

**Exploring the Role of Gender in Student Experiences  
Of Middle Years Physical Education**

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## Abstract

The middle years are “the most critical time of life to foster long-term engagement in physical activity, sport and exercise” (Doolittle, 2016, p.29). School-based physical education is one way to help foster this engagement. However, positive attitudes towards physical education decline from the start of the middle years to the end (Subramaniam & Silverman, 2007). Gender differences have been found in levels of enjoyment, participation and perceived competence in middle years physical education, with girls recording lower scores in all categories (Cairney, 2012; Johnson, 2015).

Stereotypical assumptions about hegemonic gender in middle years students persist in physical education (Larsson, Quennerstedt, & Öhman, 2014). If we can better understand the role that student gender may play in affective and participatory experiences of physical education, we can effectively tailor programs for middle years students.

This study used a feminist ethnography to explore the physical education experiences of students and teachers from one grade five/six class. Unique to this class were their combined physical education classes with a grade-alike French-Immersion class in the same school. Over a three-month period, data was collected through extensive observations of physical education classes, document analysis, interviews and focus groups. The results can be understood through three themes: (i) “*Our Class*”; (ii) *Giving it Away*; and (iii) “*Strong Girls*”.

Results suggest that the unique structure of middle years where classes remain intact, presents an opportunity for developing classroom cultures that value diverse, safe, and respectful physical education environments. Once these physical education environments have been established, strategies to develop physical literacy may play an important role in creating more equitable participation when it comes to gender, and other marginalized groups. Suggestions for practitioners, such as implementing critical social justice education in their physical education classrooms, are discussed. Implications for future research including activist research are also discussed.

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## **Dedication**

To all the “strong girls” who have surrounded, encouraged, loved and empowered me for the last 27 years. This is for you, Grandma Ettje, Nana Barbara, Mom, Jenna, and Sheila. Your strengths come in many different forms, from many different places and I have been so fortunate to have you in my life.

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## Chapter 1

### 1.1 Introduction

ParticipACTION reports annually on the physical activity behaviours of young Canadians and recently indicated that only nine percent of young people between the ages of five and seventeen are getting enough physical activity to meet the Canadian guidelines (ParticipACTION, 2016). There are many factors that contribute to physical activity levels in children and youth (Van Der Horst, Paw, Twisk & Van Mechelen, 2007). Among these factors are participation in school-based physical education and students' gender (Van Der Horst et al., 2007). According to the World Health Organization:

Gender refers to the socially constructed characteristics of women and men – such as norms, roles and relationships of and between groups of women and men. It varies from society to society and can be changed. While most people are born either male or female, they are taught appropriate norms and behaviours – including how they should interact with others of the same or opposite sex within households, communities and work places. (2017)

Theories related to the development of gender identity vary depending on one's worldview, but generally fall into three categories: essentialist, developmental and socialization (Brinkman, Rabenstein, Rosén, & Zimmerman, 2014). My personal beliefs, and those underlying the discussion of gender throughout this document most align with gender identity development as understood by socialization theories. As Brinkman et al. (2014) explain, this “[Socialization] approach describes accumulation of gender identity as a process that occurs over time due to the influence of others” (p. 837). Due to the impact that people surrounding a developing child can have on their understanding of gender, it is very much a product of culture. Culture is defined as, “...the beliefs, behaviours, norms, attitudes, social arrangements, that form patterns in the lives of its members” (LeCompte & Shensul, 1999, p.21). While the age at which gender identity develops in young people is unclear, children as young as two to three years old can use gender stereotypes in their play, begin labeling themselves and others as “boys” and “girls”, and sometimes express that they are in the wrong body, or wish to be a different gender (Putnam, Myers-Walls, & Love, 2013; Welcoming Schools, 2017).

Enrolment by Canadian youth in optional school-based physical education programs is declining, as are overall physical activity levels of young people. (Physical and Health Education Canada, 2015). This decline in physical education enrolment has been found to be much greater for young women when compared to young men (Physical and Health Education Canada, 2015). Despite a greater presence of boys and young men in physical education classrooms, there is evidence that not all of them are equally comfortable or safe in the physical education environment (Connell, 2008; Jachyra, 2011; Tischler & McCaughtry, 2011). This disparity in enrolment and participation in physical education warrants investigation into the function of gender in physical education classrooms.

Research on gender and physical education has indicated that assumptions in the classroom are sometimes based on traditional, stereotypical gender behaviours (Connell, 2008; Larsson, Quennerstedt, & Öhman, 2014). The environment has been referred to as a masculinity vortex where characteristics of hyper-masculinity such as aggression, competitiveness, strength and force are not only privileged, but sometimes learned by boys and young men (Connell, 2008; Tischler & McCaughtry, 2014). While these characteristics are often expected of young men in physical education class, young women frequently place themselves, or are placed on the opposite end of this behaviour spectrum (Cockburn & Clarke, 2002). As such they are often not expected to display eagerness for the sports that dominate many physical education curricula. Young women in physical education are frequently expected to hold attitudes and display behaviours that are incongruent with sports such as gentleness, non-competitiveness, and have an affinity for aesthetic activities (Schmalz & Kerstetter, 2006). These behaviours understood as socially “acceptable” for girls or for boys, can be thought of as hegemonic. According to McLaren (2009):

Hegemony refers to the maintenance of domination not by the sheer exercise of force *but primarily through consensual social practices, social forms, and social structures produced in specific sites such as the church, the state, the school, the mass media, the political system, and the family.* (p. 67)

While some examples of resistance to these hegemonic gendered behaviours exist (Chepyator-Thomson & Ennis, 1997; Tischler & McCaughtry, 2011), students and teachers alike tend to accept these stereotypic roles as stable and unchanging; a claim substantiated through a “discourse of naturalness” (Larsson et al., 2014; Larsson, Redelius & Fagrell, 2011). A discourse

of naturalness within the context of gender and physical education refers to discussion of boys and girls in such a way that they are constructed as naturally different, related to human science and biology (sex) and therefore, unchanging (van Amsterdam, Knoppers, Claringbould, & Jongmans, 2012).

