis realized things about myself I would have never known otherwise (Richardson, 2000). With that in mind, Patton (2002) highlights how a good analyst is one that is ultimately "able to get out of the way of the data to let the data tell their own



story” (p. 457). The interpretative nature of the qualitative inquiry I conducted demands the acknowledgement of my own biases and presence throughout the process; that acknowledgement could only be achieved by remaining self-reflexive and self-conscious throughout the analysis process and in deciding how I present my participants’ experiences.

In regards to the logistics of the analysis process, I read through every transcript multiple times before the data was sufficiently coded. I began by printing off my transcripts and making comments by hand in the margins indicating potential themes or understandings of the data. This allowed me to organize the data and begin to name what it was I was reading: a process of convergence. From this I was able to develop a type of colour-coded legend indicating various concepts or themes I was seeing, which enabled me to read through the transcripts again and begin formally coding, using coloured stickers. Being initially convergent or inductive provided the foundation for the interpretative phase and allowed for what Strauss and Corbin (1998) and Patton (2002) refer to as ‘open coding’: being open to the data and the ability to move to a divergent stage of analysis. The ultimate purpose of a researcher’s engagement and interpretation of data is to be able to attach “significance to what was found, making sense of findings, offering explanations, drawing conclusions, extrapolating lessons, making inferences, considering meanings and otherwise imposing order on an unruly but surely patterned world” (Patton, 2002, p. 480).

In order to ensure a level of rigor is brought into the process, I followed Patton’s (2002) advice about being deductive at the end of analysis in order to satisfy rival explanations and to account for disconfirming cases and data irregularities within my final interpretations. I found myself constantly going back and forth between my raw data and my interpretations that were unfolding. As the purpose of my study is to better understand how teachers’ are engaging with

postfeminist articulations of success and gender equity, I focused my data analysis on thick descriptions and the raw language that illustrated each participant's unique perspective.

Maintaining each participant's individual perspectives was important for this study, because their perceptions are in a constant state of development and can only be understood at one point in time.

### **3.6 Limitations and Difficulties**

**3.6.1 Confidentiality.** Discussions surrounding equity and social justice issues can be difficult to approach because of their likeliness to invoke emotionally charged responses or a fear of projecting an inappropriate position. As a result, these types of discussions require a vast amount of care and sensitivity when being conducted by a researcher. Especially as a novice researcher, I had to be very careful about how I approached my interviews, both with my style of questioning and feedback, as well as in following a strict ethical and confidentiality procedure. Keeping these things in mind was critical in order to ensure my participants, especially those who did not have permanent contracts, felt comfortable enough to share their real personal thoughts and stories with me, because those thoughts could at times be perceived as controversial or in conflict with the Ministry. A specific incident I faced during the process was ensuring one participant that their identity was anonymous to their satisfaction and that anything they said during our interview would not be misunderstood. To resolve this, I chose to give every participant a different pseudonym for their school board, despite the fact that some teachers came from the same school board or school. In consultation with the participant, I also agreed to send them the sections from my analysis that dealt with them directly in order to ensure their quotes were accurate and their identity was secure. I was very grateful for the time they took to

participate and to go over the material and I wanted to reassure them of their wishes to the best of my ability.

**3.6.2 Data triangulation.** In regards to my decision to only use qualitative interviews for my data collection, I have to recognize the limitation within the scope of this approach; I am unable to provide triangulation of my data to aid in providing external validity (Cohen et al. 2011). Triangulation can be defined as the process of using two or more methods of data collection when studying human behaviour (Cohen et al., 2011). Although a limitation, relying solely on interviews with teachers is reasonable within the emphasis and importance I have placed on the language that teachers use to construct their understanding of gender equity and neo-liberal and post-feminist articulations of achievement at one point in time.

**3.6.3 Recruitment and Sampling.** In connection to the scope of the study, another difficulty and limitation to my research I must recognize is the diversity of my sampling criteria. I initially struggled with participant recruitment and originally had intended to recruit all of my participants from the same school board. Once it came time to recruit, I reread my intended purpose and came to the conclusion that it would be beneficial to acquire a wide variety of teachers' perspectives across various school boards, because of the variances between policy initiatives and focuses. Although I employed purposeful sampling criteria, looking specifically for current grade nine and grade ten English teachers and literacy consultants, I chose not to mandate my criteria based on gender, ethnicity, class, sexuality, teacher experience, etc. I recognize that interviewing participants of diverse backgrounds would have provided different perspectives, but within the scope of my study it is a reasonable limitation that does not affect the validity of the data gathered. Justification for this limitation derives from my intended purpose of understanding in-depth only a few individuals' experiences of the phenomenon in question and

that I have no intention of generalizing my results from the study. With that in mind, I was still able to provide some diversity to my criteria, with two self-identifying male teachers, a self-identifying South American Indian teacher, a range of teaching experience from five years to eighteen years and current experience with a variety of high achieving and low achieving students in high and low socio-economic areas. Despite this, I recognize the limitation of my sampling frame reflecting a predominantly white, middle-class, heterosexual perspective. The decision to mandate my sampling criteria the way I did and to expand my recruitment across Ontario was also influenced by my initial struggle to recruit participants within my limited network and my decision to rely on the strategy of snowballing.

### **3.7 Conclusion**

In this chapter, I provided an overview of the methodology, data collection, data analysis and the limitations or difficulties associated with carrying out this qualitative research study. I provided a rationale for my methodological approach to collecting and analyzing the data. As the aim of my study was to investigate how teachers come to understand and engage with gender equity and postfeminist articulations of achievement, I employed informal, semi-structured qualitative interviews, because of the method's ability to provide in-depth understandings and thick descriptions of the attitudes and thoughts that lie just beneath this phenomenon (Cohen et al., 2011). My purposefully small sampling size of seven secondary grade ten and grade nine English teachers and literacy consultants provided me with 'information rich cases' that would shine light on such a phenomenon within the backdrop of literacy and standardized testing. I also discussed at some length the ethical considerations and procedures used and the recognition of my own subjectivities and biases as a researcher in this process. I feel that it is important to note how there were many times throughout the methodological process when I felt frustrated, lost or

simply unsure of whether I was proceeding properly. Although difficult at times, reflecting on the process and writing this chapter has made me realize how rewarding it was to navigate this process as it has greatly contributed to my growth as a producer and consumer of qualitative research.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Findings

#### 4.1 Introduction

In this chapter I provide an analysis of interviews with seven grade nine and ten English teachers and literacy consultants in three public school boards across Southwestern Ontario. The chapter begins with an introduction to the perspectives' of the seven teachers who participated in this study, setting up the foundation for the analysis. The rest of the chapter will be organized around the themes that emerged in relation to how the participants were engaging with gender equity and achievement within neo-liberal and postfeminist articulations of success. The recurring themes were identified as: (a) the intertwining of neo-liberalism and postfeminism; (b) understanding gender equity and success; (c) addressing gender equity and feminism in the classroom; (d) expectations; (e) literacy and emotions; (f) girls as flexible and boys as inadaptible; (g) disrupting the gap: which boys and which girls.

#### 4.2 Participant Profiles

I have chosen to include profiles of each participant in order to provide a more succinct overview of each teacher's background and perspective and to incorporate an overall description of the group I chose for my study. I have provided a table that includes: age; gender; ethnicity/race; teaching experience; qualifications. As well, I include in brief: what they are currently teaching; what I perceived of their attitude in agreeing to be a part of the study; philosophy of education; their personal and school board's pseudonyms.

Table 1

*Summary of Participants*

	Age	Gender	Ethnicity/Race	Teaching experience	Qualifications
Ron, W.	29	Male	White	5 years	English/History
Harry, P.	31	Male	White	7 years	English/History
Monica, H.	27	Female	White	5 years	English/Geography
Rose, A.	33	Female	White	10 years	English/Geography
Veronica, K.	36	Female	White	12 years	English
Emily, M.	33	Female	White	9 years	English/Geography
Angali, W.	44	Female	South American Indian	18 years	English/Special Education

**4.2.1 Ron, W.** Ron reported having worked as a supply teacher in his first semester of teaching and had been on full-time or part-time long term occasional (LTO) contracts at three different schools in the Paynes Grey District School Board since then. At the time of the interview, he was teaching two English courses that were both grade ten: one being an applied course, the other a split academic and applied course. He described the school where he taught to be located in a large agricultural base community. He was heavily involved in extracurricular activities such as coaching and various literacy committees. He seemed to view the study in a positive light and perceived the topic to be of importance. He appeared genuinely interested in reflecting on and contributing to the teaching practice. As a result of his desire to help, he did not accept the ten-dollar gift card that was offered as a thank you for participating in the study. Ron described his interest in teaching to have come from his desire to want to give back in some way and described his teaching philosophy as being about keeping students safe and believing that all students are smart in different ways. As a relatively new male teacher still struggling to

establish his teaching career and practice, combined with his willingness to express in-depth his honest understandings and ideas, I deemed Ron an asset to the project.

**4.2.2 Harry, P.** Harry had experience teaching English for several years, as well as being a Student Success teacher working with at-risk youth. At the time of the interview, he was in his second year as a literacy consultant for the Cadmium Red District School Board. The main part of his role as a literacy consultant was to support secondary school teachers, specifically English teachers, across the board and to develop and oversee the literacy programming. He described his teaching philosophy as revolving around the idea that every student can learn and that ultimately they are just kids who do not want to feel like failures. Harry appeared very comfortable and willing to express in-depth his opinions and ideas to the questions presented to him. I deemed Harry a very valuable asset to the study because of his ability to provide important insight into how his board as a whole and the English teachers within it were experiencing and dealing with literacy programming and the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (OSSLT) on a grander scale.

**4.2.3 Monica, H.** Monica worked as a supply teacher in her first year of teaching and then had a two year full-time LTO before obtaining a permanent position. At the time of the interview, she was teaching six classes at a non-semester school in the Burnt Umber District School Board: two family studies courses, a food and nutrition course, and three academic grade ten English courses, with one being a Pre-Advanced Placement (AP) course. She described the Pre-AP course as a type of enhanced course that prepares students for entry into the highly competitive AP English courses in grade eleven and twelve, where students must achieve a minimum of 85% to get into the program. She explained her school as one of the few schools in her board to offer the advanced program and describe it as being located in a highly affluent area.



She was heavily involved in extracurricular activities such as coaching and the literacy committee. She was enthusiastic about the study and perceived the topic to be of importance, especially as she was currently teaching a unit in her English classes on gender. Her interest in teaching came from her love of helping others and connecting with highly at-risk youth whom she worked with in her first few years of teaching in a fast-forward program. Her philosophy of education involved building a strong relationship with students and creating successful, well-rounded individuals who would contribute to society in a positive way. I found Monica to be very open and reflective with her thoughts and willing to explore her experiences and opinions. Her unique experience with both highly at-risk students in the fast-forward program and now highly successful students in the advanced English program made her perspective extremely valuable for my study.

**4.2.4 Rose, A.** For the last nine years Rose solely taught English, but was now teaching in a System-Alternative Education program where students were placed from across the Ultramarine District School Board at her school. She described the students who attended the program to be at a very high risk of not graduating. The program was meant to assist students in getting their credits at an accelerated rate and to help reintegrate them back into the regular system. The students in her class were working on credits across all subjects, with several of them requiring either grade nine or grade ten English credits. She described the attendance in her class to be very low and claimed that the majority of students in the program came from very low socio-economic backgrounds, with histories of violence, drug use and pregnancies.

Rose appeared to be genuinely motivated to be a part of the study by her desire to help, although she did not readily identify the topic to be of importance or relevance to her. She appeared to be somewhat hesitant or unsure about how to discuss gender, especially at first. Her

hesitancy or difficulty in exploring some of the topics or questions might have resulted from the struggle to create a comfortable rapport, as we were unavoidably interrupted several times during the process of the interview. She explained that her interest in teaching came from her love of English and her desire to share that with others, although she found this difficult to do and the reason why she switched into the alternative program. Her role as an educator in the alternative program was very different than that in a regular classroom, as she outlined the necessity of being creative and being able to provide the basic necessities to her students. Although Rose was not currently teaching in a traditional grade nine or ten English classroom, I chose to include her in the study because of her unique experience with highly at-risk youth in an alternative English classroom setting. I considered her experience important in helping to provide a diverse and rich perspective to the study.

**4.2.5 Veronica, K.** Similar to Rose, English was the sole subject Veronica had taught and she was currently teaching three English courses: a grade twelve university and two grade nine applied. She had been the residing department head at her school for the last nine years and was heavily involved in extracurricular projects, almost entirely within literacy, as she had been the literacy lead at her school for the past several years. She did not readily identify gender or gender equity to be a topic of importance or relevance to her in her teaching practice and she seemed somewhat hesitant or unsure about how to discuss these topics. Her interest in teaching came from her desire to inspire and make a difference in peoples' lives and her philosophy of education was to foster lifelong learning. I found Veronica pleasant to talk to and very knowledgeable about the changing dynamics of the literacy programming in her school. Although she seemed hesitant at times to expand on her opinions during our discussion, I found

that her vast experience as an English department head and literacy lead who dealt directly with the OSSLT made her an important component to the study.

**4.2.6 Emily, M.** For the last few years, English was the main subject Emily taught and at the time of the interview, she was teaching two academic English courses that were grade nine and had one line as the designated Differentiated Instruction Support teacher. She had been involved extensively with extracurricular work, specifically the literacy program and coaching. She appeared to be very enthusiastic about the topic of the study and interested in reflecting on and understanding her own teaching practice. Her philosophy of teaching and her interest in teaching came from her passion for lifelong learning and the need to be involved in making a positive difference in kids' lives. Emily spoke of her desire to become an administrator and was currently pursuing such a position. She was very knowledgeable and up-to-date on current Ministry and school board initiatives and policies. I found Emily quite articulate and extremely reflective and willing to go deeply into her thoughts and understandings surrounding the issues we discussed. Her enthusiasm, openness and vast amount of knowledge surrounding literacy and current teaching practices made her an information-rich case to the study.

**4.2.7 Angali, W.** Angali spent four years as the department head of a special education program and spent the last fourteen years teaching English, with the last eight years as a department head of English at her current school. She was teaching a grade twelve split college/university creative writing course, a grade ten academic English course, and a grade eleven English college course. In addition to teaching, she was involved with the Lesbian Gay Bisexual Trans and Questioning (LGBTQ) club and the Go Girls, a club about building young girls' self-esteem and identities. For the last eight years she had been involved in the mentorship program for the New Teacher Induction Program, as well as for the last eighteen years being

involved in the Status of Women committee. She had been involved with the committee at both a provincial and local level and she was the first sitting chair for the Fuchsia District School Board. Her philosophy of teaching was that everyone learns in their own unique way and that we all have to strive to be lifelong learners. Angali spoke of the idea of one day pursuing an administrative position within the board. Angali was extremely reflective of her experiences and described in a lot of detail her opinions surrounding the issues we discussed. She repeatedly spoke of her constant effort and desire to reflect and adapt her teaching practice over the course of her career. Her diverse experience and keen interest and knowledge surrounding issues of gender equity, feminism and literacy leadership made her an information-rich case for the study.

