Gender and Early Childhood Education:

A Critical Feminist Analysis of Teacher Practice and Preschool Play in Montreal Schools

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Abstract

In 2001, an educational reform took place in Québec and resulted in the introduction of the Québec Education Program (QEP). For preschool education, the QEP highlights the importance of play in early learning. As research has shown gender differences in children's play, this study seeks to examine the ways in which preschool teachers make use of play in their classrooms specifically as it relates to gender. Using a critical feminist lens, the study investigates how teachers' use of play and their gender perceptions may enable or constrain gender inequality during preschool play. The data collection methods include two semistructured interviews and a photo elicitation interview that were carried out with each of the four preschool teachers. Twelve participant observations also took place during their students' play periods. Results reveal two overarching themes of *the passive child* and *normality* that have emerged in examining teacher practices and understandings of play and gender. Informed by the dominant discourses of early childhood education that privilege child development theories, teacher practice during play may then work to silence gender as it is not perceived to be an integral part in childhood. As such, girls and boys were seen to be treated equally in the classroom. While the equal treatment of children is well intended, it does not necessarily ensure fair treatment. Overall, this study highlights the contradictory messages put forward by educational policy, where child-centeredness is mandated, yet gender, a significant part of children's lives, is absent from dominant discourses in early childhood education.

<u>Résumé</u>

En 2001, une réforme de l'éducation a eu lieu au Québec et adonné lieu à l'introduction du Programme de formation de l'école québécoise (PEQ). Pour l'éducation préscolaire, le PEQ met en évidence l'importance du jeu dans l'apprentissage précoce. Comme la recherche a démontré des différences entre les genres dans le jeu des enfants, cette étude vise à examiner les façons dont les enseignants du préscolaire font usage du jeu dans leurs classes, spécifiquement en ce qui concerne le genre. En utilisant un point de vue féministe, l'étude examine comment l'utilisation du jeu par les enseignants et leurs perceptions du genre peuvent activer ou limiter l'inégalité des genres en milieu préscolaire. Les méthodes de collecte de données comprennent deux entrevues semi-structurées et une technique d'élicitation par photographies qui ont été effectuées avec chacun des quatre enseignants du préscolaire. De plus, douze observations participantes avec les élèves ont eu lieu pendant leurs périodes de jeu. Les résultats révèlent deux grands thèmes qui ont émergé de l'examen des pratiques des enseignants et de leurs conceptions du jeu et du genre, soit *la passivité de l'enfant* et *la normalité*. Influencés par les discours dominants de l'éducation de la petite enfance qui sont prépondérants dans les théories de développement, les pratiques des enseignants peuvent alors avoir pour conséquence de faire taire le genre parce qu'il n'est pas perçu comme une partie intégrante de l'enfance. En tant que tels, les filles et les garçons sont perçus et traités de manière égale dans la salle de classe. Cependant, même si l'égalité dans le traitement des enfants est bien intentionné, elle ne garantit pas nécessairement un traitement équitable. Dans l'ensemble, cette étude met en évidence les messages contradictoires avancés par la politique éducative, où l'éducation centrée sur l'élève est requise, mais le genre, une partie importante dans la vie des élèves, est absent du discours dominant en éducation de la petite enfance.

Acknowledgements

<u>Chapter One: Introduction and Background</u>

1.1 Purpose and Problem Statement

  In 2001, Québec's Ministry of Education implemented a rigorous reform to preschool and elementary education referred to as the Québec Education Program (QEP). Since its implementation, the use of a child-centered pedagogy has become common practice in Québec schools. In line with the constructivist learning theory, play has been mandated to be an important component of the preschool curriculum. The QEP outlines, specifically, the importance of preschool play in facilitating the discovery of "various trades and occupations" (MELS, 2001, p. 45). Being a preschool educator, I am interested in how to manage the gender issues that arise during children's play, influencing their discovery of various trades and occupations. As Bussey and Bandura (1999) and Freeman (2007) highlight, children begin to define themselves as girls or boys during toddlerhood. In my own experiences as a preschool educator, I have found that by preschool they will often carry out gender-based stereotypes in their play. Research also shows that children's play is often gender segregated where girls will typically play with kitchen sets and dolls and boys with construction sets, trucks, and cars (Blakemore & Centers, 2005; Blaise, 2009; Nelson, 2011). This phenomenon has important implications as different toys and forms of play expose children to different types of knowledges, skills, and experiences. As a result, girls and boys may learn different social expectations and practice different social roles through play.

  First introduced by Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), the constructivist learning theory posits that knowledge is not solely based on individuals' inherent qualities or on external experiences, but it is constructed through the interaction between these two factors (Auger et al., 2007, p. 42). Rather than taking on the traditional role of passive learners, students, in this view, are active in the construction of knowledge about the world around them. Central to the constructivist framework is the importance of incorporating students' interests in the learning process. At the preschool level, play becomes an important component of the classroom learning environment. Based on Kant's work, Friedrick Froebel (1837) introduced the idea of kindergarten as a place where children's natural inclination to play is nurtured. In his classroom, Froebel (1837) incorporated a rich assortment of play materials for children to experiment with and use to learn about their world (Wolfe, 2002). In later years, the theories of Jean Piaget (1962) and Lev

Vygotsky (1938/1978) further legitimized play as a powerful learning tool. Piaget's (1962) research focused on the importance of play for children's cognitive growth (Saracho & Spodek, 2003). He found that play allows children to acquire concepts as they explore their surroundings through active involvement with the objects and the environment. As a socio-cultural theorist, Vygotsky's (1938/1978) research, instead, focused on the role of expert peers and adults within children's learning. He examined how social interactions during activities allow for the transmission of culture and knowledge across generations (Berk, 2009). Both Piaget (1962) and Vygotsky (1938/1978) have been influential in the development of educational policy and pedagogy where play has become central in the preschool curriculum.

According to Hughes (2003), there are three criteria that are foundational for meaningful learning to take place during play. These include children's "freedom of choice, personal enjoyment, and valuing the process rather than the outcome" (p. 23). Within a constructivist framework the use of play thus has its merits as "We envision classrooms in which children create their own stories [and] choose activities from a variety of materials and learning centers" (Canella, 1997, p. 117). Canella (1997) argues, however, that "Through the use of materials and experiences, adults actually control the choices that surround children....choice for children is an illusion" (p. 121). As such, my thesis seeks to investigate the use of play in Montreal preschool classrooms since the implementation of the QEP. A qualitative research design centered around feminist methodologies informs this study. Methods for data collection include two semistructured interviews and a photo elicitation interview with four preschool educators as well as twelve participant observations with children during play. The study draws on a critical feminist theoretical perspective to examine the ways in which a play-based curriculum in preschool may propagate dominant culture ideologies that maintain the gender binary and limit the potential of both girls and boys.

1.2 Conceptual Framework

In this section, I present the conceptual framework that informs this study. The section is divided into three parts. In the first part, I outline the benefits of implementing play into the preschool curriculum. I do so by discussing my teaching experiences with play and the research on the importance of a play-based curriculum in early childhood learning. In the second part, I

shed light on the complexities of childhood culture and gender. I do so by describing childhood culture and the ways in which popular culture, parents, and children use toys to construct and deconstruct notions of gender in childhood. In the final part of this section, I highlight the pedagogical implications for girls and boys when implementing play in the preschool classroom. Here, I point specifically to the ways in which a play-based curriculum may reinforce gender categories and expose girls and boys to different knowledges and skills in the classroom.

A) The Benefits of Play

In the fall of 2013, I began teaching my first preschool classroom. On a typical morning, the preschoolers would hurry into our classroom and begin their day in the various play areas of their choosing. I would find Mark and Simon in the block area negotiating the best way to build their towers using blocks, construction tools, cars and trucks, while Amy, Cathy, and Heather were often busy in the kitchen corner discussing the different food they needed for their meal while dressing up in different costumes. The children spent their mornings practicing their physical, social-emotional, language, and cognitive skills. For instance, through the manipulation of objects and use of legs, arms, and hands, it was clear that play supported the children's physical development as they used their fine and gross motor muscles. Smith and Pellegrini (2013) explain that play provides good opportunities for the development of "the neural and muscular basis for physical coordination and healthy growth" (p. 2). By physically engaging in activities, children learn to gain control over their bodies.

Through play the children also engaged with their social-emotional skills as they practiced playing with others. For instance, group play allowed opportunities for the children to develop social competence as they practiced how to share, communicate with others, and take turns. Similarly, Bodrova and Leong's (2003) research found play to improve "impulse control, cooperation, group participation, and empathy" (cited in Auger et al., 2007, p. 7). Such skills may then foster children's positive interactions with peers and adults and help shape a positive self-concept, which can be beneficial for academic growth. Moreover, as play provides children with opportunities to take risks and make choices, their sense of autonomy is also encouraged and their self-esteem further developed.

As I spent my mornings engaged in play activities with my students I noticed that play also facilitated their language development. With every passing week, the children learned new words and improved their grammar as they spent their mornings engaged in rich dialogue with myself and their peers. Supporting evidence is found in Bodrova and Leong's (2003) research, which shows that verbal communication and peer interactions during play provides children a space to practice their language skills, which supports "advances in verbalization, vocabulary, and language comprehension" (cited in Auger et al., 2007, p. 7). Furthermore, I have also found play to be fundamental for children's cognitive development. As children actively engage with the world around them, they practice and develop more sophisticated thinking skills. For instance, by interacting with play materials, peers, and the play environment, the children had opportunities to "explore different problem solving strategies [and] extend their thinking abilities both divergent and convergent" (Auger et al., 2007, p. 64). This is particularly important as cognitive growth is foundational for development in all the developmental domains in early childhood.

Throughout my teaching experiences I have also seen how play fosters the development of various academic skills. Studies show that different types of play support different types of learning as "play materials and activities create different affordances" (Wood, 2008a, p. 35). As such, both the block and kitchen play areas typical in many classrooms offer academic benefits to young children. For instance, after several attempts, Mark realized that his tower is more solid if he places the bigger, heavier blocks at the bottom. Hanline, Milton, and Phelps (2001) found that block play not only provides children with opportunities to practice interacting with peers, to exercise gross and fine motor skills, and to experiment with representational play and creativity, but it also allows children to engage with mathematical and geometric concepts, laying a foundation for later, more sophisticated mathematical thinking.

Meanwhile, in the dramatic play area, Amy and Cathy developed a storyline about a feast they are to prepare. As Amy looked for the cups, she directed Cathy to fill the dishes with fruit "quickly before the peoples come!" Smith and Pellegrini (2013) found that play also lays a foundation for the development of literacy skills as children practice creating story-lines and sequencing events. Moreover, in dramatic play children practice using symbols. For example, a

doll becomes a symbol for a baby. This is important as opportunities to create and use symbols help children to use other symbols such as numbers and letters. Smith and Pellegrini (2013) note that dramatic play is thus useful for "developing preliteracy skills, such as awareness of letters and print" (p. 3). Auger et al. (2007) explain that dramatic play also allows children to practice different "roles and rules about roles, more complex social interaction, and extensive verbalization" (p. 65). Practicing these skills may help children develop and maintain positive relationships with others.

While play was used to introduce children to a variety of academic subjects and skills, I noticed that not all children necessarily engaged with the same academic subjects and skills as not all children participated in all forms of play. Instead, girls and boys seemed to select different types of play materials and play areas where boys tended to gravitate towards block and truck play and girls were more likely to engage in kitchen and doll play. As I began to read through the literature on play and gender, I learned that as young as toddlerhood, children seem to demonstrate patterns of sex-typed toy selection (Blakemore & Centers, 2005; Cherney & Dempsey, 2010; Blaise, 2009; Nelson, 2011). For instance, in an early study carried out by O'Brien and Huston (1985), toddlers differed most in their preference for the doll, truck, and the tools (p. 870). In a later study, Hanline, Milton, and Phelps (2001) show that boys preferred playing with blocks over other play activities and girls tended to choose non-block play (p. 225). Fromberg (2005) found that girls instead are more likely to engage in "sedentary and socio-dramatic play, often with housekeeping and dress-up themes" (p. 5). I began to wonder, do girls and boys naturally prefer different play activities?

B) Childhood Culture

As I pursued my research I discovered that the concept of childhood is often perceived to be a natural category, but many argue that it is a modern construct developed in the seventeenth and eighteenth century (Kincheloe, 2004; Kline, 1993; Mouritsen, 2002; Steinberg, 2011). Steinberg (2011) explains that in the Middle Ages, for instance, the idea of children "as a particular classification of human beings demanding treatment differing from adults" (p. 2) had not yet been developed, instead children participated with adults in the adult world. Kincheloe (2004), suggests that it is "Forces such as urbanization and industrialization [that] have exerted

significant influences on the nature of childhood" (p. 254). Specifically, he posits that multinational corporations use the media "to invade the most private spheres of [children's] everyday lives" (p. 253) and dictate what kinds of social beings they should be through advertisements of material goods such as toys. Moreover, Steinberg (2011) explains that "Advertisers found out early in the twentieth century not only that they could induce children to buy more but that they could get children to nag their parents to consume more" (p. 19). In order to justify the consumption of toys to parents, as well as educators, in the early twentieth century toy companies began to promote toys as instruments of education, necessary for children's development (Kline, 1993). Consequently, childhood has become a lucrative market embedded in a profit-driven culture, where large corporations are central in shaping childhood experiences.

While children spend a large portion of their day in formal school settings, education takes place across many other social sites. My students often entered the classroom with new stories and new songs they learned from a television program, for instance. Thus it is no secret that one fundamental disseminator of knowledge is children's popular culture. As an alternative learning space, popular culture communicates specific cultural messages and values that inform children about the world in which they live. In this regard, childhood becomes a cultural space where its symbols, artifacts, and cultural messages teach children about their social roles and expectations. In order to understand what drives children's behaviors and interactions, one must probe the system of meanings and values that underlie childhood culture. Mitchell and Reid-Walsh (2002) suggest one way to understand childhood culture is to examine children's popular culture. Specifically, they "highlight the possibilities for seeing popular culture as an 'entry point' in and of itself for studying childhood" (p. 2). Understanding the system of meanings that underpin childhood culture becomes important for understanding the values that shape the culture of a nation.

a) Gender, Toys, and Popular Culture

As young as toddlerhood, children are bombarded with toy advertisements that separate girls and boys. Wohlwend (2009) explains that the commercial goods of popular culture "communicate gendered expectations about what children should buy, how they should play, and who they should be" (p. 57). One way this is done is through depictions of peer play in toy

advertisements. Kline (1993) found that toy companies construct girls and boys as two distinct groups as girls and boys are constantly shown playing exclusively with others of their gender in toy advertisements. Consequently, "peer play is gender play" (p. 248) and children are not exposed to the possibilities of mixed-sex grouping in play. Color coded toys and packaging also work to separate girls and boys as the color pink has long been associated with the female gender and blue with the male gender (Kahlenberg & Hein, 2010). This creates the illusion that certain toys are just for girls and others just for boys and children quickly learn that they are to identify with either one or the other. Because of its early use in gender labeling, color seems to be a prominent factor in toy selection among young children. For example, while a toy airplane is typically regarded as a masculine toy, because the airplane in Cherney and Dempsy's (2010) study was pink and purple the children considered it to be a feminine toy. Popular culture's socializing processes seems to have "enculturated [children] to develop a preference for toys that are designed, packaged, and marketed to correspond with their masculine or feminine identities" (Kahlenberg & Hein, 2009, p. 830). Through color coded toys and gendered depictions of peer play, media messages have become powerful agents in the social construction of gender.

Unfortunately, these messages communicate inequitable gender expectations as girl toys support activities that are generally undervalued in society, while boy toys are meant to develop skills that are highly valued in society. For instance, Cross (2002) found that in the early twentieth century "Boys' toys glorified technology and machines, [while] companion and baby dolls taught girls to act out personal relationships and keep up with fashion trends" (p. 128). By the late twentieth century, Klugman (1999) found that girl toys position females as "responsible caregivers of men, girls' collections of dolls reinforce the traditional female preoccupation with physical appearance and homemaking, while boys' collections embody conflict and super human power" (p. 174). In a later study, Blakemore and Centers (2005) found that girls' toys continue to be associated with "physical attractiveness, nurturance, and domestic skills, while boys' toys are associated with competition, excitement, and violence" (p. 619). More recently, Francis (2010) found that "Boys' toys concentrated on technology and action, and girls' on care and stereotypically feminine interests" (p. 325). Throughout the years, girl toys seem to perpetuate

similar passive ideals, while the values associated with boy toys vary, but consistently support active and intellectual engagement. As girls and boys play with different toys and participate in different play activities they may learn different patterns of behaviors, skills, and social expectations. Not only does this maintain the gender binary, but it reinforces and reproduces narrow, restrictive normative constructs of what it means to be a girl and a boy in Western society.

b) Gender, Toys, and Parents

        The literature shows that children's families are also influencial and a fundamental source in informing children's gender identities. Thorne (1993) explains that from the moment of birth "Parents dress infant girls in pink and boys in blue, give them gender-differentiated names and toys, and expect them to act differently" (p. 2). While there are parents who seek to disrupt traditional gendered expectations for their children, research reveals a strong tendency for gendered treatment towards children (Freeman, 2007; O'Brien & Hutson, 1985; Kane, 2006; Raag & Rackliff, 1998). Specifically, parental toy selection and play expectations are found to be common ways in which daughters and sons are treated differently during childhood. In an early study, O'Brien and Hutson (1985) show that the families who participated not only had sex-typed toys in their homes, but the interviews revealed that parents expected their children to prefer such toys. Corroborating evidence is found in a later study, where Pomerleau et al. (1990) show that the physical environment parents made available to their children differed for girls and boys, where boys possessed more sports equipment, tools, and vehicles and girls had more dolls, fictional characters, and child's furniture. More recently, Kane (2006) found that the parents in her study seemed more likely to celebrate gender nonconformity particularly on the part of their young daughters. Parents responded positively to their daughters engaging in traditionally masculine activities such as car and truck play. However, parents responded less favorably to their sons engaging in feminine activities. One parent explains, "There's not many toys I wouldn't get him, except Barbie, I would try not to encourage that" (p. 160). Kane (2006) attributes parents' positive response to their daughters gender nonconformity and negative response to their sons gender nonconformity to an "underlying devaluation of femininity" (p. 172) and the "stability and power of hegemonic conceptions of masculinity" (p. 173).

Unfortunately, such gender boundaries teach children that certain toys are acceptable for their sex and others are not.

While in my classroom I have seen children experiment with cross-gendered play, it remained limited and infrequent. Hyun and Choi (2004) explain that this is because the presence of adults tends to interfere with children's gender-bending during play. This is evident in Kline's (1993) study, which shows that "Many children reported modifying their play activities in the presence of parents or teachers to disguise what really interested them" (p. 190). According to Davies (1989b), children learn "to participate with adults both in terms of adult's concepts of children and of adult-child relations" (p. 4). She concludes that children thus engage with and position themselves in an adult pleasing discourse. For instance, Raag and Rackliff (1998) found that "Boys who perceived that their fathers thought cross-gender-typed play was "bad" played more with the tools, and less with the dishes" (p. 697). More recently, the preschool aged children in Freeman's (2007) study accurately predicted that their parents would approve of play with gender stereotyped toys and disapprove of play with cross-gender toys and thus played accordingly. These studies suggest that children understand early on the types of play in which their parents expect them to engage and this may greatly influence how and with what they choose to play.

c) Gender, Toys, and Children

Thus far in this section I have illustrated a type of childhood culture that Mouritsen (2002) defines as produced for children by adults. I will now shed light on what Mouritsen (2002) refers to as "children's culture" (p. 16), where children adopt, produce, and transform the information presented to them by adults. In this view, children are not simply subjects of adult influence, but use what they learn from the media and within their families as a foundation in their play. Play becomes a space for the reconstruction of cultural norms and expectations, where children may adopt or disrupt what is being presented to them by adults. MacNaughton (2006) posits that children are thus active in constructing their gender, rather than passively absorb gender norms and expectations from adults.

In her study, Francis (1999) examines the narratives used in children's talk about gender. She found two prominent and contradictory discourses: gender discriminatory discourses and

equity discourses. Francis (1999) explains that the gender discriminatory discourses support hegemonic discursive practices, which Davies (1989) and Davies and Banks (1992) refer to as the "dominant-gender discourse" (cited in Francis, 1999, p. 306). However, within the same context, and sometimes the same sentence, children also drew on equity and fairness discourses. For instance, one child expressed, "Well, I'm not being sexist, but...I think women are like, more sympathetic" (Francis, 1999, p. 311). Francis (1999) posits that children are thus aware of gender discrimination, but gender discriminatory talk or action will often prevail over gender equitable behavior. Davies (1989b) explains that this is because "Out of the magnitude of conflicting and often contradictory possibilities, each person struggles to make themself a unitary rational being, whose existence is separate from others and yet makes sense to those others" (p. 238).