For young people who internalize these gendered ideas while attempting to make sense of their own identity and physicality, the physical education environment can be troubling (Azzarito & Katzew, 2010). Both young women and young men who do not identify fully with hegemonic gender roles have reported discomfort, role conflict, and avoidance while in physical education (Cockburn & Clarke, 2002; Fagrell, Larsson, & Redelius, 2012; Tischler & McCaughy, 2011). Studies pertaining to issues of gender in physical education classrooms tend to focus on secondary school students (grades nine to twelve). This may be for a number of reasons including the presence of sex-segregated classes, emphasis on sports in secondary school physical education programs and the perceived ability of older youth to describe their experiences. It is interesting to note that secondary school is also a time of major decline in physical education participation for both young men and young women (Physical and Health Education Canada, 2015). While it has been indicated that children much younger than grade eight are aware of gender stereotypes in sport, there is a paucity of studies that look at gender-related experiences of these younger students in their physical education classes (Schmalz & Kerstetter, 2006). A better understanding of early physical education experiences, and the role that gender plays may be useful in creating more positive physical education experiences leading to selective enrolment in secondary school. Indeed, Doolittle (2016) suggests that the middle years (grade six to eight) are “the most critical time of life to foster long-term engagement in physical activity, sport and exercise” (p.29).

When viewing gender as a socially constructed category, the understandings, norms, and values of one’s culture(s) become very important. Through social interactions, young people learn what is considered appropriate and expected behaviour from those around them. Schools, and even individual classrooms can be thought of as culture-sharing groups, who are involved in creating and defining these social and relationship norms, routines and accepted patterns of behaviour. Both teachers and students are involved in the shaping of a classroom culture and the way that a class culture subtly or obviously frames gender may have an impact on students’ physical education experiences.

Few studies have focussed on the ways that gender may shape the physical education experiences of middle years students. While they may not be as articulate as their older peers, middle years students are aware of and impacted by their surroundings, and their voices could help to better explain the lived realities of students in physical education classes. Gaining an understanding of the topic through the people most closely connected to the environment can help researchers, educators, students, and curriculum developers begin to move toward constructing a pedagogical space that breaks down the discourse of normality and creates a more comfortable and enjoyable physical education experience.

## **1.2 Review of Literature**

**1.2.1 Traditional gender divisions in physical education.** Traditionally, the physical education environment has been home to strong gender divisions among students and teachers (Connell, 2008). This can be attributed, in part, to the ways that certain sports and physical activity behaviours and characteristics have been culturally defined as either masculine or feminine (Chalabaev, Sarrazin, Fontayne, Boiché, & Clément-Guillotin, 2013; Connell, 2008; Pawar, 2014). Despite efforts to break down these stereotypes, the idea that games and activities are gendered continues to exist in the minds of young people (Fisette, 2013; Gorely, Holroyd, & Kirk, 2003; Schmalz & Kerstetter, 2006). Responses from eight to ten year olds indicate that “boys’ activities” are defined by aggression, potential for danger, getting dirty and injury while “girls’ activities” are defined by props, aesthetic activity and coordinated movement (Schmalz & Kerstetter, 2006). The grade nine and ten girls in Fisette’s (2014) study were more aware of the problematic nature of “girls’ activities” and “boys’ activities” in their coeducational physical education classes, but conformed to the stereotype by choosing to engage in the socially constructed gender-appropriate activities offered.

Research in the area of gender patterns in physical education classes has found that traditional masculine and feminine attitudes and behaviours are consistent and persistent in the secondary school physical education environment (Larsson et al., 2014). Meta analyses have found that gender relations in physical education, “...consistently demonstrate a trend of continuity rather than change in gender relations with regard to discourse, practice, teaching, pedagogy and teacher education” (Brown, 2005, p.3). A barrier to breaking this trend of consistency is that gender equity is not simply about access to and participation in physical activities. Movement toward equity within physical education classrooms should also address

the gendered attitudes and behaviours that are available for young people to assume while in the physical education environment (Penney & Evans, 2002).

**1.2.2 Persistence of gender stereotypes based on a discourse of naturalness.** A potential reason for stability within the gendered attitudes and behaviours found in physical education environments is that students and teachers view “differences” between young men and young women, as “natural” and “normal” in physical education classrooms, rather than a behaviour learned as a result of socialization (Larsson et al., 2014; Larsson et al., 2011). Students and teachers often use this discourse of natural difference to legitimize sex-segregation in both co-educational and sex-separated physical education classrooms (Hills, 2006, van Amsterdam et al., 2012). In co-educational settings, teachers have been found to recognize the dominance of boys and subordination of girls in their classes, but are unsure about how to address this issue (Larsson, Fagrell, & Redelius, 2009; Martino & Beckett, 2004). Additionally, teachers frequently view these differences as naturally occurring phenomena that need to be managed rather than challenged within their classroom (Fisette, 2013; Larsson et al., 2009; Martino & Beckett, 2004).

When it comes to the enjoyment of co-educational and sex-segregated physical education, research on student perceptions has been mixed (Hannon & Williams, 2008). With a strong historical focus on improving the experiences of girls and young women in physical education, all-girls classes have been purported to increase participation opportunities, improve teacher feedback and teacher interactions, and limit problems associated with teasing, harassment, and exclusion by boys in the class (Derry & Phillips, 2004; Hannon & Ratlife, 2007; Lirgg, 1994; Osborne et al., 2002). While not disputing the benefits for girls participating in sex-segregated physical education, this approach has been criticized for reinforcing a gender binary, and a discourse of naturalness (Hills & Crosten, 2012). Hills and Crosten (2012) suggest that the quality of a physical education program and students’ enjoyment of that program are related to many factors beyond the biological sex of students in the class.