### **4.3 Data Analysis and Emerging Themes**

The focus of the data analysis is directed toward understanding how these teachers engage with a postfeminist narrative of academic success and gender equity within the backdrop of the high-stakes standardized testing policies that have come to refuel interest in a gender ‘gap talk’ within education (Gillborn, 2008; Martino & Rezai-Rashti, 2013). The views expressed by my participants during their interviews draw attention to the complex constructions of gender equity and literacy achievement that is occurring within the neo-liberal rhetoric of accountability and standardization. In this chapter, questions will be raised surrounding the importance of teacher threshold knowledge about gender and gender equity as it is filtered through neo-liberal and postfeminist articulations of achievement and success (Ringrose, 2007). Using Patton’s (2002) outline for qualitative analysis, certain recurring themes related to my research questions were identified after careful examination and coding of the interview transcripts. This chapter investigates the recurring themes in light of existing literature and draws on feminist-poststructuralist and critical social theories. Although I have organized the following analysis

into several themes, these categories are by no means meant to be exclusive and they are all intricately connected. These themed categories should be understood as my concerted attempt to provide some systematic way of making sense of the data as it is informed by engagement with theory and the relevant literature in the field. As one of the intentions behind this study was to draw attention to the personal experiences and understandings of the participants, I thought it was important to represent each individual voice fully and fairly, using long direct quotes in order to deepen understandings and provide in-depth glimpses into each participant's constructed realities and reflections on gender equity and schooling.

#### **4.4 The Intertwining of Neo-liberalism and Postfeminism**

As I am primarily interested in how the subjectivities that neo-liberal and postfeminist discourses produce are being performed specifically in teachers' talk, thinking, and practice (St.Pierre, 2000), I thought it was important to begin my analysis by elaborating on how teachers perceived 'successful' girls and high-stakes testing as set against the backdrop of neo-liberalism and postfeminism. During the course of the interviews, it became apparent that a similar theme of competition and marks resided among the various participants' descriptions of 'successful' girls. Emily, in particular, viewed competition as something occurring 'amongst' girls:

It's almost like there is a little more competition between female[s] to get their work done, to get the marks... [pause], very mark driven, like boys are too but I find... it's more of a performance competition for girls.

When asked what comes to mind when she hears the phrase: "successful girls", Emily depicts her female students as "avid readers, competitive... [striving for] perfectionism, wanting people to know [what] they're doing, wanting that kind of appreciation". The association of 'successful' girls and a drive for marks was echoed by Monica, as she viewed that "[girls] put a number on

success and they don't necessarily see it as a skill... they see it as like a number". The association of 'successful' girls with competition and a desire for measurement through numbers illustrates how girls can be perceived to symbolize the values of neo-liberalism; they help make legitimate an agenda of competition, accountability and academic excellence in the education system through standardised test scores (McRobbie, 2008). Such an agenda strategically moulds both teachers and students into acceptable workers for a neo-liberal economy (Davies & Saltmarsh, 2007; Davies, 2003).

Along with the idea of 'successful' girls emulating ideals of competition, there was also the idea of girls' relentless hard work and desire for success being internalized or inherent to their being. When getting marks back, Monica describes the girls in her class as being:

Quick to internalize... the girls are like you know all I got was an 85 I could have done better, I should have worked harder. They're a lot harder on themselves... there is the odd guy that's like 85 wicked kind of thing but for the most part it's more of a joke... the girls take it quite seriously in the mainstream... they're hard on each other.

The idea of an internal drive to have to work harder is expanded on by Monica, as she describes:

The girls diligently will go home and get their work done... the parents put a lot of pressure on them. They know they'll be successful, but they have to work at it the female population and they do, they work hard... and they want to be successful so they know that's what comes with it.

These ideas echo the postfeminist notion that girls' success or power comes from their relentless personal effort to just 'do it' no matter what (Pomerantz & Raby, 2011). How girls negotiate the received normalising discourse of all girls as successful and powerful is not simplistic though, and it is full of complex resistances and contradictions (Pomerantz & Raby, 2011; Ringrose,

2007). Monica draws attention to this when she discusses the role of society and how it works to create a very specific social imaginary for women:

There's a lot of pressures from society to... achieve gender equality and to push through those boundaries. They're definitely still there and I think females... are aware of that but you've almost like failed the system if you haven't tried your best to push through them... I shouldn't say that in general, but like [pause] I don't know if society places as much, you're just a mom as much as you would put that on yourself as a female, so you want more, society maybe wants more from you too and you internalize that.

As the power embedded in a discourse comes from the specific kinds of knowledge it creates (Foucault, 1972), postfeminism then can be seen to have gained its power through girls internalizing the knowledge that they have to be 'successful' and work twice as hard in order to live up to the celebratory notions of achieved equality in a meritocratic society. Angali goes even further, describing the drive for success and achievement to be a part of girls' natural identity constructions: "The girls want to do well, it's more about reputation, creating an identity, umm it's not always about so much the money... it seems to be more holistic, they're doing it for their own being, rather than what society... expects". The perceived internalization and willingness of girls to 'live up' to these constructions highlighted by Monica and Angali connects to McRobbie's (2008) argument about how the new gender regime brought in under postfeminism requires a "willingness, motivation and aptitude on the part of young women" (p. 75).

The idea of girls' drive for success being somehow 'naturally' inherent was often juxtaposed to boys, who were portrayed as 'relaxed' when it would come to achievement and work. Monica describes the boys' disposition as "just steer[ing] straight through" (i.e driving

along in a self-assured manner), with Emily describing it as males somehow “knowing they’ll be okay”. She goes on to elaborate:

It seems that a lot of the girls... know they have to go to university to... get what they want and I even had two grade tens kind of researching... they’re already looking at what they want to do futuristically and I find that sometimes the guys are not as... ready to explore that, because I think it is a little bit more lax.

Veronica similarly expresses how girls appear to be more serious and worried about their futures as compared to the boys in her class:

I feel like they are more mark driven than... the guys... they seem to show they’re a little more worried about getting into the right program and... having the money to fund it and getting the best job, where some of my guys are a little more relaxed.

The idea of girls actively seeking out and worrying about their futures could be understood as related to the internalization of certain postfeminist norms or ideals of achieved equality, raising the question: if girls are so successful and boys are failing, why are some teachers identifying girls as experiencing such anxiety while boys are being constructed as more relaxed and laid back? These ideas reflect Pomerantz and Raby’s (2011) findings of how there was a consensus from the girls in their study that the boys did not have to worry as much about being smart or successful because they knew “they could ‘get by’ regardless” (p. 559). Veronica describes these varying dispositions as a type of ‘conditioning’, where “girls are...conditioned a little bit more so...than boys to do well in school...whereas boys will be boys and boys will play, and boys will, you know, that kind of social upbringing”. Emily describes these differences in terms of a gender division in labour:



The professional opportunities to develop... are a little bit different than a lot of the male jobs versus a lot of the jobs that women have you've gotta move up... there's probably more of a drive for a female in her place of work to get up the ladder to make more money.

The importance of women needing to move up the work ladder that Emily refers to points to McRobbie's (2008) assertion of how postfeminism and neo-liberalism are intricately entwined as pro-capitalist, placing importance on "financial success in the world as the sole indicator of [the] status of women" (p. 159). Emily relates these pressures and expectations of having to succeed to the ongoing struggle women face to have to prove themselves as being just as capable as men:

That could definitely relate to umm finding your place in society. We're still proving ourselves that we can do any job out there that a male could do... like even myself and my husband like he's okay doing what he's doing... I've always wanted to move up.

In spite of Emily previously associating girls' success as inherent to their being, she also recognizes the pressures women still face to have to 'prove' themselves and live up to these expectations.

Although influential, there were many examples of participants disengaging and disrupting postfeminist constructions of all girls as confident and successful. These disruptions are critical in order for the implications of these discourses to be illuminated and to move away from what Pomertantz and Raby (2011) describe as the deeply flawed and harmfully narrow constructions of 'boys', 'girls', 'success' and 'failure'. Even though gender equity was often framed within academic achievement, there was some recognition of the mounting social pressures girls face when it comes to sexual identities. When discussing whether feminism was

perceived as something that was still necessary, Harry refers to the pressures he fears his young daughter will face:

I think academically... you might say oh well then we, we don't need feminism as a way to balance the scales, but then I think about a lot of the other pressures going on with young girls and all of the other things that happen in a young girls day and it terrifies me having a daughter myself... I think that pressures are put on girls that are not put on boys and a lot of it has to do with gender and identity and sexuality... adolescence is a terrifying age for both genders, more so for girls and it's higher stakes for girls and all of the... pressures.

Despite admitting that the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (OSSLT) was the best measure for gender equity that currently exists: "I think that our clearest indication of gender equity does come from the literacy test and I suppose math EQAO as well" (Harry), he disengages with postfeminism's notion of all girls as powerful and successful. He does this by drawing attention to the 'high stakes' girls live by, referring to his young daughter's experiences. He explains these increasing pressures as coming from a need to perform a hyper heterosexual identity, connecting to McRobbie's (2008) notions of the 'post-feminist masquerade', where girls' success comes with it the pressure to overcompensate in feminine and heterosexual performances. It is also important to note how his own experience of having a daughter has provided him with this insight, illustrating how one's lived experiences and personal perspectives will impact how they engage with the knowledge from these discourses they encounter (Kenway et al., 1998). He also takes issue with the idea of feminism becoming obsolete: "I still don't think you just say feminism isn't needed, so you wash it... it's all of the other things that go on with... adolescent girls, I think we absolutely need [it]". Connell (2010)

refers to how the statistical gap talk that standardized testing, like the OSSLT, promotes works to narrow our ‘imagination’ about what a relevant gender issue is that can be discussed, but Harry’s comments reflect how some educators are able to recognize the significance of other factors impacting girls’ constructions of themselves.

Parallel to Harry, Angali and Monica also disengage with the postfeminist and neo-liberal rhetoric of unlimited choices and academic success being held up as the sole indicator of girls as powerful with their thoughts regarding girls’ supposed economic success: “I think the females are disadvantaged, even though they seem to be higher educated... I still believe there’s an old boys club” (Angali). Angali goes on to describe a type of gendered workforce, where “things are still packaged as a very male and female identities out in the workforce and even courses you take to get there... I think those are the barriers that the young women face”. Despite Monica identifying gender equity as something that has been achieved in education and that girls are no longer at a disadvantage: “I think gender equity has been achieved... I don’t think that the girls, for sure, are impacted by gender [barriers]”, she also shares in Angali’s skepticism about unlimited female success:

I guess you come across the very few families where the mom is the CEO and the dad works at you know, is the secretary for a company for example so I guess what [girls] know to be true within... they see successful females, or successful CEOs and they’re like that’s one of a kind that won’t be me... I still think there is an overwhelming understanding that girls won’t achieve, females won’t achieve at that same rate and maybe they are putting that boundary on themselves, but I still think that is prevalent within society and they’re aware of that.

Her contradiction and change in position illustrate how she is located within a complex web of intersecting and competing discourses, in which she is offered through their repertoires many ways of seeing and both rejects and takes up the positions they offer (Kenway et al., 1998).

Monica's conflicting language surrounding postfeminist articulations of girls' feeling empowered and capable of doing anything (Ringrose, 2007) situates her as a conscious thinking subject, who is able to articulate and see things in multiple and contradictory ways as she is positioned differently among the various discourses she encounters (Davies, 1989).

Drawing on Monica's idea of how girls are influenced in the workplace, she also expands it into family life, identifying the limitations of the expected gender roles that exist:

[Girls] have an idea of [how] economics... means successful... they want to make good money but I think they're also in the back of their minds saw that like mom piece that they still have to be able to do all of that... but [they're] willing to do that... but still know that that's a part of their [gender] role.

Monica's reflections highlight Looker and Magee's (2000) findings surrounding girls' strong desires for high and unlimited career expectations, but also their acknowledgement that if they want to have a family they will have to take on the primary childcare responsibilities. The complexity of resistance and compliance by the participants demonstrates how the power exercised within these discourses is not absolute; power is a "dynamic of control, compliance and lack of control between discourses and the subjects constituted by [these] discourses" (Weedon, 1997, p. 111), creating the possibility for transformation.

In regards to conflicting messages and the pressure to negotiate a climate of neo-liberal accountability, almost all of the participants identified the reality of feeling pressured to teach to the test when it came to the OSSLT and a discomfort with how success was being framed

because of it. Emily makes apparent the professional conflict it causes by describing how “they say don’t teach to the test, but that’s the only thing we can do”, with Veronica describing the process as exhausting: “It’s really draining, like the whole model of how it should play out in a school I think... [should] be looked at... so we are teaching to the test”. Harry describes these pressures as coming from everyone wanting that “magic bullet that’s going to improve the biggest chunk”. His comments accentuate how the pressure neo-liberal accountability brings with it aids in fueling a ‘failing’ boys and ‘successful’ girls discourse, as teachers feel obligated to cater to gender stereotyping strategies that will improve scores. It also echoes concerns that such an emphasis on standardized testing brought in under a neo-liberal climate has more to do with controlling teachers and a mistrust in their professional knowledge rather than students developing literacy skills (Davies & Saltmarsh, 2007).

The limits the OSSLT sets for how educators are able to think about the gender achievement gap (Connell, 2010; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010) were expressed in the frustrations of many of the participants, with Angali describing the process as not working and entirely unfair: “We’re grouping... these kids together like they’re animals... they’re individuals that are in a system that is standardized... we’re trying to fit different shapes into one box and it’s not working and... I think it’s unfair”. Echoing Angali’s concerns of a broken and unfair process, Monica draws skepticism around the OSSLT’s ability to identify a gendered achievement gap:

I think society makes those like gender boxes and forces them almost, so... we already know that they’re there and then that test just brings them out even more and says they’re true and I don’t think that is accurate.

She goes on to express her frustration around how the test actually works to measure achievement, describing how it is “still a mystery... I guess I’m frustrated to a certain extent that

I don't understand necessarily what they're looking for". Similar to Monica, Harry also expresses uncertainty over the test's ability to identify 'gendered achievement', asking whether boys' failure is the result of perception: "Is it because of perception and therefore we're only going to perpetuate that... or is that shining a light on what's always been there. I do worry that we are making it worse". The tensions Angali, Monica and Harry are experiencing toward the test and their desire to do what is best for their students reflects Connell's (2013) ideas surrounding how the "current institutional system creates contradictions between short-term results and long-term effects" (p. 108) of the 'raising standards agenda'. That agenda draws attention to the professional conflict and unavoidable tensions teachers are being forced to deal with as they feel pressured to meet testing standards, while questioning the implications that can have on students and equity (Connell, 2013).

These professional conflicts illustrate the critical role of teachers' imaginaries when it comes to their capacity for change and resistance, as they have the potential to be both "policy subjects and policy actors" (Ball et al., 2012, p. 73). Harry identifies the importance of policies for equity and improving student achievement to come from teachers themselves and how "the minute you stop forcing it they won't continue on, because it didn't come from them right". As individuals bring their own opinions and experiences when negotiating policies and are positioned from their own subjectivities, policies supporting the notion of boys as 'failures' and girls as 'successful' are inevitably subject to diversity in their reading (Hall, 1997; Ball et al., 2012). Similar to Harry, Emily also describes how people "have a priority list and if that's not high on the priority list and if they know that somebody's not coming back in to check on them then it seems to go by the wayside". Her comments draw attention to the complexity of how

teachers buy into equity policies within a neo-liberal imaginary of educational achievement that both draws attention to and displaces issues of inequities (Wilkins, 2012).

