

## Gender Dynamics in the Primary/Elementary School Classroom

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**Abstract:** Gender-related issues are present at many levels of primary/elementary school education: in the choice of career in a feminized occupation; in education programs attended primarily by female students; and, in the school classroom itself. This paper addresses gender issues in these three areas of experience using semi-structured interviews with six teachers, four of them female and two male. Findings include: the continuing predominance of female role models and teachers at this level, more pressure for males to succeed in this career, and varying levels of awareness of and differing ways of dealing with gender issues in the classroom, often related to the age and experience-level of the teacher.

### Introduction

Teaching boys and girls from the age of five through childhood and young adolescence in the same classroom can bring challenges related to classroom dynamics and gender issues. For my research, I am examining gender inequality in the classroom. I am interested in teachers' experience of gender in the classroom in three stages of their lives: in choosing their career, in their training in education programs, and as they teach within their own classrooms. Specifically, I am interested in how teachers' (both male and female) adapt to children's needs and how they attempt to balance equally the genders within their classrooms. However, Davis and Robinson state that they "assume that individuals must first perceive that inequality exists, and then decide that this inequality is sufficiently unfair that some corrective action is warranted" (72). Consequently, because some teachers are unaware of gender inequalities within a classroom, I am also interested in knowing how these teachers perceive and deal with gender issues in the classroom.

Some of the main questions that I have covered within my research are: how does a person's gender relate to their choice of primary/elementary teaching; are teachers aware of gender differences when planning lessons or dealing with classroom interaction; and, how do teachers provide equal opportunity for boys and girls in the classroom. By researching these questions, one can gain a better understanding of whether or not gender inequalities exist in the classroom and how/if they are influenced by teachers at an early stage of a child's schooling. By using a standardized set of questions, comparisons between interviewees' responses can be made. Patterns of responses can be identified in relation to gender awareness perceived gender inequalities, and teachers' attempts to ensure male/female stereotypes are avoided in the classroom. By seeing how teachers understand and adapt to potential gender inequality within their classrooms, one can understand how/if a teacher's gender and awareness of gender issues influences students' classroom experiences.

A major reason for studying gender issues in primary school education is that I am planning on entering this profession and I am curious of about how teachers are able to prevent gender inequality in the classroom. I am also interested in how teachers are able to help males and females participate equally without major conflict within the classroom. In my own experience in primary school education, I noticed that females and males were not only given different tasks, but males were given less responsibility. Girls were asked to do certain tasks outside of the classroom, while boys had to remain in the classroom under supervision because of their disruptive behaviors. Teachers would have to keep an eye on the male students in order to keep a stable learning environment for all students. Consequently, I am interested in seeing how current teachers handle students' behavior and if the inequalities I experienced are being rectified.

My research aims to increase awareness of gender issues within contemporary school system. By interviewing primary/elementary teachers, I was able to gain a focused look at how teachers in a North Shore community in the Bay of Islands perceive gender and the workplace. Some teachers said

that gender issues and inequalities have always been an issue, at least around these small communities; this became evident with a little probing and some careful questions which revealed that it continues to be an issue that must be addressed in order for there to be positive change. By examining this, I was able to realize that this was not just an issue for the Bay of Islands area but also throughout the various schools these teachers had taught in.

### **Methodology**

This research involved semi-structured interviews of six primary/elementary teachers. Of these six teachers, two were male and four were female. Their experience levels ranged from a rookie substitute teacher to a retired teacher. All of the teachers were Newfoundland citizens who were born within Newfoundland, although two have taught outside of the province in larger communities in Ontario or Quebec. The participants were chosen to provide a variety of experiences, ages and locations of teaching for discussing gender inequality and dynamics in the classroom. In order to accomplish this, the three eldest teachers were selected because they were born within the 60s, while the other three were born in the 70s and 80s. Each individual brought their own outlooks and experiences of growing up and teaching within the Newfoundland school system and this provided insight into how teaching in a primary/elementary classroom works. In order to organize the data and be able to access each teacher without delay, I chose a convenience sample, since these six teachers were known to me. They were relatives, previous teachers or even previous co-workers. Because my study has to do with gender inequality and dynamics in any primary classroom I chose not to focus on a particular subject or area of teaching. Instead, I chose to interview those teaching in a wide range of positions, ages and schools.

During my interviewing process, I found that even though my convenience sample ensured easy access, it also entailed ethical issues. Because of my informants' familiarity to me, I thought my interviewees would be honest and be able to give me detailed information from schools that I may have attended or that are known in my own previous school district. A major challenge of interviewing

individuals one knows personally is, as a researcher, one can become nervous or intimidated by people who influence or may have influenced your life in the past. This can make interviewing people known to you tricky and difficult. However, it is also possible that because they know me, they may not provide sufficient detail because they may assume that I already know about certain issues or facts. People who are familiar or related to a person can take for granted the information that the interviewer may or may not know, so may not always answer questions in sufficient detail. This is why I asked questions and probed further in order to gain more complete information. When interviewing my informants, I became aware of how much information they were willing to share based on their comfort level and tried to respect this.