One way that these “natural” differences are managed is through the separation of young men and women for physical education, often beginning in the first year of secondary school. In sex-segregated classrooms, stereotypical behaviours can flourish as expectations and behaviours are often differentiated based on sex, and students tend not to resist these prescribed roles, also taking up the discourse of gender differences as “normal” (Azzarito & Solomon, 2010; Larsson et

al., 2009; Martino & Beckett, 2004; Paechter, 2003). In a comparison of sex segregated and coeducational secondary school physical education classrooms, Smith, Lounsbury, and McKenzie (2014) found that students in male-only classes had higher activity intensity, performing almost twice as much vigorous and moderately vigorous physical activity than students in female-only classes. In the female-only classes, students participated in vigorous physical activity for 12.9%, and moderate to vigorous physical activity for 48.9% of their scheduled physical activity time (Smith et al., 2014). This is compared to males who participated in vigorous physical activity for 21.6%, and moderate to vigorous physical activity for 67.7% of their physical education time. It is interesting to note that these disparities in activity level persisted despite higher prevalence of traditionally feminine fitness related activities in female-only physical education classes (Smith et al., 2014). Both males and females were more active in sex-segregated physical education versus coeducational classes (Smith et al., 2014).

While sex-segregated middle school physical education is rare in Canada, it is more common in the United States of America. However, like high school students, McKenzie et al., (2004) found that regardless of class type (coeducational or sex-segregated), boys were participating in more moderate to vigorous physical activity compared to their female peers. Johnson (2015) found a similar discrepancy among the 290 grade six to eight students in her study: males were active (steps recorded on a pedometer) for an average of 57% of the class time, while their female peers were active for only 48% of class time. Thus, it would appear that it is not just in coeducational classrooms that young people are affected by a discourse of natural difference when it comes to time active in physical education.

**1.2.3 The problem with a discourse of naturalness.** One result of an assumption that differences are fixed to gender is that young men and women are frequently directed to engage in different physical activities and value different aspects of physical education (Azzarito & Solomon, 2010). This is problematic as these assumptions deny the commonalities that exist between males and females, while at the same time, ignore the diversity among males and among females (Penney & Evans, 2002). The result is that students and teachers assume that the physical education environment is made up of two distinct groups (young men and young women), with each group possessing homogenous attitudes, behaviours, abilities, likes and dislikes regarding physical education while ignoring the many other complex, influencing factors on their experience (Penney & Evans, 2002). Through social expectations and privileging of the

behavioural and attitudinal characteristics assigned to each group, “norms” for young women and men in the physical education environment emerge and are referred to as hegemonic gender roles (Gramsci, 2009). Hegemonic gender roles subtly but powerfully direct students to an understanding of how to properly perform their gender while placing any young person for whom these behaviours do not align as the “other”, as “deviant” or incorrect (Gramsci, 2009; Penney & Evans, 2002). Marinucci (2010) suggests that rather than label young people who fall outside of these norms as “inherently wrong”, there should be a focus on exposing current gender stereotypes and roles as the real problem.

For adolescents who are still developing their identity, there is some uncertainty about what it means to correctly perform adult masculinity and adult femininity (Paechter, 2003). The result of this uncertainty combined with students’ feeling as if their bodies are on display causes students to be hyper-aware of the gendered behaviour expectations that surround them in the secondary school physical education environment (Paechter, 2003). Students tend to personally conform to the stereotypical behaviours, and expect their peers to do the same (Paechter, 2003). This willingness to accept and perform the hegemonic gendered behaviour in physical education has had serious recourse for both boys and girls in secondary school-based physical education.

**1.2.4 Effects of a discourse of naturalness on girls and young women in physical education.** Since the implementation of Title IX, much progress has been made when it comes to gender equality for opportunities in sport, and physical activities including physical education. However, as Azzarito (2010) asserts, the progress made is fluid and complicated. Azzarito (2010) explains:

As sites of conflicting discourses of gender, girls’ bodies are simultaneously ascribed by traditional and still pervasive corporeal notions of slenderness and unathleticism, and at the same time by the emerging image of the ‘Alpha Girl’ and the ‘Future Girl’ (p. 265). Azzarito (2010) describes these girls who represent Alpha Girls and Future Girls as new visions of femininity, as “self-made, ambitious and independent girls, to whom sport and career paths are the most important areas of self-definition and of success in society” (p.266). Alpha Girls and Future Girls embrace new athletic body shapes, and value the determination, confidence and physical skill that comes from participation in physical activities (Azzarito, 2010). However, not all girls are, or can be Alpha Girls and Future Girls. Despite the increased availability of feminine behaviours and attitudes, there is still an “other”, those who do not, or cannot embody

the new femininities of the 'Alpha Girl' and the 'Future Girl' in a sport setting (Azzarito, 2010). Thus, like other feminist movements in the past, these new identities are not available to all girls in physical education, and are very much dependent on class, race, body type and skill level (Azzarito, 2010).

For many girls and young women, the traditional ideologies of acceptable femininity persist and they are non-congruent with images of young women engaging in physical activity (Cockburn & Clarke, 2002). For those who are not Future/Alpha girls, this may mean negotiating the tension that is caused by feeling they must choose between a "masculinized doer" or a "feminized non-doer" of physical activity during physical education (Cockburn & Clarke, 2002). Feeling as though they must choose between participation and femininity is a very serious conflict for young women as masculinity is often seen as a marker of success but femininity is frequently viewed as a marker of likeableness in the physical education environment (Clément-Guillotin, Bambon, Chalabaev, Radel, Michel & Fontayne, 2012). For some young women, this tension means compensating for the "femininity deficit" they incur through participation in physical education by altering their dress and behaviour in other environments (Cockburn & Clarke, 2002; Paechter, 2003).

Fisette (2013) explored the way that American high school girls discussed their barriers to participation in their co-educational physical education classes. Through interviews and focus groups, the grade nine and ten girls in Fisette's (2013) study identified a struggle between impressing the boys enough to be included in the game and the pressure to choose "girly" alternative activities instead. Paired with the other barriers reported by the girls (domination of activity choice and game-play by the male students in their coeducational classes and teacher inability to address the problem without belittling the young women's abilities) demonstrates the way that secondary school physical education continues to be an arena dominated by young men (Fisette, 2013).