MacNaughton (2006) found, then, that dominant-gender discourses can be linked to pleasure. She explains that "The most powerful gender discourses in young children's lives are those that define the normal ways to be girls and boys, women and men. [While] these discourses often express stereotyped, mutually exclusive relationships between genders....Children adopt these discourses because they find pleasure in 'getting it right' and 'being normal' for their specific culture, time and place" (p. 121). As dominant-gender discourses shape normative assumptions of femininity and masculinity, children become accustomed to and familiar with what is considered to be typical feminine and masculine behavior within a particular society. Straying away from what is considered to be normal poses a risk, which may become less pleasurable than remaining within the societal constructs of gender. Davies (1989b) explains that "As children learn the discursive practices of their society, they learn to position themselves correctly as male or female, since that is what is required of them to have a recognizable identity within the existing social order" (p. 238). Therefore, children quickly understand that their social acceptance requires that their talk and actions echo those found within dominant-gender discourses.

Nevertheless, children may also actively resist what is familiar and comfortable. While gender discriminatory talk or actions may prevail, children also disrupt dominant-gender discourses in their play. For instance, MacNaughton's (2006) study illustrates how a kindergarten boy wanted to play in the home corner, but is constrained by his peers. The teacher asks, "Would

you like to play the mum?" The boy replies, "Yes, but the girls won't let me play mum" (p. 133).

This example shows how children are active in regulating gender norms and roles as the girls

refuse to have the boy play a mother character. At the same time, the boy is trying to break away

from traditional, normative assumptions of motherhood where males can also be caring and

nurturing. Likewise, some girls enjoy action packed forms of play typically associated with

masculinity. In her research with superhero play in the classroom, Marsh (2000) found that once

notions of masculinity were dislocated from the superhero discourse, girls demonstrated just as

much interest in superhero play as the boys did. In fact, "five girls and four boys" (p. 125) were

found playing in the Bat cave one morning. Marsh (2000) explains that although the girls'

superhero play was different from the boys' superhero play, the girls became "agents of action

rather than passive onlookers" (p. 133). These examples illustrate that children do not necessarily

passively accept what is presented to them by adults, rather may struggle to position themselves

in ways that are socially acceptable and pleasing to others. Thus creating various avenues and

opportunities for children to experiment with the multiple ways of being may encourage them to

express and take on alternative discourses of femininity and masculinity that allow for more fluid

gender identities.

 C) Play and Pedagogy

        Unfortunately, more often than not, children are restricted to two ways of being, girl or

boy, and are guided towards certain types of play and presented with certain types of toys based

on their sex. Consequently, girls and boys are typically exposed to different forms of knowledges

and practice different skills. Francis (2010) found that the different toys children play with

provide girls and boys with different curriculum related skills. For example, girl toys "afford

opportunities for girls to develop communication skills and emotional intelligence, while boy

toys help develop technical knowledge and skills" (p. 326). The block and construction play in

which boys typically engage in the preschool classroom provide a space "to learn mathematical

and geometric concepts, to create topological knowledge, and to learn to match and

group" (Hanline, Milton, & Phelps, 2001, p. 224). These early experiences with block play help

support later mathematical learning. While dramatic play is also important, skills learned are

limited to language and socio-emotional development. As girls typically engage in dramatic play,

they "spend more time talking, drawing, and role-playing in relational ways" (Eliot, 2010, p. 34). In later academic years, this early socialization through play may influence academic ability, curriculum subject preference, and academic opportunity. Eliot (2010) found that "Girls have outperformed boys in reading and boys have outscored girls in math" (p. 33). This not only has important implications for children's academic performance, but the academic subjects they excel in may influence their future aspirations. Webber (2010) highlights that "Women are graduating with university degrees in increasing numbers, yet this has not yet translated into wide occupational rewards as women continue to earn less than men and are not well represented in the top positions of power" (p. 255). Consequently, in limiting the gender discourses available to children, they are streamlined into two categories that reproduce and maintain gender inequality.

1.3 Research Questions

As classroom play provides children an additional space for replicating or challenging the gender norms and stereotypes of the dominant culture, it becomes important to bridge the gap between research on gender and play and the recent policy reform in Québec education. The overarching goal of this study is thus to investigate the ways in which the QEP's emphasis on play in preschool has influenced teachers' use of play in the classroom, specifically relating to gender. This study's overarching question asks the following: In what ways, if at all, has the QEP's emphasis on play in preschool influenced teachers' use of play in the classroom? As this study seeks to examine the gender issues that arise during play it also asks two sub-questions: How do preschool teachers' gender perceptions shape classroom play periods? What challenges do teachers experience in relation to play and gender?

1.4 Theoretical Perspective: Critical Feminism

This study uses a critical feminist perspective to examine teacher practice and gender issues in the preschool classroom. According to Wood (2008b), critical feminism is the intersection of critical theories and feminist theories. She explains that critical theories intend to identify prevailing structures and practices that maintain inequity and aim to uncover the ideologies that shape people's understanding of reality. Central to feminist theories, Wood (2008b) explains, is the distinction between gender and sex, where gender is understood as a

socially constructed concept and sex a biological category. Feminist theories also deconstruct the effects of patriarchy on our social world, a system that privileges the interest, perspectives, and experiences of white, heterosexual men. Critical feminism is thus "the result [of] theories that identify, critique, and seek to change inequities and discrimination, particularly those that are based on sex and gender" (Wood, 2008b, p. 326). Theories within the critical feminist perspective "ask how cultural structures and practices shape women's and men's lives and communication and how women's and men's lives and communication shape structures and practices" (Wood, 2008b, p. 326). Critical feminist theories not only focus on official forms of power, such as laws, but also on the everyday, mundane practices that maintain gender inequality, specifically those practices that devalue subordinate groups such as women and hold them in unequal status that limit their privilege. Moreover, Ackerly and True (2010) explain that "A critical feminist perspective uses critical inquiry and reflection on social injustices by way of gender analysis, to transform, and not simply explain, the social order. The perspective encourages opening new lines of inquiry versus simply 'filling in gaps'" (p. 2). Within critical feminism there are several avenues that can be taken to examine and address issues of gender power, inequity, and discrimination. For this study, I use a critical feminist theoretical lens informed by two significant currents within critical feminism: feminist poststructuralist theory and feminist standpoint theory.

A) Feminist Poststructuralism Theory

        In order to make sense of the male-female binary that guides our everyday practices, I draw upon feminist postructuralism. According to Davies and Gannon (2005), feminist postructuralism makes visible the male-female binary and "shows how relations of power are constructed and maintained by granting normality, rationality and naturalness to the dominant half of any binary, and in contrast, how the subordinate term is marked as other, as lacking, as not rational" (cited in Somekh & Lewin, 2005, p. 318). Central to feminist postructuralism are the concepts of discourse and subjectivity, where discourses influence and create subjects. According to Blaise (2005), "Discourse is a structuring principle in the classroom and society, and language is always located within discourse....Discourses provide a framework for how we think" (p. 16). Discourses thus establish various "truths" through the messages they carry about

what is normal and abnormal. For instance, the gender discourses in media messages targeted towards children have established the idea or "truth" that all girls enjoy playing with dolls and all boys do not. While this is not true for all girls and boys, it has certainly become a dominant gender discourse. Blaise (2005) explains that "Dominant discourses appear "natural," supporting and perpetuating existing power relations, tending to constitute the subjectivity of most people" (p. 16). Subjectivity, according to Blaise (2005), is a person's understanding of themselves and their relation to the world. She explains, "A person's subjectivity is a process that is socially and actively constructed through discourse and language" (p. 17). In this view, individuals are affected by gender discourses as these discourses shape their conscious and unconscious thoughts about what it means to be female or male. Dominant-gender discourses thus become powerful in establishing the "right" way of being female or male.

Critiques of feminist poststructuralism argue that this view does not support human agency as such theories are based on the belief that ideology and discourses of power regulate the subject (i.e. the student). However, Davies (1991) diverges from strict poststructuralist thought to incorporate a version of agency based on her research with young children in the classroom. She posits that subjects do make choices, however they are considered to be forced choices. For instance, a young girl may choose to play with dolls when surrounded by peers in the classroom because this is the socially acceptable form of play in this setting. While this young girl also enjoys playing with cars and trucks, she does so when playing with her brother at home, for instance. Davies (1991) explains, that the subject "can move within and between discourses, can see precisely how they subject her, can use the terms of one discourse to counteract, modify, refuse, or go beyond the other, both in terms of her own experiences subjectivity and in the way in which she speaks in relation to the subjectivities of others" (p. 60). In this sense, children are active agents in choosing their positioning within particular discourses as different discourses allow individuals to take up a range of subjectivities. Children understand what is socially acceptable in different contexts and behave accordingly within a particular context. In a classroom setting, feminist poststructuralism becomes a tool for educators to recognize the multiple gender discourses that may arise and to understand how children position themselves within the available discourses. The objective then is to break down the female-male dualism and

create space for many gender discourses to emerge so that children are not restricted to positioning themselves within one of two categories.

B) Feminist Standpoint Theory

While socio-cultural structures and practices may influence individuals' conscious and unconscious thoughts and actions, feminist standpoint theories attempt to bridge the gap between structure and human agency as they recognize that both elements are at work. Feminist standpoint theories advocate that the impact of societal structures are different for people in different social locations and thus knowledge is socially situated. It becomes necessary then to include the insights of individuals of different social positions, although they may be partial, for a fuller understanding of the realities of our social world. For instance, Hartsock (1983), who examines the sexual division of labour and women's activity in society, posits that "Women and men...grow up with personalities affected by different boundary experiences, differently constructed and experienced inner and outer worlds, and preoccupations with different relational issues" (cited in McCann & Kim, 2013, p. 360). Moreover, Hartsock (1983) highlights how subordinate groups are caught in the contradictions between the structures and practices of the dominant culture and their social realities. For instance, women live in the inconsistency of a society that expects them to take on the responsibilities of domestic labour, yet does not value such work. Hartsock (1983) argues that women are then in a position to see more clearly than men how knowledge produced by the dominant culture distorts social reality. Such contradictions further intersect with race and class, where a black, working-class woman may see more clearly the inequalities of our social world than a white, middle-class woman, for instance. In a classroom setting, it becomes important then to be aware of students' social positions and how this may influence what students know and what they can contribute to classroom learning.

Significant to the discussion of agency is the concept of voice. In her book, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, hooks (1994) introduces the concept of an engaged pedagogy. The essence of an engaged pedagogy advocates for education to be the practice of freedom. As the central tenets of an engaged pedagogy are openness and self-actualization, it is designed to value student expression and position students as whole human beings. An engaged pedagogy works to give students a voice and make their experiences a

valuable contribution to knowledge. Kenway and Modra (1992) explain that "When students are the passive recipients of knowledge which is selected by others, of teachers' assessments and of external and remote administrative decisions, they cannot help but have a limited sense of their capacity to effect change" (p. 143). An engaged pedagogy then attempts to construct a curriculum that does not reflect exclusively knowledge produced by the dominant group, which from a standpoint perspective, distorts reality. Instead, by engaging students within the curriculum by giving them a voice, subjugated knowledges can be uncovered and reclaimed. hooks (1994) explains, "As a teacher I recognize that students from marginalized groups enter classrooms within institutions where their voices have been neither heard nor welcomed....My pedagogy has been shaped to respond to this reality....we all bring to the classroom experiential knowledge, that this knowledge can indeed enhance our learning experience" (pp. 83-84). In this view, school becomes a participatory space to share knowledge rather than a space that encourages Freire's banking concept of education, where the biases of the dominant culture are perpetuated.

In relation to gender, the concept of human agency becomes important when shaping ideas of femininity and masculinity. In order to transgress the gender biases of the dominant culture, hooks (1994) advocates for the classroom to become a safe space where students can grapple with the dominant-gender discourses absorbed through the media and within the family as well as provide their own perspectives and beliefs on what it means to be female or male. Creating a space open to and accepting of difference and individuality may encourage all children to contribute their experiences and inform each other about the realities that make up their social world. As such practices may motivate the discovery of gender discourses that go against the grain, it helps create a clearer picture of the social realities of marginalized people. For instance, a student who is transgendered may not only feel safe and accepted in the classroom, but embracing that student's knowledge and experiences also unsettles dominant understandings of sex and gender and in turn furthers the other students' understanding of what it means to be female or male. As such, I draw on both feminist poststructuralism and feminist standpoint theories to examine the ways in which classroom play discourses shape children's positionings

during play and how children's lived experiences are also encouraged to unsettle these play discourses and bring about social change.

1.5 Overview of the Thesis

In this first chapter, I have mapped out the introduction and background of this study into four sections. In the first section, I presented the problem statement and purpose of this study. In doing so, I highlighted how educational policy has required play to be an important part of preschool education in Québec, however has dismissed the implications for gender. In the second section, I introduced the conceptual framework that informs this study. In this section, I discussed the benefits of play, the ways in which play and toys have shaped childhood culture, and the pedagogical implications for girls and boys in using a play-based curriculum in the preschool classroom. In the third section, I outlined the study's main research question and its two sub-questions. Here, I questioned how teachers make use of play in their classrooms as well as the ways in which their gender perceptions may shape classroom play periods and the challenges teachers face in terms of play and gender. In the fourth and final section of this chapter, I described the ways in which critical feminism informs this study's theoretical framework. Specifically, I pointed to feminist poststructuralism theory and feminist standpoint theory to understand the ways in which classroom play discourses shape children's gender identities and their lived realities in the classroom.

In Chapter two, I offer a review of the literature on the gender perceptions of early childhood educators (ECEs). I begin the chapter by outlining the theories behind ECEs' gender perceptions. I then present the ways in which ECEs' gender perceptions may affect their teaching practices. The chapter ends with a discussion of ECEs' concerns with gender equity and the implications on social justice in the preschool classroom.

In chapter three, I outline this study's research design. The chapter highlights the steps I took for gaining access to the settings, the recruitment process, the participants who took part in this research, and the settings I visited to collect the data. In the third chapter, I also address the methodology that drives this work, the methods used to collect the data, and a brief discussion on the procedures implemented to collect the data. I then situate myself within the fieldwork, discuss the reliability and validity of this study, and its ethical considerations.

In the fourth chapter, I present the research findings gathered from the fieldwork. I begin the chapter by describing the transcription and coding processes. The findings are then organized into three sections that explicitly address this study's three research questions. Each section begins with a table outlining the teachers' responses to the research questions, followed by a discussion of the results.

In the fifth and final chapter, I begin with a summary of the study, which is followed by the conclusion. I then discuss the limitations of the study and its implications for further research. I end the chapter and the study with final reflections.

Chapter Two: Literature Review: The Gender Perceptions of Early Childhood Educators

2.1 Chapter Introduction

Research shows that early childhood education has long been informed by and organized around child development theories (Blaise, 2005; MacNaughton, 2000). As such, teacher education programs often draw on developmental psychology to inform early childhood educators (ECEs) about "good" teaching practices. Unfortunately, as teacher education programs often focus on developmentally appropriate practice, teachers are not always equipped to address, manage, or even see issues surrounding social justice in their classrooms. Specifically, the literature highlights that ECEs' gender perceptions continue to be deeply rooted in traditional beliefs, where several myths about gender prevail and influence their teaching practices. As a result, gender stereotypes and biases continue to arise throughout the curriculum and formal instruction as well as throughout the hidden curriculum. One of the more subtle, yet powerful ways in which ECEs shape students' gender identity is through teacher-student interactions in the classroom. Unfortunately, as narrow truths about childhood have permeated the field of education and have shaped ECEs' beliefs about good teaching practices, the dominant gender discourses that are produced and maintained in the classroom on a daily basis are often masked.

The research in this chapter pertains to the gender perceptions that prevail among ECEs. Specifically, in this chapter I outline four aspects of gender perceptions. In the first section, I lay out why certain gender perceptions are common among ECEs. Here, I discuss how biological and sex-role socialization theories seem to inform ECEs' existing gender perceptions. In the second section, I illustrate how ECEs' gender perceptions affect teaching practices. Here, I outline how the male-female binary is produced and reproduced in the preschool classroom, where girls and boys are positioned as opposites and continue to be treated differently and often times unequally. The third section highlights how ECEs' existing gender perceptions may discourage them to engage in equitable teaching practices. In this third section, I discuss gender issues and parental involvement, gender and homophobia, and the concern for boys' underachievement. Finally, in the fourth section, I look at how ECEs' gender perceptions may affect their practice of social justice in the preschool classroom. In this last section, I outline how ECEs' gender perceptions play a role in positioning children as passive and unknowing subjects

and legitimize the equal treatment rhetoric and child-centered practices that are not necessarily fair to all students. In this chapter I hope to illustrate how ECEs' existing gender attitudes maintain the gendered nature of the early childhood classroom, which is often characterized by hegemonic masculinity, where the dominance of men over women and other masculinities prevails (MacNaughton, 2000). Specifically, I argue that ECEs' traditional perceptions and understandings of gender mask the gender power that surfaces during children's actions and interactions. As such, children are perceived to be and are treated as passive recipients of knowledge rather than active agents in the construction of gender and in the perpetuation of gender power.

2.2 The Theories Behind ECEs' Gender Perceptions

While much of ECEs' gender perceptions and expectations likely stem from societal gender stereotypes and biases learned in the family, through the media, and in peer groups, the child development theories that dominate Western early childhood education and teacher education programs further normalize stereotypical gender beliefs. Specifically, Blaise (2005) explains how the notion of the naturally developing child is a common assumption that underlies educational policies, pedagogy, curriculum, and training, but has important, negative, implications for gender equity. Child development theories not only legitimize gender as a natural category, but also reinforce gender differences, which shape the social expectations of girls and boys. Often times, these expectations limit both girls' and boys' potential and the opportunities available to them. For instance, if ECEs perceive females to be *natural* caregivers, girls may not be encouraged to pursue subjects such as science and math. In this section, I examine how the child development theories that dominate the field of education rely on both biological and socialization frameworks to make sense of gender and gender differences.

The research shows that ECEs' gender perceptions are largely grounded in biological theories of gender construction (Bhana, 2003; Blaise, 2005; Leach & Davies, 1990; Lee-Thomas, Sumsion, & Roberts, 2005; MacNaughton, 2000; Mweru, 2012). In line with theories of the naturally developing child, ECEs' perceptions of gender differences are prominently found to be synonymous with biological sex differences. In this view, teachers will often refer to girls and boys as simply "being born that way" (Bhana, 2003; Blaise, 2005; MacNaughton, 2000). ECEs'

reliance on biological determinism can be problematic in the preschool classroom as the assumption that gender differences reside exclusively in biological differences homogenizes girls and boys. For instance, Bhana (2009) found that biological determinism legitimizes the commonly held belief among ECEs that "boys will be boys" (p. 39), where the idea that boys are troublesome is produced and reproduced in the classroom. Because boys are expected to cause trouble they are less likely to be reprimanded than when girls cause trouble as girls are homogenized as "being passive, weak, and hushed" (Bhana, 2009, pp. 40-41). Such discourses position girls and boys as having essential and naturally emerging human qualities, rather than socially constructed ones. Davies (1989b) argues that making difference biological obliges one to "achieve the ways of being that appear to be implicated in a particular set of genitals they happen to have" (p. 237). Consequently, femininity and masculinity are naturalized and homogenized and children's gender identities are perceived as fixed and unitary. Davies (1989b) posits that femaleness and maleness become a constraint on children's behaviors and identities, where "Boys are obliged to take themselves up imaginatively as forceful and dominant and girls as other to any manifestation of 'masculine' power" (p. 235). Perceiving gender exclusively through a biological framework may become problematic in the preschool classroom as children are not given opportunities to explore and experiment with the multiple ways of being a girl or a boy.

Understanding gender through the biological lens also legitimizes the commonly held belief among ECEs that "gender doesn't matter" when working with young children (Bhana, 2003; Blaise, 2005; MacNaughton, 2000; Pardhan, 2011). Such a view is consistent with an essentialist and universal view of childhood, which ignores difference and naturalizes children's behaviors. Unfortunately, as gender is perceived to be unimportant in childhood, it is not seen as a marker of social inequality in the preschool classroom. For instance, MacNaughton (2000) found that when the ECEs in her study observed their students during play, they relied exclusively on a developmental gaze where "the child was viewed as gender neutral" (p. 76). Furthermore, Blaise (2005) found that ECEs in her study view children as "autonomous, rational, and self-determining individuals, [which] is biased both culturally and in terms of gender" (pp. 6-7). Within such perspectives, teaching practices are likely to focus exclusively on nurturing children's individual needs and ignore the cultural and social factors that influence children's

development and shape their gender identities. Not seeing gender and thus not addressing the gender power that unfolds between children on a daily basis allows for hegemonic masculinity to guide children's actions and interactions. This may lead certain boys to exercise power over girls and other boys, which normalizes patriarchal relations between children and maintains gender inequalities in the classroom.