Once I started writing my paper, it became difficult for me to know when to leave out personal information given to me, or even when certain types of information were not necessary. So, confidentiality became a major concern for me during this process, especially in term of the teachers' identities. Another issue that created some difficulty throughout the paper writing process was that for the most part, teachers that are being interviewed were discussing former students, current students or even former teachers by whom they have been influenced. For such reasons, I had to make note when to include true identities in my paper and when to keep them out. Some teachers may feel they have a need to keep their identities confidential for work-related purposes, but there may be some who wish to disclose certain information. In the end, I granted my interviewees whatever confidentiality they needed or requested.

### **Literature Review**

When surveying today's primary/elementary teachers, we can still see that there is a significant demographic difference between the ratio of females and males. Canadian statistics on the distribution of elementary and kindergarten teachers by sex reveal they are 87.3% female and 12.7% male (Service Canada). This percentage is based on the occupation of Unit Group 4142, which deals with "skill type:

occupations in social science, education, government service and religion” (Service Canada). The stereotypes of female predominance in primary/elementary school positions are confirmed by this website in showing that females are still predominant. This ratio can become problematic for males wanting to enter the field as they may feel they are not meant for that job.

Being female has definitely influenced a lot of women’s career choices over the years. In some eras, females were encouraged to stay away from further education or jobs because it was thought this would take their focus away from their household duties. Mid nineteenth-century sociologist Harriet Martineau observed how women were treated and how gender inequality affected their everyday lives. Martineau states that she “wishes them [women] to be companions to men, instead of play things or servants” (92). During this time period, Martineau felt that women were in need of having the same critical thinking skills as men and because of this, they were in need of having a formal education equal to that of men. Martineau saw that by gaining an education for themselves, women could become companions instead of servants to their husbands. However, although women did stay within the household after marriage, they were not marrying at younger ages in the 1880s, therefore needing some kind of education to keep themselves supported financially until marriage. As Martineau states, “not all Englishwomen are cared for by a man and that women need to be educated for an occupation so that they can earn their own way” (88). Martineau therefore argued that women must learn to support themselves and in order to do so; they must become educated and become equal to the men in their society. When discussing females and education, Martineau argues that women should have an education that prepares them for the demands of the household. She states that:

girls will never make a single effort, in any length of school years, for such an object as being companions to men, and mothers of heroes. If they work, and finally justify the pains taken for them in establishing such colleges as these, it will be for the same reasons that boys work well, and come out worthy of their schooling; - because they like their studies, and enjoy the sense of mental and moral development which is so strong in school and college years; and because their

training is well adapted to educe, develop, and strengthen their powers, and render them as wise and good as their natures, years and circumstances permit (98).

Martineau felt that women should be taken seriously and realized they could pursue a formal education that would prepare them for the type of critical thinking skills needed within a household. Martineau's main argument about women and education was that women should have a say in the amount of education they could pursue. Although Martineau still assumes that women are being educated essentially to use their skills in their households and marriages, she nevertheless argues for the need for women to develop their critical thinking skills, despite the fact that many of those skills would be used essentially in raising young children. Had she lived within the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Martineau may well have applied these ideas to arguing for the types of skills needed for teaching at the primary school level.

Today's teachers bring not only general ideas about gender into the classroom, but also ideas about gendered parenting. In fact, teachers who are parents, of young children have to choose whether to relate to their students as teachers or as parents. In "Being and Becoming: Teacher's Perceptions of Sex-Roles and Actions Towards their Male and Female Pupils", Terry Evans states female teachers have to deal with the ambiguity of knowing when/if to exchange their roles between being a teacher and being a mother. At such a young age, children may accidentally call their teachers "Mom" or "Dad" if the teachers act or speak in the same way as their parents. Evans states that "teachers explained aspects of boys and girls behaviors in terms of those children's mothers which emphasized the traditional view of parenting as a female responsibility" (141). Students at a young age still rely on their parents for both material and emotional support, so female teachers are put into a position of being regarded as both teacher and mother, creating challenges for a teacher. Children can get the impression that their female teachers will be just as nurturing and caring as their mothers, which can lead to children referring to these individuals as mother or simply not taking them seriously within the classroom making teaching of young children difficult for the female teachers. When males pursue a teaching degree, the gender

differences lead to stereotypes, which can make it difficult for males to enter into primary teaching. The field of primary teaching is looked at as being female dominated based on their abilities because as Akhtar states, "female(s) [have] more passions and [a] soft corner for kids and their motherly attitude, tolerance and encouragement enhanced students motivation and learning" (260). Gender stereotypes are still clearly visible today within the school systems, creating assumptions that females are better equipped for the job and making males hesitant to pursue this degree. Akhtar furthermore notes that males are found more readily in what are perceived to be more masculine jobs and having more female teachers in primary classrooms gives children the 'more loving and comfortable/comforting aspects' they need while entering the world of formal education. The concept that female teachers are more loving and represent that gender stereotype is still visible within the school systems. More importantly, gender issues relate to how males and females are treated within the classroom and in academic settings generally, whether it occurs in education programs that train teachers or within primary school classrooms.

Males, according to Coulter and McNay are very influential on children within the primary school level, so "the absence of male role models at the elementary school level adversely affects the provision of quality education" (399). Without males in these positions, the quality of education is limited in the sense that children are getting the impression that females are dominant in lower teaching levels, while men are dominant in higher grade levels and administrative positions. However, Coulter and McNay state that "boys who have male teachers do not have fewer problems in school nor are they better adjusted; boys from father-absent homes do not imitate or rely more on male teachers than other boys" (399). In the end, despite conflicting evidence, there are still many people who want more males within the primary and elementary school teacher positions and feel as if it would be beneficial for their children.