Some girls who describe themselves as "sporty" and who enjoy participation during physical education class report having to prove their femininity and heterosexuality as a result of their participation (Paechter, 2003). Hill (2015) asked young women (aged 13-14) in a diverse, urban school in the United Kingdom to create a photo-diary of the physical activities in which they participated. During discussions about the photos, girls discussed feeling confident and competent in sport settings but also reported that they would try to not do their best in physical



education class to avoid being called, “strong”, “a man”, and “fat” by their peers (Hill, 2015). One of these participants recognized that these comments were unfair, hypocritical and hurtful but with the persistence of the teasing, she expressed, “you start to believe it” (Hill, 2015, p. 674). For others, physical education class is an opportunity to demonstrate their femininity through resistance, non-participation, or underperformance in class activities (Fagrell et al., 2011; Paechter, 2003). Young women have described their position in physical education class as a role conflict, unfair and a no-win situation, and cite withdrawing from action and blending in as survival techniques (Cockburn & Clarke, 2002; Fisette, 2013; Paechter, 2003). As long as the participation of young women in physical education remains surrounded by ideologies of masculinity, young women will remain the ‘other’ in many physical activity environments, which can lead to lower participation, feelings of isolation, and identity confusion (Paechter, 2003).

**1.2.5 Effects of a discourse of naturalness on boys and young men in physical education.** Gender is a system of social relations and as such, a discussion about the impact of gender in physical education is not complete without consideration of the experiences of boys and young men (Connell, 2008; Penney & Evans, 2002). While a discourse of sports and physical education as naturally masculine privileges some young men in the classroom, it is far from comfortable, safe or healthy for other students who display alternative forms of masculinity (Jachyra, 2012; Tischler & McCaughtry, 2011). Jachyra (2012) found that there was a distinct divide between “dominant” and “non-dominant” boys, which “...in turn influenced how adolescent boys enjoy and socially experience [physical education]” (p. 176).

Many young people regard sports as a major marker of masculinity, and masculinity as highly important during the teenage years (Paechter, 2003; Tischler & McCaughtry, 2011). As such, young men who enjoy sports, are aggressive, competitive, and competent in physical education achieve what Jachyra calls, “Physical Cultural Capital” (Jachyra, 2012). Through his grounded theory ethnographic study of physical education at an all-boys private school in Toronto, Jachyra created this term to describe “...a symbolic or intangible resource or tool that is associated with power/privilege, practices and governing logics imbued within physical cultural fields dictating corporeal practices and subjectivities” (Jachyra, 2012). Thus, boys and young men who embody a hegemonic form of masculinity are afforded more privilege, power, and resources in physical education, than their peers. Young men who have the wrong body shape, are less athletic or fit than their peers, are more subdued or simply are not good at, or interested in

sports, are at a high risk for marginalization, teasing and violence during school-based physical education (Jachyra, 2012; Paechter, 2003; Tischler & McCaughtry, 2011). Martino and Beckett (2010) reported that young men in physical education engaged in more verbal and physical abuse based on skill level than did young women, and that the teacher often dismissed this bullying behaviour as natural jokes among young men.

Boys and young men also have far less social latitude in terms of straying from hegemonic masculine behaviours than do young women when it comes to physical activity, meaning that smaller deviations from behavioural “norms” are less acceptable (Schmalz & Kerstetter, 2006). This expectation of hyper-masculinity excludes young men from enjoyment or success in traditionally feminine activities, behaviours and values. Sports-based physical education has been shown to oppress young men with masculinities that have been deemed “abnormal” through the content taught, pedagogies employed, teacher-student interactions as well as peer relationships (Tischler & McCaughtry, 2011).

Similar to Azzarito’s (2010) Alpha/Future girl, Anderson and MacCormack (2016) discuss “inclusive masculinity” as an emerging embodiment of gender option for boys and young men. Specifically interested in sports and physical activity settings, Anderson and McCormick developed the term to help discuss the way that adolescent boys’ relationship to masculinity has been changing as homophobia becomes socially unacceptable (Anderson & McCormack 2016). Anderson and McCormack (2016) assert that when homophobia is rejected, young men “...include gay peers in friendship networks; are more emotionally intimate with friends; are physically tactile with other men; recognize bisexuality as a legitimate sexual orientation; embrace activities and artefacts once coded feminine; and eschew violence and bullying” (p. 2). In their use of “inclusive” and “exclusive” masculinities in a Scottish case study of secondary students, Campbell, Gray, Kelly and MacIssac (2016) discuss the way that inclusive masculinities are accepted, and sometimes even related to high social status in environments outside of physical education. However, participants in their study continued to feel pressure to display hegemonic masculinity while participating in physical education, and felt that peers even policed their behaviour to ensure “normality” (Campbell et al., 2016).

While young peoples understandings of and relationships to masculinity changes, acceptability of “inclusive masculinities” seem to be limited in physical education environments. While the prevalence of hegemonic masculine assumptions in the physical education

environment privileges some students whose characteristics match the hegemonic norm, the current environment may do little in the way of providing students access to the multiple identities, characteristics and behaviours needed to work towards gender equity in physical education classrooms.

**1.2.6 Resistance to hegemony in physical education.** There are examples of student resistance to hegemonic gender roles in physical education classrooms which indicate both a need for rethinking gender in physical education and also hope that change in the attitudes and behaviours of students is possible. Azzarito and Katzew (2010) investigated student ideas about physical activities, sport, and bodies at a school committed to a gender equity curriculum. All teachers in the school made efforts to explicitly discuss and address topics related to gender within all subjects. When presented with a variety of images of males and females participating in physical activities, participants were asked to identify which pictures best represented themselves and their physical experiences (Azzarito & Katzew, 2010). Azzarito and Katzew (2010) found that on an individual level, young people felt that they were drawn and related to a number of photos representing multiple body types, poses and expressions that extended beyond the traditional masculine and feminine physical activities. Furthermore, students who did identify with multiple body types reported a greater sense of empowerment in physical education than those who did not (Azzarito & Katzew, 2010). Likely because of the school-wide focus on equity, students were aware that their responses placed them opposite to a gendered “norm” (Azzarito & Katzew, 2010). While these findings are contextual, the results point to possibilities that the physical education environment can be reworked to empower young people in regards to their gender identities.