In regards to the importance of teacher ‘buy in’ when it comes to equity initiatives, all of the participants expressed an appreciation for the opportunity to be able to explore their understandings of gender and gender equity and to reflect on them in their everyday practices. Rose admits that she “may have never thought about these things” and describes it as bringing it back into her ‘consciousness’, stating:

It’s been good for me to kind of re-evaluate... you know how I have been performing in terms of gender equity in my classroom... I think this experience... has helped me... you know every time you get a refresher on these types of things... when it’s brought back in your consciousness, you think more specifically about it.

Similar to Keddie’s (2010) work surrounding gender equity initiatives, such expressions give prominence to the necessity in creating professional spaces that provide the language and permission for teachers to speak about and reflect on their own personal experiences when it comes to gender. These spaces are especially imperative when it comes to exploring alternative ideas surrounding feminism and gender equity that conflict with dominant narratives. The implications of not having these spaces is illustrated by Ron when he admits to not feeling like he has access to the knowledge to even talk about it, describing how he would have to be a scientist to be able to deconstruct the implications of gender: “I think I’d really have to be... a very involved scientist to... understand the interminglings of [gender] a little bit better... I really, I don’t know”. As issues surrounding gender are an inescapable component within the education system, educators must be provided the opportunity to engage with and analyze their own assumptions and constructions of gender, rather than opportunities that are just framed around

common sense ‘tips’ for improving boys’ literacy. By exploring teachers’ engagements with neo-liberal and postfeminist discourses, it makes visible the socially constructed nature of their knowledge, which in turn disrupts notions of this knowledge being natural and unchangeable and makes it capable of transformation (St.Pierre, 2000; Davies, 2000; Kumashiro, 2004).

#### **4.5 Understanding Gender Equity and Success**

Before beginning the interviews with my participants, I was genuinely unsure of the level of emotions and opinions a discussion surrounding gender equity would bring up and how in-depth they would be willing to go in exploring their thoughts surrounding the topic. When I introduced the terms ‘gender equity’ and ‘feminism’ into our discussions and asked for their definitions and understandings, it quickly became clear to me through the body language and pauses of all of my participants that this was a difficult or uncomfortable question for some of them to engage with. As we delved deeper into the topic, it became readily apparent in the language of almost all of the participants’ descriptions of gender equity and success that they were being explained through the neo-liberal lens of ‘free’ choice. The language of ‘free’ choice is often considered an intricate part of neo-liberal ideology (Hall, 2012; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010; Peck & Tickle, 2002) and despite becoming clear that it was an important part of how my participants perceived gender equity and success, it was not always absolute in meaning and was subjected to deconstruction by some of them.

Although the language of choice was repeatedly brought up in our discussions, several of the participants appeared to struggle to come up with a specific definition of what it meant. Rose defined it as “having more than one option and I guess the ability to make a conscious decision of what you want or what’s important”. Ron perceived it as a “personal decision to do one thing



or the other... I don't know if I could really expand on that much". In Angali's definition, she highlights the importance of choice being 'free':

Choice is the ability to pick what you need that's best for you... in whatever situation it is.

Whether personal, professional, leadership, no matter what it is choice is when you have... free, without restrictions, being able to choose what you need.

The idea of choice being personal and in some cases an 'individual' act that was not contextualised was an issue that came up in reference to how choice greatly influences one's success.

Despite many of the participants recognizing the structural barriers that existed for some of their students, such as SES, lack of success still seemed to be positioned as an issue of individual choice within a meritocratic society, with choice and hard work becoming a symbol for social mobility. For example, when asked if choice could overcome any barrier, Rose states how "it is all choice... if they don't make the choice to do it, they don't want to try, if they're not going to put in the effort, it doesn't matter what we do, they're not going to be successful". From Rose's statement, it can be inferred how the language of neo-liberalism still acts as the dominant framework for her to interpret her experiences (Baker, 2010). Similar to Baker's (2010) qualitative findings of women's perceptions of the role of choice, it appears choice is being used for individualised explanations of achievement, where effort is the key component in determining one's success. Through the lens of neo-liberalism, choice becomes used to ration the necessity of known losers within the education system, as students become constructed as consumers who are 'individual autonomous agents' capable of choosing the resources they require to be successful within the current education system (Connell, 2013; Wilkins, 2012;

Clark, 2009; Stromquist, 2002). Similar to Rose, Ron also frames choice and hard work as capable of superseding any barrier, with success generally seen as a personal choice, stating:

Choice, hard work and patience... I think you can overcome ninety-nine percent of the barriers, obviously there are probably going to be exceptions to the rule... for someone to be successful... it comes down to personal motivation... so it's their choice really to partake... the extra supports that we have going on in the school, so ultimately a lot of it is choice.

The idea of success becoming equated with individual choice ties into what Skelton and Francis (2005) describe as a neo-liberal individualist policy drive, where despite recognizing that barriers exist and that they make achievement far more difficult for some, ultimate responsibility for 'failure' still lies with the individual, rather than structurally. The idea of the individual 'taking' or 'choosing' success also came up with Angali in reference to whether choice and hard work could overcome any barrier, with the idea that "resilience, hard work will get you far in life... if you want to take it". Angali's point also ties into postfeminism's construction of success being readily available to any and all girls, as long as they are willing to choose it and work hard, framing individual effort as the key component in determining outcomes (Pomerantz & Raby, 2011; Baker, 2008). Although Rose, Ron and Angali frame choice and hard work as available if one chooses it, Monica appears to frame it as something internal that one has or does not have:

Hard work and the choices they make directly impact their success... hard work is hard to teach, right, it comes from within them and within the ethics and values of their home, so by the time they get to high school, they are who they are.

Monica alludes to choice and hard work being internalised and unchangeable, but her reference to the home influencing how one approaches choice and hard work does suggest the idea of

one's success being impacted by other people's choices. The influence of others is most noticeable when she tries to define choice and reflects on the grade ten prep course to get into the advanced English program that she was teaching:

I guess ability... to make a decision... I guess I use this word loosely, but sometimes the parents make the choice on their behalf, so I don't know if the student is always in control. In some circumstances... I know for a fact that there are students who go home and their parents say I'm setting the timer you have you know an hour, I want you to work on your English and they're like I have no homework and they're like do it anyway and those tend to be the pre-AP parents so they didn't have a choice.

Monica's struggle in defining choice as individual and free illustrates the problematic issues associated with the neo-liberal and postfeminist narrative of unlimited, free choice as a "transparent account of agency" (Baker, 2008, p. 68).

Monica was not the only one to question the transparency of choice as 'free' and the 'great equalizer'. Harry, looking from a macro perspective, directly comments on how his board is finding that "sometimes by grade nine, choice and hard work aren't even part of the equation anymore" when it comes to success on the OSSLT. He even goes further when he criticizes the idea that anybody would ever 'choose' to fail rather than succeed:

If a kid can do it, they will do it... no kid really chooses to fail, absolutely not... kids know they are failing... it's not that they're ignorant of that fact... they aren't getting up in the morning and saying I'm going to fail something today... they are absolutely not choosing when it happens. I think they're meeting our expectations.

Harry's complex construction of choice as something limited by the expectations through which it is framed is important in disrupting the common sense notion of 'free' choice undoing

inequities that influence ‘success’ and ‘failure’. In this case, Harry is drawing on how a neo-liberal imaginary of competition and accountability creates expectations that there must be winners and losers within the education system (Connell, 2013; Gillborn, 2008; Keddie, 2010). He sees those students who are expected to fail as simply recognizing those expectations placed on them and therefore meeting them. Harry actually goes as far as to say less choice is better, with “more of a direct approach to here’s what you need, here’s where we’re gonna... funnel you toward”, acknowledging the role of the system in where students ultimately end up. His comments reflect how the presentation of free choice as the most important factor in why boys and girls succeed functions as a mask to conceal the power relations and inequities that exist, as disadvantaged students are not choosing to fail, but rather meeting the expectation that they are supposed to be (Baker, 2008; McRobbie, 2008).

Similar to the use of choice to explain success, the significance of choice in defining the inner workings of gender equity in the classroom also became apparent. For example, Veronica states:

Gender equity probably in terms of if there was choice... there would be some choices, say for an essay, that would be things that might be of more interest to the boys, depending on what they’ve already kind of shown [in] time in the class and same to the girls.

Similarly, Angali draws on the language of ‘free’ choice to describe how gender equity operates in her classroom, citing the importance of students’ interests being met in her framework of gender equity:

I definitely would teach with gender in mind and I think that’s why they’re allowed to pick their own novels... I don’t think they necessarily pick it based on their gender, but

their interests... once again it comes to choice and allowing kids to choose exactly what they need.

Both of these ideas appear to be operating within the presumption of choice being capable of 'freeing' gender restraints; choice itself seems to be viewed as a 'free' entity and the 'great equalizer', with no major consideration for the greater structural restraints that may prevent students from 'choosing' to do what they want. The idea of having the freedom to choose one's interests equating to gender equity speaks to the seductive rhetoric found in neo-liberalism and postfeminist ideals of choice and hard work being held up as the symbol of achieved equality. In Baker's (2008) discursive analysis of choice, she argues that the upholding of choice as a symbol of equity within neo-liberalism and postfeminism ultimately functions as a mechanism to regulate consent to current economic power structures and relations. She describes how that consent is achieved through inequities becoming a matter of personal choices and interests in a meritocratic society. McRobbie (2008) also describes the use of the word 'choice' as a type of empowerment being reframed within an individualistic discourse so it can function as a form of 'substitute' for feminism and equity. Similarly, Veronica describes gender equity to be about offering "the same option, the same types of things to either gender that it would appeal to their interest and abilities". In this sense, equality becomes simplified and limited to choice based on personal interests and naturalised abilities rather than equality of outcome.

The seductive narrative of choice and hard work being used as a means out of inequity is powerful and it comes as no surprise why it is held up compared to the intolerable notion that there is nothing one can do. I argue that it is not wrong that choice and hard work are celebrated as important components to success, but where it becomes problematic is when it is framed as 'free' and 'individual' under the premise of school as a neutral entity. Assumptions of choice

must be challenged and it is important to deconstruct how the discourses of neo-liberalism and postfeminism use this language to create common sense knowledge that serves to hide and justify structural inequities. The language of these dominant discourses must be scrutinized to determine how they limit what types of inequities are possible within schools and society as a whole (Connell, 2013). By deconstructing how this language is used, the existing power relations can be brought to the surface and examined (Anyon, 2009).

In regards to the participants' narratives surrounding their perceptions of achieved gender equity, there was a high level of variety and complexity, especially when these narratives were framed within academic achievement and the workplace. Such complexity was most noticeable in Monica's narrative, as her perceptions diverged and contradicted surrounding the achievement of gender equity. From her experiences teaching a gender unit, she admits that the girls in her class have expressed conflicting emotions around gender roles. They want to be able to financially support themselves, while acknowledging that they have to be able to balance that with primary childcare responsibilities:

[They] have an idea... [that] economics, it means [being] successful, they want to be, they want to make good money, but I think they're also in the back of their mind saw that like mom piece that they still have to be able to do all of that.

Here Monica recognizes the conflicting pressures and desires her female students were experiencing around needing to have a high income and being able to balance that with primary childcare responsibilities in order to be considered 'successful'. In combination with this, she also relates a recent personal experience in which she was putting oil in her car and a male passerby asked if she needed help, making her feel that she was stereotyped. Despite

acknowledging these ideas and experiences surrounding gender inequities, she admits later on in our conversation that she does believe gender equity in reality has been achieved:

I don't think that the girls, for sure, are impacted by gender [barriers]. They may put their own pressures on them[selves], but like as a school I think we've achieved gender equity... so the lit[eracy] test would say that boys are not literate and it would say that females are, but I don't think that's accurate.

Despite recognizing gender stereotyping and conflicting pressures girls are facing in society, she appears to reposition gender equity through a neo-liberal lens, framing these issues as 'individual' pressures girls put on themselves. Monica's rephrasing of gender equity relates to the smart girls in Pomerantz and Raby's (2011) study who were aware of gender inequality, but countered this discourse with the postfeminist belief that girls and boys are now equal, especially when it comes to academics. What this may suggest is that young girls are not experiencing this conflict in isolation and that teachers are also being influenced in similar ways by neo-liberal and postfeminist rhetoric. It brings attention to how gender equity is always open to "challenge and redefinition with shifts in its discursive context. What it means at any particular moment depends on the discursive relations within which it is located, and it is open to constant rereading and reinterpretation" (Weedon, 1997, p. 25) and by no means remains a 'fixed' concept.

These contradictions buttress Ringrose's (2013) argument for more direct lessons in debunking the measurement of gender equality through standardized test results and drawing attention to the reality that some women are still faced with complex dilemmas surrounding economic security and work and family life balance. It is important to note that several participants were able to acknowledge the economic barriers women still face, with Harry asserting that in "the workplace it's still a big problem... I think what's the income disparity? It's

still [a]bout thirty percent different” and Angali noting several times how “we know that males it’s been shown, males are... making a lot more than females even for the same jobs nowadays”.

Intertwined in the stories of the participants’ relationships and perceptions of achieved gender equity was the concept that it is simultaneously both visible and invisible, with several participants acknowledging the importance of gender equity, but deeming it as inherent and not requiring direct attention. When discussing the advantages and disadvantages that both girls and boys face, Ron for example hints at how gender equity is something already known, stating how “it’s in staff consciousness, it’s in student consciousness even... but there’s still obviously progress that can be made”. Interestingly, he also describes a recognition that the Ministry’s mandated literacy test is making visible a gender gap and somewhat reluctantly admits to “hav[ing] to trust the government and the results they’re giving [us]”, but also argues for a type of invisibility, by stating that “I just don’t know that it needs to be communicated”.

Rose, who perceived gender equity as something already achieved and not a concern of hers, commented on how issues of gender equity are no longer visible and relevant, as “gender equity, it’s sort of inherent... [pause] unless you have a prejudice[d] teacher or something”. Here she describes how the vocabulary of gender equity is no longer required by everyday people, because it has become ‘internalized’, as she states: “I think everyone knows that there’s supposed to be equity and equality”. The idea of gender inequity simply resulting from a prejudice teacher also hints at liberal feminist ideals that good attitudes and intent can erase discrimination by making it irrelevant in the classroom, concealing structural inequalities (Briskin, 1990). Rose’s notion of somehow being ‘past’ conversations about gender equity connects to McRobbie’s (2008) notion of how neo-liberal and postfeminist discourses frame issues of feminism as now being widely recognized and responded to, insinuating that it is



therefore no longer needed in “contemporary political culture” (p. 55). It also reflects Davies’s (1989) argument that it is no longer a question of whether the majority of teachers today believe there should be gender equity or not, but rather it is a question of what gender equity exactly means and how it manifests into practice that needs to be addressed.

The idea of feminism or gender equity becoming irrelevant is reinforced by Rose when she tries to define it, describing it as no longer being about females anymore and that there needs to be equality for men and boys too:

I don’t know, I find the name kind of confusing I guess when I try to pair it with the definition, because I would just think it’s like ensuring equity, it’s not really about... females anymore other than I know in the past that females weren’t treated equally with males, but now I see it more as... not necessarily you know specifically related to females anymore.