Skelton states that “some men choose to enter upper primary teaching in order to maintain and demonstrate more easily conventional forms of masculinity” (204). Studies have found that there is a decline in the number of male teachers because of the overall predominant percentage of female teaching in primary schools today. Stereotypes and other assumptions about males as teachers in the primary/elementary school system are discussed throughout Skelton’s article and tie into the responsibility factor mentioned by Evans, who states that “[there is] little evidence that more men in elementary schools will counterbalance the “feminized” environment of those schools or enhance boys learning” (399). In some cases, the males who were interested in teaching at this level of teaching were discouraged from doing so and were told to look for jobs at a higher grade level. As Coulter and McNay state, “men who expressed interest in teaching primary grades encountered explicit discouragement from other teachers, both male and female” (404). This is one of the stereotypical views that society has about males. As long as such stereotypes exist, it will be difficult to find more males within a career originally gendered female.

Gender in the classroom is, of course, also integral to the identity of students in primary/elementary classrooms, although this identity has begun to be formed well before children reach the school classroom. Gender, as mentioned in Elmore and Oyserman, “is a core identity; it is established early, and there is evidence that it is consequential for both boys and girls... and knowing whether one is a boy or girl influences what one prefers to do and what feedback matters” (177). Teachers are encouraged to adapt to the gender of a student because they need to find out what will influence and help that child grow based on their likes and dislikes. If this is not accomplished, teaching can become difficult and students will not gain the quality of education they need. Gaining the interest of male students is one of the hardest things to accomplish because “boys are more likely to be sanctioned for failing to pay attention to the gendered relevance of behavior; boys prefer gender-congruent behaviors at an earlier age than girls” (177). Students become socialized within their own

families before entering into the school system so they are used to being praised for certain gendered behaviors that are not rewarded or considered as acceptable within the classroom. One behavior, for example is verbal turn taking. As Shirley Brice Heath states,

“between the ages of two and three, children begin to initiate... running commentaries themselves, often interrupting adults or changing the topic of adult talk. These interruptions are rarely condemned when the child is this young, and adults agreeably shift topic or continue the child’s topic. (250)

These behaviors and actions can become problematic in the classroom, so boys therefore need to adapt to new behaviors in order to fit into their new social settings. If teachers do not understand how children act within the age groups and the importance of that for children, their teaching can create a lack of engagement in learning for their students.

Gendered activities within the classroom are influenced by the actions and occurrences that take place within the classroom. Evans mentions gender and the classroom in relation to how “primary teaching allows the observation of children during their earliest encounters with formal school socialization” (128). By being able to observe children at such a young age, teachers and parents can become aware of the behaviors and reactions that the students have to tasks and activities that can be related to gender neutral or gender equality issues. Overall, Evans wanted to find out how teachers were maintaining a “concentration upon the extremes of typicality of boys and girls [and how they] provided a structure for ascertaining each teacher’s constructions of masculinity and femininity both in relation to their own self and to their perceptions of their pupils as boys or girls” (129). If a teacher does not have an overall perception of what masculinity and femininity means to them (students or teachers?), they tend to struggle with knowing how to teach their students to the best of their abilities. However, the terms masculinity and femininity are cultural stereotypes that are brought to people’s attention while growing up and there are many different conceptions of the terms so this insight can become problematic not only for the teachers but for the students as well. In order to fully address

these stereotypes, one must come to terms with the state of one's classroom at the beginning of every day.

In the start of a school day, teachers have the task of becoming prepared for the day's tasks based on the circumstances that were present the previous day. As Sadker and Sadker state,

the classroom is the only place in society where so many different, young, and restless individuals are crowded into close quarters for an extended period of time day after day. Teachers sense the undertow of raw energy and restlessness that threatens to engulf the classroom. To preserve order, most teachers use established classroom conventions such as raising your hand if you want to talk (317).

Teachers become aware very quickly what works for certain students. Without control of the classroom, it becomes chaos. Male students become engaged with this type of behavior, and with every chance they can get they are taking the opportunity to start exercising their attempts at dominance. Sadker and Sadker state that, "boys call out significantly more often than girls... the result is that girls receive less time, less help, and fewer challenges" (317). Boys want control and most importantly to create chaos for their teachers and fellow students. Even though this is not all the time, it is still significant within the classroom. As stated, the results can be catastrophic towards girls, who lose the teacher's attention within the classroom. Therefore, teachers must know how to control the classroom and give equal and fair opportunity for children to speak and express their opinions.

If a teacher does not give the proper attention to and equal treatment for each gender, it will not only impact that particular cohort, but can continue to impact a child's entire school experience, including high school. As Duffy *et al*, state in their study of gender at the high school level, "teachers may interact more with male students than with female students simply because male students respond to, or initiate interaction with, teachers more than do female students" (582). As can be seen, even within this age group, students continue to speak out and teachers may interact with males more often, especially if they are disruptive and this can take away from the learning of the other children in the

classroom. However, as Duffy et al state, “in an effort to reduce this disruptive behavior, elementary teachers often develop themes and examples which interest males; the teachers feel this will help males focus more on the class” (582). Thus, if males are continuing to gain all of the attention because of their disruptive behaviors, young females are not as important to the teacher as are the males within their class. Without a full understanding as to how gender can affect a child, and without knowing how to balance the two equally, learning can become a problematic issue for children in the classroom.