Heteronormativity is:

the assumption of heterosexuality as the given or default sexual orientation instead of one of many possibilities, and that the preferred or default relationship is between two people of ‘opposite’ gender. The concept of Heteronormativity relies on the assumption that gender is a binary rather than a spectrum. (The Human Rights Campaign Foundation, 2016, “LGBTQ Definitions for Adults”, para. 28)

Some students have been reported to resist heteronormativity and sexism in physical education class through acts such as dancing with a partner of the same gender during formal dance lessons and objecting teachers’ requests for teams split “fairly” based on gender (Berg & Lahelma, 2010;

Chepyator-Thomson & Ennis, 1997). Thus, conversations about gender norms are highly related to discussions about sexuality and vice versa. With an increase in rights for Lesbian, Bisexual, Gay, Transgender, and Queer students including Gay-Straight Alliances, Rainbow Clubs and other groups within schools, there are new spaces for which students and teachers can have difficult conversations about gender.

In a study designed to understand the experiences of young men who were marginalized in two secondary school physical education classrooms, Tischler and McCaughtry (2011) noted that the participants in their study used their bodies as tools of resistance in uncomfortable hyper-masculine situations. The boys in this study reported using avoidance and removal techniques to limit their participation and subsequent opportunities for harassment, teasing and uncomfortable situations (Tischler & McCaughtry, 2011). The authors viewed these actions as resistance to the hegemonic masculinity present in these physical education environments, rather than as marginalization. However, Tishler and McCaughtry also recognized that non-participation is not a productive “solution” to the gender issues present in physical education classes. Young women of the same age in Fisetts’ (2014) study used similar invisibility, or blending-in techniques to resist participation in activities that made them feel like they were not valued, or which made them feel uncomfortable.

**1.2.8 The importance of the middle years for physical education.** The ages between grade six and grade eight (nine to fourteen years) have been regarded as a critical time to foster physical activity habits, and enjoyment through physical education (Doolittle, 2016). In the United States and some areas of Canada, students at this age go to a separate “middle school” for grade six, seven, and eight. In other areas, they remain in their elementary or kindergarten to grade twelve school and are referred to as “middle years” students. The terms middle school and middle years are both used to refer students between the ages of nine and fourteen. During the middle years, young people tend to quit playing sports outside of school, and experience a significant drop in moderate to vigorous physical activity (Doolittle, 2016). The middle years can also be thought of as the foundation for physical education in secondary schools, as students will reflect on their middle school physical education experiences when deciding whether to enrol in optional (grade 11 and 12) physical education in secondary school. With school-based physical education being one way to foster a physically active lifestyle, and an environment in

which young people can explore their physicality, much attention has been focussed on physical education classrooms and curriculum during the middle years.

Middle years students tend to have moderately positive to overall positive attitudes towards physical education (Baghurst, 2007; Barr-Anderson, 2008; Johnson, 2015; Patterson & Collins, 2012; Subramaniam & Silverman, 2007). However, this level of enjoyment and positive attitude decline from the start of the middle school (grade six) to the end of middle school (grade eight) (Baghurst, 2007; Subramaniam & Silverman, 2007). While the number of required physical education classes taken by a student in secondary school varies across Canada, enrolment in optional physical education courses is low (Physical and Health Education Canada, 2015). With negative attitudes towards physical education peaking in grade eight, there may be a link between the physical education experiences of middle years students and their future participation in physical education.

Johnson's (2015) study of 290 grade six to grade eight students found that while enjoyment levels were high overall, gender differences existed, with boys citing higher enjoyment levels than girls. Barr-Anderson (2008) surveyed only girls in grade six and found that enjoyment levels were slightly lower than those reported in mixed gender studies, with only 77% of girls surveyed agreeing that they enjoy physical education class. In their study of middle school girls aged 12-15, Patterson and Collins (2012) found that 92% of girls surveyed had an overall positive feeling about their physical education class. However, when they asked the same group of girls about participating in physical education with boys, only 35% "felt good" about playing sports with boys while 34% reported "negative" feelings about those experiences, citing that they felt they were less skilled than their male peers (Patterson & Collins, 2012).

While middle years students tend to have positive attitudes towards physical education, they also hold stereotypical ideas about gendered behaviours. In Constantinou's (2009) study of grade seven and eight students, girls held the opinion that boys were more aggressive and competitive, and the girls didn't enjoy physical education as much when boys created a learning environment that was unsafe (physically or emotionally). Similar gender differences were found in a study that employed surveys to 5308 middle and secondary school students: it was most likely for boys to agree that they enjoy competitive activities and physical challenges while girls enjoyed working at their own pace in a less competitive environment (Couturier, Chepko & Coughlin, 2007). Girls consider themselves less skilled, and express lower self-perceptions of

ability and competence (Klomsten, Marsh & Skaalvik, 2005; Constantinou, 2009).

Girls often report that their negative attitudes towards physical education are related to bringing a change of clothes, discomfort changing, a lack of time to shower and going to class sweaty (Couturier et al., 2007). They also mentioned the competitive and aggressive nature of young men as a reason to disengage from their physical education classes (Couturier et al., 2007). Boys too reported that these traditionally masculine behaviours impacted their physical education experiences during middle school. Jachyra (2012) found that amongst the boys in a private Ontario school, “non-dominant” boys were turned off by negative physical education experiences such as exercise as punishment, negative experiences with teachers, non-acceptance of alternate masculinities, teasing, and bullying (Jachyra, 2012).