In a way, Rose’s comment hints at Lingard and Douglas’s (1999) ideas of how boys are being positioned as the new disadvantaged group and that girls, as an entire group, no longer require the specific attention emphasized by feminism like they once did. When Angali was asked if she discusses feminism and gender equity in her classroom, she admits to not using these words, because they are already well known: “I don’t know if I ever even use those words, because once again... it’s out there, we do it, it’s always existed”. The problematic issues associated with assuming that these words are already known and understood is that it positions their meanings as ‘fixed’, without recognizing how they take on new meanings as social relations change (St. Pierre, 2000).

When discussing her perceptions of whether gender equity had been achieved in society, Angali also uses the word “we” as though to invoke common sense knowledge that everyone

knows that women still face inequities and economic barriers, despite documented media attention on the idea that girls have achieved equity with boys, if not more due to their academic achievement on standardized testing (Jackson et al., 2010; Pomertantz & Raby, 2011; Ringrose, 2007, 2013; Gills & Tranter, 2012):

It definitely has not been achieved... we know now that women do not get paid the same as men. We know that even men who stay home to look after their children are not viewed the same way... it's still there but I think [with] the death of the old generation, a lot of this may die.

Her musings about the possibility of gender equity improving as generations die out appears to also position gender inequity within the language of neo-liberalism, as it is seen as an individualized problem and not a systematic institutional one, ingrained in the very fabric of society. It also draws on an idea that once these notions become a part of our schemas, they are irreversible, highlighting the importance feminist post-structuralism places on deconstructing and exposing these power relations in order to make visible their true susceptibility to change. Interestingly, Ron and Veronica were the only participants to say directly that they felt they lacked enough knowledge to really make an informed opinion on the achievement and measurement of gender equity. Although Ron stated the belief that both girls and boys are equally disadvantaged, just in different ways, he admitted that it is “very hard for me to quantify that... I don't know... my feeling... and my definitive answer would be I have no idea... I think it is probably a good idea that I don't have an idea”. His comments reflect an honest acknowledgement of how issues of gender equity cannot be easily simplified and require a critical deconstruction.

Along with the idea of gender equity becoming a concept that everyone ‘naturally’ knows they are supposed to be striving for, there was also a distinct decision by several participants to take out the word ‘gender’ when discussing gender equity and feminism. When asked if gender equity and feminism were still relevant, Veronica reinforces the necessity of it going both ways:

It is a good [pause] thing to keep in mind just in terms of equity, but I think it would... go both ways... thinking of males being treated equally too. So, just more in terms of humanity... Feminism to me would be... like getting equal rights, equal opportunities.

In connection to her suggestion that she sees it as issues of “humanity”, she highlights her preference to not call it gender equity at all by stating: “I wouldn’t say I normally sit down and think of it... in terms of gender. I think of it [in] terms of interest”. Once again gender equity is being repositioned or rephrased through the neo-liberal language of interests and having unlimited or unrestrained choice to do what one wants. The idea of everyone simply being seen as just a human being also connects to liberal humanist notions of how a person or subject is capable of being unmarked by race, gender, class and sexuality (Weedon, 1997). The concept that one’s identity or self can be positioned as neutral ultimately works to buttress neo-liberal ideals of self-responsibility and individualism, highlighting how these two are mutually reinforcing. Weedon (1997) describes language as “ultimately construct[ing] an individual’s subjectivity in ways which are socially specific” (p. 21) and such statements shine light on how the language of neo-liberal and liberal humanism is transforming how gender equity is being understood and approached by teachers. Framing gender equity as merely issues of interests seems to result in a simplification and hiding of gender, disallowing the space and opportunity to question structural inequities and the gendered policing that occurs. When these words are no longer being used, such as gender, it prevents them from becoming issues of importance; by

displacing them, they become supposedly irrelevant because they are no longer transparent. In trying to make invisible the “supposed gendered nature of academic achievement” (Wilkins, 2012, p. 766), we inadvertently heighten visibility to homogenizing and essentialized characteristics of gender.

Similar to Rose and Veronica, Ron also describes feminism without the use of the words ‘women’ or ‘gender’, rendering both genders as now being disadvantaged and subscribing to what McRobbie (2008) describes as an ‘instrumentalised’ feminism: inherently taken up to symbolize what freedom and equity now mean. By claiming to engage in only ‘equity’, it can be seen as an ‘undoing’ of feminism, because of the conscious elimination of the words ‘women’ and ‘gender’ from the critical vocabulary. No longer having the language to name intersecting inequities, like sexism, racism, homophobia or classism weakens one’s ability to identify and stop harmful gender stereotyping and inequities that are occurring underneath the surface. The word ‘equity’ on its own seems to take on a neutral or safe position, where rather than identifying specific groups as being oppressed, everyone is positioned as potentially being oppressed in some way, drawing attention away from the power structures in place that benefit some and not others. Ron, for example, takes a position of being a ‘feminist’ and ‘masculinist’ in describing the importance of equity being for everyone and that men and women are both disadvantaged:

I would consider myself a feminist...women are disadvantaged potentially in our world, and men, so I would also consider myself a masculinist if there is a term that exists... I think for me feminism... it’s a term that is associated with sometimes just women trying to... you know... do certain things but I think it’s a term that if everyone who believes in

equality should really engage with and that's kind of how I view it, that it's just people trying for equality, trying to achieve that.

Ron's connection to being a 'feminist' as well as a 'masculinist' and that men and women are both potentially disadvantaged, just in different ways could be perceived as him unknowingly taking up a recuperative masculinity position, where girls' and boys' needs are somehow always in opposition in one another (Lingard & Douglas, 1999). The idea of the 'masculinist' in some way connects to a recuperative masculinity politics that views social power as now being equally distributed between men and women, if not more for women, and that both are suffering in 'analogous' ways from narrow sex roles (Lingard & Douglas, 1999).

Trying to claim a neutral position in regards to which gender is more disadvantaged and asserting that equality is for everyone results in an erasure of gender, as Ron describes: "In my class, I really try not to see gender I just try to see students". The idea of being gender-blind or gender becoming erased connects to liberal humanist or liberal feminist notions that frame students as individuals who are capable of being seen outside the social markers of sex, class, race and sexual orientation (Coulter, 1996). Rather than focusing on equality of outcomes, liberal feminism draws attention to the importance of equality of opportunity and providing women with the same options and choices within the idea of a meritocratic and inherently 'fair' society (Coulter, 1996; Weedon, 1997). Liberal feminism's focus on equality, rather than equity within a gender blind approach relates to and fuels neo-liberal ideals of choice and individualism. Placing an emphasis on just seeing individuals and not recognizing the social markers of race, class, sexuality, or gender serves to conceal structural inequities and prevents challenging education's complex role in reproducing an exploitative, oppressive relationship that is both classed and gendered (Kenway, 1990; Coulter, 1996). When discussing feminism, Harry similarly attempts

to frame himself in this way: “I... identify myself as... neutral... which I think makes me a feminist in comparison to some men”. In trying to identify himself within a neutral position, in which he sees no gender, he is subscribing to the neo-liberal individualising notion that “we can no longer talk about groups of girls and women or boys and men, only ‘individuals’ who are ‘weak’ and ‘inferior’” (Ringrose, 2013, p. 142).

Despite complex and varying discursive engagements with gender equity, there was an underlying importance placed on the topic, with almost all participants claiming that more professional development would be wanted and needed. Angali was the only participant to actually identify herself as a feminist: “I define myself as a feminist and I think I define feminism as... you know seeking for your rights as a... woman, whatever that looks like”. She goes as far as to describe gender equity to be “one of the fundamental things... one of the fundamental ways we understand other human beings”. Although Angali was the only participant to readily identify herself as a feminist, there were others who still expressed its importance, especially within education. For example, Ron claimed that “feminism will always be needed” and finally Emily stating that “to understand the thoughts of another gender... will help each individual kinda see society in a more realistic, in a more open-minded way”. These comments show the possibilities for how gender equity is always open to debate and redefinition within competing discursive contexts and despite the apparent presence of neo-liberal and postfeminist rhetoric, there is still room for resistance (Kenway et al., 1998; Wilkins, 2012; Weedon, 1997).

#### **4.6 Addressing Gender Equity and Feminism in the Classroom**

In connection to the range of interpretations of gender equity documented by my participants, I wanted to additionally draw attention to some teachers’ decisions to discuss issues

of gender, feminism and gender equity in the classroom with their students. The decision to include discussions around gender issues in the classroom varied, with some purposefully incorporating ‘gender’ units into their grade nine and ten courses, with others choosing to discuss it briefly if it came up in their senior classes and some admitting to never talking about it due to its irrelevance. Ron, for example, talks about purposefully teaching a book on gender in his junior classes and how the students “generally seem engaged with those types of questions, because a lot of the times it’s surprising for them”.

Although Ron was willing to explore these topics with his students and the positive response he has gotten from doing so, a common theme among the other participants was the caution of the appropriate age at which to discuss such topics. An example of this is given by Monica, who incorporated a unit on gender in her junior class and in fact admits that her students were able to demonstrate awareness about gender and gender equity. She claims to “get the best conversations out of that unit”, while also stating that “I think they’re aware of [gender and gender equity], but I don’t know... if they internalize it like that they’re still... pretty young in my opinion, grade nine and ten”. Interestingly, Emily admits to only bringing up the topic of feminism and gender equity in her senior classes, because at “that level they’re very mature”. She later reflects though on past experiences of discussing sexism in her junior media units and how impactful it was: “I think it’s huge and in a lot of things and actually now that I’m talking to you, I’m like man! We should do a lot more!” When discussing the importance of feminism, she also goes on to describe it as something that is “definitely important to touch on, because these kids today don’t know anything else... just as important as history is, I think gender equity and just the whole history of it... is just as important”. Despite experiencing positive responses from students when exploring the topics of gender and gender equity, these comments regarding a

reluctance to discuss these topics due to maturity level are significant in the context of extensive research that indicates how adolescents and children are already negotiating complex discourses of gender (See Keddie, 2005; Reay, 2001; Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2005; Jackson, 2006; Ringrose, 2010; 2013; Pomerantz & Raby, 2011). The significance of teachers' decisions to discuss these issues with their students is connected to how teachers are engaging with gender equity within a postfeminist narrative.

#### **4.7 Expectations**

While discussing definitions of success and achievement within the framework of gender equity and 'failing' boys and 'successful' girls, it became evident very quickly the emphasis placed on 'expectations' in determining achievement and success. This became most evident in Harry's response to the question of how he understands success: "It's less [about] choice, but basically high expectations. I think that if they come in and we come in with high expectations, [but] that doesn't mean you go beyond their ability". When asked about his definition in reference to the idea of 'failing' boys and 'successful' girls, he expands on his previous point:

No kid really chooses to fail, absolutely not. I think they're meeting our expectations. I think in a lot of cases we don't expect much at all and they say I'm going to give you exactly what you're looking for and it makes you want to cry.

Here he draws attention to the limitations of neo-liberal choice as the great equalizer because of its inevitable framing within the expectations and options provided to students. The negative implications of feeling like a failure that Harry is elaborating on are emphasized by Martin (2002), who talks about the lingering negative effects failure can have on specifically male students' motivations and orientations towards school work.



The grand narrative of girls' academic success and boys' failure appeared to be seen by several participants as a systematic construction manufactured through the expectations projected from the institution, the media, parents and teachers themselves. The implications of girls internalizing the expectations created through neo-liberal and postfeminist discourses are acknowledged by Monica, when she states:

I think they put too much pressure on themselves, so like the flipside of the boys lacking self-confidence they feel like they have to live up to this, like they have a certain expectation that has been put on them, whether it's by society or by teachers or by their parents.

The recognition of the pressure girls are facing from internalizing expectations of needing to 'have it all' is also reinforced by Angali and Monica's comments surrounding how gender equity is measured and societal influence: "a lot of girls look at... the realistic possibility of getting into a program, or getting into a certain area, based on what they've already seen" (Angali) and that idea that "female[s] tend to limit themselves based on what they know to be true in society around them" (Monica). Monica and Angali's comments surrounding how perception equals reality and that girls' beliefs are formulated through the expectations communicated to them connects to Jones's (1993) notion of how girls become 'girls' by engaging with the social meanings and language provided to them that try to define what it means and looks like to 'do' girl. It illustrates how the postfeminist narrative of 'girl power' comes into conflict with the reality that although girls are achieving higher on standardized testing and more are graduating from high school and university, women are still earning less than their male counterparts and make up the majority of part-time workers in Canada (Hammet & Sanford, 2008; Alperstein, 2005; Chiose, 2014). Despite this celebratory discourse of girls' success, their new ability to do

and be whatever they want is not necessarily being represented in immediate reality, which causes conflict.

The implications of girls' internalizing 'successful' girl expectations were expressed most vividly through the role of parental influence. Monica's experience with parent/teacher interviews in the highly competitive pre-AP program that she was teaching best illustrates such pressure from parents:

Then you see the girls and it's like how can they get into pre-AP they need to work harder they have an 85, how can they get a 90 so there's like tons of pressure on them and that's very obvious to me then with the pre-AP it's like overall pressure, so parents are sitting down, they have a 94, how can they get a 98, like take it easy.

She then goes on to describe the pressure of the parents as something her female students internalize:

I would see it through the pressure of the parents that I already see, so you *will* be successful... and then I think they internalize that and move forward with it... they tend to come out with a lot of self-confidence and they're okay to maintain that and they believe they'll be successful and society says they will be successful, studies say they will be successful, so they tend to be successful.

Rather than seeing girls' success as just somehow innate, Monica draws attention to how such success is socially constructed through the popular discourses working around them. Her final words surrounding the repeated statements of success illustrate how gender norms become justified by relying on 'unquestioned assumptions' (Weedon, 1997), in this case that girls, as a homogenized group, *will* be successful.

As gender differences become fixed within biological differences, it produces these uninterrupted or naturalised assumptions that gender norms are formulated around (Davies, 1989). As Murphy and Elwood (1998) point out, these gendered expectations greatly influence how children respond to the world, how they make sense of it and what they learn. It influences what children come to see as appropriate behaviours for themselves and others (Murphy & Elwood, 1998). Common sense looks to “‘human nature’ to guarantee its version of reality [and]... is the medium through which already fixed ‘truths’ about the world, society and individuals are expressed” (Weedon, 1997, p. 74). With this in mind, it can be seen how these gendered expectations of girls having to be successful become intricately entwined with common sense notions of *all* girls as successful promoted through a postfeminist discourse. These taken for granted socially constructed notions of all girls being successful must be disrupted in order to expose other structural inequities at play. In reflecting on the role of expectations in girls’ and boys’ success, Harry comments on this process:

If you go in thinking so and so... she’s bright, she’s a girl, she’s going to do fine on these things. Then... she just goes okay fine, oh I better live up to that... and I think the reverse happens a lot too, for boys... you know, it’s okay, this novel here, this one is for you... or whatever it is how we sell it. The message is you can’t do it.