The literature shows that sex-role socialization theories also shape ECEs understanding of gender (Blaise, 2005; Davies, 1989; Lee-Thomas, Sumsion, & Roberts, 2005; MacNaughton, 2000; Mweru, 2012). Within this view, teachers see gender and are often aware of gender issues in their classrooms. Gender is not perceived to be simply a natural category. Instead, "Socialization theories view gender identity as a product of various forms of learning....the child learns her or his role directly through modeling and reinforcement and recognizes the importance that society and culture place on the different expectations for both females and males" (Blaise, 2005, p. 9). Sex-role socialization theories, however, can be problematic because they reinforce the gender dichotomy and the misconception that girls and boys should have distinct interests. Moreover, understanding gender through this model suggests that girls and boys are simply "doing what they see" (Blaise, 2005, p. 11). Gender issues in this view are related to girls and boys behaving inappropriately according to their sex. Socialization theories thus justify ECEs' encouragement of children's sex specific behaviors and the discouragement of behaviors that are deemed inappropriate for a particular sex. For instance, Mweru (2012) found that "Preschool teachers influenced the children to select gender-appropriate play materials and use play materials in a gender-appropriate manner significantly more than selecting cross-gender or gender-neutral play materials...teachers seemed to have preferences as to which play materials children of different genders should play with and tended to encourage children to sex-type these play materials" (pp. 15-16). Thus, although sex-role socialization theories facilitate an awareness of gender among ECEs, gender inequalities persist as girls and boys are expected to passively fulfill different social roles.

According to Blaise (2005), both biological determinism and sex-role socialization theories interact with each other as "socialization theories of gender imply that what men and women are socially is derived from what they are biologically" (p. 13). Consequently, sex differences are

assumed to be biological and the gender roles a child is taught are contingent on these biological differences. Thus, while teachers often speak of the importance of gender equity in their classrooms, it is not always reflected in their practice. Instead, research shows that teachers who attempt to challenge sexism are often times, unknowingly, perpetuating gender stereotypes (Blaise, 2005; Davies, 1989; Gray & Leith, 2004; Leach & Davies, 1990; MacNaughton, 2000; Tatar & Emmanuel, 2001). For instance, ECEs may perceive to be practicing gender equity by giving the same amount of attention to both girls and boys. However, what girls and boys receive attention for differs as girls will often be praised for being pretty during Princess play, for instance, and boys for their building abilities during block play. Davies (1989b) explains, "More often, it is possible to see teachers setting out to teach equitably and failing to do so because their discourse constitutes the pupils in exactly the ways that they are saying is no longer appropriate" (p. 232). Thus, relying exclusively on biological and socialization frameworks seems to maintain the gender binary, reproduce gender inequalities, and reduce all femininities and masculinities to two homogeneous groups, simplifying the complexities of gender and gender issues in the early childhood classroom.

2.3 ECEs' Gender Perceptions and Their Effects on Teaching Practices

While historically girls and boys who attended the same schools were often overtly segregated within the schools through separate entrances, separate playgrounds, separate seating, and rigorous gender streaming (Webber, 2010), I wonder, how much has changed; are girls and boys necessarily receiving the same education today? Studies show that girls and boys continue to receive a different education in schools, but perhaps in more subtle ways (Grossman & Grossman, 1994; Stanworth, 1983; Thorne, 1993; Webber, 2010). This manifests itself through both the formal and informal curriculum. Formally, normative assumptions about how children should be are produced and reproduced during story time, for instance, through children's storybooks. Davies' (1989b) work illustrates how "the idea of dualistic oppositional maleness and femaleness...is embedded in the usual stories that [children] hear" (p. 231) and informs their everyday lives. Informally, through gendered line ups, bathroom breaks, gendered seating arrangements, and student-teacher interactions children are also exposed to two ways of being: girl or boy. According to Thorne (1993), "Apart from age, of all the social categories of the

students, gender [is] the most formally, and informally, highlighted in the course of each [school] day" (p. 34). For instance, Thorne (1993) explains how throughout the school day announcements often open with "Boys and girls" (p. 34), further normalizing the gender binary. In this section, I illustrate that while not overtly segregated, girls and boys continue to be perceived as two distinct groups by ECEs. Consequently, teachers develop separate social and academic expectations for girls and boys and thus treat girls and boys differently in the classroom.

The literature shows that ECEs' gender perceptions are deeply rooted in traditional gender role beliefs, where men are held in positions of power and privilege and women are devalued (Hyun & Tyler, 2000; Pardhan, 2011; Stanworth, 1983; Webber, 2010). For instance, an early study by Stanworth (1983) highlights how ECEs' gender perceptions reinforce occupational stereotypes where boys are seen by teachers in jobs involving considerable responsibility and authority, such as civil service or management careers. Girls instead are seen in stereotypically female occupations such as secretary, nurse, and teacher. Similar evidence is found in a later study by Gray and Leith (2004), which reveals that "Typically girls are seen [by teachers] in supporting rather than in authority roles" (p. 10). Corroborating evidence is highlighted in Hyun and Tyler's (2000) study, which shows that preschool teachers perceive boys "as constructive, active, independent, and creative learners" (p. 349). The authors explain that girls instead are viewed as positive and sensitive learners who are calm, nicer, and passive. More recently, Pardhan (2011) found that boys are assumed to be more intelligent and to have greater academic potential, specifically in math and science. Boys are viewed to be naturally stronger to face challenges as well as have a natural tendency to be better decision-makers. These findings illustrate how hegemonic masculinity permeates classroom discourses and indicates an implicit assumption that boys are and should be vocal and active thinkers, while girls are passive learners to be channeled into subordinate roles. Such gender perceptions have important implications as they will influence how ECEs interact with their students on a daily basis.

As ECEs hold distinct beliefs and expectations about each gender category, girls and boys are treated differently in the classroom. Stanworth's (1983) work shows that teachers will generally accept answers from boys who do not raise their hands, while a girl "who speaks out

early is instantly 'fixed' by her teacher (p. 28). In a later study, Streitmatter (1994) found similar trends where "Preschool teachers interact with girls more gently and boys in a more robust way; teachers' voices tend to be louder and more directive with boys. [Moreover], girls are directed to quieter play such as coloring, the dress-up area, or dolls, and boys are encouraged toward play that requires more activity such as block building or 'combat'" (pp. 50-51). More recently, Webber's (2010) research shows that "Boys are often praised by their teachers when they successfully complete a task, while girls may be applauded for their attractive appearance or quiet behavior....Girls are praised for being 'congenial' and 'neat' while boys' work is praised for its intellectual quality" (p. 250). Finally, Pardhan (2011) found that compared to girls, boys seem to dominate whole-class discussions, are disciplined, praised, instructed, responded to and listened to more. They receive more helpful and constructive feedback, are asked more open, complex, higher-order questions, and are given more challenges and strategies for problem solving. Unfortunately, such gendered practices not only maintain a gender divide among children, but they also nurture girls' dependence and boys' independence.

ECEs' gendered practices have important academic implications as well as real material consequences as a child's sense of self will affect the choices she or he makes. Treating girls and boys differently may influence children's academic abilities, subject preferences, and academic opportunities in later academic years. For instance, Webber (2010) explains that girls are more likely than boys to take generalized social sciences and less likely to pursue careers in domains such as computer science, engineering, mathematics, and vocational occupations. Unfortunately, the continued gendering of subject areas leads to differences in career options and salaries for women and men. This is evident as women remain substantially underrepresented in decision-making positions and continue to earn less than men (Streitmatter, 1994; Webber, 2010). Thus, gender differences in teacher attention, feedback, and expectations may have adverse effects, particularly for females as developing a low self-concept may limit their future aspirations.

2.4 ECEs' Gender Perceptions and Their Concerns with Gender Equity

In this section I highlight that while some ECEs do not engage in or are unaware of gender equitable practices, many ECEs do strive towards gender equity in their classrooms (Blaise, 2005; Davies, 1989; MacNaughton, 2000). However, these ECEs also bring to light several

concerns that arise when engaging in gender equitable practice. For instance, ECEs may be reluctant to address gender equity in their classrooms because parents may disapprove (Gray & Leith, 2004; MacNaughton, 2000). MacNaughton (2000) found that teachers "are worried about parents' expectations, and being challenged by parents about their program, more so now, because twenty years ago what the teacher did with the kindergarten children was gospel and no-one challenged them" (p. 188). Today, as the importance of parent involvement in early childhood education is promoted in educational texts and policies, ECEs may feel uncomfortable, even daunted, with the idea of challenging gender stereotypes in their classrooms as the importance of gender equity may not always be easily accepted by all families. For instance, while teachers in MacNaughton's (2000) study were able to negotiate their way through some parental support, they also experienced "resistance, vacillation and indifference to their gender equity intentions" (p. 184). In an earlier study, Davies (1989b) highlights a teacher's experience with a student's father who sent an angry note "requesting that Michael not be allowed to play with the nail polish...because 'he was a boy' and 'boys don't wear nail polish'" (p. 237). Moreover, a mother in MacNaughton's (2000) study claimed that "Boys need to learn to be aggressive, because they need to be aggressive to succeed in the world of business" (p. 186). Thus, counteracting gender stereotypes in the classroom may become challenging for ECEs if their students' family values and beliefs are not consistent with gender equitable practices. This discussion then also highlights the controversy surrounding teachers' role and responsibility in attempting to challenge gender stereotypes in the classroom. Gray and Leith (2004) found that while some say that it is the teachers' responsibility to introduce alternative viewpoints in relation to gender, others believe that gender roles are learned in the home and schools should remain neutral in relation to such topics. Thus, in pursuing gender equitable practices in the classroom, ECEs may become overwhelmed and overworked as they may need to deal with and navigate through the backlash from their students' families.

Research shows that resistance towards gender equitable practices in the preschool classroom seems to be rooted in the rigid gender perceptions that inform societal understandings of femininity and masculinity. Specifically, allowing for alternative discourses of masculinity becomes taboo in a society that continues to be relatively homophobic. For instance, as the

teacher in Davies' (1989b) example allowed Michael to wear nail polish to introduce an alternative way of being male, she explains that the child's parent instead found this to be a threat to his son's masculinity. According to Connell (1995), "Hegemonic masculinity is a culturally exalted form of masculinity. It is authoritative, tough, heterosexual, brave, adventurous, assertive, strong, and competitive and in possession of public knowledge" (as cited in Bhana, 2009, p. 329). Consequently, any alternative to hegemonic masculinity alludes to homosexuality. It seems as though then that a binary exists within the concept of masculinity where boys who do not fit hegemonic masculinity are perceived to be homosexual. Unfortunately, a Western cultural homophobia may influence ECEs' understandings of gender role behaviors and expectations and, in turn, their teaching practices. For instance, in Cahill and Adams' (1997) research, ECEs found it "appropriate to offer young girls greater latitude in the exploration of behaviors and aspirations that have been traditionally defined as 'masculine' than they do for boys exploring behaviors and aspirations that have been traditionally defined as 'feminine'" (p. 526). Moreover, Pardhan's (2011) study reveals that "Although equal opportunities for girls and boys such as participating in non-gender stereotypical play were advocated...[teachers] humorously shared with colleagues when boys dressed up like girls or cooked; when girls made trains in the block area, this did not usually become a topic of discussion" (p. 938).

Such attitudes and responses to gender role exploration may be rooted in the fact that greater social value is placed on masculine behavior. As a result, "Females who adopt male behavior receive little reproach but males who adopt female behavior are readily stigmatized" (Mweru, 2012, p. 16). As supporting and encouraging feminine behavior among boys is perceived to be taboo and encouraging masculine behavior among girls is acceptable, it becomes clear how patriarchal values and beliefs guide gender expectations. In this sense, the commonly accepted rhetoric of equal treatment in schools becomes problematic as it seems to suggest a normative standard for all children to achieve, specifically a standard informed by hegemonic masculinity. As one teacher in MacNaughton's (2000) study came to realize, "The idea of equality meant everyone being the same was implicit, but she had a sense that this meant everyone being the same as the masculine standard" (p. 13). Thus, instead of supporting and encouraging feminine behavior and thinking, the objective is for girls to conform to hegemonic

masculinity. Such practices not only marginalize girls, but also boys who do not fit the standards of hegemonic masculinity. Making sure girls play in the block area then is not a gender equitable practice if the girls are expected to behave as the boys do and are evaluated based on these expectations. Such practices become counterproductive and instead produce and reproduce gender inequalities in the early childhood classroom.

Finally, the literature also reveals a common concern among ECEs that affirmative action for girls is unfair to boys as boys' needs are no longer being met (Lee-Thomas, Sumsion, & Roberts, 2005; Lahelma, 2014; MacNaughton, 2000). According to Lahelma (2014), as the gender equity discourse emerged, "so too has the 'boy discourse,' which is fed by concerns about boys' school achievement, attainment and behavior" (p. 174). ECEs are concerned that by focusing on ensuring that the girls are being treated fairly, boys are not receiving adequate attention. For instance, one teacher in MacNaughton's (2000) study expressed: "I feel for boys too....the boys do miss out a little bit" (p. 134). Teachers in Lee-Thomas, Sumsion, and Roberts' (2005) study also suggested that gender equity has gone too far as "[they] discussed how gender equity risked transgressing what is normal and desirable and, at times, favored girls and disadvantaged boys" (p. 25). Inherent to such concerns is the underlying belief in the male-female binary and the hegemonic masculine standard that informs the social order of this binary. Because gender equitable practices seek to dismantle hegemonic masculine standards in the preschool classroom, ECEs' concern for boys may be a concern about their perceived responsibility to ensure that boys fulfill the social standards of what is considered to be "true" masculinity. Since gender equitable teaching practices threaten boys' privilege and domination, such practices also then threaten what is perceived to be natural and normal.

2.5 ECEs' Gender Perceptions and Social Justice in the Preschool Classroom

As I discussed at the start of this chapter, ECEs' existing gender perceptions have been found to be heavily influenced by biological and socialization theories. Unfortunately, such theoretical frameworks not only offer a rigid understanding of gender that maintains the gender binary and oppresses the potential of girls, but they also position all children as passive recipients of knowledge. As such, ECEs' existing gender perceptions allow for alternative discourses of femininity and masculinity to go unnoticed and remain unsupported in the preschool classroom.

In this section, I examine the literature that highlights how ECEs' narrow gender perceptions discourage children's attempts to resist or challenge dominant gender discourses and, in turn, hinder teaching practices that encourage social justice. Moreover, I highlight that as teacher education programs rely on developmental psychology, issues of social justice are not perceived to be integral to "good" teaching practices.

According to Leach and Davies (1990), through biological and socialization frameworks, "the passive child is actively taught, usually by one central adult, how to be a boy or a girl. It is assumed that this learning presses the "real" person into particular ways of being male or female" (p. 327). Such perceptions are problematic as they normalize and legitimize the adult-child relationship, where the adult, such as the teacher, is perceived to have the ultimate power to mold children. Consequently, in working exclusively within these frameworks, ECEs come to believe that children passively learn gender rather than actively participate in the construction and reconstruction of gender roles and expectations. In their study, Lee-Thomas, Sumsion, and Roberts (2005) found that ECEs' "recognition of gender enactment was largely limited to sex-segregation in play and the use of sex-associated materials....the complex and dynamic nature of how a child assumes multiple and contradictory gender positions did not seem well understood by the teachers" (p. 23). Instead, as childhood is understood to be a normative sequence of developmental stages, children are viewed as incomplete gendered adults (Bhana, 2003) who belong to one of two categories and require adult guidance to learn the roles and expectations of their respective gender categories.

In positioning children as developing subjects, they are perceived by ECEs to be unaware of their gender. In her research, MacNaughton (2000) found that a shared discourse among the ECEs was that children are "too young to know" (p. 90). Consistent with these findings, Bhana's (2003) research shows that "the assumption that children in the early years of schooling are too young and too immature to be implicated in gender considerations" (p. 43) is prominent among ECEs. These assumptions emerge from broader discourses of childhood innocence, which stem from child development theories and position children as unknowing. Bhana (2003) explains that "Making gender escape in the lives of young children is related to dominant discourses that tend to construct children as biological, passive and unprotesting, without agency, and renders both

boys and girls invisible" (p. 42). In fact, as I mentioned in Chapter 1, research shows that children construct an understanding of gender at an early age. As young as toddlerhood, children begin to define themselves as girls or boys (Bussey & Bandura, 1999; Freeman, 2007). Children's awareness and understandings of gender become especially evident during play as studies show that girls' and boys' toy selections are influenced by sex-typed toy labels and are less likely to select toys that are labeled as being for the other sex (Martin, Eisenbud, & Rose, 1995; Raag, 1999). Unfortunately, ECEs' beliefs that children are "too young to know" gender may discourage them to carry out teaching practices that encourage the deconstruction of gender norms and stereotypes with their students. As discourses of the innocent, developing child silence gender in children's lives (MacNaughton, 2000), normative and limiting assumptions and expectations of femininity and masculinity are perpetuated in the early childhood classroom.

Silencing gender in the classroom also legitimizes discourses of equal treatment, which are typically misinterpreted to result in fair treatment. The research shows that ECEs claim to practice equality by providing the same materials to all students, by ensuring all students receive equal access to the curriculum, and by providing the same opportunities for participation (MacNaughton, 2000; Pardhan, 2011; Streitmatter, 1994). While these efforts are important, taking up teaching practices exclusively according to an equality framework can be counterproductive and may instead reproduce and maintain gender inequalities in the classroom. Streitmatter (1994) posits that equal treatment "is concerned primarily with giving all students, female and male, an equal footing at the start" (p. 8), however the reality is that not all students begin at the same level at the start. Within this view, the implications and complexities of gender continue to be masked, rather than addressed in the classroom. Simply including girls in the male dominated block area, for instance, is not enough when addressing gender inequality in the classroom as gender relations and power will unfold within this play area. This is evident as MacNaughton (2000) found that teachers who made it a point to ensure girls play in the block area realized that "[it] was regularly constructed as a patriarchal space where masculinist (macho) ways of acting, being and feeling gave boys powerful access and involvement" (p. 119). Thus, equal treatment does not necessarily mean fair treatment as individuals who do not embody hegemonic masculinity will enter the preschool classroom from a disadvantaged

position. Blaise (2005) posits that it becomes important then for ECEs to understand how "the kindergarten curriculum is gendered...[where] learning activities, such as Lego, are connected to hegemonic masculinity and influence gender norms and differences in the classroom" (p. 142).

In line with the equal treatment rhetoric, many ECEs often do not perceive gender inequality to be an issue in their classrooms (Lee-Thomas, Sumsion, & Roberts, 2005; MacNaughton, 2000). Rooted in educational discourses and pedagogies of child-centered learning and freedom of choice, research shows that ECEs believe children are treated fairly as they have the freedom to choose with what and with whom to play. MacNaughton (2000) found that a common perception held by ECEs is that "if children are 'free' to choose where they play, equal play and equal choice for boys and girls will eventually result" (p. 36). However, as children understand gender early on, play becomes less about choice and more about gender performance. According to Cannella (1997), "the freedom that is implied for young children within the construction of play is a false liberty" (p. 127). This is because children learn early on through the family, the media, and peers what is considered "good" behavior and "bad" behavior according to their sex. As children are aware of the standards they are constantly being judged against by adults, they do not necessarily act freely, but may instead choose to behave in ways that conform to the social expectations associated with their sex. Simply acknowledging gender in the classroom is thus not enough to ensure that social justice prevails. Instead, ECEs may need to intervene to directly address the gender issues that arise during learning activities.

Unfortunately, through child-centered philosophies and pedagogies, discourses of "good" teaching practices in early childhood education have emerged and inform ECEs about the importance of freedom of choice, especially during play. Consequently, the research shows that ECEs are often reluctant to intervene when issues of social justice arise in their classrooms. ECEs in MacNaughton's (2000) study expressed that intervening during play, for instance, may be perceived as "bad" practice by other teachers and administrators. It is such narrow beliefs and discourses in the field of education that may limit ECEs' teaching practices in the classroom, especially in relation to issues of gender inequality. Because the importance of intervening to address social justice issues is not emphasized in teacher education programs, ECEs are not only reluctant to intervene to address gender issues, but are also unprepared if they choose to do so

(Lee-Thomas, Sumsion, & Roberts, 2005; MacNaughton, 2000; Pardhan, 2011). For instance, participants in Lee-Thomas, Sumsion, and Roberts' (2005) study "seemed uncertain as to how to facilitate deconstruction...and consequently missed the opportunity to challenge the children's gender positionings and support alternative constructions" (p. 23). It seems as though ECEs are ill-equipped to explore with their students the different meanings of being female or male and to challenge their own interpretations of gender and gender roles. Unfortunately, as Davies (1989) explains, "The absence of an appropriate alternative discourse [for children] leads the teacher, unwittingly, to knit back up the fabric of the patriarchal social order faster than he can unpick it" (p. 233).