While many studies regarding gender and middle school physical education have high participant numbers and shine an important light on patterns of gendered participation, attitudes and behaviours, they emerge largely from quantitative studies using surveys and physical activity data. With the exception of the work of Jachyra (2012), we rarely hear the voices of middle years students and teachers regarding their lived reality of middle school physical education, nor do we seek to understand ways to positively shape those experiences. Doolittle (2016) recommends a “theoretical shift” towards understanding middle years students’ physical and social ecologies, both intrinsic and extrinsic, in order to have a more holistic understanding of middle school physical education.

### **1.3 Purpose**

The objective of this study was to better understand the culture of a middle years physical education class, with a focus on the role that student gender may play in their physical education experiences. Guiding questions for this study were: (1) How do students view and describe the overall culture of their physical education class, and their personal experiences within that environment; (2) Does gender play a role in student perspectives, experiences and behaviours within the physical education classroom; (3) What are the perceptions of the classroom teacher about the culture of their physical education class and the role that gender plays within that environment and; (4) How might the political, social, and physical aspects of the physical education environment contribute to the shaping of culture within the classroom?

## Chapter 2

### 2.1 Methodology

**2.1.1 Positionality as a researcher.** It is important for qualitative researchers to continually reflect on their position as a researcher and the ways in which their approach to life and research may shape the study (Creswell, 2003). The design of this research has been influenced by the perspective of social constructivism; guided by the belief that there are multiple realities that are socially constructed (Hatch, 2002). This study has also been influenced by interest and curiosity about gender, defined in this thesis as, “A person’s internal sense of self as male, female, both or neither (gender identity), as well as one’s outward presentation and behaviours (gender expression)” (The Human Rights Campaign Foundation, 2016. para.16). A social constructivist perspective suggests that one’s gender is learned, shaped, and defined by their social engagements with the people, media, and institutions that surround them. Gender is indeed a complex part of our identity, and cannot be separated from the corporeal. As such, I believe that schools, as socializing institutions, and physical education, with its focus on the body, have an obligation to offer broad and diverse behaviour and attitude options so that all students may feel comfortable on their personal path to development.

I have experience working with young people in numerous settings including teaching and coaching and I have assumed a number of roles in the physical education classroom. Through these experiences, I have come to understand that children and young people are not only shaped by their environment but are active participants in the shaping of their world, and the worlds of those around them. In physical education, I have witnessed this through the incredible impact that one student, or one group of students can have on their peers, the teacher’s pedagogical decisions and the overall class atmosphere.

Throughout the research process, I actively welcomed the notion that a physical education classroom is complex and multi-faceted, and could not be separated from the actors, the participants in this study. I believe that we can only begin to understand the realities of students when they are given the space to explain their realities themselves. As such, I consider the experiences and perspectives that students shared throughout the research process to be highly valuable and important contributions to my understanding of this physical education class.

My interest in the topic of gender in physical education comes from the combining of two passions. First, as a formally trained physical education teacher, my assumptions are that

physical education is an entry point to the physical activities through which important social and life skills can be developed. Second, I believe that understanding and acceptance of diversity among humans is exciting and necessary for progress towards peaceful and equitable societies. However, as a society, myself included, we sometimes struggle to see beyond what is deemed “normal”, particularly in terms of gender and behaviour, thus placing some people in marginalized positions. Naturally, I wonder what young people could learn and achieve if we encouraged diverse gender expressions and behaviours while developing social skills such as respect, communication, and teamwork in a physical activity setting.

In educational theory and pedagogical terms, I believe strongly in critical social justice education. Critical social justice, as defined by Sensoy and DiAngelo (2012) is comprised of:

...specific theoretical perspectives that recognize that society is stratified (i.e., divided and unequal) in significant and far-reaching ways along social group lines that include race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability. Critical social justice recognizes inequality as deeply embedded in the fabric of society (i.e., as structural), and actively seeks to change this. (p. xviii)

Critical social justice education, then, is the belief that teachers have a responsibility to address and encourage thinking about critical social justice in hopes that students leave school with the motivation and tools needed to advocate for themselves and others who are in marginalized positions.

Shaped by my own lived experiences, I have attitudes and values about gender, behaviours, relationships and the purpose of schooling and physical education. I have experienced and been influenced by a number of cultures including, but not limited to family, school, and professional cultures. My multiple identities as a woman, student, teacher, researcher, friend, Canadian and feminist have influenced every aspect of this thesis from the development of research questions through to the results and discussion.

The purpose of ethnographic research and its product, an ethnography, is to tell the story of a culture-sharing group. In this study, the culture-sharing group included the participating students and teachers in a grade five/six classroom located in a Canadian prairie city. However, it is naive to claim that this ethnography tells the only story of this classroom. Perhaps Buch and Staller (2014) said it best that this ethnography “...can offer only one possible window of understanding into the lives of the people it portrays” (p. 108). The window of understanding I



present in this thesis is mine. It has been shaped by shared understandings between myself and by the participants. For me, the beauty of ethnography, as a method and as a product is this co-creation of a window of understanding. However, this beauty can only be appreciated when the ways that my attitudes, beliefs, cultural experiences and identities may have shaped each step of the research process are made transparent. As such, the reader will notice reflections on my positionality as a researcher throughout the thesis, as it felt disingenuous to package them exclusively into this section.

**2.1.2 Qualitative research.** Creswell (1998) defines qualitative research as "...an inquiry process of understanding based on distinct methodological traditions of inquiry that explore a social or human problem" (p. 15). Qualitative studies occur in natural settings, value participant perspectives and the researcher acts as the main data-gathering instrument (Hatch, 2002). Through prolonged engagement in the field, qualitative researchers seek to describe and make meaningful the complex perspectives of participants (Hatch, 2002). As such, qualitative researchers are able to ask broad questions that give participants the opportunity to explain experiences on their own terms, allowing important issues and research questions to emerge (Creswell, 2003; Hatch, 2002).