Feminist post-structuralism constructs meanings and identities as always being in flux as they are fragmented and positioned across various discourses that form an individual’s sense of self (Kenway et al., 1998). With this in mind, one can see how ‘successful girl’ identities are being constructed through the meanings and common sense knowledge that a postfeminist narrative demands, in this case that young women are now seen as the bearers of qualifications and are the

model subjects of the ‘new’ more accountable and competitive education system brought in under neo-liberalism (McRobbie, 2008; Clark, 2009).

Similar to the discussion surrounding the participants leaving out the words ‘women’ and ‘gender’ in their constructions of gender equity and feminism, Rose draws attention to how *all* girls are expected to do well in literacy, to the point that they are not recognized in literacy resources: “So we’ve had specific... learning on boys’ literacy, we haven’t had anything on girls’ literacy and then it’s only boys’ literacy or it’s *just* literacy”. The emphasis on boys’ literacy or ‘just literacy’ highlights the assumption of everyone knowing girls are successful and boys are failing at literacy due to the gendered achievement numbers produced from standardized testing. The problematic issues associated with an emphasis on boys’ literacy is that it lends itself to homogenizing all boys and girls and inscribes an ‘essentialist mindset’ that claims natural differences between boys and girls, thus failing to engage with how other forms of inequity impact some boys and some girls (Martino & Rezai-Rashti, 2012; Rowan, Knobel, Bigum & Lankshear, 2002). Such a failure is especially problematic as “disaggregated data tend to highlight that middle-class boys perform much better than girls from disadvantaged backgrounds and that the race gap in achievement is much greater than any gender gap” (Martino & Rezai-Rashti, 2012, p. 13; Martino, 2008; Mead, 2006 ).

Like the girls, boys were also framed as internalizing the expectations provided to them through the ‘failing’ boys discourse. Monica makes account of this when discussing the barriers to success she believed boys were facing:

I don’t know if they’re as invested in English or the barrier of like their own mindset.

Boys are not very good at communicating and females are... they’ll say things in class

like well I’m a male, I’m not strong... that is just a little bit scary for me that they chunk

themselves and the females... I think students are aware of it and it does impact... their ability to be successful.

Monica's concerns reflect Millard's (1997) work into the 'gendered nature of reading' and how English becomes constructed as 'feminine'. The quiet reader is seen as a 'gendered marked behaviour' by children and becomes linked to a "passive feminine identity" (p. 43). Millard (1997) highlights how both boys and girls from her study identified 'good' readers in their classrooms as girls, with boys identifying reading with school and work, rather than a leisurely activity. Millard (1997) connects these ideas to Pidgeon's (2004) findings of how even early reading is already being constructed by children as a 'girl activity', in which boys are unable to access it as it conflicts with dominant constructions of masculinity. Even though masculinities and femininities are performative in nature and therefore susceptible to change, it must be understood how those performances are constrained by place and circumstances, including the power relations of that particular context (Paechter, 2007).

When considering the concept of expectations, it should be noted how it is tied to particular understandings about gender and that students' gendered socializations influence what they come to perceive as their expected 'gender domains' (Browne & Ross, 1991; Murphy & Elwood, 1998). These gendered domains are formed very early and influence whether boys and girls choose to partake in or avoid certain activities, as it constructs their perceptions of their competencies in various areas. As Davies and Saltmarsh (2007) point out, it must be understood how 'being gendered shapes individual interest and engagement in literacy practices' (p. 8) and that these learned gender preferences greatly influence differences in performance between girls and boys that are not necessarily related to ability (Murphy & Elwood, 1998). The implications of these gender learning domains on boys is illustrated in their supposed refusal to engage in

what they perceive as a feminized learning domain within English, illustrating the importance in taking into account how these gendered domains become constructed (Murphy & Elwood, 1998). These ideas connect to Harry's reflections on the expectations of boys lacking literary skills being fostered through the OSSLT, questioning whether the perception of boys as 'failing' is making it a reality through the gender constructions it brings with it:

I think the perception is that there is a gap and that in maybe, does the perception itself reinforce the gap... I think that's my biggest concern is that it's a perception gap, it's that... we're lowering our expectations and they're going to lower their expectations of themselves... if they look at a text and it doesn't make them feel stupid, were halfway there.

Similar to Easthope and Easethope's (2000) study where they found teachers outright refusing to accept the changes to their teaching practices brought on under neo-liberalism, Harry's criticism of the OSSLT demonstrates how there is room and a willingness by teachers to question the rhetoric of these discourses, especially when they conflict with their pedagogies and professional ideologies. Drawing on Davies (1989), it illustrates how teachers have access to "many forms of discursive practice and many possible ways of positioning themselves and being positioned within those practices" (p. 237). Although neo-liberalism and postfeminism appear monolithic and are dominant, Harry's questioning of the common sense knowledge they dictate illustrates how they are not fixed, but rather organic as the knowledge and language they create are moulded by his interactions (Archer & Francis, 2007).

The extent to which some teachers questioned common sense notions produced through the 'failing' boys and 'successful' girls discourses is also highlighted by Harry's assertion of the role of educators:

It's our job to expose them to things, right?... multiple intelligences isn't about oh this kid is kinesthetic, therefore everything has to be running around. It's that is a strength for that kid, and I need to recognize it, but out in the real world, they are going to need these other things, which are weaknesses right now, so I need to work on them... we need to stretch, we need to have the kids stretch more and that's expectations.

Here he suggests expanding our expectations beyond gendered stereotypes rather than subscribing to them in an effort to improve OSSLT performance.

In connection to the skepticism some teachers exercised with the 'failing' boys and 'successful' girls discourses, there was also recognition of how expectations differed at various streamed levels, bringing into question which boys and which girls subscribe to these meta-narratives. Such recognition is most clear in Monica's experiences with her pre-AP and regular courses, where she identifies:

Guys tend to be like... we don't talk about our feelings and the pre-AP you'll see the complete opposite, the males are overwhelmingly making connections, hands up, let's talk about it and the girls tend to back off... but then you go back to the like grade nine, grade ten regular stream and like it switches again.

Similarly, Harry identifies how the most powerful difference in expectations can be seen with the applied and academic streams, which he identifies as the "huge one" in terms of a literacy gap. He describes a scenario of a split academic and applied grade nine English class, where "their applied kids did better than almost any other school in our board", regardless of gender. Overall, teachers appear to be making sense of postfeminism's narrative of girls' academic success against the backdrop of the OSSLT through the perception of 'expectations' ultimately determining girls' and boys' achievement; expectations they see as harmful and open to the

possibility of change. In the end, neo-liberalism's claim of standardization, accountability and competition being capable of generating a neutral learning environment where inequities are no longer issues ultimately fails to get at "the heart of the ways in which literacy, gender and social power are mutually constitutive" (Davies & Saltmarsh, 2007, p. 8).

#### **4.8 Literacy and Emotions**

When discussing girls' success and boys' failure on the OSSLT and in the general English classroom, an interesting theme emerged around emotions and their explanatory potential. These ideas appeared to be intricately connected to how the participants approached and understood gender, illustrating the importance in examining their threshold knowledge. The language that makes up one's perceptions and understandings of gender in many ways acts as a structure that artificially limits individuals and keeps them securely positioned within a particular box or place (Halberstam, 1998). Although gender and characterisations of femininity and masculinity were discussed throughout the interviews, defining these concepts was difficult at times for some participants, and understandings widely ranged. Halberstam (1998) shines light on how it is often difficult for society to explicitly define these concepts, yet so much time and energy is spent supporting particular understandings that are somehow implicitly recognizable. Rose, in her attempt to define femininity, admits to only being able to describe it through assumed stereotypes:

I know it's going to sound stereotypical before it comes out, but yeah the soft aspects of being a girl... identifying this with those differences that make a female different from a male... don't ask me to identify what the softer aspects are [laughs]... because I couldn't. Rose's admittance to being unable to describe her perceptions more concretely reflect Butler's (1993) notions about individuals struggling to identify actual gendered differences, but knowing



they are there. Similar to Rose, Angali also reflects on how femininity is difficult to explain, stating: “Femininity to me... are individuals who convey feminine qualities, you know. I don’t know how to explain that”. Rather than trying to define these terms as concretely fixed, Monica goes on to describe it as something that has become internalized for each individual and that “femininity defaults to whatever, however you were brought up, what you know to be true for a female, what you know to be true for a male quality”.

Drawing on the idea of what one knows to be ‘true’ as a male and female quality, Angali shows how literacy becomes explained through gender, as she takes on a more essentialist perspective when describing how “as females we naturally are animals that analyze things, we think about things, we look at different angles, like why did this happen... for the boys, I find, a lot more things are very black and white”. Angali’s positioning of literacy within a feminine/masculine binary draws attention to Walkerdine’s (1984, 1991) argument of how femininity becomes framed within opposition to qualities of masculinity, which effectively limits how literacy and gender can be approached. What becomes especially problematic is when these normalizing and common sense assumptions about boys and girls become the main mechanisms for approaching literacy, rather than the research-based knowledge of how gender constructions impact both boys and girls learning (Martino & Berrill, 2003; Murphy & Elwood, 1998; Millard, 1997). Despite Angali’s viewpoint taking on an essentialist positioning, she does express flexibility in how gender should be understood, stating how “whatever you identify as now, that is what I consider your gender” illustrating how these normalizing assumptions are not absolute in how they are taken up.

In regards to essentialist or socially constructed understandings of gender, there was no concrete positioning and despite many explicitly recognizing that socially constructed

understandings of gender were ideal, many still subscribed to natural or biological perspectives, leading to conflicting viewpoints at times. Emily, for example, identified how she did not “think there was any difference between a male and female when they’re born”, but admitted to the idea of some natural differences, despite also seeing it as a social construction:

I agree that... [boys and girls are] naturally born with differences [pause] pertaining to traits and characteristics... I honestly think it’s the type of personality male or female that the child is born with and I think it’s their surroundings... its dependent on their home life... what their community offers, what... their school, the expectations they give... the traits they develop and the characteristics they develop... I totally believe it’s social.

Emily’s confliction highlights how teachers’ knowledge of gender is not clear cut despite postfeminist notions of gender and female success being irrelevant issue for educators; teachers’ understandings of gender will impact how they come to negotiate these discourses (Ringrose, 2013).

Participants’ understandings of gender were also influenced by their reflections on personal experiences, most noticeably as parents. Despite admitting that gender was not something she normally thought about: “I can’t say I really think a lot about gender”, Veronica describes the idea of boys as active learners as something ‘innate’ she sees in her own children: “I think it’s just innate... [be]cause we look at my little guys, they’re just kind of born with it”. In this biological explanation, Veronica’s personal experiences translate into common sense knowledge surrounding how boys’ learn, becoming fixed and an acceptable approach to gender (Weedon, 1997).

As gender arrangements are reproduced socially through the power structures that shape individual action, they often appear static and ‘naturalised’ (Connell, 2009). Although they

appear this way, gender arrangements are in a constant state of change, as structures or discourses develop conflicts and contradictions (Connell, 2009). These ideas help explain Harry's struggles around wanting to see gender as a social construction and trying to understand his personal experiences with his daughter:

I have a three year old daughter who is becoming very girly and I just think... we didn't go about it as... we want to make sure we have a gender neutral household, but we also have not said you need to be a pretty princess... yet we have a little princess right, now mind you she goes to daycare, so I do think it has been constructed there. Part of it comes from the home, I mean we've watched little mermaid, but we've watched boy movies too, right and we're very cognitive of that... so I think that... somewhere in the... genetic code, there is something, but it doesn't mean that everybody has that something right... to close yourself off and say I'm this and therefore I must be this is ridiculous.

Harry's struggle to explain why his daughter embodies a type of hyper-femininity draws attention to what poststructuralists refer to as the battle for the signified: a desire to fix particular versions of femininity and masculinity as natural on behalf of specific power relations (Weedon, 1997). As Butler (2004) points out, "one does not 'do' one's gender alone. One is always 'doing' with or for another... the terms that make up one's gender are, from the start... beyond oneself in a sociality that has no single author" (p. 1). Although Harry acknowledges the potential of his daughter's gender performance as something socially learned, he struggles to identify where exactly those constructions come from, resulting in the need to relate it to something in the "genetic code".

Ron experiences something similar in his desire to do what is best for his child: "Like I admit I've been brainwashed... even I said I'm going to pick out [a gendered stroller] just

because I don't want other people looking... you don't want your kid to be different from the norm I guess". Although he recognizes how gender is constructed and the problematic issues associated with this, he admits that the pressure to conform is incredibly high. Ron's comments about being "brainwashed" can be seen to reflect Connell's (2009) point of how it is learned through our actions and language to recognize gendered inferences and how being a man or a woman is a becoming: "a condition actively under construction" (p. 5). With this in mind, it comes as no surprise then that one of the most important aspects for parents in raising their child 'successfully' is to do it within the language of 'normality' (Weedon, 1997). The language of normality becomes especially problematic when it confines parents, as well as teachers to "accept dominant definitions of the necessity and meaning of gender difference" (Weedon, 1997, p. 73).

With an understanding of my participants' threshold knowledge surrounding gender, I can explore how they were engaging with constructions of literacy as emotional and feminised, with two teachers in particular identifying literacy as being perceived as a feminised learning domain: "I believe, yeah, literacy is considered more feminised" (Angali) and "feminised, I haven't like, thought about it in that specific way, but I do think that" (Monica). In some ways the construction of literacy as 'feminine' connects to the recuperative masculinity agenda that argues how the English classroom has become feminised and no longer relatable for boys (Ringrose, 2007; Lingard & Douglas, 1999). Monica even indicates from her experiences that "if you talk to the other male English teachers they wouldn't maybe go as deep with the poem or something and they're like ohh that's a girl thing". Monica's comments illustrate how some teachers are subscribing to what Davies (1989) describes as a binary discourse of male and female dualism. The manufacturing of such a dualism in schools is highlighted by Davies (1989)

in how our understandings of who we are as a person “require individuals to take themselves up as distinctively male or female persons, these terms being meaningful only in relation to each other and understood as essentially oppositional terms” (p. 234). Rather than masculinity and femininity being constructed as inherent to being human, they should be perceived as being produced from social processes (Davies, 1989). Monica’s comments reflect how influential those everyday processes are in constructing individuals into that discourse of male and female dualism and how it conflicts with gender equity in a way that often goes unrecognized (Davies, 1989).

Although recognizing the constructed nature of these binaries, some participants never problematized the framing of boys, in comparison to girls, as having an inability to connect to or express their emotions:

Some of the males are very literal where [as] a lot of my females will look beyond the text and because they’re so driven it’s not going to matter... what I give them, they’re just going to do it. So and they’ll see the deeper meanings of it more or less and I think even with the Lord of the Flies... what the males think is cool, the women will be empathetic, like oh my gosh, poor piggy. (Emily)

Emily hints here at natural biological differences and how girls’ success is intertwined with their capacity to emotionally engage with a text and their drive to just “do it” no matter what.