2.6 Chapter Conclusion

In this chapter, I examined commonly held gender perceptions among ECEs. It began by uncovering some of the truths and assumptions that dominate the field of early childhood education. The research in this section found that biological and sex-role socialization theories heavily influence ECEs gender perceptions. Consequently, ECEs seem to maintain traditional gender views. The second section of this chapter brought to light how the dichotomous understanding of gender justifies and encourages the unequal treatment of girls and boys in the preschool classroom. However, it is important to highlight that many ECEs do strive towards gender equitable practices in their classrooms, but are met with several concerns and challenges. The third section of this chapter illustrated how ECEs are concerned that their gender equitable efforts may clash with their students' family values and beliefs, may encourage homosexual behavior, and may shortchange boys' education. These concerns further demonstrate how ECEs' gender perceptions seem to be influenced by patriarchal beliefs and values. In the final section of this chapter, I showed how ECEs' existing gender perceptions assume children to be passive agents who unprotestingly accept the rigid gender roles and expectations associated with their sex. This final section illustrated how ECEs' beliefs that children are too young to know gender mistakenly position children as unable and unwilling to question or challenge dominant gender discourses. As such, ECEs rely exclusively on equal treatment and child-centered practices, which often work against social justice.

It is through these four sections that I hope to have brought attention to the importance of and necessity to encourage teaching practices that deconstruct commonsense beliefs about gender and gender norms. The dominant discourses of what is considered "good" practice influence how teachers see children in the classroom and, perhaps more importantly, what they do not see. Consequently, ECEs' teaching practices are not likely to be committed to addressing issues of social justice where children are not only encouraged to question and challenge stereotypical gender attitudes, but are also given opportunities to construct alternative forms of masculinity and femininity. My argument in this chapter is twofold. First, I proposed that gender inequality will not disappear from the preschool classroom until dichotomous understandings of femininity and masculinity become more fluid and inclusive. Second, social justice in the preschool classroom requires more than simply acknowledging gender inequalities and ensuring equal treatment. Instead, it requires ECEs to perceive children as active agents in the construction and reconstruction of gender. A shift is thus necessary in the power dynamics between educators and students, where both work together to construct knowledge about the different ways of being in our world.

Chapter Three: The Research Design

In this chapter, I outline this study's research design. The chapter is divided into ten sections. At the beginning of the chapter, I address the steps I took for gaining access to the settings, the recruitment process, the participants who took part in this research, and the settings I visited to collect data. I then discuss the methodology that drives this work, the methods used to collect data, and a brief discussion on the procedures implemented to collect the data. I end the chapter by situating myself in the fieldwork, by outlining the reliability and validity of this study, and by summarizing the ethical considerations. For confidentiality purposes, the teachers participating in this study were invited to select pseudonyms. As such, the names used in this study are fictitious and the name of the school board and its schools have remained undisclosed.

3.1 Gaining Access

For this study I intended to visit the classrooms of and interview preschool teachers in Montreal public schools. The school board selected for this study is a public Anglophone[1] school board and is one of five school boards on the island of Montreal. I have selected this school board because it is the school board whose schools I attended growing up and whose schools with which I have completed my teaching internships. Thus I am familiar with many of its schools and its schools' cultures and practices. In order to contact preschool teachers, approval from the McGill Research Ethics Board and the school board was necessary. After receiving approval from the McGill Research Ethics Board, the research approval process for the school board began in February 2014. As changes to the application and additional meetings (which took place once a month) were required, the study was approved by the school board in June 2014. At this time, the schools were closed for the summer. Therefore I began recruitment at the end of August 2014 during the week preceding the start of the school year. Prior to contacting the schools, the school board's protocol required that I first provide them with a list of schools I hoped to include in my study. The school board's research secretary then sent out a letter to each school outlining the school board's approval of the study. The school board's preschool

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[1] In the province of Québec, there are Francophone school boards, which serve the French community and Anglophone school boards, which serve the English community. While French is the dominant language in schools belonging to a Francophone school board and English is the dominant language in schools belonging to an Anglophone school board, bilingual and/or French immersion programs are offered to students in the various schools.

coordinator then sent me the names of the principals and preschool teachers of these schools. As

of August 26th, I had permission to contact the teachers and their principals.

3.2 Recruiting the Participants

During the week preceding the first day of school, an email introducing myself and my

study was sent to eleven preschool teachers and their principals. Sara[2] and Hannah responded

within a week and agreed to participate in the study. Megan and Laurie agreed to participate after

a follow-up email was sent in mid-September, two weeks after the initial email. At this time, two

other teachers declined participation in the study. At the end of September, a second follow-up

email was sent to the remaining schools. By mid-October three teachers declined participation in

the study. A third follow-up email was sent to the two remaining schools, but a response was

never received. While I attempted to contact the principals by phone, I could not get passed the

schools' secretaries.

During the recruitment process some issues arose that may have hindered my contact

with the preschool teachers. For instance, the list of names I had received in August was

incomplete as schools were still in the midst of organizing and finalizing class lists and assigning

teachers to their classrooms well into September. As such, many of the school websites were also

not updated with the correct staff information in September. While I was able to contact the

principals, I could not contact all the preschool teachers the first time around. Because the

beginning of the school year is a hectic time, it took some time to receive a response from the

principals, if at all. Another issue that arose was that the list of names I did have were not all

accurate. On a few occasions, the email was sent to teachers who were not assigned to a

preschool classroom, which the principals rectified weeks into the recruitment process by

forwarding my email to the correct teacher. This confusion took place because some teachers

were on maternity leave and others had recently retired. Thus, the contact information had not

been updated prior to the recruitment process. This led to another issue, which is that a few

teachers were new to preschool and communicated that they felt unprepared to participate in the

study.

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[2] These are not the participants' real names. The participants have chosen pseudonyms.

During the recruitment process, I was able to establish a rapport with the teachers who agreed to take part in the study. Sara and I had already established a relationship as I had completed my first teaching internship in her classroom three years ago. We communicated through email to discuss a convenient meeting time for the first visit. I met Hannah at her school early in September to introduce ourselves, discuss the study, discuss her participation in the study, and establish the dates for the next three visits. I was able to speak to Laurie over the phone to introduce ourselves, discuss the study, discuss her participation in the study, and establish a meeting time for the first visit. I did not meet Megan prior to the first visit, but we communicated over email to establish a convenient meeting time for my first visit.

3.3 The Participants

There are eleven preschool classrooms affiliated with the selected school board. The eleven preschool teachers were invited to participate in this study, of which four accepted. The participants in this study include four bilingual, Caucasian female preschool teachers who differ in age and in the number of years they have been teaching. Sara has been with the school board for sixteen years and has been teaching preschool for ten years. Megan has been teaching at the elementary level for fourteen years and has been teaching preschool for three years. Hannah is now entering her fourth year teaching preschool. Laurie has recently begun her teaching career and has been teaching preschool for seven months. The teachers' participation in this study was voluntary.

Some of the children in the four classrooms also took part in this study as each of the teachers allowed me to participate during their play periods during my visits. The students are four years old and are from various racial and socio-economic backgrounds. Most of the students speak English, however some are native French speakers who seemed to understand English well. A handful of the students did not speak English or French. The student population varied within each classroom from thirteen to sixteen students during my visits. Each classroom had a similar, but not an equal number of girls and boys during my visits. The children did not take part in interviews, rather I remained in the classroom during their play periods and played with them if they invited me to join them. Parental consent was requested and only fieldwork with those students whose parents accepted participation in the study is included in this study.

3.4 The Setting

The schools belonging to the participating school board are divided into three regions named region 1, region 2, and region 3. Of the four schools participating in this study, one belongs to region 1, two belong to region 2, and one belongs to region 3. Each of the four participating schools is located within a different Montreal borough. Thus the fieldwork took place in schools across different Montreal areas. Specifically, data collection was carried out in the teachers' preschool classrooms. The semistructured interviews and photo elicitation interview took place during a teacher's spare period and thus during a time when the students were not present in the classroom. Depending on the teachers' schedules, I was able to participate in the children's play before or after our meeting. The participant observations took place within the classrooms' play spaces during both structured and free play, depending on the time of day of my visit.

3.5 Methodology

For this study I use a qualitative research design to explore play and gender and teacher practices in Montreal preschool classrooms. Punch (2009) offers a simplified definition of qualitative research to mean "empirical research where the data are not in the form of numbers" (p. 3). More profoundly, qualitative research moves away from the positivistic thinking typically associated with quantitative research where knowledge is based on objective accounts and scientific explanations of the world. Instead, qualitative research relies on the meanings people bring to different situations and behaviors. Using a qualitative framework this study thus explores the teachers' meaning making, feelings, and concerns related to educational policy, their use of play in the classroom, and their understandings of the gender issues that arise during play. As such, qualitative research does not seek to confirm a hypothesis about phenomena, but instead explores people's meaning-making of phenomena using more flexible, descriptive, and open-ended methods to gather information.

Qualitative research is a diverse field that includes multiple methodologies and research practices. According to Punch (2009), "Four aspects of this diversity concern paradigms, strategies and designs, approaches to data, and methods for the analysis of data" (p. 115). In line with its theoretical perspective, this study hones in on a feminist paradigm and methodology.

While there is no single form of *feminist* research, they tend to have common characteristics and objectives that distinguish them from other qualitative methodologies. For instance, Somekh et al. (2005) have found that in feminist research the social construction of gender is at the center of inquiry. Feminist methodologies also "reconstruct the process of research...from the chosen focus of study to relationships with participants, methods of data collections, choices of analytical concepts and approaches to reporting" (Somekh et al., 2005, p. 3). According to Burns and Walker (2005), feminist research then is more than a matter of method, instead it aims to raise philosophical issues of ontology and epistemology. She explains, "What feminist methodologies have in common is a shared commitment to drawing attention to the deep and irreducible connections between knowledge and power (privilege), and to making problematic gender in society and social institutions" (p. 66).

Important to feminist research is the relationship between the researcher and the participant. In response to the positivist paradigm, feminist research aims to address the power relations involved in knowledge production. The concept of reflexivity has become pivotal within feminist research, where researchers "openly reflect on, acknowledge, and document their social location and the roles they play in co-creating data and in constructing knowledge" (Doucet & Mauthner, 2006, p. 41). For instance, I am a white, young woman, a novice teacher, and a novice researcher in the field of education. I have had the privilege of attending university at the graduate level to further my knowledge and expertise in the field of education, gender, and social justice. As such, I have access to a body of knowledge that the participating teachers may not have and this may influence my perceptions of what are considered good teaching practices, particularly in relation to play and issues of social justice. My perceptions of what are considered good teaching practices may then influence my analysis of the teachers' use of play in their classroom, for instance, without taking into account their lived realities in the classroom.

While this acknowledgement is important, reflexivity goes beyond a researcher's awareness of their own subject position and its influence on the research as this maintains the researcher at the center of the research process. Instead, reflexivity seeks to make transparent, but cannot remove, the hierarchical relationship between the researcher and the participant. In

doing so, I can respond to and act upon the power inequalities to minimize the risk of reproducing them within the research. One way this can be done is to use data collection methods that minimize my influence on the knowledge being constructed where the participants have a greater influence. As such, participant observations, semistructured interviews, and a photo elicitation interview were used in this study as the teachers could be actively involved in shaping the data being collected.

3.6 Methods for Data Collection

Three data collection methods were used to gain insights on the teachers' use of play in their classrooms, their gender perceptions and its influence on their use of play, and the ways in which the QEP may have influenced how they use play in their classrooms. Semistructured interviews and a photo elicitation interview were carried out with the teachers during a day and time that was convenient for them. On the same day, participant observations were conducted with the children during their play period. To help create a more egalitarian environment, I aimed to select data collection methods that not only encouraged the participants' active involvement, but also ones that facilitated an informal conversation between myself and the participants.

A) Participant Observation

Punch (2009) explains that participant observation "differs from direct or non-participant observation in that the role of the researcher changes from detached observer of the situation, to both participant-in and observer-of the situation" (p. 157). On the days of my visits, I was fortunate to take part in the children's play, which allowed me to observe more closely the interactions that took place between the children and between the children and their teachers. According to Ackerly and True (2010), "Participant observation refers to the researcher being engaged in the life and activities of the context of study" (p. 202). For the purpose of this study, everyday engagement in all aspects of the school day was not necessary. Instead, the participation observations were limited to children's play. They were carried out monthly as the children's daily routines were quite hectic due to the scheduled library time, physical education period, science period, art period, field trips, school assemblies, to name a few.

While the participant observation method may not necessarily alleviate the power relations within the research process, participating in what is being studied may help to minimize

the hierarchical order between the participants and the researcher. Norris and Walker (2005) quote Kluckhohn (1940) who explains that participant observation is to "obtain data about behavior through direct contact and in terms of specific situations in which the distortion that results from the investigator's being an outside agent is reduced to a minimum" (p. 132). As such, a more intimate account of a situation or context can be recorded. As a more involved observer, there was less speculation on my part about the behaviors and interactions that unfolded during play. Instead, being embedded within the context under study allowed me to gain greater insights and understandings of the teachers' and students' interactions during play.

a) Technique

The participant observations took place in the play areas in the teachers' classrooms during a play period that followed or preceded our meeting. The play periods I partook in were scheduled by the teachers for approximately thirty minutes, which was explained to be the typical length of time dedicated to play. During playtime, I remained close to the play area and waited for a child or children to invite me in their play or for an opportunity to join their play by asking questions about their play, for instance. Once I was accepted in and became part of their play, I followed their lead regarding the story-lines and assigned roles. Field notes were recorded after the play period.

b) Benefits

I have found there to be several benefits in using the method of participant observation. For instance, I was able to immerse myself within the context I am examining. This allowed for less of my own assumptions guiding my observations and field notes as I was able to speak to the children and engage at their level in the play. I was able to gain greater insights into the types of play in which they were interested, their interactions during play, how they responded to their teachers, and how the teachers responded to them. Jones and Somekh (2005) explain that "Participant observers gain unique insights into the behavior and activities of those they observe because they participate in their activities and, to some extent, are absorbed into the culture of that group" (p. 140). As I became part of the classroom during the time of my visits, it enabled a more intimate experience of the daily play routines that unfold. Playing with the children also permitted me to better hear their conversations, which allowed for richer field notes as they

include both behavioral observations as well as the verbal interactions between students and between the teacher and her students. Another benefit of playing with the children rather than observing from a distance, I think, was that it was less intrusive for the teachers. Because I was immersed in a particular game or play area, I was not constantly watching and recording how the teachers interacted with and responded to the children's play. I think this facilitated a more comfortable atmosphere during my visits.

c) Limitations

As Jones and Somekh (2005) explain, one of the limitations I experienced in using participant observations is that it "distracted [me] from [my] research purpose by tasks given to [me] by the group, and note-making [became] much more difficult and [had] to be done after the event" (p. 140). In playing with the children, I quickly became caught up in their play as I ate the food they prepared or built towers with them. I often had to remind myself to be mindful of the interactions that were taking place and to remember them well. I did not take notes during the play as it may have distracted the children and may have interfered with the play. I recorded my observations after the play period, which means that certain information may have been left out. Also, when I was in a particular play area, I missed out on the play interactions taking place in other play areas. For instance, during one play period, I was in the kitchen area with five boys taking part in a feast. As such, I missed out on the interactions taking place between a girl and boy playing with the farm house behind me. Consequently, I was engaged in a limited variety of play during a play period.

B) Semistructured Interviews

According to Ackerly and True (2010), "Semistructured interviews allow guided focus, but also the ability of the subject-participant to give answers that do not conform to the researchers' (known or unknown) expectations" (p. 168). Semistructured interviews thus resemble an informal conversation between the researcher and the participants. Feminist research makes use of semistructured interviews as they facilitate the participants' active involvement in the construction of data and knowledge. The structured interview instead is based on a hierarchical relationship between the respondent and the researcher, where the respondent is in a subordinate position. Punch (2009) explains that "Minimizing status differences between

interviewer and respondent, and developing a more equal relationship...[enables] greater openness and insight, a greater range of responses, and therefore richer data" (p. 149). As such, because using semistructured interviews helped create a more egalitarian relationship between myself and the teachers, the interview period became an informal dialogue about our mutually relevant topics of education and play and gender.

a) Technique

  Two semistructured interviews were carried out with each preschool teacher. They took place in the teachers' classrooms during a spare period and during a time when the students were not in the classroom. The teachers' spare periods were approximately thirty minutes in length. Depending on the teachers' schedules, the interview took place either before or after the play period. Prior to the meetings, I had prepared a set of questions to help guide the conversations (See Table 1).

Table 1 - Semistructured interview: Guiding questions

General Guiding Questions:
1. How long have you been teaching preschool?
2. What is your favorite part of teaching preschool?
Guiding Questions Relating to Play:
1. Can you describe how you make use of play in your classroom?
2. Can you describe what you perceive your role to be as an educator during play?
3. What purpose do you think play has in the curriculum?
4. Can you tell me a little bit about how your students make use of the different play areas?
5. What are some of the challenges you face in relation to play?
6. Can you describe if and how the QEP has shaped your practice in relation to play?

  Having prepared a set of questions allowed for a well organized meeting, which helped minimize feelings of uncertainty for both myself and the participant. However, as Hesse-Biber (2007) explains, while the "semistructured interview is conducted with a specific interview guide--a list of questions that I need to cover...I [was not] too concerned about the order of these

questions" (p. 115). Depending on the teachers' responses, I was able to change some questions and ask additional questions throughout the interview.

In order to establish a comfortable atmosphere, I began the first interview with short, less pointed questions asking the teachers about their general experiences teaching preschool. As a teacher myself, I also shared some of my own experiences, which helped build a personal connection and establish a rapport. The objective of the first interview was to obtain a general understanding of the teachers' experiences, practices, and perspectives regarding play and to explain the purpose of the second visit, which included the photo elicitation interview. During my third and final visit, a second semistructured interview took place in order to share four themes that have emerged during the last two visits across the participating schools and to invite the teachers to comment on these themes. To facilitate the discussion, I wrote each theme on four different cue cards and at the back of each cue card I included a quote said by another teacher relating to the theme. The teachers were invited to read each cue card and share any comments or feedback on the themes and/or the quotes. In addition to this, I shared a video commercial introducing GoldieBlox, a company who has created toys aimed to develop an early interest in engineering and problem solving for young girls. This was done to further probe the teachers' gender perceptions and how these perceptions may shape the play spaces, play discourses, and play expectations in their classrooms. To facilitate note-taking during our conversations, the interviews were audio recorded.

b) Benefits

An advantage in conducting semistructured interviews is the use of open-ended questions. In using open-ended questions the teachers had greater control throughout the interview session. They expressed their thoughts and perspectives in their own terms and were actively involved in the type of conversation that unfolded. Using open-ended questions thus allowed space for the teachers to discuss the topic with greater detail and depth. Another advantage I found in using semistructured interviews is that the interview did not depend exclusively on answering the questions I had prepared. This technique allowed for much more flexibility in the conversations as well as created opportunities for additional questions and issues I had not thought of prior to

the meeting to emerge. Using semistructured interviews was thus less intrusive and encouraged a two-way conversation about planned and unplanned issues and questions relevant to my study.

c) Limitations

One of the challenges in conducting semistructured interviews was being able to maintain the flow of the conversation while making sure that the necessary topics were being covered. As the structure of this method is less rigid, the conversations at times deviated from the topics I hoped to explore. For instance, the conversations would often diverge to topics related to play and child development, which did not address gender. Thus, it was sometimes awkward and abrupt to guide the conversation back on topic. Moreover, while semistructured interviews encourage participants to address issues that may not be part of the interview guide, it was challenging to offer quality follow-up questions on the spot. Not being able to prepare for the type of conversations that unfolded may have, at times, limited the depth of our discussion of certain issues.

C) Photo Elicitation Interview

Photo elicitation is based on the idea of inserting photographs taken by the participants into a research interview and asking open-ended questions about the photographs. As such, the photographs become a tangible tool for eliciting and creating knowledge in the research process. As a mnemonic device, the photographs facilitated descriptions and interpretations of a play interaction, a play object, or a play space. The teachers were thus central in the knowledge creating process. Stanczak (2007) explains that "The meaning of the images reside most significantly in the ways that participants interpret those images....Images gain significance through the way that participants engage and interpret them" (pp. 11-12). The photographs themselves did not necessarily inform, rather it was the teachers' descriptions, interpretations, and analyses of the photographs that told a story.