Gender is a complex phenomenon and highly impacted by a myriad of social influences; therefore it was important to respect the different understandings that the students and teachers had on the topic. Qualitative research was the appropriately chosen method as it was conducive to participants explaining their own, varied experiences of physical education and the role that gender plays in shaping those experiences. Using qualitative research allowed me to better explore the topics that were deemed important by the participating students and teachers.

**2.1.3 Ethnography.** The focus of ethnographic research is on the social relations and behavioural practices of what Creswell (1998) refers to as a "culture-sharing group". Middle years students in a class together can be thought of as a culture-sharing group as they come to understand the behaviours and language that are appropriate and expected when they are at school together (Creswell, 1998). The role that gender plays in an environment like the physical education classroom is very much a cultural aspect with behavioural "norms" that a group comes to adopt and perform (Connell, 2008). Thus, research involving gender as a cultural aspect must be approached with a recognition that each culture sharing group, and each participant in that group may understand these "norms" differently. Ethnographic research is a necessarily flexible

method with a goal of gaining a, “...nanced, contextualized understanding of the everyday social lives and relationships [of participants]” (Buch & Staller, 2014, p. 140).

Both a process and a product of research, ethnography seeks to explain a culture-sharing group and to understand participant beliefs and behaviours in light of broader contexts (Agar, 1980; Buch & Staller, 2014). In the context of this study, ethnography allowed me to better understand how participants described their physical education experiences in light of their own understandings of gender, the purpose of physical education, the curriculum, and their social interactions with peers. Furthermore, using ethnographic methodology allowed me to use a variety of data collection techniques to understand not only teacher and student behaviours (via observation) but also their intentions, values, feelings and beliefs (via interviews), and their physical and political environment (via analysis of documents such as the Provincial Physical Education Curriculum, and posters/messages on gymnasium walls).

**2.1.4 Feminist ethnography.** The subtype of ethnography used in this study was feminist ethnography. While Hatch (2002) regards a feminist approach as its own research paradigm, he acknowledges that many feminist scholars successfully embed the approach within another research paradigm, such as ethnography. When embedded in another research method, a feminist lens is taken to observe and understand the research setting, and when interpreting the results of the study.

A feminist ethnographic approach is generally used in highly gendered settings as it can expose structures that limit human possibility based on gender identity, roles, or behaviours (Buch & Staller, 2014). Physical education environments are often regarded as arenas where gender boundaries are quite strong, yet regarded as natural. The ontological view of feminist researchers, including my own, is that structures regarded as natural, or ‘real’ can lead to inequitable and differential experiences based on one’s gender (Hatch, 2002). Indeed, this approach helped me to identify behavioural and attitudinal differences amongst students that were related to their own gender and their perception of gender as it relates to physical activities, skill levels and participation.

**2.1.5 Research involving children.** When engaging in research involving children, particularly in ethnographic studies where the feelings, values, and attitudes of participants and their relationships to others are of interest, there are certain methodological issues which require more attention than when using ethnographic method with adult participants. Too often research

involving children removes the experiences of the child, focussing only on development to adulthood, under-valuing the current perspectives of that child (Boyle, 1999). However, within any environment involving children, particularly in a culture-sharing group like a classroom, students play a key role in the creation and definition of their “social reality” (Boyle, 1999, p. 92). As such, it is important that the voices of children are heard, valued and shared as legitimate descriptions of their lived realities. While the students in this study were approaching adolescence, I found two of Boyle’s (1999) methodological considerations to be particularly applicable when working with the participants in this study: the role of the researcher and gaining access to the worlds of children including building rapport. In the next section I have included a detailed outline of the ways in which I gained access to the field and built trusting relationships with the adult participants. In this section, I wish to outline the strategies that I used to gain access to student participants beyond the physical access granted by the classroom teacher.

In my work, I adopted the role of Boyle’s (1999), “The Least-Teacher”, a role designed to help young student participants separate me, the researcher, from the other teachers in their school. Immediately, I chose to dress more casually than their classroom teachers, and repeatedly reminded students that I could not grant them permission for requests such as exchanging a library book, getting a drink of water, or going to their locker. Each time such a request was made, or a complaint issued about a curricular activity, I would refer the students to their own teacher, reminding them that I had no control over their class. In this way, I was attempting to shape my identity as clearly *not* their teacher and without the powers that a teacher holds over students in a class. Other times, I would participate with the students in classroom games and activities, often choosing to sit in the small desk of an absent student. In these instances, I was further trying to reduce the metaphorical and physical distance between myself and student participants. My hope was that students would begin to feel comfortable around me and view me as a trusting adult, but not as their teacher. In developing that relationship, my aim was for students to view interview situations as non-threatening and feel that they could safely respond to questions honestly.

The second of Boyle’s methodological considerations when working with children, gaining access, deals with the fact that children themselves are gatekeepers, and need to be treated as such (Boyle, 1999). Although the school principal and teacher allowed me to physically enter the field of study, ultimately, it would be up to the students whether or not I

gained access to the inner workings, feelings, and beliefs of this culture-sharing group. Using the strategy of openness, I explained my project in accessible, but not patronizing language to the students and answered all of the questions they had about the study. Thankfully, the classroom teacher allowed this to happen during class time, and expressed that we had the entire 45 minute period to discuss the project, if needed. Furthermore, throughout the study, rapport with students was developed, in part, by being open to their non-study related questions as well. These questions tended to be about where I came from, my family, my likes and dislikes. As students started to warm up to my presence, I attempted to further build rapport by validating student feelings and experiences and engaging genuinely in the conversations that they initiated with me.

Naturally, this warming-up process, and building of trust took more time for some students than others. Within days, some student participants were initiating conversations about their “crush” in the other class. Other students had no interest in engaging in conversation with me whatsoever, even after 2 months in the classroom. Notably, one young man had many questions about my educational background and credentials, consistently comparing them to his father’s, a medical doctor. Sceptical, he was later quite guarded during our interviews, refusing to answer many questions. Of course, all of these different relationships and levels of rapport had an influence on the content, quantity and quality of the data collected from each participant, and in turn, the final results of the study.