Within a similar context, Angali also highlights how “girls seem to show their emotions a lot more than guys”, but also identifies that “males have just as much to deal with”. She also goes on to attribute girls’ success and boys’ failure in literacy to be about “emotionally connecting with your subject or your topic, boys aren’t doing that, so it’s suggesting possibly to me there are not things... that boys are interested in that they have to write about... on these

tests”. Emily and Angali’s comments in many ways connect to Alloway, Freebody, Gilbert and Muspratt’s (2002) report on boys’ literacy in Australian schools, where they explore the importance of teachers expanding the ‘repertoires of practice’ provided to boys in their literacy practices. These repertoires of practices include: (re)presenting the self, relating to others, and engaging with and negotiating cultural knowledge and meanings. Within their recommendations, they draw attention to the importance of expanding knowledge about gender constructions and that boys are not all the same, with varying social and cultural backgrounds. They do highlight though how dominant discourses of masculinity and ‘doing boy’ are commonly negotiated in Australian society. Angali’s thoughts connect to the popular discourses that Alloway et al. (2002) found surrounding teachers’ explanations and observations around boys’ lack of engagement and achievement in the English classroom, including boys’ lack of interest and relevance to school work, as well as a lack of confidence as learners. In Angali’s case, she connects these issues to biology rather than framing them as constructed, where boys’ lack of emotional and critical engagement with texts can be addressed through their ‘repertoires of practice’.

Although Angali recognizes that boys do experience emotions and that the key for them to improve on the OSSLT is to be able to emotionally engage with the content, she still subscribes to biologic and determinist explanations which reinforce this notion that emotions are natural for girls and not boys. These ideas illustrate how a particular type of hegemonic masculinity becomes legitimised and consented to, as Angali states:

This may sound sexist, but I think [women are] natural nurturers... I think as females we naturally are animals that analyze things, we think about things, we look at different angles, like why did this happen... you know a lot more... than males.

Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) define hegemonic masculinity as a pattern of practices that keep in place patriarchal dominance that positions women as subordinate to men. It is the main mechanism for which the power of patriarchy is maintained and consented to (Paechter, 2012). Hegemonic masculinity is what becomes the normative and should be considered differently from subordinated masculinities (Connell, 2009; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Through societal and institutional pressures, it demands a particular way of 'doing' man or boy and requires all men to position themselves around it (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). It is important to note though that hegemonic masculinity will take on different forms and is fluid in how it manifests (Paechter, 2012).

With these ideas in mind, one can see how schools become battlegrounds, where masculine and feminine identities are actively constructed and negotiated within the discourses available (Paechter, 2007, 2012). Such complex negotiations can result in individuals upholding narrow views of gender, in this case relying on essentialist notions to explain and remedy the achievement gap. Gender, as an identity, must be understood as something that is not static, but rather "shifts in relation to expectations, pressures, opportunities and desires (Hammett & Sanford, 2008, p.13; Sanford, 2005). As identity and power relations are in a constant state of change, so are the constructions of what counts as masculinity and femininity (Paechter, 2007). Angali makes the point of criticizing the topics on the OSSLT for catering to girls' strengths, but does not make it overly problematic why boys seemingly cannot think critically or emotionally engage with the text:

The topics that they seem to talk about make me wonder whose exactly writing the test... they're the more emotionally based things, they're the more thinking, they're the more critical things that girls seem to think about and analyse... there's fewer barriers for

women and their understanding in terms of approaching the test... you almost have to make an emotional attachment to the subject... not just a factual attachment... in order to... convey what it is and girls seem to have a stronger umm ability to do that than boys.

Although Angali constructs boys as having difficulty or an inability to express emotions, she attributes this difficulty to a lack of texts that boys as a group can attach to, rather than the effects of a 'pedagogical practice' that is based on specific assumptions about boys' innate abilities (Martino & Meyenn, 2002)

Just as Angali does not problematize boys' inability to emotionally attach to subjects, Monica explains this difficulty as boys just being shy: "Typically it's the females who take a lot of initiative and... I don't think it's the boys that they're... not able, but they're just shy... I think... their own self-confidence holds them back". I found Monica's explanation of why boys were less likely to express their emotions while engaging with a text in her class interesting because of how gender normalization regimes (Martino & Meyenn, 2002) that dictate a specific type of masculinity without emotions appear to be explained away or erased from her discourse as she describes the boys' behaviours as just being "shy". Monica's comments demonstrate how these ideas surrounding gender regimes located in everyday discursive practices can become difficult to immediately recognize as inequitable (Davies, 1989). By not recognizing how these regimes govern what gender performances are 'acceptable', there runs a risk that the consequences of hegemonic masculinity that contribute to an enforced marginalization of some boys will become 'actively denied' (Martino, 2008). It illustrates the necessity of investigating "the nature and implications of those hegemonic versions of language and subjectivity which most people take for granted and which underpin our notions of common sense, social meanings and ourselves" (Weedon, 1997, p. 72). By disrupting these beliefs and notions of normative



masculinity, we can begin to understand how to engage and challenge institutional barriers that marginalize and perpetuate inequities. As Butler (1993, 2004) identifies the importance in seeking to understand the limits of a discourse and what it excludes and includes, one can see how the ‘successful’ girls and ‘failing’ boys discourses exclude multiple ways of understanding and approaching masculinity and femininity, with all girls positioned as emotionally intelligent and boys as non-empathetic. It asserts the importance of what Connell (2009) refers to as ‘gender democracy’ and conceptualising femininity and masculinity within a diversity of forms (Lingard & Douglas, 1999).

#### **4.9 Girls as Flexible and Boys as Inadaptable**

The theme of emotions that came up surrounding gendered achievement was intricately entwined with an emerging theme of interests. Particularly, the concept of girls and boys as homogeneous groups having inherently set differences in interests repeatedly came up in the interviews, with an apparent willingness to cater to these naturalized differences as a mechanism to improve achievement in literacy, specifically with boys. These ideas are reflected by Emily when she describes how she introduces a novel to her class by ‘selling’ its appeal to both boys and girls: “When I do introduce... a novel study or that kind of thing I do kind of sell the fact of how it would appeal to both”. On some level, her reflection speaks to Connell’s (2009) assertion that what really lies at the centre of “common sense thinking about gender is the idea of natural difference between women and men” (p. 50). Interestingly, Rose recognizes the stereotypical assumptions made with appealing to a specific gender’s interest, but still goes on to legitimize catering to these assumptions:

Anything could appeal to boys and it should be all equal, but I know definitely... sports is a huge interest in that right, so if... [boys] can read about sports in general or about

particular you know athletes or stars... I would probably say and then cars, guns [laughs].

I know it's all really cliché and stereotypically, but... it does seem true.

Despite recognizing these ideas as stereotypical, she is still willing to abide by these 'common sense' understandings of boys and how they learn rather than questioning or taking issue with why these self-identified clichés appear to be true.

Similar to Rose, Harry also experienced a contradiction in his thoughts surrounding catering to 'common sense' and naturalized notions of boys' interests and learning:

Now one of our schools, the boys did better than the girls and it was our LD school... they had purposefully tried to get, whether it was a class novel, choice readings... that boys want to read... of course non-fiction as much as you can, which I know all of this stuff, I know is stereotyping and I know is incorrect in some cases and that's my perception, but I know that... there is data to suggest that... boys will read non-fiction more, it engages them more.

In contrast, he describes the message from the media to be that "boys don't read and when they do read, they don't read novels... fiction is not for boys, which I think is ridiculous. I think good fiction is for everybody". Although he recognizes it as problematic, he is still funnelled as a result of increased accountability pressures toward viewing gender in a specific stereotypical binary way and legitimises it, because of its 'proved' potential to improve OSSLT achievement.

Foucault (1978) describes power as tolerable "only on condition that it mask a substantial part of itself. Its success is proportional to its ability to hide its own mechanisms" (p. 86). In this case, the gender domains learned by boys that dictate a particular type of interest and learning style are made legitimate and masked within a neo-liberal imaginary that places improved standardized test scores by any means possible as the most important consideration when it

comes to questions of equity. As a result, it intensifies a reinforcement and consent to a regime of gender normalization that leaves unchallenged the ramifications of stereotypical constructions of masculinity and femininity (Martino, 2008). Relying on essentialist understandings about boys and their academic achievement runs the risk of undoing a reform for gender justice that aims to expose the limits of hegemonic masculinity that are upheld by binary constructions of gender (Martino, 2008). As Paechter (2007) points out in her examination of what constraints are placed on how one takes up their gender, these performances are ultimately socially learned within local communities of masculinity and femininity. Boys' literacy practices must be understood then within the overarching social practices that they perform and construct their masculinities in (Martino, 2008; Alloway et al., 2002). Harry's previous contradiction though does draw attention to how the political and social implications of discourses are only achieved through the friction they create in competing to gain subscribers who will uphold the social practices they demand (Weedon, 1997). His conflict illuminates how "individuals are both the site and subjects of discursive struggle for their identity" (Weedon, 1997, p. 93).

The idea of boys' interests becoming framed through hegemonic masculinity had a lingering presence in several participants' responses, with boys often being constructed as only interested in action-packed narratives or informational texts focusing on sports or cars. Veronica, for example, identifies one of the reasons for boys' failure in literacy to come from their "unengagement... I think if they're unengaged, it's hard to get them to do anything", which inadvertently becomes used to justify, rather than disrupt narrow versions of what it means to 'do' boy: "We have a lot more informational texts, cause... [boys] seem to be drawn more so to Guinness Book of World Records and Ripley's and those kinds of texts". Emily also identifies the essential difference in boys and girls interests, noting how when students are free to pick

their own novels, the “action packed, suspense is more what the... males will pick... and then the girls are more... like the kind of love story or... they all center around females essentially like the gossip girls or like you know that kind of thing”. These assumptions and strategies for improving boys’ literacy, as highlighted by Martino and Rezai-Rashti (2012), result in educators having to approach boys as specifically gendered subjects, promoting harmful stereotypical and homogeneous views about how *all* boys and girls learn.

The implications of these learned assumptions about male and female abilities and interests documented above is that they are likely to influence the ways students are treated and the expectations teachers have of them (Hammett & Sanford, 2008). As boys’ literacy practices are strongly connected to how they perform their masculinity, the risk of these assumptions is in enforcing problematic norms rather than creating the possibility for multiple masculinities (Martino, 2001; Martino & Meyenn, 2002). If the texts that boys are choosing to read are connected to the collective repertoire of acceptable masculine performances they have access to in their literacy practices outside of school, there must be an emphasis placed on providing opportunities for boys to investigate their own constructions (Martino, 2008). This is especially important as some boys may not necessarily be rejecting fiction texts, but instead they are rejecting how these texts function within the English classroom (Martino, 2001; Hunter, 1988). Instead of catering to texts that emphasize a dominant version of masculinity to improve boys’ literacy, it should be asked what texts are possible for encouraging students to deconstruct these dominant narratives of masculinity and femininity (Martino, 2008).

The idea of ‘gendered’ interests being socially constructed is highlighted by Rose when she identifies reading as being perceived differently for boys and girls socially:

Reading wouldn't be seen as... a masculine thing to do necessarily, unless it's reading, you know, about cars, or like trade magazines or something like that... whereas for a girl to read... it's just that's fine... that's accepted, but I guess for a boy to read it would be more... you know the sensitive quiet type... I'm sure socially that would, is a factor.

As Martino and Rezai-Rashti (2012) reiterate from their analysis of policies for improving boys' literacy, it appears that these strategies or constructions about how boys read continue to be framed in a way that mobilises a recuperative masculinity politics that rely on simplistic and harmful stereotypes (Lingard & Douglas, 1999). Lingard and Douglas (1999) describe the core of a recuperative masculinity agenda to be the notion of a feminist backlash and that boys are the new disadvantaged in education due to policies of increased 'feminisation' in schools to improve girls' achievement. These ideas create a 'competing victims' syndrome' (Cox, 1996) that relies on dualistic binaries that emphasis differences and that girls' needs and achievement are always in opposition to boys' (Lingard & Douglas, 1999; Jackson, 1998; Ringrose, 2013). A competing victims' syndrome serves to foster an environment that sees girls' needs having been met to the detriment of boys' and that it is now time for boys, who have been largely ignored, to get the specific attention they deserve (Lingard & Douglas, 1999). To achieve such an agenda, it looks to 'reaffirm masculine identities' of competitiveness and physical and emotional strengths in order to recreate a cohesive community among boys, which effectively ignores marginalized or subordinated masculinities (Lingard & Douglas, 1999).

Although the topic of interests came up surrounding girls' success and boys' failure, the importance and role that interests played in achievement differed dramatically. A theme of girls as flexible and capable of adapting to anything as the key to their academic success came up repeatedly, juxtaposed to boys' failure often being associated with their inability to relate to

female protagonists and their need to have their interests met. Angali highlights this when asked what strategies she has seen for improving boys' literacy, such as "using articles that involve boys", with Veronica making direct reference to this:

If we read a book about a group of girls on an island, I don't think the guys would be into that at all, whereas the girls are much more adaptable to, they don't care about the gender... if we're reading stories about girls, I could see the guys saying uhh are we reading another book about the girls?

The notion that girls are adaptable and boys demanding or requiring specific attention seemingly works to uphold the postfeminist narrative of girls 'having it all' and being capable of success no matter what, because of their willingness to work hard (McRobbie, 2008; Ringrose, 2013; Pomerantz & Raby, 2011). It positions girls under neo-liberalism's 'processes of responsabilization', where individuals become 'discursively constituted' as being responsible for their own successes and failures within a climate of competition and choice-making (Davies & Saltmarsh, 2007). It also connects to liberal feminist notions of how even when barriers exist, the focus is on girls becoming 'empowered' enough to overcome the obstacles in their way, rather than an emphasis on alleviating those barriers (Coulter, 1996). These articulations of girls' 'adaptability' and 'success' provide the justification for a specific type of male-centered approach to education and learning emphasised in recuperative masculinity politics.

The framing of boys as inflexible when it comes to their learning practices also connects to the socially constructed idea of masculinity as 'resistant and rebellious' in the education system (Francis, 2000, 2006; Mills, 2001; Keddie, 2005; Martino et al., 2004; Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2005; Skelton, 2001). The concept of girls as flexible and therefore successful and boys as inadaptably and therefore failing also reflects Ringrose's (2007) concept of the

postfeminist narrative of girls' academic success being premised on the overlapping discourses of 'what about the boys?' and 'girl power'. Veronica's characterization of girls' learning as "not so picky, a little bit more relaxed, [and] easy going" could be seen as connecting to the idea of girls' success not necessarily being attributed to their inherent intelligence, but rather their hard work and commitment to learning (Jackson, 2010).

In regards to the possibility of transformation, there were examples of teachers whose pedagogies did not adhere to a normalising gender regime and they were in fact willing to break from catering to stereotypes and to challenge essentialist solutions to boys' and girls' learning. Ron, in particular, took a strong position in disrupting these gender normalizations:

By delivering content that boys stereotypically like... I think it defeats the whole purpose of education in a lot of ways... you need to expose kids to a lot of different things... they might really like a lot of sports as a young man or woman, doesn't matter... you need to expose them to different things that they might be interested in. So maybe they would... really like travelling, but if you don't expose them to a book that is about something like that then you know... I think as teachers it's important for us to challenge certain norms, to challenge the things that they really like, to expose them to different things and then they have the choice... as opposed to just reaffirming the stereotypes that are already in our society.

Although Ron is more direct in his disruption of common sense approaches to gendered learning, Veronica comes to recognize the negative implications of buying into these notions through her reflected experiences:

I had a book study... and I previewed all of the books and just kind of gave my... interpretation of what each one would be and one I kind of referred to... probably there'd

be girls interested in this one book and then afterwards I had a couple boys say I really wanted to read that book, but you said it was mainly for girls and... they were a little upset that I said that... cause they wanted to pick it, but they didn't want to look like they were picking a girl book, so it really made me think as a teacher.