When discussing how teachers address each gender in the classroom, it is seen that there are many different techniques as to how to approach male and female students. Jordan and Cowan observed how teachers dealt with children and their interactions with classroom activities such as okaying “house, farm and shop” what does that mean? (732). They found that the teacher who they were observing found ways that made playing house and farm appropriate for both genders without conflict of acting out undisciplined such as using toys for different meanings. Jordan and Cowan found that the teacher “practices a gentle, but steady discouragement of such bricolage... [and that] she made strong efforts to assert their cultural meaning instructing the children in the “proper” use of the equipment and attempting to control their behavior” (733). Most of the students who were male acted out and were the focus of her guidance. Because males are seen to be more disruptive, teachers tend to be more focused on the males within the classroom. This may result in ignoring females, who normally do not break cultural meanings and norms as the males do.

People often assume they are aware of and know exactly what is meant by gender inequality. However, as Davis and Robinson state, “we assume that individuals must first perceive that inequality exists, and then decide [if] that inequality is sufficiently unfair [and in need of] some corrective action” (72). Scholars tend to feel that if people are not part of an oppressed group they will not be aware of the concept. In relation to teaching, females are the majority of teachers in lower grades and therefore they may not be aware of the inequality or the position of the male teacher when placed in these typically

“female” careers. However, even though they may feel that females would not sense inequality in positions such as a primary/elementary teacher, it is said that “women will be more conscious of gender inequality than men... [and] men with less prestigious occupations or low incomes may tend to view women as a threat in the competition for jobs and perhaps as responsible for their own disadvantaged positions” (73). This is what we are seeing within the primary school teaching career today. Males are seeing themselves as having more pressure to succeed and to be placed within these job positions because of the female dominance.

Gender inequality has been an issue for many years and throughout those years, scholars like Martineau and Evans has tried to make a difference in the way people view the primary school teacher. Women have not always has a key role as primary in society but when it comes to the primary school teachers, they have become dominant. Men on the other hand, must deal with their position in society and especially within the school system because they are not seen as being dominant in these teaching positions, creating the stereotype that men do not belong in young grades, but only in the higher grades that bring with them, less responsibility over the children in the classroom. In the end, children adapt to their surroundings and teachers become aware of their actions, creating gender equality once comfortable within the students and the classroom.

### **Findings**

My research findings are organized around the primary questions I presented to my interviewees: why they chose primary/elementary education as a profession, their perception of the gendered nature of teaching at that level, gender and teacher education, gender in the classroom, and the relationship between teaching and parenting.

### **Why did these teachers choose primary/elementary education as a profession?**

As stated by Elmore and Oyserman, “boys express more interest in professions stereotyped as masculine, while girls are more interested in feminine-stereotyped professions” (177). When asking

each interviewee their rationale for becoming a primary/elementary teacher, I discovered they all had similar answers: a childhood desire. One female interviewee stated that, “as a young child I knew I was going to be a teacher” (Casey). The desire to become a teacher appears to have been a long-term career choice. The males also felt from an early age that they wanted to be teachers, although not from as young an age as their female counterparts. In one interview, a male stated, “I always felt that I wanted to help people and going into the education faculty was something I always planned to do” (Jackson). Although there may have been obstacles along the way, each individual felt from a young age that they wanted to be a teacher.

Interviewees were influenced to go into the teaching profession by family members, or former teachers who felt that, they had taken the time to make their careers their own and felt that this was the best decision for them as individuals. An older female spoke about how she was “sort of led into [teaching] by family, [by having] an older sister doing teaching and older siblings who were already teachers” (Becky). Her first choice had been to become a psychologist, but gauging from the experiences of her siblings, she felt that teaching would be the best path for her. Teaching is a career to which a person should become committed because of the possible negative impact arising from uncaring teachers; these consequences could include inadequate instruction or neglect. According to one interviewee, teaching was not for everyone, because teaching is a profession that is a way of life and something that would be desired by men and women from a young age. Becky stated that, “the most important thing that any good teacher should be or have is respect for the students. If you give them respect, they will respect you... you got to get them interested and motivated.” Teachers’ shape and form students from a very young age and some may wonder why teachers are not in the career to help students. In similar interviews by Skelton, he found “there was broad positive agreement from males and females to several general statements on primary teaching; this is, it is as intellectually demanding as secondary teaching, a stressful occupation, and involves excessive paperwork” (198). If

individuals are not committed to their teaching roles the stress of the profession may be overwhelming.

One female interviewee felt that teaching is a way of life and that,

teaching is a career that... people should pursue if they love people, if they want to engage people, if they want to inspire children, [and] if they want to have a thumping heart probably 500 times during the day with a smile or a little thing that a child as done; that's the rewards of teaching. (Casey)

She believes that people should pursue this career because they love children and want to make a difference in their lives. Each of the individuals interviewed always wanted to be teachers and love being around children. In fact, one male teacher, who obviously enjoys teaching, stated, "kids are cool" (Adam).

### **Is primary teaching stereotypically female?**

Over the years, many females have entered the primary level teaching. This creates the stereotype of this teaching level as a female occupation. This gendered pattern has been observed and explained by some researchers, like Akhtar, who states:

Teacher education is also gendered and it is perceived as a female profession. The reason given for that was: females have more passions and soft corners for kids and their motherly attitude, tolerance and females are good teachers especially for primary school education (260).