Photo elicitation adds a layer of complexity as it probes for a deeper understanding of an interaction or context. According to Mitchell (2011), visual research methods such as photo elicitation activities can "evoke the richest possibilities for not only seeing through the eyes of participants but also taking the resulting visual products as far as possible towards social change" (p. 53). Important to a photo elicitation activity then is not simply what is present in the

photographs, but also what has been left out of the photographs. Mitchell (2011) highlights the importance of the *presence of absence*, where "the absence of social justice on the playground" (p. 99) in a photograph, for instance, is what is at stake and perhaps necessary to trigger social change. In this sense, Mitchell (2011) explains that "absence is the point. By this I mean that absence is not just viewed in the objects and scenes presented but that it is a broad discourse" (p. 102). For instance, a picture of the construction corner that depicts only boys begs the questions: Where are the girls? Why are they missing? Should girls be playing in the construction corner? Uncovering what is absent in photographs may work to unsettle normative assumptions about gender and unveil the unspoken.

a) Technique

Prior to the second visit, the teachers were invited to take eight to ten photographs of typical gendered play instances in their classrooms. Each teacher used a different device to take the photographs. Sara borrowed a camera from the Participatory Cultures Lab at McGill University, Megan used her iPad, Hannah used her own camera, and Laurie used her iPhone. The photographs were then viewed on the devices' screens or on a laptop. The photographs belong to the teachers and were not included in the study. Instead, they were used to elicit a conversation about gender and play during my second visit. For the photo elicitation interview, I prepared guiding questions to help initiate a discussion (See Table 2).

Table 2 - Photo elicitation interview: Guiding questions

Guiding Questions
1. Can you describe what is taking place in this picture?
2. Where are the girls/boys in this picture?
3. Can you describe if and how this picture may have been different or the same if girls were present? Why do you think?
4. Can you describe if and how this picture may have been different or the same if boys were present? Why do you think?
5. Can you describe if and how girls would make use of this center/toy? Why do you think?
6. Can you describe if and how boys would make use of this center/toy? Why do you think?

As the teachers and I looked through each photograph the teachers described what they saw and explained why they thought certain interactions were taking place in the pictures and why others were missing. To facilitate note-taking during our conversations, the conversations were audio recorded.

b) Benefits

I have found there to be several benefits to using a photo elicitation interview. First, the photographs allowed for a depiction of the gendered play that took place during the times I was not present in the classroom. Using photographs also seemed to have captured the teachers' attention much more easily during our conversations. Schwartz (1989) explains that there is less hesitation in responding during a photo elicitation interview because the participants are provided with a task that is similar to viewing a photo-album with family or with friends, for instance. Establishing a level of comfort seemed to have facilitated a more fluid conversation with the teachers. Another benefit in using photo elicitation is that it disrupted some of the power dynamics involved with traditional interviewing. Because the conversations were about the teachers' interpretations and explanations of photographs they had taken, their thoughts and perspectives were at the center of the interview and thus they were in control of the conversation. The teachers responded directly to the photographs and payed less attention to my presence. Therefore, I had less of an influence on the type of conversation that unfolded. Moreover, Stanczak (2007) explains that photographs help create meaning and spark memories. As such, the conversations with the teachers about play were richer and more detailed than the conversations we had during the semistructured interviews. The photographs allowed the teachers to tap into particular memories and emotions and seemed to have facilitated connections to other play instances that took place on previous days or in previous years. This led to conversations about play not seen in the pictures, which helped create a fuller account of the types of play that take place in the preschool classroom.

c) Limitations

While the pictures sparked a rich dialogue about play and gender, the conversations did at times diverge to play topics unrelated to gender. Thus, it was sometimes challenging to maintain a conversation about play and gender when the pictures seemed to have sparked a memory

unrelated to this topic. Also, because the conversations were mainly dependent on the teachers'

comments about the pictures, most of my probing questions were developed on the spot. As such,

some important follow-up questions came to me after the meeting or while transcribing the

conversations, for instance. This may have hindered opportunities to uncover important insights

the teachers may have had on play and gender.

3.7 Procedures

The data collection for this study took place over the course of three months, from

September 2014 to November 2014 (See Table 3). I visited each classroom one day in

September, one day in October, and one day in November. During each month, each visit took

place on a different day within a two-week timeframe. The first visit took place at the end of

September and included a semistructured interview and participant observations, each were

approximately thirty minutes in length. The second visit took place at the end of October where

the photo elicitation interview was carried out as well as participant observations, each were

approximately thirty minutes in length. The third and final visit took place at the end of

November and included a semistructured interview and participant observations, each were

approximately thirty minutes in length. The conversations with the teachers were audio recorded

and the play observations were recorded in a notebook.

Table 3 - Implementation

Data Source	Timeframe	Duration	The Prompt	The Purpose
Semistructured Interviews	1st visit September	Approximately 30 minutes	Open ended questions.	For participants to express their perspectives and uses of play in their classroom.
Participant Observations (Field Notes)	1st visit September	Approximately 30 minutes	Asking the child/ children if I can play with them. Asking questions about their play.	For the children to involve me in their play, so that I can gain a better understanding of the types of play and interactions that unfold.
PhotoElicitation Interviews	2nd visit October	Approximately 30 minutes	The teachers were invited to take 8-10 photographs of typical gendered play instances in their classrooms.	For participants to express their perspectives and experiences with gender and play.

Data Source	Timeframe	Duration	The Prompt	The Purpose
Participant Observations (Field Notes)	2nd visit October	Approximately 30 minutes	Asking the child/ children if I can play with them. Asking questions about their play.	For the children to involve me in their play, so that I can gain a better understanding of the types of play and interactions that unfold.
Semistructured Interviews	3rd visit November	Approximately 30 minutes	Four themes that have emerged from the previous conversations with participants and GoldieBlox video clip.	For participants to clarify their responses, to respond to and provide feedback on their colleagues' comments, and to further probe the participants' gender perceptions.
Participant Observations (Field Notes)	3rd visit November	Approximately 30 minutes	Asking the child/ children if I can play with them. Asking questions about their play.	For the children to involve me in their play, so that I can gain a better understanding of the types of play and interactions that unfold.

3.8 Situating Myself in the Fieldwork

Being a recent graduate of a teacher education program and having taught over the last few years, my involvement in classroom settings has been that of a teacher. However, in conducting this study over this past year, I entered the four classrooms as a researcher. In doing so, I took on the role of an interviewer and observer of teacher practices during play, particularly as it pertained to gender. As I entered the classrooms from the position of a researcher, I was mindful to minimize the extent to which I shared my own practices and experiences with play in the preschool classroom as well as my points of view on sex and gender. Moreover, I made sure to hold back on discussing my perspectives on the gender issues that arise during preschool play. Thus, I strove to remain respectful and nonjudgmental of the teachers' practices of play and their perceptions of gender in childhood.

3.9 Reliability and Validity (Trustworthiness)

While the concepts of reliability and validity are particularly important in quantitative research, many highlight their relevance in qualitative work. For this study, I address specifically internal reliability and internal validity. In qualitative research, Punch (2009) defines reliability as the dependability of the data. As this study uses three data sources it becomes important to

address the degree to which the data obtained from the different methods are consistent. Punch (2009) refers to the internal consistency of a study as the extent to which the data obtained from multiple data sources converge or diverge. Because this study uses open-ended methods of data collection, ensuring stability over time is beyond the scope of this study.

The concept of validity can also be relevant in qualitative research. For this study, internal validity is particularly pertinent. According to Denzin and Lincoln (1994) internal validity refers to 'the isomorphism of findings with reality' (cited in Punch, 2009, p. 114), which Punch (2009) suggests to mean "the extent to which the findings faithfully represent and reflect the reality that has been studied" (p. 314). As such, this study uses the feature of *member checking* (Punch, 2009) to facilitate data accuracy. Member checking was carried out during the third visit as the teachers and I discussed the themes that had emerged from my first and second visits. Because this study does not seek to generalize its findings, external validity is not addressed.

It is important to note that in feminist research the concepts of reliability and validity are problematized as they respond to and reflect a positivist paradigm in research. While there is no clear cut definition, feminist research has turned to the concept of trustworthiness, where the quality or credibility of a study relies on the voices and lived experiences of those being researched. As such, the methods used in this study to collect data are ones that value the teachers' voices and experiences in the classroom.

3.10 Ethical Considerations

As this study involved human participants it required ethical approval from both the McGill Research Ethics Board as well as the school board. An application for ethical approval was submitted to the McGill Research Ethics Board in January 2014 outlining the purpose of my study and the methods I planned to use to obtain my data. A sample consent form for the participants was sent with the application (See Appendix 1). Once I received approval from the McGill Research Ethics Board, in February 2014 I sent an application for ethical approval to the school board. The school board required that I meet with their Research Committee during their monthly meeting. Due to spring break, the first meeting took place in April 2014. At this first meeting, some of the members were hesitant about carrying out a photo elicitation interview.

Some felt that the teachers may not have time to take photographs. Therefore, it was suggested that I give teachers the option to take photographs or have me remain in the classroom for play observations. Some members felt that the observations would require less work for the teachers. Thus I made the changes to the original application and added to it the choice for teachers to engage in a photo elicitation interview or to allow me to conduct student play observations. The head of the Research Committee also asked that I meet with the school board's preschool coordinator for further feedback. The preschool coordinator liked the idea of a photo elicitation interview and thought that it would not require additional work for teachers because they take photographs for their end-of-year portfolios. She also thought that play observations would facilitate a richer understanding of the teachers' use of play. Thus she suggested I carry out the semistructured interviews and the photo elicitation interview with the teachers as well as conduct student play observations. After this meeting, I made the changes and resubmitted the application to the school board's Research Committee along with a sample parent consent form asking for parental permission to observe the students during play (See Appendix 2). At the next meeting in May 2014, I explained to the Research Committee the changes that were made. The Research Committee approved it and sent the application to the Education Policies Committee. The project was approved in June 2014 and I was asked to submit to them a list of schools I hoped to visit. The school board's research secretary prepared and sent official letters to the schools outlining my research proposal and its acceptance and I was given permission to contact the principals and teachers.

3.11 Chapter Conclusion

In this chapter, I presented this study's research design. I began the chapter by outlining the steps I took for gaining access to the schools and for recruiting the participants, I introduced the participants, and I described the settings I visited to collect the data. I then discussed the study's methodology and the three methods used to collect the data along with their benefits and limitations. I ended the chapter with a brief discussion on how I implemented the data collection methods, I then situated myself in the research, I addressed the reliability and validity of the study, and I outlined the necessary steps I took for ethical approval of this study.

Chapter Four: Findings

4.1 Chapter Introduction

In this chapter, I outline the findings gathered from the fieldwork that was carried out in Sara's, Megan's, Hannah's, and Laurie's preschool classrooms. As described in the previous chapter, three data collection methods were implemented, which include semistructured interviews, a photo elicitation interview, and participant observations during play. I have organized the findings into three sections that explicitly address this study's three research questions. The sections include: teachers' use of play in the preschool classroom, teachers' gender perceptions and classroom play discourses, and teachers' challenges with play and gender. In coding the data from the interviews and the field notes, two overarching themes have emerged and underlie the findings of this study. These include *the passive child* and *normality*. In the next section, I describe the procedures I undertook to uncover the themes that inform the findings of this study.

4.2 Transcribing and Coding

The conversations I had with Sara, Megan, Hannah, and Laurie were audio recorded and later transcribed. There are a total of twelve transcripts, which include our conversations during the first and second semistructured interviews and the photo elicitation interview. In addition, field notes from the participant observations during play were rewritten into electronic documents. There are a total of twelve files that include field notes. After my first, second, and third visits I carried out full transcriptions of each conversation with each teacher, which were approximately thirty minutes in length. Once the transcribing process was complete, I compiled the transcripts into one large file to facilitate the coding process. I began by reading through the transcript document and coded instances that related to my research questions using the 'comments' function. According to Saldana (2009), "A code in qualitative inquiry is most often a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data" (p. 3). In Table 4, I illustrate how I coded the data. Once the coding process was complete, I listed the codes in a separate document and grouped them to uncover the larger themes. I then created a concept map to help me visualize the connections between codes and themes (See Appendix 3). In the next section, I

present the findings of this study into three sections: teachers' use of play in the preschool classroom, teachers' gender perceptions and classroom play discourses, and teachers' challenges with play and gender. Table 5 outlines the transcription conventions I followed when reporting the findings.

Table 4 - Examples from the coding process

Datum	Code	Theme
"I think it's just because they don't know. Lack of knowledge. Lack of knowing what that is, what do you do with it, how do you play with it." (Megan)	Children as unknowing Children needing adult guidance	The Passive Child
"It's normal that I would see that calm kind of play in the kitchen and more rough and tumble in the construction." (Hannah)	Expected play behavior Standards in play spaces	Normality
"I find girls generally are more calm than boys, but then you do have some girls that are more tomboyish." (Hannah)	Essentializing girls Essentializing boys Labeling	Normality
"It's really about what their parents show them, you know what I mean, like what they see on TV." (Laurie)	Adult guidance Children easily influenced	The Passive Child

Table 5 - Transcription Conventions

Symbol	Function
...	Text was removed to shorten original quote
[text]	Text was added to clarify original quote or for fluidity

4.3 Findings and Analysis

<u>A) Introduction</u>

The transcription data and field notes reveal two overarching themes, which include *the passive child* and *normality*. I have found both themes to underlie the teachers' responses during the interviews and the interactions that I observed during the children's play. As such, an inherent understanding of a normalized and dichotomous adult-child relationship was present in our conversations. By this I mean that there seemed to have been a commonsense belief that children and adults make up two distinct categories, where one category (the adults) is inherently superior to the other category (the child). At the start of our first conversation, Megan explained "I have high expectations, but I have to remind myself, they're four year olds, they're learning, they need to be taught" (Interview 1, p. 3). Teaching a younger person about certain skills is an important part of classroom learning. However, viewing children as unknowing will certainly affect what is to be taught and how it should be taught.

After spending time in Sara's, Megan's, Hannah's, and Laurie's classrooms, it was clear that the teachers are dedicated to and passionate about their students' learning. Speaking with the teachers, I learned that they seem to take on much of the responsibility for guiding and teaching their students. While one might claim that this is indeed what teachers are supposed to do, bell hooks (1994) offers an alternative understanding of schooling. Her concept of an engaged pedagogy delegates the responsibility of learning and teaching to both the teachers and the students. In this sense, learning is not a top-down approach, but instead a more cyclical approach where teachers and students learn from each other. This model then nurtures children's agency in the learning process. Unfortunately, the data shows that it is the top-down approach to learning, which positions children as unknowing, that seems to guide early childhood pedagogy and inform teachers' expectations of children. For instance, when looking at a picture Hannah took of two of her female students playing with a doctor's kit, she explained "I thought [it] was really interesting because they haven't really utilized the doctor kit until recently and I haven't shown them how to use it or I haven't talked about the tools that are inside" (Interview 2, p. 1). Here, Hannah was surprised to see her students using toys correctly before they were taught how to by the teacher, suggesting that children are expected to enter the classroom as unknowing and

needing adult guidance. A similar sentiment was expressed by Megan, who explained that "[The children] need to be taught each of the games. Right now, if I tell them to choose in the blocks, they won't even know what to do with half of the things" (Interview 1, p. 3). While children might benefit from their teacher's well-intended guidance, the top-down approach to learning assumes that there is one correct way of playing. Such a model then positions adults, in this case teachers, as the ultimate knowers, which may work to silence what children can bring to classroom learning. In relation to gender, a top-down learning model may further exacerbate gender stereotypes and assumptions in the classroom. This was evident in Sara's reasoning that "For [girls] in their mind it's Princesses, you know Walt Disney, nice, happy" (Interview 2, p. 7). Such assumptions not only work to legitimize the adultist social order, where the adult *knows* what the child is thinking, but they are also indicative of how dominant discourses in early childhood education universalize girlhood and couple childhood with innocence. Unfortunately, understanding childhood in this way may limit what children's experiences and backgrounds can bring to the classroom and may thus disempower certain children.

While the QEP highlights the importance of child-centered learning and the teachers showed support for this approach to learning, it never seemed to be fully realized in a classroom setting. According to hooks (1994), this is because "Caring about whether all students fulfill their responsibility to contribute to learning in the classroom is not a common approach in what Freire has called the 'banking concept of education' where students are regarded merely as passive consumers" (p. 40). As such, the data reveals a constant pedagogical contradiction, where children seem to have choice during classroom play, but always within certain limits. I wonder, then, how can child-centered learning unfold if it is consistently located within an adult world?

B) Teachers' Use of Play in the Preschool Classroom: What is "Good" Pedagogy?

In this section, I address the first research question: In what ways, if at all, has the QEP's emphasis on play in preschool influenced teachers' use of play in the classroom? Table 6 presents the teachers' descriptions of the ways in which they make use of play in their classrooms. I then discuss the ways in which the QEP has shaped their practice.

Table 6 - Teachers' uses of play in the classroom

Teachers	Uses of Play in the Classroom
Sara	"I let them go and choose the toys they want in the class. If I see there is too many playing with blocks-I would like four or five-I let them go to the kitchen or use the Lego blocks. In the beginning of the year, I would say there's a lot of free play. When I have them limited to the tables and you're picking out a little puzzle, then you're focusing on structured play, where they're not allowed to go in other areas" (Interview 1, p. 2).
Megan	"What I'm doing now is I give them the choice, so I'll put out some of the centers and choose one or two children. Eventually, they'll have to go into each center. But now I'm letting them explore. I'm teaching them how to play the board games or certain games so it's a learning process" (Interview 1, p. 2).
Hannah	"Play is very important for preschool primarily for fine/gross motor development and learning social skills, moral development as well and I try to utilize that in the class. I try to build it around my curriculum. I like to use play every day. I develop play into eight stations. I want them to enjoy their play, but at the same time I don't want them to be doing anything that they want. I need to direct it a little bit or structure it a little, so I try to come up with certain centers that develop certain skills" (Interview 1, p. 1).
Laurie	"What you saw right now is free play and I don't try to force them to do anything that they don't want to. I do allow them to change play areas from time to time because I want them to get a variety of, a good feel of all the games and all the centers...Structured play, I have them choose the center, so they have control, but then it's timed" (Interview 1, p. 1).

Throughout my visits, I learned that the QEP had been influential in informing the teachers' practices as play was perceived to be and was treated as an important part of the preschool curriculum. The teachers work hard to ensure that time is made available for play to take place on a daily basis. I found that the teachers made use of play in similar ways as all four teachers implemented both structured and free play in their classrooms. Hannah clarified that "Free play is really a question of the children going wherever they would like, playing whatever they want, and switching centers whenever they want" (Interview 3, p. 1). Similarly, Laurie explained that during free play "I don't try to force them to do anything that they don't want to" (Interview 1, p. 1). The use of free play seems to nurture children's agency as children are to

choose the toys and play spaces with which they want to engage. Play spaces are also at times modified to accommodate children's interests. For instance, during my visits, I noticed that it was not uncommon for the kitchen area to be transformed into a restaurant or a store. Structured play differs in that the children are to engage in a specific game or to choose among specific play centers set up by the teacher during the play period. For instance, Sara has often set aside puzzle time or has set up a Bingo game at the tables. Megan has made use of structured play by setting up centers such as blocks, math, and alphabets, for instance. Structured play can also encourage children's agency as the children may choose with what they want to play within a particular center or how they would like to engage with a play center. However, it remains a choice for children to make within certain limits set by the teacher as the teacher decides which centers are available to them. Megan explained, "You choose the centers for them and you say 'well you have to play with the blocks,' but you're giving them four, five different things to choose from in the blocks center" (Interview 3, p. 1).