As Weedon (1997) points out, what “an event means to an individual depends on the[ir] ways of interpreting the world, on the discourses available to her” (p. 76). With this in mind, one can see how Veronica's realization of the ways in which her students are actively aware and impacted by these gendered learning domains highlights the extent to which the discourses made available to her and her conceptions of gender influence her interpretations of her experiences.

Similar to Martino and Meyenn's (2002) findings from their qualitative interviews with Australian English teachers about their perceptions of single-sex classes, teachers' pedagogical practices seemed to be framed most of the time around the necessity to cater to the stereotypical interests and naturalised notions of how boys' and girls' learn. It appears many of my participants are making sense of postfeminist ideals of girls' academic success through the language of interests and girls' inherent willingness to be flexible. These articulations appear to result in essentialist views of gender and highlight the importance of such a qualitative analysis in providing insight into how educator's normalising assumptions and knowledge about gender within the backdrop of neo-liberal and postfeminist discourses can impact how they approach their teaching practices in the classroom.

#### **4.91 Disrupting the Gap: Which Boys and Which Girls?**

Although many of the participants struggled with and in some cases upheld the discourses of 'failing' boys and 'successful' girls, almost all acknowledged other intersecting factors as more important in influencing student achievement. There was a strong awareness



surrounding the academic and applied gaps and that not all girls are outperforming boys within the same grade levels. In reference to the diversity in the gaps that exists: “I think we have a variety of gaps, in a variety of different buildings, in a variety of different contexts” (Harry), Harry identifies how “the academic and applied gap... is the huge one” and refers to how the “academic kids in this board, ninety-five percent will pass the literacy test, right? Our applied kids, it’s more like sixty, sometimes down to fifty”. In relation to Harry’s point about the gap in the academic and applied, Monica draws attention to how the girls in her advanced programs were not necessarily outperforming the boys and that her experiences in fact reflected the opposite: “I would tell you the opposite, in many cases, especially in the pre-AP class it would be almost flipped completely”. Rose shares a similar narrative with Monica, except with her lower achieving, at-risk students: “Well to be honest in this class these girls are not experiencing success... in this class... the boys are achieving and being more academically successful than the girls”.

Next to the applied and academic gap, all of the participants identified socio-economic status (SES) as the major contributing factor to achievement, despite some of them also entertaining the notions of *all* boys as ‘failing’ and *all* girls as ‘successful’. Harry readily identified how “boy or girl, SES is what’s going to hold you back”, along with Angali describing in detail how SES plays out:

I think social economic class is probably one of the biggest ones, because I’m thinking, if a child can’t eat before they get here, if they don’t dress, they can’t fit into a group, if they don’t have the money, they can’t get technology at home, they can’t get a computer, they can’t access WIFI, they can’t Google things, or do research like their peers can so... I would say social economic is the driving factor behind everything else.

Similar to Angali, Monica also reflects in detail how SES plays out in achievement gaps, comparing her current high SES school and advanced program to her previous low SES school and the program for low achieving, at-risk students she taught:

Socioeconomic status comes in immediately. So I run into parents that have hired English tutors, math tutors, they have a tutor every night of the week for a different subject and then you go back to KCI, my original starting school and fast forward kids didn't have a hope from the beginning... the lifestyle they've been given, the opportunities they been given has a huge impact on their success.

These reflections buttress an understanding of how much the underachievement of boys and girls is classed and how the class and education levels of parents continue to be the greatest indicator of students' success on standardized tests and in school in general, with boys from privileged backgrounds being able to outperform girls from disadvantaged ones (Riddell, 1998; Epstein et al., 1998; Ringrose, 2013; Delpit, 2000). It also highlights the problematic issues associated with how a neo-liberal imaginary constructs literacy as being capable of being a neutral or generic skill (Davies & Saltmarsh, 2007). By composing literacy achievement in this way, it results in framing those who supposedly 'resist' or 'choose' to not engage with literacy as simply being 'individually troubled', ignoring structural inequities (Davies & Saltmarsh, 2007).

Intersecting with SES was the role of parental involvement in determining student achievement. Despite Harry's earlier claim that SES is the biggest factor, he later changes this by stating that "it's not just the SES, it's the parent involvement, right? Because you can be very low SES and still really care about what's going on with your kid... and if that's there you will overcome almost everything else". Ron echoes Harry's comment about the role of parental involvement, stating how "the success... I have seen from any student... again regardless of their

gender, comes from a really strong home... so parental involvement, parental encouragement”. Emily actually goes as far to claim that gender has no real defining influence at all and that it comes from the family: “You look at the family and you’re like, okay, it matches where they’re at... male or female... I think they both have the exact same opportunity to do the exact same things”. Breaking from that, Rose specifically identifies the core of girls’ success to come from “a solid family structure at home. I think that... they’re driven to be successful and... to produce high marks and get good test scores and stuff like that from home”. It appears Rose is engaging with Walkerdine, Lucey and Melody’s (2001) notion of how only particular girls are enjoying success and it is not those from ‘broken’, low SES homes.

The idea of only particular girls succeeding illustrates how the gender gap talk created through neo-liberal accountability policies works to mask how success is being based on the ‘superior’ performance of a specific few girls (Ringrose, 2007). Although engaging with often essentialist views of gender that uphold postfeminist articulations of all girls as ‘successful’, every participant was still able to engage with counter narratives that disrupted the importance placed on the gender gap. The participants’ capacity to do this illustrates Weedon’s (1997) concept that individuals are capable of committing “themselves to specific subject positions and [can] embrace quite contradictory modes of subjectivity at different moments” (p. 94); these multiple subjectivities leave open the possibility to resist the problematic issues associated with existing equity and achievement policies within a neo-liberal climate of accountability (Weedon, 1997). It is through these contradictions and conflicts with other discourses that postfeminist and neo-liberal discourses become fragile, as it exposes their existence and the possibility for alternative ways of knowing.

#### 4.92 Conclusion

This chapter has provided a description and analysis of my participants' experiences and understandings regarding gender equity and success within the backdrop of the OSSLT and through the lens of neo-liberal and postfeminist discourses. Digging deeply into teachers' personal narratives and thoughts at this one particular point in time has provided an opportunity to grasp the complexity of how postfeminism is functioning in schools and shaping perceptions of 'girls', 'success' and 'equity'. In exploring how teachers are engaging with these discourses, it allows the possibility for "deconstructing the postfeminist discursive terrain" (Ringrose, 2013, p. 146) and exposing alternative avenues of disruption.

Overall, the interviews revealed several themes regarding how teachers were engaging with and understanding postfeminist articulations of success. It is important to reiterate that these findings may only infer and not generalize to all teachers, as it was not my intention to produce a fixed picture of how all teachers understand gender equity and achievement; rather, I was interested in understanding existing power relations and to investigate in-depth how teachers were negotiating and engaging with postfeminist articulations of success. My purpose was to use the interviews as a means by which to contribute to further theorizing about and to reflect on the significance of neo-liberal and postfeminist influences on teachers' thinking about gender equity within the context of their pedagogical experiences in the classroom. The findings revealed how participants seemed to internalize the complex intertwining of neo-liberalism and postfeminism, while blatantly disrupting them through the contradictions their intertwining created. Understandings of gender equity appeared to be simplified through the rhetoric of 'free' choice and at times reduced to a matter of the students' *personal* interests. There was also an apparent discomfort or contradiction while talking about gender equity and feminism, with many

participants choosing to take out the word 'gender' or 'women' altogether. Many disrupted and drew attention to the issues of sexism and gender inequities that still exist, while simultaneously stating they were no longer issues and that it had been achieved. There also appeared to be an understanding that issues of gender and gender equity were topics that should not be discussed until senior high school grades, but of those who did discuss it, there was a strong awareness and positive reaction demonstrated by the students.

The 'successful' girls and 'failing' boys discourses were expressed and understood through articulations of socially constructed 'expectations' and students inevitably meeting them. These discourses were also understood through an essentialist positioning, where girls' success, particularly in literacy, was equated with their 'natural' ability to be emotional and adaptable. Rather than it being problematic that boys were being positioned as unable to do these things, there was an emphasis on catering to these ideas, resulting in an adherence to a recuperative masculinity politics and hegemonic masculinity. With regards to constructions about how boys' and girls' learn, teacher threshold knowledge around gender was diverse and illustrated how there was an understanding that gender should be perceived as socially constructed, yet biological positions were taken up to explain generalized experiences. Finally, in regards to a recognition by many of the participants about the differences in how girls and boys were succeeding and failing, there was skepticism toward the idea of a severe gender gap, with almost all acknowledging the role of other intersecting inequities as more important barriers to achievement, such as SES. Although there was engagement with the 'which boys and which girls' argument, these structural barriers of achievement were often repositioned and explained within the alluring neo-liberal rhetoric of choice and hard work.

Despite some participants' willingness to disrupt or contradict negative gender stereotypes or assumptions about equity, they inevitably 'repositioned' these ideas within the discourses of neo-liberalism and postfeminism. The idea of a 'contradictory consciousness' ran throughout the themes that emerged, illustrating how teachers are sites of 'discursive struggle', capable of both actively constructing new meanings within the emerging contradictions between discourses and being shaped by them (Weedon, 1997).

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Conclusion and Implications for Further Research

This thesis intended to explore in-depth teachers' negotiations and understandings of gender equity and achievement within neo-liberal and postfeminist articulations of success. Using qualitative, informal semi-structured interviews, seven grade nine and grade ten English teachers and literacy consultants in three public school boards across Southwestern Ontario were asked questions relating to their understandings of gender equity and achievement within the backdrop of the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (OSSLT). Feminist post-structuralism and critical social theories were used to inform this study, as the purpose was to provide insight from frontline educators on how the language of gender equity and success is being perceived and determined for girls, as well as boys within the discourses of neo-liberalism and postfeminism.

Throughout this thesis I have drawn attention to the critical role educators play in whether normalizing gender regimes and inequalities are re-inscribed or altered in schools (Keddie, 2010). As well, I was interested in highlighting the possibility for agency that teachers have in disrupting the dominant discourses of neo-liberalism and postfeminism. Issues surrounding a 'crisis' with boys' underachievement in schools has taken precedent for more than a decade, with high-stakes standardized testing in literacy fueling a continued emphasis on a gender 'gap talk' (Gillborn, 2008; Martino & Rezai-Rashti, 2013a). With that in mind, *some* girls' high performance on these tests have in time come to contribute to a positioning of *all* girls as 'successful', both in and out of school (Ringrose, 2007, 2013; Pomertantz & Raby, 2011). The impact of how 'successful' girls and 'failing' boys discourses are constructing our understandings of what it means to 'do' girl and 'do' boy resonates strongly with other studies

that have deconstructed these discourses and the creation of a ‘gender gap’ that favors girls (Gonick, 2004, 1999; Ringrose & Walkerdine, 2007, 2008; Baker, 2008, 2010; Pomertantz & Raby, 2011; Gonick et al., 2009; Ringrose & Renold, 2011; Griffin, 2011; Ringrose, 2007, 2013, Skelton & Francis, 2008; Martino & Rezai-Rashti, 2012; Epstein et al., 1998; Younger & Warrington, 2007; Iverson & Murphy, 2007; Gill & Tranter, 2012).

Qualitative interviews were chosen as the most appropriate methodology for which to conduct this study. They provided the opportunity for in-depth understandings of the discourses of postfeminism and neo-liberalism as well they allowed me to gather rich insight into how some teachers’ viewed gender equity and success through their terminology and complex perceptions and experiences (Patton, 2002). My intention was not to generalize my results to all teachers, but rather to understand more deeply how participants were negotiating and engaging with neo-liberal and postfeminist articulations of gender equity and success. I chose the sampling frame of grade nine and grade ten English teachers and literacy consultants because of their direct interaction with the high-stakes grade ten Ontario literacy test and the policies that have resulted from it that have helped to foster a ‘failing’ boys and ‘successful’ girls discourse.

In analyzing the data from this study, the following themes were identified: (a) the intertwining of neo-liberalism and postfeminism (b) understanding gender equity and success; (c) addressing gender equity and feminism in the classroom; (d) expectations; (e) literacy and emotions; (f) girls as flexible and boys as inadaptible (g) disrupting the gap: which boys and which girls. The findings revealed how participants seemed to consent to neo-liberal and postfeminist ideals of equity and success while simultaneously challenging their notions of accountability and standardization. This idea of a contradictory or conflicting consciousness became especially apparent with some of the participants as they drew attention to issues of



sexism and gender inequities that still existed, while simultaneously framing gender equity as something that had been achieved. With that in mind, gender equity appeared to be understood through the neo-liberal language of ‘free’ choice, hard work and interests, with girls’ success in education being equated to their ‘natural’ ability to be emotional and adaptable. In regards to teacher threshold knowledge, there appeared to be an understanding that gender should be perceived as socially constructed, yet biological positions were often taken up to explain some of the experienced differences between how boys and girls learn. Despite an acknowledgement of these differences, there was skepticism toward the severity of a gender gap with almost all identifying the role of other intersecting inequities as more important barriers to achievement, such as SES.

The postfeminist terrain that women are finding themselves in is complex, where rather than rejecting that women should have equal rights, it is openly celebrated that they should and do, most noticeably in the West (McRobbie, 2008). Although mutual gender equality is recognized as ideal, it does not always translate into practice (Bittman & Pixley, 1997) and despite these celebratory claims, women still face unequal divisions in labour and pay, as well as competing pressures associated with their bodies and family and work life balance (Ringrose, 2013; Fenwick, 2004). These pressures continue to be experienced differently depending on one’s class, race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation (McRobbie, 2008). My aim with this research was not to lay claim that boys’ literacy education is a non-issue and that attention should only be paid toward girls. Rather, my goal was to emphasize the complexity of current gender equity issues in a neo-liberal and postfeminist era. By examining what constitutes ‘success’ and ‘failure’, as well as ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’ according to some educators, I have illustrated

how much gender equity is a multi-faceted notion that cannot be simplified into something that is easily measurable and addressable with quick-fix solutions.

Overall, the findings from this study highlight how there needs to be a more complex conceptualization of gender equity in education. Teachers are not understanding gender equity, as well as girls' success and boys' failure in clear and absolute ways through the discourses of neo-liberalism and postfeminism. At times, the participants expressed conflicting views toward how success and failure were being constructed for boys and girls. Although every participant expressed a genuine desire to promote equity in their classrooms, those conflicting views often resulted in an upholding of harmful stereotypical assumptions. As the Ontario Ministry of Education's official *Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy* policy identifies boys as a homogenous group as now being disadvantaged, it aids in contributing to a recuperative masculinity politics and the idea that everyone can be considered discriminated against in education. The construction of every student as somehow disadvantaged was reflected in my findings with the word 'equity' seemingly being phrased as a 'safe' and neutral word by some participants. The problematic issues associated with the word equity becoming a term used to describe everyone as discriminated against is that it fails to identify the power relations in place that benefit a specific few. The changing meaning of equity reflects the current importance for educators to have the opportunity to explore the implications of their threshold knowledge surrounding gender and gender equity.