These differences in males and females are also supported by some teachers. A female interviewee stated that she felt males were "more towards the older kids [suggesting that] males may not be comfortable with the younger ones... You see a lot more women in elementary and primary [teaching] than men and you think sometimes that [women] have more patience, more caring and more maternal" (Becky). This particular outlook was the same for all the interviewees. For these particular teachers in the Newfoundland School District, primary level education is regarded as a female profession.

Many students do not experience a male teacher until they enter into the upper elementary or even high school levels. As one male teacher stated "almost every year, [my students] would look up [and see the] first male teacher [they] ever had" (Jackson). In all of his years teaching of at his present

school, there has “never been [a male teacher] lower [than grade 5] teaching” (Jackson). However, while there has always been a perception of teachers being females at the primary teaching level, one interviewee feels that, “things are getting better” (Adam). The relative number of male to female teachers at the primary teaching level is increasing. This is a positive change in presenting teaching, and particularly primary school level teaching, as more of gender equal profession.

Amber said that “it seemed like... the primary [teachers] were more female. As you got into elementary there were a few more males and the high school would have been, I don’t want to say dominated, but that’s where you would find most of the men in the education faculty.” This individual feels that the primary level of teaching is still primarily female. She felt this may be in reference to the woman as a motherly figure. When discussing this issue she stated that “I know that it’s probably very sexist thing to say, but... even when you talk to male teachers and... tell them about your day they [say], I couldn’t do that. Most of [male teachers] just want to go and assign the work” (Amber). From the interviews, I gathered that men do not want to be placed within these teaching levels and this interviewee expresses a perspective as to why females feel males are virtually nonexistent in these positions.

### **Are male teachers regarded more as leaders than as teachers?**

At a primary school level, students are usually taught by female teachers. This occurs because of the stereotype that females are more efficient and better equipped for teaching at this level. It is not until elementary school, grades 4 to 6, that most students come into contact with a male teacher. This is the case at the school where one male interviewee works. He is the first male teacher that students encounter within their school lives and he is a teacher of the fifth grade. He also mentioned that until then, the only other males that students encounter in the school system are, male principals and vice principals (Jackson). This segregation between women in the classroom and men in leadership roles is explained by Skelton in her article “Male Primary Teachers and Perceptions of Masculinity”:

[Male] teachers come to be located in the dominated management positions in primary schools [because of the] combination of two factors: the positioning of some men as 'natural leaders' in patriarchal societies and the endeavors of individual men to emphasize those aspects of teaching compatible with 'proper masculinity', such as leadership and management (203).

The ingrained patriarchal ideas of this society, allow males to still obtain the majority of the leadership roles, such as principal, vice-principal and also school board positions. Meanwhile, females are continuously being placed in the teaching positions because society views leadership as "masculine."

Women often feel that men are given more options for careers. As one female interviewee mentioned, males "did everything [and] anything," that is, career-wise (Casey). However, she felt, "a woman was either going to be a teacher, a nurse or a secretary" (Casey). Both male and female interviewees were aware of societal views of the roles of males and females in leadership roles. The male interviewees claimed that while they were still students, they saw males in positions such as "special needs teacher, janitor, bus driver, gym teacher, and principal" but never had a male teacher "until elementary school" (Adam). When mentioning the female roles in the schools, many people view these as being the teacher and according to Skelton, the reason this gendered occupational divide persists is that, "there are various ways in which the 'feminization' is perceived to be taking place but the main issue is the predominance of women teachers, i.e., the feminization of primary school teaching, which has been argued to have led to primary schools favoring girls and 'girls' learning styles' over those of boys" (195). Feminization is the predominance of women in a particular occupation. Feminism is women's attempts to gain equality, but there are so many types of feminism, that you would have to cite a particular author. You're best off to leave the above paragraph as is.

Even today, the only male influences at the primary level are mainly principals and gym teachers. Females still often get the "feminine" jobs involving young children within the school system because of their perceived motherly image. One female interviewee stated that "maybe... women are picking lower levels than males [because they] don't want the responsibility" (Amber). Females

themselves can feel that they are placed in these positions because of their femininity and males view their job positions based on their years of teaching and the degrees they have attained. However, not everyone believes in this gender divide. One female stated that there was an “even split when it came to principals being either male or female” and she did not see the male dominance that other interviewees noticed in their schools (Amber). In the end, in today’s society, there are more occurrences of women getting into higher position jobs and because of this, my interviewees and I are starting to see a significant change in the relationship between gender and various positions within schools, such as principleship; change has started, but there is still room for improvement.

**Are male teachers viewed with the same amount of respect as females?**

Both of my male interviewees mentioned that, as male teachers they can be more harshly judged when involved in physical interactions with students, such as hugging students or even when simply mentioning dress codes to female students. Even though these teachers mentioned that they did not hug their students, there was still precautions of keeping a professional teacher/student relationship which is stressed within the school system today. Adam mentioned, “if a male hugged a student and a female hugged a student, that would be perceived more differently... and so... it was stressed upon the male students in our class that you have to be careful because it will be perceived much differently.” From Adam’s quote, we can see that females and males are looked upon in different ways when it comes to teaching younger age groups. . Even within classrooms today, men are taught to approach female students differently than male students. This way of thinking makes males feel that they are not equal to females or that they might be perceived as predators within this career path. Physical contact between teachers and students is not allowed in the Newfoundland English school district and even comments or visual interactions that are sexually suggestive are viewed negatively. The possibility of problematic interactions with young female students could account for males not being placed into job positions dealing with younger children.. Jackson, for example, stated that, “sometimes when you’re

dealing with [them], you are a little more leery on how you deal with female students.” As a male, this particular teacher felt that he had be cautious when speaking to female students. Some students tend to feel uncomfortable around male teachers because it can be awkward when the dress codes are mentioned. This then becomes a tricky subject for females and even male students. Thus, male teachers have to second guess their every action within their workplace, while female teachers do not have to counter a negative or suspicious attitude towards them.