While the teachers and I typically discussed free play and structured play as distinct activities, in practice we found them to be quite similar. For instance, in speaking with Hannah about her use of play centers, I asked about her use of free play and she explained that "Well, it's kind of the same thing really" (Interview 1, p. 2). This was true as participating with the children during their play I learned that free play becomes quite structured in many ways. First, not all forms of play were perceived as appropriate for a classroom setting. This was particularly the case with the prevalence of gun play among certain boys. The four teachers highlighted that some of their male students enjoy gun play and transform various toys, such as blocks and kitchen utensils into guns. Sara explained, "I discourage them if I know that they're taking something even the Lego building a gun from that or like pow pow pow, I stop it. I don't want that" (Interview 2, p. 6). Second, the teachers' comments during play may also suggest to children how they should play in certain centers. For instance, when discussing a picture Megan took of children playing in the kitchen area, she explained "Lisa seemed to dominate everyone, telling them what role to play. So I asked her, 'well, who are you?' I said, 'are you the mother?' She said, 'no' and that Cathy was the mother, the other little girl...and she was the older sister. I said, 'since you're the sister aren't you supposed to be taking orders from [the

adults]'" (Interview 2, p. 1)? According to Davies (1989a), Megan's comment works to relocate Lisa "as the child in the particular form of adult-child discourse that [Lisa] clearly knew well" (p. 3) and may have been intentionally rejecting in her play. A third reason why I found free play to be structured is because the teachers feel pressure to limit the amount of students in a given play space to typically four students at one time. Laurie explained that the children "know that there's only four spots let's say in the Playdoh section. I can't have fifteen kids playing with the Playdoh" (Interview 1, p. 2). As such, when a student's name is called to select a play area of preference, that play area may already consist of four children and the student is asked to choose again. This means that even during free play, some students do not necessarily choose freely where they would like to play. Instead, they may be forced to choose their second or third play center of interest. In order to decide which student will choose first, some teachers make use of a chart that lists the available play centers and the children's names are selected at random and placed beside a play center of their choosing. Other teachers ask those students who are sitting quietly or those students who have finished their work to choose first. More often than not, such a system may then privilege certain students. I wondered, why are these limits in place?

hooks (2000) attributes such limitations on children to our society's inherent culture of domination. She posits that "In a culture of domination where children have no civil rights, those who are powerful, adult males and females, can exert autocratic rule of children" (p. 73). This viewpoint emerged in an analysis of the QEP's *The Broad Areas of Learning* and *Preschool Education* that I carried out to better understand what is expected of teachers from educational policy. I found that the language used in the QEP is contradictory in that it speaks of children's agency and freedom of choice, but within certain limits to be set by the teachers and informed by educational policy. For instance, the QEP positions children as active subjects in the learning process as children are to "discover," "construct," "explore," "exercise," "choose," "express" and "create" (pp. 52-65). However, the QEP also suggests that children are passive subjects who need adults' protection from the world outside of school life as the word "issues" is used repeatedly when referring to what children will be facing when not in school. For example, "a number of issues that confront young people" (p. 42), "The issues they deal with" (p. 42), "Issues important as" (p. 42). The document also explicitly refers to life outside of schools as "real life" (p. 42),

suggesting that school is an artificial setting meant to protect children from the real world and children are to remain in this setting until they are deemed ready for the outside world. This discourse implies that children are passive recipients of knowledge in two senses. First, the document positions children as easily and passively influenced by the world outside of school. Second, the document positions children as subjects who will passively accept guidance from adults as the "right" or "good" way of life. This reflects and maintains dominant culture beliefs that children are incapable of making wise decisions and thus need adult guidance.

Such expectations not only normalize the adult-child dichotomy, where children are to be controlled by adults, but they also create and maintain perceptions of "good" teaching practices. A chaotic classroom, for instance, ultimately suggests that the teacher has lost control over her students. Putting an end to active gun play and limiting the number of students per play center are then perhaps common practices because a seemingly chaotic classroom is not typically well received by outsiders, such as principals and administrators. Laurie explains, "If I'm not there guiding them at this point in the year, they're just all over the place...It gets a little bit chaotic, so I have to be there" (Interview 1, p. 4). hooks (1994) explains, "Given that our educational institutions are so deeply invested in a banking system, teachers are more rewarded when we do not teach against the grain. The choice to work against the grain, to challenge the status quo, often has negative consequences" (p. 203). While a chaotic classroom does not mean that the teacher has lost control of her students, especially as play is meant to be exploratory and, sometimes, messy, teachers may feel external pressures to maintain a well organized classroom during play. As such, play periods are constantly under surveillance to ensure that orderly play is taking place.

The QEP has also been influential in guiding the teachers' evaluation processes. The teachers agreed that addressing the QEP's preschool competencies is particularly important. A standard seems to be set by educational policy, which affects how teachers make use of play in their classrooms and determines how children fare in relation to these standards. For instance, Megan explained, "[The QEP] did influence what I would put in the centers because there are some things that are specific in the QEP...you have to refer to the QEP" (Interview 1, pp. 3-4). As such, the toys and play spaces available to the children during play will often support what the

teachers are required to evaluate. Play spaces then may not necessarily reflect the children's interests, rather are created to accommodate certain subject matter and develop certain skills determined by educational policy. The QEP (2001) states that in preschool "Learning centers [are set up to] stimulate their curiosity and allow [children] to explore various areas of learning: languages, the arts, mathematics, the social sciences, and science and technology" (p. 52). This was evident in my fieldwork as it was common for a math center to be set up during play in some classrooms. The children part of this center are to select from a set of manipulatives and practice sorting and classifying objects, for instance. Here, the play environment is organized to reflect and fulfill adult expectations and interests. As math is perceived by adults to be an important and valuable skill to develop, it becomes a play center from which children are to choose. Therefore, it is ultimately the teacher who decides what is available to children during play and this will be determined based on what is perceived to be important knowledge and skills for children to learn, which is largely informed by the preschool competencies.

Educational policy then is powerful in shaping discourses of "good" pedagogical practice, which inform teachers on how to implement play in their classrooms and to what they should respond during play. When Hannah and I discussed the purpose of play in the curriculum, she explained that "The purpose of play in the curriculum, it's many things...social skills development, moral development, kinesthetic, fine/gross motor movement, for the preschool children to learn to communicate with each other" (Interview 1, pp. 2-3). Similarly, the QEP (2001) states that preschool play encourages children to "learn to be themselves, to interact with others and to solve problems" (p. 52). The importance of preschool play thus seems to revolve exclusively around child development discourses, where early childhood learning is about children's progress in the five developmental domains and attaining the six preschool competencies. As such, teachers will often observe and evaluate their students during play using exclusively a developmental lens. For instance, during play Hannah explained that she "observe [s] how [the children are] playing with each other, how they're using their social skills to interact with each other, how they're using their problem solving skills primarily, definitely for social skills development" (Interview 1, p. 2). As developmental psychology drives dominant discourses of early childhood education, the gender issues that arise during children's play seem

to go unnoticed and the gender power that regulates play spaces goes unaddressed. I wonder, then, what does this mean for social justice education in preschool?

C) Teachers' Gender Perceptions and Classroom Play Discourses

In this section, I explore the study's second research question: How do preschool teachers' gender perceptions shape classroom play periods? Table 7 presents the data on the teachers' understandings of play and gender. I then discuss how such understandings affect play expectations, particularly pertaining to the toys and play spaces available to children and the teacher talk that takes place during play. I conclude this section by highlighting the implications of such perceptions for equitable practice and for the perpetuation of the status quo during play.

Table 7 - Teachers' gender perceptions

Teachers	Teachers' Gender Perceptions and Classroom Play Discourses
Sara	"[Boys] tend to be more rough with their play and usually the girl won't be interested with the ideas the boys have. It's more like action [with boys]" (Interview 2, p. 3).
Megan	"We think 'oh dolls are for girls' but then we start to teach and we see the boys actually carrying a doll or dressing a doll. And it's like oh ok it's acceptable for them, then why do I come with these ideas about what's right for a girl and what's right for a boy" (Interview 3, p. 5)?
Hannah	"I think the environment definitely plays a role, but it could also be innate too. I mean I find girls generally are more calm than boys, but then you do have some girls that are more tomboyish...I think that it's definitely within them, but it's also the space, for sure it's the environment as well" (Interview 3, p. 4).
Laurie	"It's not like the girl is the Queen of the kitchen or anything like that. It's really 'I want to be chef today.' It's whoever it is and they don't really go by gender" (Interview 2, p. 1).

a) Teachers' Perceptions of Children in Early Childhood

When early childhood education is driven exclusively by theories of developmental psychology, children are often seen and treated as universal and autonomous subjects detached from social and cultural influences. As such, when an issue arises during play it is often addressed in isolation from its social context and onus is placed on the individual child. For

instance, during my classroom visits, it was not uncommon to find a child, typically a girl, playing by herself rather than engaging in group play. Sara and I discussed my observation of Mara playing alone with the Legos one morning. Sara explained, "Some still want to be alone and I have to take them by the hand and say 'ok sit with her and play together'" (Interview 1, p. 3). It seemed as though such instances were often understood to be a developmental issue, where the child may not have yet progressed through the stage of solitary play. Similarly, if a girl and a boy argued over the blocks in the building area, for instance, it was typically approached as a sharing issue, where the children are still learning how to take turns. Megan explained, "There are certain children that have difficulty with the sharing and with taking turns....[It's] not so much the actual toys, but more the personalities" (Interview 2, p. 6). In both cases, how the play environment may influence children's interactions during play was unaddressed in our conversations and, consequently, the very real gender power that regulates different play spaces was also absent. By this I mean that, because toys and play spaces are marked as feminine or masculine, it will determine who has power and control within a particular space. According to hooks (1994), some students "may not feel at all 'safe' in what appears to be a neutral setting [and] it is the absence of a feeling of safety that often promotes prolonged silence or lack of engagement" (p. 39). Therefore, while a child may indeed still be working on progressing from the stage of solitary play to group play, how safe and in control a child feels within a particular play environment may also influence the types of play in which the child will engage.

Viewing children as subjects detached from their cultural and social context then maintains the misconception that children are too young to know gender and understand gender roles. This was evident as Megan explained that "At this age they don't associate pink with girl and blue with boy. I think that it will start a bit later" (Interview 3, p. 2). She suggested that "It's personality more than anything. I don't think [the differences in children's play] has anything to do with gender" (Interview 3, p. 2). Likewise, Hannah indicated that gender roles are not significant among young children because "At this age boys are a lot more open to really role play and use their imagination when it comes to playing in the kitchen and dressing up and things like that" (Interview 3, p. 3). Megan also found that in some years "The boys would actually dress up and they would wear the heels and the crown and the little purse...it was more

of a look at me laugh at me kind of thing" (Interview 2, p. 6). While both teachers raise an important point that differences in children's play is not exclusively influenced by gender, leaving gender out of the picture means that such instances of gender bending is seen and treated as innocent and comical play, where the boys, for instance, are perceived to be unknowingly and unintentionally exploring gender roles rather than noticing how they are actively resisting dominant gender discourses in their play. As such, teachers may be less likely to capitalize on such opportunities to encourage multiple discourses of femininity and masculinity in the classroom. While children may seek out as well as create alternative gender discourses in their play, their perceived inherent passivity may prevent teachers from seeing children as active subjects who construct and deconstruct gender on a daily basis. Davies (1989b) explains that a "critical resource in this context...is access to different forms of discourse. If we can see the way in which the discursive practices...locate or position us, then the possibility of refusing that positioning and taking up another becomes more readily available....but that 'alternate' discourse exists outside the meaning structure recognized and legitimated by the school authorities" (p. 239). The language used during play may then encourage children to behave in ways that is appropriate for their sex rather than ways that question the gender categories and their associated gender norms. Consequently, gender may be seen as imposed on children in an uncontested way.

b) Preschool Children and the Gender Binary

The transcription data on gender and play shows what might be described as a commonsense belief in a gender binary. The teachers' comments often oscillated between understanding gender to be natural as well as socially learned. In both views, however, gender seemed to be understood as a dichotomy and the child was seen to have little control in the gendering process. For instance, when looking at a picture Sara took of five male students playing in the building area, she explained that the boys were "pretending to be construction workers building. They love that...I think I see more the boys doing it. It's funny how we're made like that" (Interview 2, p. 7). As another conversation addressed the differences in girls' and boys' play, Sara further explained that "Girls from a very young age they're more into sitting. It's different. It's how I think genetically how we are" (Interview 3, p. 3). Hannah also drew on biological determinism to explain how the boys in her classroom play in the kitchen area

in more active and aggressive ways than the girls do. She explained, "I think [the boys] are just being themselves. I think they're just...more physical. They use actions more....It's not really role playing and really using that center to it's advantage like girls would. I think it just comes more naturally for girls" (Interview 2, p. 2). At the same time, the teachers also drew on sex-role socialization when discussing gender. For instance, Megan asserted, "I don't think they're born with these interests. They develop them...when I see girls come in and they're in their little pink dresses and you see the ones that are Princess lovers and there's the ones that are not, I wonder is it because they weren't exposed at home...is that all they've been shown at home, is that all they're aware of" (Interview 3, p. 5)? Laurie found TV shows to also have an influence on children's gender identities as she explained that "Boys will be building towers or bridges things like that. More construction. Manly things that are seen on TV to be as manly things...it's socially constructed, I guess" (Interview 2, p. 5). Throughout our discussions, the teachers and I grappled with the nature versus nurture debate in an attempt to make sense of the gender issues that arise during play. Davies (1989a) suggests that "This puzzlement derives to a large extent from the commonsense but inaccurate theories most of us have about the relationship between the individual and the social structure....the conceptual division of the person into the biological self (sex) and the social self (gender)...aids in the confusion" (p. 5).

Unfortunately, such perceptions of gender position children as passive recipients of knowledge, agents who model discourses rather than actively construct and maintain them. While it may seem as though children are simply modeling behavior learned across various social sites, children are instead actively and correctly positioning themselves within dominant gender discourses. Davies (1989a) posits that "By basing our interactions with children on the presumption that they are in some unitary and bipolar sense male or female, we teach them the discursive practices through which they can constitute themselves in that way. [As such], children learn to take up their maleness or femaleness as if it were an incorrigible element of their personal and social selves" (p. x). Unfortunately, as a poststructuralist understanding of gender is left out of dominant discourses in early childhood education and teacher education programs, teachers are not equipped to see, probe, and break down dominant gender perceptions that maintain the gender binary and ultimately keep girls at a disadvantage.

Understanding and defining gender as a binary is limiting in that it essentializes children by assuming that all girls and all boys are interested in certain toys and play in certain ways. For instance, Hannah claimed that "Girls [are] a lot softer and more mild mannered and they're not as aggressive as the boys are" (Interview 2, p. 3). While this may indeed be true for certain children, seeing the world in this way works to silence and marginalize those children who do not fit perfectly into either category. It is such essentialist understandings of gender that leads to the labeling certain children. Because boys are typically and consistently referred to as being aggressive, rough, and active, it not only alienates those boys who are not forceful, but it also maintains an expectation that girls are to exhibit the opposite behavior. As such, the female students were typically described as calm and compliant and were expected to enjoy kitchen play. Sara explained that "The girls are more interested in an activity that requires them to sit more and maybe the boys are always looking to go around and fix, so the girls are more like the sitting types" (Interview 2, p. 10). Again, while this may indeed be true for certain children, a girl who does not exhibit docility is then labelled as a "rough and tumble girl" or a "tomboy," creating and sustaining the gendered and the adultist elements of the social order. That is not to suggest that the teachers are not correct to say that aggressive and active behavior is predominantly exhibited among certain boys in the classroom and this can be true for a combination of reasons. However, it is the unquestioned belief in such generalizations that maintains dominant gender discourses and disenfranchises other ways of being, where girls can also exhibit aggressive and active behavior and that does not make it a biological deficiency or compromise their femininity. Davies (1989a) explains that "The apparent facticity of two opposite genders renders those behaviors, thoughts and emotions which are involved in stepping outside the male and female patterns appear as incompetence, even immorality. The failure to be 'correctly' gendered is perceived as a moral blot on one's identity" (p. 20). As such, children who take themselves up in a complex mixture of femininity and masculinity are pushed to the margins and are not recognized as a legitimate kind of person. In this case, a girl labelled and treated as a "tomboy" may struggle to gain acceptance from her male peers, who may reject her because she is not a boy and from her female peers, who may reject her because she is not exhibiting appropriate female behavior.

As dominant gender discourses reflect the misconception of an inherent gender binary, they mask the potential for more fluid gender categories. Unfortunately, rigid gender categories and expectations have not only led to labeling certain girls as "tomboys," but have encouraged an array of labels for girls who are vocal and speak up in the classroom. Throughout my visits, such girls were often described as tattletales, bossy, or complainers on several occasions. For instance, when describing a picture she took of Amy in the building center, Laurie explained "I remember her on that day. She was telling them which blocks to give her because she wanted to build the tower higher and they were getting the blocks for her....She's a little boss" (Interview 2, p. 9). Here, as Amy takes on a more active role in the building center, she is not necessarily applauded for her assertiveness or leadership skills, but is instead referred to as being a boss, which is often seen in a negative light, particularly among girls. Unfortunately, a similar reaction occurs when girls do not respond in forceful ways. For instance, when discussing the challenge of resolving peer conflicts during play, Megan found that "When [the boys] fight over something [they] tend to be more aggressive and will start to struggle with that item. Whereas the girls will come run to me sort of like the tattletale, 'she took my this nananana.' More of that going on" (Interview 3, p. 4). Similarly, Sara explained that "If there are more boys than the girls in [the blocks center], they might be more like 'Oh he did this' [using a whining voice]" (Interview 3, p. 4). When girls do not behave forcefully as the boys would during peer conflict, for instance, it is also considered to be a negative character trait. However, according to Thorne (1993), what goes unnoticed in such contexts is how "Girls have less access than boys to physical aggression which gives some of them little recourse except to turn to adults" (p. 78). Unfortunately, such language not only maintains the female-male dualism, but also works to disempower girls.

c) Teachers' Gender Perceptions and Play Expectations

<u>*i) Toys and Play Spaces*</u>

In the fieldwork I saw what might be described as a dichotomous understanding of gender, which was also powerful in shaping the physical layout of the classrooms' play environments. The play areas available in all four classrooms included a building center and a kitchen center. Other play areas were common in some, but not in all four classrooms. These included a drawing/writing center, a kinesthetic center with the Playdoh and moon sand, and a

math center with various blocks, letters, shapes, and other manipulatives. While the kitchen area in all four classrooms was never blatantly pink and purple, it was generally made up of pastel colors and pink and purple toys such as a dollhouse, dolls, accessories for the dolls, stuffed animals, and kitchen accessories. The building area, instead, was typically covered in dark and bold colors and the toys typical in this space included cars and trucks, blocks, public service equipment (firefighters and police), and action figures. Both the kitchen area and the building area took up the majority of the play environments, while the other play centers were set up at tables in and around both these areas. It seemed to me that the gender binary was reflected in the classrooms' structure as the play environments were largely divided between the building area, a space typically geared towards boys and the kitchen area, a space typically geared towards girls. Sara explained, "It's important I think to provide a fair amount of toys to both [girls and boys]" (Interview 3, p. 6). A specific type of play was also expected to unfold within these spaces. For instance, Hannah explained that "The kitchen obviously requires more calm and sitting kind of play...it's normal that I would see that calm kind of play in the kitchen and more rough and tumble in the construction" (Interview 3, p. 4). Unfortunately, such expectations may alienate certain children from certain play spaces. Because rough play is expected to unfold in the building area, for instance, a girl who might feel unsafe in this center may attempt to avoid it altogether. Similarly, a girl who is more active in her play may avoid experimenting with different roles in the kitchen area because calm and seated play is expected.

The teachers were mindful of the gender divisions during play and therefore encouraged cross-gendered play within the centers. However, such efforts, sometimes, exacerbated gender differences. For instance, when describing how she sets up her blocks center, Megan explained, "If I'm taking three or four of the blocks out I will put in the jewelry making. That'll be geared more towards the girls, but boys will also choose it...the blocks too, there's the ones with the little pink and the blue and the green...the little pastel ones [geared towards the girls]" (Interview 3, p. 4). While selecting feminine type toys for the blocks center may encourage some girls to use the center, it also works to legitimize and normalize gender differences by suggesting that certain toys are for girls and other toys are for boys in a particular center. As such, not only does the organization of a classroom's play environment communicate to children where they can

play, but the toys and colors available to children in the different play centers may also further legitimize and normalize the gendered social order.

It is important that I highlight that teachers do not necessarily mark play spaces as feminine or masculine. Hannah explained that "The construction and the kitchen are centers [and] toys that we've been exposed to from such a young age, that certain toys should be for girls and certain toys should be for boys and unfortunately I can't really take that stigma away" (Interview 2, p. 8). As I have illustrated in Chapter 1, children enter the classroom having learned gender roles across various social sites such as in their families and through the media. Children will then typically gravitate towards spaces and toys with which they are familiar and that are perceived to be appropriate for their sex. For instance, Megan found that "The girls love the kitchen center and they would always be there" (Interview 1, p. 4). Hannah elaborated that "When it comes to the kitchen [the girls] really take on their roles seriously and if a boy does come in then they might try to control him" (Interview 3, p. 6). When I asked Hannah why she thought so, she explained, "Because they can, because they think it's their- because they have the right to- because that's their role" (Interview 3, p. 6). According to Davies (1989a), children's "choice of activity [becomes a] key signifier that can be used in successfully positioning oneself as a girl or a boy" (p. 2). In doing so, children are active in creating and maintaining the gender binary and legitimizing the assumption that girls and boys prefer different activities. Unfortunately, the stigma attached to particular toys and play spaces restricts children's exploration of various gender discourses as it encourages the perpetuation of dominant and narrow discourses of femininity and masculinity. Davies (1989b) posits that "There are many beliefs, narratives, images and metaphors located in everyday discursive practices that are not immediately recognizable as constituting inequitable practice. Even when they are recognized as such, it is often perceived as impossible to let go of them since the development of alternative discursive practices has not yet taken place" (p. 232).