Lingard (2010) reinforces how the role of intelligent and rich accountabilities that support educators' improvement, rather than disciplining them are critical to enhancing the teaching profession as a whole. What needs to occur is a move from "accountability as surveillance to accountability for improvement" (Lingard, 2010 as cited in Earl & Fullan, 2003, p. 393). With

this in mind, my findings revealed how teachers need to feel as though they have the space to question their constructs around gender and gender equity and how they might be contributing to these normalizing gender regimes. All of the teachers in the study expressed a strong desire to do what was best for their students and were open to the idea of gender being viewed as a social construction, but within an environment of accountability for surveillance, there were also residing fears of not following the already set out agenda for how equity should be determined and measured. As equity became framed by some participants as something that everyone already knows and has become ‘naturally’ ingrained in the education system, it becomes difficult to question and deconstruct it.

### **5.1 Implications for Future Research**

This research has attempted to contribute to further theorizing on the significance of postfeminist and neo-liberal influences on teachers’ thinking about gender equity and success within the context of Ontario’s high-stakes standardized testing policies and their pedagogical experiences in the classroom. I argue that issues of gender and girls’ success are important to educators and as teachers are an integral part of equity policies, more research attention needs to be placed on how educators are negotiating and dealing with their conflicting understandings about gender and gender equity within a postfeminist discourse. Similar to Keddie’s (2010) findings into teachers’ engagements with gender equity reforms, my study illustrates how there is a need to keep examining how teachers are reflecting on their practices as ‘ideological’ and how they may be complicit in producing harmful and narrow gender constructions. As mental health initiatives are being taken up in Ontario classrooms (Toronto District School Board, 2013; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2012; Gallagher-Mackay, Kidder, Proulx, & Strachan, 2013), my findings also draw attention to the need to better understand how teachers who identify

‘successful’ girls as struggling with extreme anxiety and perfectionism are dealing with and approaching these students in their classrooms. What strategies are currently in place, if any? As almost all of the teachers identified a desire for more professional development around how to approach gender and gender equity in the classroom, there needs to be a more established system that supports teachers’ threshold knowledge in regards to gender and schooling that is not just framed around gender normalizing ‘tips’ to improve achievement. Gender equity reforms must be understood as localized and highly dependent on teachers’ perceptions and knowledge (Keddie, 2010). As Lingard et al. (2013) point out, it needs to be questioned “what is to count as gender equity within official policy discourse” (p. 437) and there needs to be greater possibilities for what gender equity can mean and look like beyond “successful” and “failing”.

## **5.2 Final Thoughts**

In this chapter I provided an overview of the objectives, significance, methodology and findings of this research study. I explored the implications for future research and how important it is to deconstruct how postfeminist and ‘successful’ girl discourses are functioning in the education system and impacting how boys’ and girls’ achievement are being perceived. Teachers’ perceptions of gender equity and success are a significant context for understanding how equity is functioning in schools within the backdrop of accountability and standardization policies. Insight into the nature of the impact of ‘failing’ boys and ‘successful’ girl discourses fueled by neo-liberalism and postfeminism is apparent in the literature reviewed and the findings of the study I have conducted. Throughout my study, I have attempted to draw attention to the need for teaching strategies that are based on social constructionist theories of gender, rather than binary, essentialist notions when approaching and thinking about gender justice in schools. While conducting this research, I found myself being changed by the process and only now

understand what was meant by qualitative research also being about the researcher making sense of their own relationship to the world and realizing things about themselves they would have never known otherwise (Patton, 2002; Richard, 2000). Rather than girls' success being positioned as non-issues for educators, there needs to be a renewed focus on what gender equity now means and looks like in practice, as issues of gender equity have undergone dramatic changes in the last twenty years. There is a need to move beyond binary constructions of gender equity that get reduced to pitting 'successful' girls against 'failing' boys. What is needed are critical frameworks that are capable of interrogating the current limits of how gender equity is being defined through predominantly neo-liberal and postfeminist lenses so that the question of which boys and which girls are not doing well and/or who are at risk in the education system can be more effectively addressed.

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## APPENDIX A

### Letter of Information



#### **Project Title:**

*Failing' Boys and 'Successful' Girls: Investigating Teachers' Understandings of Gender Equity and Achievement in Postfeminist Times*

#### **Principal Investigator:**

Wayne Martino, PhD, Education, the University of Western Ontario

#### **Co-Investigator:**

Goli Rezai- Rashti, PhD, Education, the University of Western Ontario

#### **Student:**

Katee Van Campen, OCT, Education, the University of Western Ontario

### LETTER OF INFORMATION

#### **Introduction and invitation to participate**

My name is Katee Van Campen and I am a graduate student at the Faculty of Education at Western University. Wayne Martino, Goli Rezai-Rashti and I are currently conducting research into teachers' engagement with student achievement and gender equity and would like to invite you to participate in this study because of the potential that grade nine and ten English teachers have in providing rich insight into the gender achievement gap within policies of high-stakes standardized testing.

#### **Purpose of the letter**

The purpose of this letter is to provide you with information required for you to make an informed decision regarding participation in this research.

## **Purpose of the study**

Results from high-stakes standardized testing regimes, both in Ontario and globally, have fostered a renewed interest in a gender ‘gap talk’ (Gillborn, 2008; Martino & Rezai-Rashti, 2013) within education. Based extensively on the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) and the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) literacy results, educational policymakers in Ontario and around the world continue to spend significant amounts of time and resources on addressing what has been deemed a ‘crisis’ surrounding boys’ underachievement. As a result, the aim of this study is to reveal how teachers engage and come to make sense of achievement and gender equity within policies of high-stakes standardized testing, specifically as it relates to female students’ success.

## **Inclusion criteria**

Individuals who are currently teaching grade nine and/or grade ten English, as well as literacy coaches are eligible to participate in this study.

## **Exclusion criteria**

Individuals who are not currently teaching grade nine or grade ten English, or are not currently working as a literacy coach will not be eligible to participate in this study. As well, teachers working in private schools will not be eligible. Individuals who do not consent to having their interview audio recorded will not be eligible.

## **Study procedures if you agree to participate**

If you agree to participate in this study you will be asked to participate in one approximately hour to an hour and a half long interview, which will take place at your preferred location. Interviews will be audio-recorded for accurate transcription. If participants do not wish to be audio recorded, they should not participate. There will be a total of 6-10 participants.

## **Possible Risks and Harms**

There are no known risks or discomforts associated with participating in this study.

## **Possible Benefits**

You may not directly benefit from participating in this study but information gathered may provide benefits to educational policy and society as a whole by creating insight into educators' understandings of current gender equity policies and how success and achievement is being perceived and determined for girls, as well as boys.

## **Compensation**

You will be provided with a \$10 Tim Hortons or Starbucks gift card.

## **Voluntary Participation**

Participation in this study is voluntary. You may refuse to participate, refuse to answer any questions or withdraw from the study at any time with no effect on your future employment status.

## **Confidentiality and Publication**

The information collected will be used for research purposes only, and neither your name nor information which could identify you will be used in any publication or presentation of the study results. Results of this study may include anonymous quotations from your interview in order to provide an accurate representation of your perspective. A pseudonym will be used instead of your name and efforts will be made not to disclose your identity. If you choose to withdraw from this study, your data will be removed and destroyed from the database. All information collected for the study will be kept confidential by being stored in a locked cabinet and will be accessible only to the investigators of this study. Data will be securely kept for five years in accordance with The University of Western Ontario's policy and then destroyed. Representatives of The University of Western Ontario Health Sciences Research Ethics Board may contact you or require access to your study-related records to monitor the conduct of the research. Participants will be provided with copies of the transcripts for verification. If you would like to receive a copy of any potential study results, please provide your name and contact number on a separate piece of paper.



## **Contacts for further information**

If you have any questions about the conduct of this study or your rights as a research participant you may contact The Office of Research Ethics, Western University at xxx-xxx-xxxx or [xxxuwo.ca](http://xxxuwo.ca). If you require any further information regarding this research project or your participation in the study, please contact Katee Van Campen at xxx-xxx-xxxx or [xxxxxx@uwo.ca](mailto:xxxxxx@uwo.ca), or the principal investigator, Wayne Martino at [xxxxxxx@uwo.ca](mailto:xxxxxxx@uwo.ca), or the co-investigator Goli Rezai-Rashti at [xxxxxxx@uwo.ca](mailto:xxxxxxx@uwo.ca).

This letter is yours to keep for future reference.



Katee Van Campen

**APPENDIX B**

**Consent Form**



**Consent Form**

**Project Title:**

Failing' Boys and 'Successful' Girls: Investigating Teachers' Understandings of Gender Equity and Achievement in Postfeminist Times

**Study Investigators' Names:** Wayne Martino, Goli Rezai-Rashti, Katee Van Campen

I have read the Letter of Information, have had the nature of the study explained to me and I agree to participate. All questions have been answered to my satisfaction.

I consent to having anonymous direct quotations from my interview used in any future published work of the final research study.

Participant's Name (please print): \_\_\_\_\_

Participant's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

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

Person Obtaining Informed Consent (please print): \_\_\_\_\_

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

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

## APPENDIX C

### Outline of Interview Guide

#### Background

- Age
- Ethnicity/race
- Gender
- Teaching experience
  - What are you currently teaching?

#### Values

- What drew you to teaching?
- What do you view your role to be as an educator?
- What is your teaching philosophy?
- How important are the Ministry's policies and resources to your everyday practice?

Probe: Do you feel like you adapt a lot of it or really just a general guide?

#### Experience/Behavior

- Based on your personal knowledge and teaching experience, what kind of contemporary barriers do you think \_\_\_\_\_ face academically, socially, and economically?
  - a) Boys
  - b) Girls
- From your experiences, where would you say girls' success in your classroom and in school comes from?

Probe: Please feel free to describe what success means to you in your own words

Probe: Can you define what achievement means to you in your own words?

- Based on your experiences, what role would you say choice and hard work have in who succeeds today in and out of school?
  - Probe: Please define what choice and hard work means to you in your own words

- Based on your understanding and teaching experience, how would you define gender equity?

Probe: What about how it is measured and/or should be measured?

- I am interested in hearing about the different experiences or situations that you would identify as meaningful in shaping your understanding of gender equity and what it means for girls to be successful today.
  - Probe: Why are these experiences meaningful in shaping your understandings?

### **Experience/Behavior**

- How have you directly or indirectly discussed feminism or gender equity in your classroom with students? Can you describe this to me?
  - Probe: Can you expand on what you understand feminism to be and what you feel it means today?

### **Feeling**

- What is your opinion about academic performance on standardized testing being used to measure gender equity in and outside of school?

### **Knowledge**

- What type of knowledge have you acquired about boys' literacy as compared to girls' literacy from the media, as well as from the Ministry of Education in the form of policies and resources?
  - Probe: Have you ever felt that this information conflicted with your own understandings of boys' and girls' literacy as well as gender equity?

### **Feeling**

- Some people believe that gender equity has been achieved in schools and that if anything boys now need help in catching up to girls and have become disadvantaged in terms of literacy achievement. Others believe that gender equity has not been achieved and that girls still face barriers to achievement. How do you feel about this?
  - Probe: What about in light of the EQAO grade ten literacy test?
  - Probe: What about in light of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) results that identify a gap in girls and boys literacy? (Show statistical graph)

## **Opinion**

- I am interested in hearing what you think about looking at literacy in terms of ‘gender gaps’, where boys’ failure is compared against girls’ success and vice versa.
- - Probe: What comes to mind when you think of ‘successful girls’?
  - Probe: What comes to mind when you think of ‘failing boys’?
- Do you think that you would benefit from professional development that addressed gender equity in the classroom?

## **Feeling**

- Some people define gender as biologically determined and that males and females are naturally born with differences in traits and characteristics. Others believe that gender should not be viewed as binary and that gender is a social construction or performance. How do you feel about this?
  - Probe: What is gender and ‘gendered identities’?
  - Probe: What is femininity and masculinity?
  - Probe: What about in light of your teaching experience and how boys and girls develop literacy skills?

\*\*\*Is there anything that you would like to add?

## APPENDIX D

### Western Approval of Ethics



Research Ethics

Use of Human Participants - Ethics Approval Notice

**Principal Investigator:** Prof. Wayne Marino  
**File Number:** 104287  
**Review Level:** Delegated  
**Approved Local Adult Participants:** 0  
**Approved Local Minor Participants:** 0  
**Protocol Title:** 'Failing' Boys and 'Successful' Girls: Investigating Teachers' Understandings of Gender Equity and Achievement in Postfeminist Times  
**Department & Institution:** Education/Faculty of Education, Western University  
**Sponsor:**  
**Ethics Approval Date:** September 23, 2013 **Expiry Date:** August 31, 2014

**Documents Reviewed & Approved & Documents Received for Information:**

Document Name	Comments	Version Date
Other	Bibliography	2013/08/22
Recruitment Items	Recruitment Email for Principal	2013/08/22
Recruitment Items	Recruitment Email for Teachers	2013/08/22
Western University Protocol		2013/08/27
Letter of Information & Consent	'Track Changes' of letter of information and consent form with recommended changes	2013/09/16
Instruments	'Track Changes' of Research Instrument - Outline of Interview Questions with recommended changes	2013/09/16
Letter of Information & Consent	'Clean copy' of letter of information and consent form with recommended changes	2013/09/16
Instruments	'Clean Copy' of Research Instrument - Outline of Interview Questions with recommended changes	2013/09/16
Recommendations Form	Recommendations	2013/09/13

This is to notify you that The University of Western Ontario Research Ethics Board for Non-Medical Research Involving Human Subjects (NMREB) which is organized and operates according to the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct of Research Involving Humans and the applicable laws and regulations of Ontario has granted approval to the above referenced revision(s) or amendment(s) on the approval date noted above.

This approval shall remain valid until the expiry date noted above assuming timely and acceptable responses to the NMREB's periodic requests for surveillance and monitoring information.

Members of the NMREB who are named as investigators in research studies, or declare a conflict of interest, do not participate in discussions related to, nor vote on, such studies when they are presented to the NMREB.

The Chair of the NMREB is Dr. Riley Hinson. The NMREB is registered with the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services under the IRB registration number IRB 00000941.



**Ethics Officer to Contact for Further Information**

Grace Kelly (grace.kelly@uwo.ca)	Vicki Tran (vicki.tran@uwo.ca)	Erika Basile (ebasile@uwo.ca)
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*This is an official document. Please retain the original in your files.*

Western University, Research, Support Services Bldg., Rm. 5150  
 London, ON, Canada N6A 3K7 t. 519.661.3036 f. 519.850.2466 www.uwo.ca/research/services/ethics

## Curriculum Vitae

**Name:** Katee Van Campen

**Post-secondary Education and Degrees:** Brock University  
St. Catharines, Ontario  
2007-2012 Concurrent B.A., B.Ed.

Western University  
London, ON  
2012-2014 M.Ed.

**Honours and Awards:** Dean's Honour List  
2007-2011

Board of Trustees President's Choice Award  
2008

Senior Visual Arts Award  
2009-2010

Honours Visual Arts Award  
2010

Bluma Appel Award  
2011

Ontario Graduate Scholarship (OGS)  
2013

Canadian Graduate Scholarship (CGS)  
2013