My male interviewees were aware that they would be looked at differently from female teachers in their interactions with their female students so they knew they would have to be cautious as in how they interact with students in the classroom. For example, in a gym change room, female students are comfortable changing in front of other female students and male students in front of other male students. But, when an opposite sex teacher comes into the picture; it becomes a case of questioning why that individual came into the room, and wondering if their intentions were sexual.

#### **How are male and females treated in the education faculty classroom?**

**Within** the education faculty classroom, there is conventionally a minority of males and a majority of females. . For example, Amber stated that in the “primary/elementary [teaching program] the majority [of the teaching students] were females, probably 20-25, and there were two males, but I thought it was [because] men didn’t choose to apply to primary.” In fact, every interviewee mentioned that there were always fewer males than females within their graduating class. When asked how males and females were treated within the education classes, one male, who had recently graduated from the faculty, said he felt the males were experiencing more pressure than females because there are fewer of them. He noticed that the males received more individualized attention and more pressure to do well, making their experience different from that of the females within the same classes. Adam felt that the texts books being used by the education faculty were “usually based [toward] female[s].” However, Adam felt that textbooks are starting to improve and are becoming more accepting of males within the

educational field. On the contrary, Jackson discussed feeling that there was a “better chance of getting in [to the education program] because of the female dominance.” From this interviewee’s perspective, being male gave him a better chance of being accepted into the education faculty because the program/school system is looking for more males to fill positions in the primary/elementary teaching level.

Female teachers, on the other hand, felt that they were treated the same as males in the education program. Kristina stated that there was no pressure for females within the education faculty and she also felt that they were “equally treated.” Female teachers in my research tended to feel that they were part of the class and did not notice any differences between how males and females were treated. However, this was not the case for Casey, who felt that there was pressure “because of the fact that males had so many choices [in careers].” Casey would have been influenced by the era in which she grew up, which was during the 1960’s, thus, she felt confined to more “traditional” female careers such as “teachers, nurses or secretaries.” Different time periods and an age gap appear to have an effect on the ways that interviewees felt about job options. Female interviewees who are older felt that there was more pressure in the past for them to get accepted into the education program given their limited career options. My male interviewees feel that there is more pressure to succeed now because they are a visible minority. There are normally few males that enter the career of teaching because of the continuous stereotypes. Males are still being viewed as the minority and noticed more frequently within the classroom.

### **Are teachers aware or conscious of differences in gender when planning lessons?**

My two older female teachers addressed the issue of establishing classroom curriculum in relation to student’s interests. Each of these teachers mentioned that they strategize their curriculum choices. Becky stated that she does “surveys at the beginning of the year to get their [students] interests” in order to prepare teaching materials, because, “it’s more difficult to get stuff for boys.” This

teacher, along with the other older female, noticed that they needed to gain an understanding of their students at the beginning of the school year in order to become effective as possible. Casey stated that, “in my planning, I needed to make sure that I implanted enough boy interesting things that would motivate them; you had to have a balance.” For my female teacher participants, effective classroom management is about getting to know each student individually and the class as a group, so when they are teaching they can accommodate students’ interests within the curriculum. However, as stated by Curwin and Mendler, “becom[ing] aware of how you manage your classroom and what you need in order to make your personal style of classroom management consistent with your beliefs and values” is one way of keeping a stable and balanced environment for yourself and also students (28). Teachers have to learn quickly what materials they need in order to make the males comfortable and interested during class times. Lastly, according to Elmore and Oyserman, “boys and girls scan their environments for gender-connected information, constructing gender stereotypes about the traits, abilities and behaviors of boys and girls” (177). Some teachers may feel that younger children are not as capable of picking up social cues but as Kristina stated, “[children] are smart, they notice.” This young female teacher noticed that her students were aware of any gender preference when assigning tasks, such as bringing things to the principal’s office or even bringing lunch orders down to the cafeteria. Kristina felt that she had to accommodate each gender when assigning tasks, or she would be questioned by her students.

Jackson noted the difference in his students’ perceptions on the word “guys” being used in his classroom while addressing the majority. Jackson mentions that “I have a tendency to say “okay guys let’s do our stuff... when I say the word guys [I use it] to indicate everybody in the classroom, and a few years back...as I said it one of the guys made a comment... and said what about the girls?” He noticed that the girls in his classroom would use this word while talking to their girlfriends but it was the complete opposite for guys, meaning that they would not say “alright girls” when hanging out with the

guy friends. Jackson found that he therefore had to watch his wording and even had to make opportunity for a discussion about why society has made it acceptable for women and girls to refer to their girl friends as guys. Thus, when planning classroom activities and the layout of a day's work, Jackson would not only have to be conscious of the activities for each gender but also about the way that he was addressing students because of the implications and reactions that the students would have. Jackson concluded that people come to the assumption that using guys neutrally becomes acceptable strange rationale. He states that "male being the man but female being of the male... I think where I teach French and words become masculine and feminine, it really throws a monkey wrench into sometimes when you are talking about stuff because you say well a car is feminine but a truck is masculine" (Jackson). Jackson feels that he has to educate his students about the stereotypes and gender conflicts that can come from using incorrect grammar terminology the students consider to be sexist when expressing themselves.