While Hannah raises an important point, Megan alludes to Davies rejection of a unitary identity. She responded to the GoldieBlox (2013) commercial by explaining that "If you're buying girls only Princess toys and Barbie dolls, they don't know the science kits and construction building...But exposing them to different toys when they're growing up shows them

that yes, they can build. Yes, they can do science" (Interview 2, p. 5). Here, Megan draws on the feminist poststructuralist assumption that "maleness and femaleness do not have to be discursively structured in the way that they currently are. Genitals do not have to be linked to feminine or masculine subjectivities unless we constitute them that way. Children can take up a range of both masculine and feminine positionings if they have access to discourse that renders that non-problematic" (Davies, 1989a, p. 12). Classroom play environments are thus powerful spaces that can work to keep children in line with rigid gender categories or they can be a place for teachers and children to develop and explore the multiple ways of being. The organization of a classroom's play environment, however, is not the only influencing factor. How teachers respond to the children's play within the play environment can be just as critical in communicating to children what is acceptable or unacceptable behavior for their sex.

ii) Teacher Talk and Responses During Play

The ways in which teachers interact with children during play is crucial to breaking down, or not, the misconception of a unitary being. For instance, Sara explained that in the kitchen area, "They love playing mommy or little baby, feeding maybe mommy is making a plate for the child" (Interview 3, p. 2). However, when looking at a picture with Laurie of four of her students playing restaurant in the kitchen area, we noticed that perhaps not all children enjoy playing mommy and daddy in the kitchen area. Laurie said, "I haven't really noticed any mommy-daddy play in the kitchen. I don't know why. Maybe they're not there yet in their development, but they haven't started that...she's the mommy and that's it, it doesn't extend further than that" (Interview 2, p. 4). It seems as though Laurie's concern may not only be rooted in child development expectations of play, but also in the hegemonic heteronormativity that Sara also expects to unfold in the kitchen area, where the kitchen is a space to learn about and model roles of a nuclear family. While the girl in the picture might not have been engaging in mommy-daddy play because of her own family background or because she is simply not interested in playing house in a traditional way, the play is perceived as deficient. During my third visit with Laurie, she explained that she has "been encouraging them to go and cook for their friends...now it's starting, just today Alice and Emma were mom and baby" (Interview 3, p. 3). Davies (1989a)

posits that it is such language and expectations that further presses girls into a particular social mould and work to disempower certain children.

According to hooks (1994), education should be inclusive in that it incorporates the students' backgrounds, experiences, and preferences in the curriculum. She explains that "We all bring to the classroom experiential knowledge [and] this knowledge can indeed enhance our learning experience. If experience is already invoked in the classroom as a way of knowing that coexists in a nonhierarchical way with other ways of knowing, then it lessens the possibility that it can be used to silence" (p. 84). Unfortunately, more often than not, it is certain voices and experiences that seem to dominate in the classroom, further maintaining the status quo. Not only does this limit what girls can do in the kitchen area during play, for instance, but it may also discourage boys to take on nontraditional, nurturing roles. This was evident one afternoon when I played in the kitchen area in Megan's classroom with four girls and one boy. The girls set up the kitchen for a birthday party for the baby, but became disappointed when Oliver joined them. When I asked Jill why they did not want Oliver in the kitchen area, she said, "He is mean" (Field Notes, p. 2). I watched Oliver as he quietly and quickly prepared food for the party. However, Jill was not impressed and said to me, "He's making a burger, that's not birthday food" (Field Notes, p. 2)! The girls ignored Oliver for most of the play period, but Oliver quietly continued to place food on the table. By the end of the play period, the girls warmed up to Oliver as he did not exhibit mean behavior and was indeed trying to help out with the birthday festivities. According to Davies (1989a), the girls' initial resistance to Oliver might have been because "Within the preschools the 'home corner' is an area of female safety and control. Boys do occasionally play in these areas, but usually it is the smaller boys who join in and on terms dictated by the girls" (p. 81). While the girls in this play instance have positioned themselves appropriately within the dominant gender discourse, Oliver took himself up in a more complex and less socially acceptable masculinity. Unfortunately, these complex realities that unfold in children's play sometimes go unnoticed. At the start of the play period, Jill told Megan that Oliver was in the kitchen and that they did not want to play with him. Megan addressed the issue by encouraging the children to share the play space and play together. While this is indeed important, it does not necessarily address the complex gender power at play in the kitchen area. Consequently, Oliver

was not fairly integrated into the girls' play. When Hannah encounters a similar situation, where "one of the girls says to the boy 'you can't be a mom or a sister, you have to be a dad because you're a boy,'" she explained, "then maybe I might interject and say well you're role playing, you're using your imagination" (Interview 3, p. 6). While the teachers responded appropriately to their students in both cases, the narrow perception of what constitutes acceptable gender roles in the kitchen area is unquestioned and maintained, where females are expected to be the sole nurtures and caregivers.

d) Gender Equality in Preschool Play

While the teachers' belief in a gender binary may lead them to assume that girls and boys belong to two distinct categories with different interests and behaviors, they also conveyed that there is no difference between the sexes, that girls and boys equally enjoy the spaces in the play environment and have equal access to them. Laurie explained, "I think it's just equally. I don't think there's anything in particular that [girls and boys] are attracted to or something that really pulls them there....I see that there's a tendency for girls to want to play in the building center equally to the boys" (Interview 3, p. 4). Hannah also explained, "I don't necessarily think that just because you decorate or organize your classroom a certain way that the boys and girls can't equally enjoy it" (Interview 3, p. 5). At first glance, it was clear that girls and boys did have equal access to all the play spaces and it was not uncommon for girls to be playing in the building area with boys. However, on many occasions there was an unequal mix, where girls were typically outnumbered by boys. Because the building area is associated with 'macho' discourses of masculinity (MacNaughton, 2000), a noisy, physical, and sometimes aggressive type of play typically unfolded in this space, giving certain boys an advantage and dominance over the play area. MacNaughton (2000) explains that as "Many boys position themselves within traditional ways of being male, [they want] to control girls' access to block play and the nature of girls' involvement in the area. As a result, girls rarely [choose] to be involved in block play when boys [are present]" (p. 120).

MacNaughton's (2000) observation and insight was evident throughout my fieldwork. One morning in Sara's classroom, I spent some time in the blocks area with three boys and one girl. While the boys built a large castle together, Beth sat by herself and built bubbles using a

small pile of blocks she managed to take from the bin of blocks. When the boys ran out of blocks for their castle, they quickly turned to Beth and grabbed the blocks from her. Beth became upset and exclaimed "No!" (Field Notes, p. 2), but the boys continued to take her blocks. They explained to her that they needed all the blocks to build their big castle. Beth struggled with the boys for a short time and then gave up and changed play area.

Unfortunately, such an interaction was not an uncommon occurrence during my visits. One afternoon in Hannah's classroom, I spent some time in the building center with three boys and one girl. Two of the boys played with the fire station and loudly drove the toy cars in and out of the station, around the carpet, and around the classroom. I noticed that Lily quietly grabbed the bucket of blocks and began to build at the edge of the carpet. Within seconds, the third boy, Matt, came up beside her and attempted to join her play by asking if he could play with her. Lily refused by saying "Go away" (Field Notes, p. 2) and turned her back to Matt. As Lily continued to build by herself, the two boys quickly flew their cars very closely to Lily's tower several times almost knocking it down, but making sure not to. Matt attempted to join Lily's play a few more times, until Lily was completely off the carpet as she tried to move away from him. Matt then joined the other two boys.

A similar interaction took place in Laurie's classroom one morning. As I sat with Sabrina and Leah in the building center, we talked about the tower they were building using the soft blocks. A short while later, Frankie joined us in the building center. As Frankie began sharing his ideas on how the girls should build the tower, they ignored his suggestions and continued to build together. After several attempts on Frankie's part, the girls eventually included Frankie. However, Frankie quickly took over and began directing us on how to build the tower and then knocked it over. Sabrina became upset and eventually left the building area and Leah wandered in and out of the area. Frankie asked Leah to join him again, but she told him that she wanted to build the tower her way. They began to argue and Laurie, who was close by, intervened and encouraged the children to share.

In all three instances, it seemed as though the girls struggled to maintain control in a space where they are typically disempowered. The teachers were well intended in responding to such play interactions by encouraging the children to play together and share. From a

developmental perspective, preschool is the time when such skills are to be nurtured and developed. However, this leaves out the reality that not all children enter the classroom on equal playing fields. Girls, for instance, typically have less access to position themselves within physically aggressive discourses as boys do. As such, some girls may not have the same resources to share in male dominated spaces and requiring them to do so may further exacerbate gender inequality as girls are asked to act from a vulnerable position. Therefore, although teachers may not restrict girls from entering the building area, for instance, children may not necessarily have equal access to and equal opportunity in all play spaces.

Unfortunately, male dominance not only unfolds in masculine spaces, but also in female marked spaces. For instance, one morning in Sara's classroom, Marla played by herself with two dollhouses found at the back of the classroom. She had figurines placed in both the newer, colorful dollhouse and in an older, wooden dollhouse. Midway through the play period, two boys rushed to the dollhouses and, without acknowledging Marla's presence, grabbed the colorful one, turned it around, and began filling the doorway with figurines. Marla became upset as she frowned, but she did not speak to the boys. Instead, she stared at them as they undid her work in the colorful dollhouse. She then turned away and continued to play by herself with the wooden dollhouse. This interaction illustrates that while "power [may] become legitimate for girls in domestic spaces...[it can] always be potentially overridden by male force" (Davies, 1989a, p. 86). When Sara and I spoke about my observation of this interaction, Sara explained that "sometimes they'll come and tell me right away or they'll try and say 'no' and they'll start a fight, but this one maybe she was the one that doesn't talk much, Marla?...she's very shy, so she won't fight you know, she won't start up" (Interview 2, p. 8). My discussion with Sara regarding this play instance did not extend further, suggesting that such interactions are considered as normal occurrences in the classroom. From a developmental perspective, it is appropriate to place the responsibility on Marla to stand up to the boys. Marla's choice to ignore the boys' intrusion then was perceived as a lag in her social and communicative skills, rather than a safety issue she may have been avoiding, for instance.

In participating with the children in their play throughout my visits, I learned how play environments are heavily regulated by hegemonic masculinity and thus fair treatment of the

sexes is an illusion legitimized by child development theories. While the teachers are well intended in their practice as they promote gender equality during play by encouraging both girls and boys to play in all spaces, the lack of tools and support from the ministry of education to help teachers develop gender equitable practices and manage social justice issues in the classroom works to reinstate the very problem teachers are attempting to address in their students' play. Relying exclusively on equality discourses, rather than equity discourses, in order to ensure fair treatment in the classroom, specifically among the genders is therefore not enough and instead perpetuates and legitimizes male dominance in the preschool classroom.

e) Boy Centeredness and Preschool Play

Male dominance was not only apparent during the children's play periods, but also prevailed throughout the conversations between the teachers and I. While my questions did not directly address boys' experiences in the classroom, our conversations would often turn to boys. This included discussing boys' achievement in certain play centers and mostly the concern that boys are missing out and limited in their play. For instance, when discussing a picture Sara took depicting two boys playing with the dollhouse, she explained "I think because they don't have it at home...sometimes the boys see something different, even if it's for girls, they miss that and they want to play that game...I think they miss that sort of thing" (Interview 2, p. 1). Here, Sara shows concern for boys missing out on the play experiences in which girls typically engage. However, the girl-type play is also seen as limiting for the boys. When discussing how some boys have experimented with jewelry making in the blocks center Hannah explained that "The manipulatives that they use like the links or the strings and stuff like that is not necessarily defined by a certain thing, they could really do whatever they want with it, so that's why I feel it's more open ended for [the boys] because they can do what they want, whereas in the kitchen area I feel like they're limited a bit" (Interview 2, p. 7). Moreover, Laurie seemed concerned that the classroom play environment altogether, including the masculine play spaces, is not stimulating enough for boys. She explained that some of the boys have had difficulty exploring in the building center in that they always end up building a gun or a sword and "if they don't get the building center, then they just don't know what to do." She continued, "They'll go to the kitchen center and I don't even know what they're doing in there. They're just sitting there and

pushing buttons on the cash. They're bored with it" (Interview 3, pp. 2-3). Laurie attributed the lack of engagement partly to the overstimulation boys typically experience when playing video games and watching action packed TV shows and thus fears that "[in the classroom] it's more restricting [for boys]" (Interview 3, p. 3). Interestingly, while the classroom is regulated by hegemonic masculinity, and thus inherently privileges certain boys, there is a common perception that boys are being shortchanged in the classroom. Unfortunately, this belief further shifts teachers' attention away from the inequalities experienced by those students who enter the classroom already marginalized by the dominant culture.

The boy centeredness that prevailed throughout our conversations did not relate exclusively to the teachers' concerns for boys, but also addressed the seemingly inappropriate behavior that some boys exhibit during play. Specifically, as mentioned in an earlier section, the teachers have found that some of the boys in their classrooms exhibit aggressive behavior during play. According to Davies (1989a), this may be because "male power equals domination in public spaces...their power relies heavily on the use of violent symbols such as guns" (p. 91). For instance, Megan found in her classroom that "When [the boys are] building, they'll tend to build guns and there's more of the poof poof....I don't see girls doing that. I see more of the boys" (Interview 3, p. 3). All four teachers are particularly displeased with and do not accept violent behavior and symbols that depict swords and guns in the classroom. When discussing this with Laurie, she explained "I put an end to it with the knives. They were fencing [and] the knives became swords and they were using [the megaphone] as a gun" (Interview 2, p. 3). Sara found that boys' aggressive play is not limited to any particular center, but instead the boys will take over the play environment. She explained, "A lot of the times I'll tell the boys, 'stop running around the tables' you know they're playing that game because the Lego becomes a gun. It turns into that" (Interview 3, p. 3). As loud and rowdy play is unacceptable in the classroom, certain boys are often called upon to stop such play. While this attention is negative, it still allows certain boys to be the focal point of a classroom and the center of teachers' observations and attention during play.

Moreover, when a girl also exhibits aggressive behavior, it is attributed to her modeling the boys' behavior. For instance, Hannah explained that "Girls can be as aggressive as boys...if

there are girls playing in construction with the boys, they might model their behavior off the boys and play just as aggressively" (Interview 3, p. 4). Making sense of female aggression in this way was common among the teachers. However, such a perception suggests that girls are passive agents easily influenced by the behavior of their male peers, rather than active agents fighting for dominance in the classroom. Unfortunately, as the teachers reason through boys' aggressive behavior by drawing on 'boys being boys' discourses and holding TV shows and video games responsible, it marks such behavior as unchangeable. Teachers may then feel disempowered and daunted as they attempt to end a behavior that is perceived to be natural. Consequently, male dominance in the classroom is then also treated as natural and unchangeable.

D) Teacher Challenges: Play and Gender

In this section, I address the third research question: What challenges do teachers experience in relation to play and gender? Table 8 outlines the common challenges teachers have expressed to face when implementing play in their classrooms as well as the challenges that arise during play. I then discuss how gender issues are implicated in these challenges.

Table 8 - Teachers' challenges with play

Teachers	Teacher Challenges: Play and Gender
Sara	"The challenge is trying to have them resolve their conflicts and to be fair and not fight" (Interview 1, p. 5).
Megan	"[When] they're not getting along or not- the conflicts. That's the challenge" (Interview 1, p. 3).
Hannah	"I wanted to open more [moon sand centers] to give more children the opportunity to use it because sometimes we don't always [have time to] switch, so at one time there's only three [children], which is not even one-third of the class that gets to enjoy it" (Interview 2, p. 5).
Laurie	"The challenges with structured play I would think for now is that when they're in a center that they don't want to play in, sometimes they just don't play" (Interview 1, p. 4).

In visiting the four classrooms I learned that teachers put great effort into ensuring that play is integrated into the curriculum on a daily basis. Not only because educational policy

requires it, but mostly because they know that the children require it. However, I also learned that integrating play into the preschool curriculum is not an easy task. One of the challenges the teachers commonly face is being able to carve out enough time for play in a day. While the QEP highlights the importance of play in preschool, teachers are expected to fulfill many other requirements that often work against philosophies of play. For instance, teachers are required to adhere to the preschool competencies, which are expected to be achieved by all students by the end of the school year. As play does not necessarily show tangible results for school officials and parents, I have noticed during my visits that teachers will take time to lead structured activities for children to produce tangible work. Organizing and implementing such activities can become time consuming in the preschool classroom. Moreover, I learned that the teaching of certain subject matter is often delegated to specialized teachers within the school. Therefore, preschoolers spend a portion of their days going to science class, physical education class, and art class, for instance. While exposing children to diverse subjects and different teachers is beneficial for children, transitioning to different classrooms and spending time in those classrooms further reduces play time. All four teachers were thus left with roughly thirty minutes to allocate to play in a day, if all went well. Sara and Hannah who teach two half-day groups are further limited in how much time they can allocate to play. The teachers expressed that this is not ideal, particularly for center play. Hannah explained, "I'll have it usually up to thirty minutes, but now it will only be fifteen, twenty minutes...So I find the rotating really difficult...it's difficult. I find it a bit disruptive...I don't find five minutes is enough time in one center" (Interview 1, p. 6). As center play requires rotations, a short play period limits the amount of rotations. During my visits, the most I have seen children rotate is twice in a play period, but typically there was one rotation, which means that children barely have fifteen minutes in a play center. This has important implications for gender as girls and boys are then not necessarily experimenting with a variety of toys and play spaces during play. Thus educational policy seems to be communicating mixed messages as it mandates play for preschoolers, but other daily requirements make it almost impossible for teachers to allocate a sufficient amount of time to play.

In addition to time constraints, teachers also face the difficulty of encouraging children to explore various play centers and toys as girls and boys typically gravitate towards certain toys

and play spaces, particularly at the start of a play period. Sara expressed that, "They just go where it's known to be more for girls and vice versa (Interview 3, p. 1)....But what are you going to tell them? You can't tell them 'no, today you're going to try building, you're not going to go there'" (Interview 3, p. 6). Megan explained that this might be because "[the children will] try to choose something that they're more familiar with" (Interview 3, p. 1). In Laurie's attempts to encourage cross-gendered play, she noticed that "[The blocks will] be the first thing that the boys will want to go to. I'll say 'no, you played in the blocks center yesterday or this morning, do you want to play somewhere else now? We'll give a turn to somebody else.' Then I'll ask the girl 'oh you know you played in the kitchen today why don't you play in the blocks center?' I'll try to guide them" (Interview 2, p. 2). Teachers may have difficulty engaging children in the different play centers because children may be looking to correctly position themselves within dominant gender discourses by selecting sex-typed toys and play spaces. As children understand where they belong in the social order, they know in which play spaces they have power and control. For instance, Davies (1989a) explains that "The only context in which women are accorded apparent legitimate power is in the domestic sphere" (p. 73). She continues to suggest that "positioning themselves in feminine ways gives girls relative control in the 'home corner'" (p. 85). Thus, girls' insistence for kitchen play is not exclusively a result of socialization nor is it necessarily because it is a space in which they prefer playing, but girls hold power in the kitchen area and thus may feel safe in this space during play. However, as such gender issues are left out of dominant discourses in early childhood education, teachers are not always equipped to or given the necessary support to address social justice issues in the classroom. Consequently, rather than working with children on ways that they can enjoy a variety of play spaces and feel safe and in control within them, children are taken up as passive subjects and teachers are expected to dictate to children where they should play on a given day.