### **How do teachers provide equal opportunity for boys and girls?**

Being able to provide equal opportunities for students within the classroom is an important part of being a teacher. Without equal opportunities for males and females, students can be given the impression that one sex is more highly valued than the other. Within the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Akhtar states that "male and female students have different kinds of teaching needs. These needs are basically related to genetically different brains of male and females students and their learning styles" (161). My interviewees assessed all children in terms of their learning style rather than based on their sex. When we take a step back, we can see if there are some problematic thoughts and reactions to what she is saying. Males and females are biologically different, meaning that females and males may be closer the opposite sexes traits than their own. For example, females may be more masculine for the fact that they may dress like the boys in their classroom, or males may be more feminine than the other males and want to play with dolls like the girls. Children pick up on these differences and conflict can arise. When

asked about how they provide equal opportunities for each sex within the classroom each interviewee expressed a similar perspective. For example, all of the individuals interviewed felt that it was not about asking a child a question in the classroom involving the topic of the day. Rather, it was about being able to engage with those students to give the students a better sense of their interests or dislikes, in order to get them involved within the classroom. Casey stated that:

I can't say I ever deliberately thought about [gender/sexual difference]... [it is about] what interests or disinterests the child... It's their learning styles that you would reach out too ... some boys may be interested in certain questions, so you ask them those questions; if you are a good teacher you have to give them that time [to be] reflexive in their thinking... I don't know if that's planned.

For Casey, it is about the individuals and their interests, regardless of the sex of the student. Her thoughts were different than Akhtar's, Becky assessed her students in a similar way but with a different strategy of using surveys. Becky felt it was a good way to get to know her students and to be able to engage with their skills and interests.

Adam however, did not approach engaging his students in the same ways as his female counterparts did. Adam, who is currently a substitute teacher, directs questions to his students based on "people [he] ha[d] interacted with," meaning that he had spoken or knew the students from interactions before the class started or during the class. His reasoning was that he did not want a student to feel pressured into answering a question, since he was not familiar with the students. According to Curwin and Mendler, "there is little time to get to know the students and there is not enough time to develop social contracts unless you are a long-term substitute" (218). Being a substitute teacher like this individual can have its disadvantages as Curwin and Mendler mention and some students will just simply not engage with teachers who are unfamiliar to them.

However, as Whitbread states, "equal opportunity does not necessarily mean identical classroom provision for boys and girls but it is essential that, in translating their aims into day-to-day

practice, schools should not by their assumptions, decision, or choice of teaching material, limit the education opportunities offered to girls” (217). During the time of the 1977 Green Paper, a document which began the process of curriculum review, Canadian women were still being discriminated against in terms of work and their roles in society. It was not until this point, that boys and girls were given the same opportunities and looked at equally. Even in today’s society, maintaining equal opportunity can be difficult, in order to keep children aware that they can be whoever they want and do whatever they want, equality is a way to do so, making sure that each individual does not look at themselves differently.

### **Are there differences in classroom layouts, styles and discipline related to gender?**

To understand the concept of discipline and how it relates to the school classroom one can look at Curwin and Mendler’s article:

Discipline is a word frequently used by teachers, parents, and administrators, yet there is little common agreement on its meaning. For many it refers to punishment: “if you don’t stop misbehaving, I will discipline you, but good.” For others, it means classroom management, or what the teacher does to control student behavior.....one other common perception of discipline relates to students’ attitudes. Students with “bad” attitudes and/or feelings are discipline problems. (7)

Discipline can be implemented in different ways. Even though the ways of discipline may have changed over the years, teachers continue to have strategies in order to keep their children in line and on their best behavior at school. Although there are still arguments and disagreements for the ways to discipline students, discipline is still needed in order to maintain a healthy and stable environment.

An individual’s schooling has a major influence in the way that they each teach or have taught in their own careers. The older generations of teachers have a different outlook and experience than do the younger ones. All the older individuals that I interviewed mentioned having grown up within schools which consisted of only one or two rooms. In these interviewees’ experience, their teachers were very strict and because of this, they rejected strict (physical) discipline and favored treating children as

individuals, not as male or female. Casey stated, "I grew up in the time when school was very strict... you sat and you listened and you didn't speak and you certainly got punished when you spoke if you were not asked to." Even though Casey was raised within the time of strapping and strict discipline, she went on to teach in that same system and chose to discipline her students differently. As Casey stated "discipline was totally different, in fact... I could have even strapped if I wanted to [although I] chose to never do that; [I saw] teachers grab children in [my] first year of teaching; it was accepted I guess. Society accepted it" (Casey). Today, teachers are adapting to the changing of discipline styles within the classroom, and even though there are changes, teachers are witnessing ways that male and female students react within the classroom setting. Casey wanted the students to be equal and understood as their own person, something that she did not see growing up. Males would be strapped more than females based on their disruptive behavior, and although males tended to be at the same disruptive behavior, she had to attempt a balance of the two genders in disciplining.