Another challenge the teachers have expressed to face during play is resolving peer conflicts. Sara explained that "When they're fighting over the same toy, they're grabbing 'it's mine' and then one might be too aggressive and you have the one that cannot speak up and comes to me quickly to complain" (Interview 1, p. 5). Hannah also found that "When, for example, a boy or a girl is building a certain thing, let's say with Legos and then they run out of

Legos, there's that conflict, that question of you know you're not sharing you have all the Legos, I want some" (Interview 3, p. 4). As teachers often approach peer conflict from a developmental perspective, it leaves the gender power that works to regulate play spaces out of the picture, which further exacerbates this challenge. For instance, on many occasions during my visits to Laurie's classroom, the kitchen area, a space where girls typically have power and control, became a restaurant in order to encourage the boys to play in that area. A conflict arose as Paul wanted to be the chef, while Emma also wanted to be the chef. Here, Emma is asked to share control and power over a space she typically dominates. Thus, her resistance to sharing may go beyond simply being a developmental issue. Instead, Emma may be trying to retain her control and power in the kitchen area. Understanding how gender power unfolds in the different play spaces may provide teachers an additional perspective as to why certain conflicts arise and can then allow for more effective ways to resolve the conflicts fairly, where teachers are not only encouraging sharing, but are also empowering certain children in different situations. According to hooks (1994), "One way to build a community in the classroom is to recognize the value of each individual voice" (p. 40). It becomes important then for teacher education programs to expand beyond developmental reasoning and approaches for conflict resolution and to consider how issues of social justice intersect. This can be helpful in providing teachers with the resources and tools to effectively address gender issues in their classrooms and encourage more equitable treatment of students.

Finally, another challenge the teachers have expressed to face during play is setting up play spaces that are interesting and motivating for their students. Hannah explained that "A small challenge is to make it interesting...to make it look interesting...They have to want to kind of go to that center" (Interview 1, p. 4). While the QEP is premised on a child-centered approach to learning, it does little to provide teachers with practical ways to ensure child-centeredness in the classroom. Instead, the requirement for teachers to adhere to the student competencies works against child-centered learning as it implies a standard for all children to meet. Consequently, children are constantly being compared to what is perceived to be "normal" behavior by preschool age. Teachers are then left to juggle between ensuring their students are meeting the QEP's student competencies, while at the same time integrating their students' needs and

interests into the curriculum. Hannah expressed, "The QEP is a little vague for preschool. I try to adhere to the six competencies that are in the QEP for preschool, [but] the QEP doesn't really tell me how to use them during play in my class" (p. 45). This gap illustrates the ministry's simplistic use of constructivist philosophies in educational policy. Child-centered learning requires teachers to be aware of their students' backgrounds and to encourage children to share their individual experiences in order to build a curriculum that is meaningful to all. I wonder, then, how is child-centeredness truly being addressed when gender, a significant part of children's lives, is left out of play discussions in educational policy?

Unfortunately, this contradiction materializes in the classroom. When the teachers and I discussed the gender issues that arise during play, we were often times puzzled about certain play interactions. For instance, when Laurie and I discussed why certain girls are less likely to go into the blocks area, she responded, "They do enjoy it, but I think that the girls- hmmm seriously that's a really tough question" (Interview 2, p. 2). On another day Laurie said, "When you say does gender have an effect on [the way children play], it depends. If they're built that way, then fine they'll continue to do that, but- I don't know. I'm not sure" (Interview 3, p. 6). As Hannah and I discussed how her male students use the kitchen area, she explained, "I set aside two plastic knives that you're supposed to use for cutting when you're eating, instead they're using them as swords. I don't know. As soon as they get distracted they just wanna be boys. I don't know how else to explain it" (Interview 2, p. 3). In a later conversation, Hannah grappled with if and how gender plays a role when she sets up play centers. She said, "I mean all centers are pretty open to boys and girls, so I mean I'm not necessarily- I don't know if I keep gender roles in mind. I don't know that I do that. That's a good question" (Interview 3, p. 2). As social justice issues are not treated by educational policy as important to students' learning and educational success, how to address gender in the classroom is not undertaken in significant ways by teacher education programs. Teachers are then exposed to and learn about a piece of the puzzle and this piece alone has become the dominant discourse in education: that of the developing child. This not only maintains children as passive agents rather than the active agents required for constructivist approaches to learning, but in leaving out the other pieces of the puzzle, such as

social justice education, teachers do not have the tools to effectively execute equitable practices in their classrooms and as a result all children are in some way shortchanged.

4.4 Chapter Conclusion

In this chapter, I have outlined the research findings of my fieldwork. I highlighted two themes that have emerged from the transcription data and field notes. The findings are presented in three sections to explicitly address the study's research questions. In doing so, I illustrated how the themes of *the passive child* and *normality* underlie dominant educational discourses in early childhood education and thus affect teacher practice with play in the preschool classroom. Specifically, I point to the implications of such perceptions of children and childhood on gender equity during play. While the teachers strive to best meet their students' needs, the QEP's contradictory messages and inattention to gender during play has resulted in little resources and support to be available for teachers to adequately manage social justice in the classroom. Consequently, gender issues often go unnoticed and unaddressed during preschool play. In the following chapter, I present the summary, conclusion, limitations, and implications for further research.

Chapter 5: Summary, Conclusion, and Implications for Further Research

5.1 Summary

Educational policy and teacher education programs have highlighted the importance of play in preschool learning. The QEP states that, "Play [is children's] way of mastering reality; this justifies giving play a central place in preschool education and organizing the space and time accordingly" (p. 52). However, absent from the discussion is the gender segregation that typically unfolds during children's play. From the moment of birth, people are expected to fit into two categories: girl or boy. As such, children are often exposed to different toys and play activities based on their sex. Through media representations and family expectations girls are introduced to passive and domestic play, while active and aggressive play is encouraged for boys. Although girls and boys may not necessarily prefer the types of play associated with their sex, in the classroom children will typically gravitate towards play spaces with which they are familiar and where they know is socially acceptable for their sex.

This study sought to better understand the lived realities of implementing a play-based curriculum in the preschool classroom. Its purpose was to explore how teachers' use of play addresses, or not, the gender segregation that typically unfolds during children's play. Through a qualitative and feminist exploration of preschool teachers' use of play in the classroom, specifically relating to gender, this study investigated and answered the following questions:

A) In what ways, if at all, has the QEP's emphasis on play in preschool influenced teachers' use of play in the classroom?

B) How do preschool teachers' gender perceptions shape classroom play periods?

C) What challenges do teachers experience in relation to play and gender?

The data collection for this study took place over three visits in each of the four classrooms. During my first and third visit, a semistructured interview with the teachers and participant observations during the children's play were carried out. During my second visit, a photo elicitation interview was conducted with the teachers and participant observations took place during the children's play. The findings of this research reveal two overarching themes that stem from dominant discourses in early childhood education and that drive teacher practice in the classroom. These include *the passive child* and *normality*. The fieldwork showed that the

teachers integrated play into the curriculum on a daily basis and made use of both free play and structured play. In the findings section, I discussed that while free play and structured play are spoken of as distinct activities, they are often carried out in similar ways in the classroom. Free play is often quite structured as teachers attempt to maintain control over their students' actions and their students' learning. Such practices are motivated by dominant discourses of "good" pedagogical practice, where children have the freedom to choose, but always within limits set by the teacher and informed by educational policy.

The fieldwork also revealed a common belief in a gender binary, which not only seemed to influence how the play environment was organized, but also how the teachers responded to the children's interactions during play. Unfortunately, as girls and boys are perceived to belong to two distinct groups, their thoughts and actions are essentialized, which has led to the marginalization and labeling of certain children. While girls and boys were treated as distinct groups, the teachers also claimed that girls and boys have equal opportunities in the classroom. The data illustrated, however, that equality discourses often mask the gender power that unfolds during play allowing for hegemonic masculinity to persist in classroom play environments, further legitimizing male dominance in the preschool classroom.

In the findings section, I also highlighted the challenges the teachers face in relation to play and gender. Specifically, the data revealed that the demands of the preschool curriculum seemed to limit the time available for teachers to dedicate to play. As such, girls and boys may not necessarily have the opportunity to explore and experiment with various play centers and engage with different knowledges and skills. The teachers are also faced with the challenge of addressing peer conflicts during play. Unfortunately, as child development theories are dominant in early childhood education, a partial understanding as to why certain conflicts arise informs teachers' practice. As such, the gender power at play during peer conflicts goes unnoticed and unaddressed, further exacerbating this challenge. Finally, the teachers have also expressed a challenge in developing play centers that are interesting to their students. As teachers strive to nurture children's development of the preschool competencies, play centers will often reflect the requirements of the QEP and not necessarily the students' interests.

5.2 Conclusion

Overall, the study shows that teachers' use of play in the classroom reflects and responds to the QEP in that play has become an important part of children's days in preschool and is used as a tool to foster children's development in the five developmental domains. In chapter 1, I highlighted how the different toys targeted towards girls and boys in the media and within the family nurture different knowledges and skills and in turn may affect the subject areas in which girls and boys feel confident and competent. While studies have shown that girls and boys tend to prefer different toys, the fieldwork revealed that this is not necessarily the case for all children. The teachers have expressed that girls and boys will select similar toys and types of play, where some girls have shown preference for block play and some boys enjoy kitchen play. Throughout my visits I have also seen the teachers encourage their students to engage in cross-gendered play. The use of rotating play centers also intends to create opportunities for girls and boys to interact with similar toys and play spaces, working to close the gap between the sexes. However, new questions regarding play and gender arose and, unfortunately, just as gender issues are absent from discussions of play in the QEP, so too are they unaddressed in the classroom.

While girls and boys show interest in playing with similar toys and within similar play spaces in the classroom, fairness among the sexes within these spaces does not necessarily prevail as certain play spaces are marked as feminine or masculine. Consequently, many girls and boys continue to gravitate towards different toys and separate play spaces as they not only find pleasure in 'getting it right' (MacNaughton, 2006), but also feel safe and in control in these particular spaces. According to poststructuralist feminism, discourses work to influence and create subjects. As such, children learn early on how to position themselves appropriately within dominant gender discourses. Davies (1991) posits then that while children do make choices, they are considered to be forced choices. Not addressing this subtly masks the gender power that regulates play environments and works to marginalize those children who actively resist dominant gender discourses in their play. Interestingly, notions of "good" pedagogical practices seem to silence gender in children's lives, which contradicts the essence of a constructivist approach to learning, where children are to be at the center of the learning process.

Consequently, gender blindness legitimizes the equal treatment of all children, rather than the fair treatment that is required for social justice to prevail. While the teachers are well intended in their practice as they strive for gender equality during play, the lack of tools and support from the ministry of education to develop gender equitable practices restores the very problem the teachers have attempted to address.

5.3 Limitations

While this study examines specifically preschool play as it relates to gender, I recognize that race, class, and gender intersect and that this reality further complicates the issues that arose throughout my fieldwork. The implications of race and class during children's play went beyond the scope of my research topic and was thus not addressed in this study. I also recognize that the fieldwork for this study was carried out in four preschool classrooms belonging to one of several school boards in Montreal. As such, in no way can the findings of this study be generalized to represent the practices and perspectives of all preschool teachers in Montreal schools.

5.4 Implications and Recommendations

This study raises several key issues and questions regarding play and gender in the preschool classroom. A prominent issue, I think, is that teachers' gender perceptions seem to be rooted in traditional beliefs, where gender is treated as a binary and children are to belong to one of two groups. This not only limits children in achieving their full potential as human beings, but also marginalizes those children who do not fit neatly into either category. As school boards organize workshops on pedagogical days to address various topics related to teaching and learning, I think, it would be worthwhile to dedicate workshops to address explicitly the gender issues that arise during play and how these issues materialize in other ways throughout the school day. The workshops would not only provide teachers with alternative understandings and perspectives of gender, but more importantly, the workshops would facilitate an open dialogue between teachers and school staff, where participants can think critically about their own gender identities and beliefs, share their experiences and concerns in addressing gender issues in the classroom, and offer recommendations for ways to carry out more equitable teaching practices in the classroom. Without the support and collaboration of colleagues, addressing social justice in the classroom can be a daunting and overwhelming task. Therefore, I think it is important to

open the communication lines and directly address the very real gender inequality that unfolds in the preschool classroom.

5.5 Future Directions

Future directions for this research can extend to include the perspectives of preschool children themselves. In chapter 1, I pointed to Mouritsen's (2002) concept of "children's culture" (p. 16), where children are active in adopting, producing, and transforming the information presented to them by adults across different social sites. While speaking with the teachers and playing with the children have raised several questions and important issues regarding play and gender, a fuller understanding requires hearing the voices of those who are immersed in the play environment on a daily basis. As such, including children more directly into the research process would allow for greater insights on the ways in which children negotiate through the contradictory narratives of sex and gender in their play as well as call attention to the ways in which race and class are also implicated. I would approach future research with a greater focus on standpoint feminism and draw on hooks's concepts of children's agency and voice not only within the curriculum, but within the research process as well. It would thus be enriching to speak to the children about their experiences with play in the classroom in order to get a better sense of the lived realities of four year olds. In doing so, we can learn about the pleasures, struggles, and concerns children encounter during play and better understand the ways in which a child's positionality affects their play experiences on a daily basis.

5.6 Final Reflections

As I mentioned at the start of my thesis, I am a teacher and I have taught at the preschool level. In pursuing my studies, I have become aware of the social justice issues that unfold during preschool play, however I am no expert in addressing such realities in the classroom. I think that awareness is the first step towards change. However, more needs to be done by the ministry of education and teacher education programs to first raise awareness about issues of social justice in the classroom and second to provide the necessary support and resources for teachers, such as myself, to act on the injustices that unfold in our classrooms. I will end with the inspiring words of bell hooks (1994) who is "Urging all of us to open our minds and hearts so that we can know

beyond the boundaries of what is acceptable, so that we can think and rethink, so that we can create new visions, I celebrate teaching that enables transgressions--a movement against and beyond boundaries. It is that movement which makes education the practice of freedom" (p. 12). In doing so, we are not only encouraging equitable practice in the classroom, but we are educating future generations to question and think critically about the world we live in and the discourses that shape it.

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Appendix 1 - Participant Consent Form

Dear Participant,

My name is Jessica Prioletta and I am a second year Master student in the department of Education at McGill University. I am conducting research on the current state of preschool play in various Montreal schools. I am interested in learning about teachers' experience with the Quebec Education Program, specifically pertaining to play and gender. The purpose of the study is to investigate how the QEP has influenced preschool teachers' use of play in the classroom.

I have received approval from the EMSB's Research Committee, its Educational Policies Committee, and the McGill Research Ethics Board and would like to invite you to participate in this study. With your permission, I will visit your classroom three times (once a month for 3 months (September, October, November)). You will be asked to choose a day and time that is convenient for you sometime during the last 2 weeks of each month. During my visits, I will invite you to take part in an interview of approximately 30 minutes. You will be asked open-ended questions about your teaching experiences using play in the classroom and the impact the QEP has had on your practice. To facilitate note-taking during our conversations, the interviews will be audio recorded. The interviews will take place during a time that is convenient for you (e.g. before or after school or during a break). During my visits, I will also take some time to observe the students during their play period. The play observations will take place during a time that is convenient and not disruptive to your daily routine.

The objective of the first interview is to obtain a general understanding of your experiences, practices, and perspectives regarding play and to explain the purpose of the second interview. The second interview will focus on gender and play. In order to facilitate our discussion, you will be invited to take 8-10 pictures of various play instances (free and/or structured play) at your convenience throughout the month. I will not keep the pictures and they will not be included in my thesis. Instead, the pictures are meant to elicit a conversation for the second interview. You will be provided with a camera if needed. The third interview is meant as a follow up in terms of

any additional issues or changes that may have taken place over the months in relation to play and gender.

Your participation is voluntary and you may choose to decline to answer any question or withdraw at any point from the project. The information will be reported <u>anonymously</u>. Interview material will be organized by codes rather than by names and will <u>not</u> be accessible to or used by others. Your real name and the school you work at will <u>not</u> be used in the report.

For general inquiries about the study please contact me at jessica.prioletta@mail.mcgill.ca or my faculty supervisor Dr. Claudia Mitchell at claudia.mitchell@mcgill.ca. If you have any questions or concerns about your rights or welfare as a participant in this study, please contact the McGill Ethics Officer at 514-398-6831 or lynda.mcneil@mcgill.ca.

I, _____, have read the above information and agree to participate in this study.

_____I agree to allow the researcher to observe play periods in my classroom on the chosen dates.

Signature: _____   Date: _____

Appendix 2 - Parent Consent Form

Dear Parent/Legal Tutor,

    My name is Jessica Prioletta and I am a second year Master student in the department of Education at McGill University. For my thesis, I am investigating the current state of preschool play in various Montreal schools. I am interested in learning about teachers' experience with the Quebec Education Program, specifically relating to play and gender. The purpose of the study is to examine how the QEP has influenced preschool play in Montreal schools.

I have received approval from the EMSB's Research Committee, its Education Policies Committee, and the McGill Research Ethics Board and have invited your child's teacher to participate in this study. I will be visiting your child's classroom 1 day a month for 3 months (September, October, November). During my visits, I will observe the students during play. In consultation with your child's teacher, the visits will take place during a time that is convenient and not disruptive to the rest of the school day. During my visits, I will also take some time to speak informally to students who are willing to discuss their play. This is meant to gain greater insight on the types of play the students are engaging in.

Your child's participation in this project is voluntary. The information will remain <u>anonymous</u> as I will <u>not</u> learn or include students' names in my observations. No child's real name, teacher's real name, or school's name will be used in my thesis. The results of this study will be disseminated through a master's thesis.

I would like to ask for your permission to observe your child during play and potentially ask your child questions about her/his play. Your child's participation is voluntary and she/he may choose to decline to answer any questions and you may choose to withdraw your child from the project at any point.

For general inquiries about the study please contact me at <u>jessica.prioletta@mail.mcgill.ca</u> or 514-707-4064 or my faculty supervisor Dr. Claudia Mitchell at <u>claudia.mitchell@mcgill.ca</u> or

514-398-1318. If you have any questions or concerns about your rights or welfare as a participant in this study, please contact the McGill Ethics Officer at 514-398-6831 or lynda.mcneil@mcgill.ca.

I, _____, have read the above information and give consent for _____

____ to be observed and to potentially speak informally with the researcher during her/his play

____ to be observed during her/his play only and not speak with the researcher

____ I do not wish for _____ to participate in this study.

Signature: _____   Date: _____

Appendix 3 - Conceptual Map

The Prevalence of Normality

'Good' Pedagogy

Classroom Play Discourses

Child-Centered (Children's Agency)
Children choose (toys and spaces)
Children change play spaces
Refusing/resisting to play
Children's interests
Children know to share
Children's freedom to choose
Children's responsibility [chart]
The individual [character, personality]

Gender Binary
Biological
Nature/genetics "made like that" "typical boys" "boys will be boys"
Unchangeable [gender binary/gendered preferences/stigma]
Sex-Role Socialization
TV
Family
Colours
Video games
Societal influence
Children model behaviour
Peer influence
Environment

Toys and Play Spaces
Building
Kitchen
Blocks
Tools
Cars
Dollhouse
Trains
Playdoh/moon sand

Educational Policy
Competencies
Assessment

Importance of Play
Cognitive development [construction/building, matching games]
Fine motor [construction/building]
Social development (fairness, turn taking/sharing, friendships)
Communication development
Literacy development

The Passive Child

Adult-Child Power Relations
Children as unknowing
Children unable to make decisions
Children as innocent
Just being children
Young children don't see gender/unaware
Children have difficulty following rules
Teacher control/Adult guidance
Surveillance during play
Teacher as ultimate knower

Dominant Gender Discourses
Dominant interests ["popular" "typical"]
Essentializing girls' and boys' interests
Generalization
Girls: calm, seated play, tattletales, catty, compliant, cautious, docile
Boys: disruptive, rough/aggressive, action, gun play, exploratory
Labels: "tomboys" "rough and tumble girls" "little boss"
Male spaces as complex [cognitive, open-ended]
Female spaces as passive [social, rules]
Masculinity [towers, bridges, construction]
Femininity [castles, princesses]
Gendered spaces - natural [kitchen vs building]
Cross gendered play - surprising, but not unusual
Nuclear family in play [kitchen]
Teacher talk - Status quo
Gender power/Power relations/Power struggle

Teacher Practice
Structured play - Play centers set up by teachers
Free Play
Positive reinforcement during play
Administrative tasks during play
Teacher participation during play - play ideas and interventions
TEACHER INTERVENTIONS
Conflict resolution
Solitary play - Encouraging group play
Ensuring equality [children's accessibility to toys and spaces]
Counter gender discourses
Security and safety
CHALLENGES
Lack of time
Children's interest
Conflict resolution

Boy Centeredness
Boys missing out
Kitchen limits boys
Classroom restricts boys
Boys as emotionally immature
Boys and femininity [comical]
Boys' play undesirable in classroom

Teacher Directed
Rules during play [clean, no gun play]
Types of toys available [teacher/school]
Types of play allowed
Play space arrangement
Teacher chooses who plays
Purposeful play [academics, development]
Limit number of students per center
Children as unpredictable
Forced choice