During my research, Jackson mentioned that he always had rules in his classrooms: no running, no fighting and things like that. He felt that his rules were enforced for "gender equality, as I tell them you all have equal opportunity; a rules a rule" (Jackson). He felt that there needed to be order in his classroom in order to keep the public from the private. Jackson meant that the public, which is outside of the classroom, and the private, which is within the classroom setting, in which he needed to maintain a stable classroom environment for his students to learn and grow. For Jackson, growing up during the 1970's, there were a lot of rules enforced in his schooling so when he became a teacher, he wanted to maintain those same standards for his students. Rules make the classroom a quiet and gender neutral space for learning and in his opinion that without rules there would be no stability in the actions and words of his students. This outlook however, is not always the case in many classrooms as Jackson has pointed out when mentioning that all teachers and classrooms are different. According to Sadker and Sadker, "teachers praise students only 10 percent of the time. Criticism is even rarer- only 5 percent of

comments; in many classrooms teachers do not use any praise or criticism at all” (319). Teachers do not always know how to control a classroom and how they should praise their children when doing well. Without praise and guidance, students can become reckless and refuse to do their work within the classroom; this is where conflict begins and rules have to be made as Jackson mentions earlier in his interview. Rules make a classroom a safe and respectable environment that encourages students to do well in their studies and interactions with others. Male students were the disruptive students who were more involved with the rules while girls were more quiet and conserved. Because of this, Jackson had to encourage his male students that good behavior had its rewards. He would give out warhead candies to students with good behavior in order to maintain order if male students in particular with behavior during the day or complete a task sufficiently.

When discussing the overall classroom layout, each interviewee had their own techniques of arranging their desks during classroom events and months. Kristina mentions having to organize her desks in relation to the task at hand. When teaching math or a particular subject that certain students are struggling with, she has to group the children based on their needs and not on their gender. Even though there is usually no conflict amongst the students unless there are two boys grouped together or two girls during classes, these situations result in her having to split up the students to get her classroom back in order. Lining up for recess has also become more relaxed over the years, meaning that there is not such a divide in the two sexes as they were in the past. In Becky’s childhood experience, they would have “one set of stairs for the males and another for the females.” In today’s classroom, Kristina gets tables to line up after one another, but males and females line up separately. Kristina felt that she had to be aware of the ways of lining up her students, not only because of the gender equality issue but because of disruptive students who talk during events such as assemblies. Casey has a similar system for the arranging of students before assemblies. She knew that certain students would be disruptive if not separate so, in those cases, she divides her students by having one female to one male instead of all

males and females. Lining up with females themselves makes gender equality more neutral, teaching the students that it is acceptable to be taught as equal.

### **Does having children affect females teaching lives?**

Being a mother can have an impact on a teacher, especially balancing school work and family. When asked questions related to teaching their own children, Becky and Casey mentioned that they had to create distinctions between home and school. Casey stated, "You don't notice the other kids... when it's your children you notice. I reacted to everything they did... I chose not to; I didn't teach any of my [extended] family." However, she did not feel that she was disadvantaging her students within the classroom, but rather her own children because she was so aware of every move they made in her presence. Becky also mentioned that she had to turn off her motherly outlooks when searching for books because she would find herself "picking out things [her children] would like." Thus, she had to be conscious of the materials that she brought into her classroom (Becky). Having children is clearly a factor that can influence a teacher's career and they must learn to adapt to. Males on the other hand, did not mention having any issues with teaching their children. They may have been because, the males who were interviewed for my research, either did not have any children or they did not have children in their grade level.

It is difficult to avoid the challenges of being both a parent and a teacher, but it is a reality that is present in many young teachers' lives, both today and also many years ago. Casey felt that "when my kids got older I had more time with my class. I rested better when they got older... [it] became a different teaching world for me... [I had] more time to reflect over the day... like wine, you do get better with time" (Casey). Looking back and reflecting on her own experiences as a teacher, she felt confident when saying that teaching her children was one of her challenges and that once they were older it was much easier to her classroom and her home, and also to become more involved with her students. Without a balance and a sense of understanding of how children work in a classroom, not only can the

teacher become disadvantaged when in the classroom, but, the children can also become disadvantaged in relation to how their teacher is addressing them as individuals along with a group. Having a teacher who is always teaching their children or having children of their own can have its advantages and its disadvantages; it is all about how one handles the pressure. One gender can become favored because of the sex of a teachers child. The teacher can be familiar with the ways that a male child works over a female child, and because of this, they can start to favor that sex over the other in their teaching styles, making the other disadvantaged.

### **Conclusion**

From my research, I found that there are various gender-related issues present in the primary/elementary school level around the Bay of Islands. Primary teachers are still seen as essentially female and more of the students who attend the primary/elementary education programs are females. Out of the three areas of experience which were addressed within the semi-structured interviews conducted, there were findings such as: a varying level of awareness of the different ways that teachers could address gender issues within the classroom along with differences in discipline in relation to the age and experience of the teacher. Most of the interviewees became teachers out of love for children and the desire to educate people. The teachers manage their classrooms in many different ways such as with gender-mixed groups, and giving equal opportunity to answer questions and complete classroom tasks. In conclusion, it can be seen that there is still a pressure on males within this degree to do well, while females expressed that there was no pressure at all to fit in. Gender inequality still exists and is especially evident within the education faculty today.

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