## **2.2 Procedures**

**2.2.1 Site selection.** Ethnographic studies are especially concerned with the social environment of a culture-sharing group within a natural setting, referred to as the field (Buch & Staller, 2014). When choosing the field for this study, it was important to me that I not only had access to and could be immersed in a natural environment for long periods of time, but also that the setting was a good “fit”. Because ethnographers learn, in part, through building relationships with participants, a “good fit” for this study meant not only the intended grade level but also a teacher who was both eager to participate and comfortable with my presence in their classroom.

When beginning the search for a participating class, my criterion for inclusion was an intact grade six classroom with frequently occurring physical education classes and a relatively stable population of students within a local school division. Work in the area of gender in physical education has focussed strongly on students in secondary schools, generally including students between the ages of 13 and 18 years (for examples, see Cockburn & Clarke, 2002;

Fagrell et al., 2012; Tischler & McCaughtry, 2011). Older students tend to have a solidified understanding of hegemonic gender roles and how they function in the physical education environments (Brown, 2005). However, Schmalz and Kerstetter (2006) found that between the ages of eight and ten years old, students have a less solidified and restricted view of gendered behaviour when compared to their older peers. Thus, for this study, a grade six class, at the beginning of middle years was sought in order to better understand the transition to a more solidified understanding of gender norms and behaviours.

After much consideration, it was decided that the classroom teacher in this study should teach at least some of their own physical education classes, as they would serve as a key informant to the culture of the physical education class. I was interested in the experiences of all students, so a co-educational physical education classroom was required. Most, if not all, elementary physical education programs within the selected school board are co-educational.

Ethical approval was received from the University of Saskatchewan as well as the Coordinator of Research and Management at the local school division (See Appendix A and B, respectively).

**2.2.2 Negotiating access into the research site.** While obtaining ethical approval from the University of Saskatchewan and permission from the participating school division was a mandatory and important step, it was only the beginning of ‘gaining access’ to the research site. When it comes to ethnographic studies, having permission to enter a physical site does not necessarily grant you the trusting, open relationships and natural rapport that are needed to collect authentic data in the field. Rather, the process of gaining access is ongoing throughout the study and includes multiple points of access and entry, and establishing and re-establishing rapport and trust (Buch & Staller, 2014). In this section, I wish to outline the steps taken to not only choose a class with which to work, but also how I negotiated and built relationships with a number of “gatekeepers”, those that hold a direct or indirect key position in gaining entrance to the sometimes private workings of the culture-sharing group (Creswell, 1998).

Having taught and conducted research within the local school division for many years, my graduate studies supervisor, Dr. Louise Humbert served as a valuable connection with regards to recruiting a teacher and class to work with. After “sending out some feelers”, two teachers expressed interest in participating in the study. Dr. Humbert and I met with each of these teachers at their respective schools to explain my project, and the role that they and their class

would play if they chose to participate. While both teachers were interested in participating, I decided that Ms. Green's grade five/six classroom at Quinte Public School (QPS) (both pseudonyms) was most appropriate for the study. The reasons for the selection of QPS included the grade/age of the students, the presence of both a male physical education "specialist" teacher and a female classroom teacher in the physical education environment, and the eagerness of the classroom teacher to be involved in the study. QPS is a "Dual-Stream School", which means that the school offers both French Immersion and English streams for the attending students. Once I had confirmation from the teacher that she and her class were willing to participate, I wrote the Principal of the school to outline the study, including the purpose, potential roles of her staff and students and the length of time that I would be present in the school. With her approval, I obtained formal consent from both Ms. Green and the physical education specialist, Mr. Smith and began spending time in Ms. Green's classroom. Please see Appendix A for the consent forms used with Ms. Green and Mr. Smith.

At the first opportunity, I attended a school staff meeting where Ms. Green introduced me to the staff and gave me an opportunity to share some information about my study. This was an important step in ensuring that staff met me, and understood my role and purpose for spending so much time in their school. Over the next 3 months, staff members were very welcoming, and often asked about the research process. When this happened, I chose to be completely transparent when discussing the study's purpose and goals, but did not share any ongoing findings or information collected from students, Mr. Smith or Ms. Green.

Facilitating rapport with both Ms. Green and Mr. Smith was much easier than with the student participants. Our shared experiences working with children in physical activity settings, keen interest in discussing pedagogy and shared acquaintances in the local physical education and sport community made conversation easy and natural. Both teachers' genuine passion for sport and physical activity within and outside of their school made it easy to have meaningful discussions that I believe helped to build the trust and rapport needed throughout an ethnographic study.

While it wasn't explicitly discussed with Ms. Green, I initially played the role of a classroom helper, while also working towards a "Least-Teacher" identity, as discussed earlier. I assisted with in-class activities, engaged in discussions with students and teachers, and helped with extra-curricular events. I had no part in daily lesson planning, discipline, or supervision. I

felt it was important that I stayed away from the responsibilities of a teacher, particularly in the early stages of observation. I wished to earn the trust of students and build relationships akin to those between a caring adult and student rather than those of a teacher and her student. For many students, adults in school settings are seen as superiors in the form of teachers and administration. As such, it did take some time for the students in Ms. Green's class to understand the role that I played in their classroom.

Buch and Staller (2014) posit that the relationship between an ethnographic researcher and her participants often evolves into that of friendship. As the study progressed and I became a more stable figure in the classroom, I felt comfortable that I had reached that stage with students when they would ask me to join in on games they were playing, and engage me in conversations about their lives when they were entering and leaving the classroom. I felt that Ms. Green and I also had a friendly relationship, discussing many topics, both related and unrelated to school and the project. While I saw Mr. Smith less frequently than Ms. Green, we also had friendly discussions about many of the shared interests that helped us to form a relationship.

After spending some time in the classroom, but before conducting any interviews or focus groups, I asked students for their consent to participate in the study. On the same day that I explained the study to the students, Ms. Green sent an email to parents to let them know that an information and consent form (see Appendix B) would be coming home in their child's homework book. Every effort was made to ensure that students did not feel obligated to participate in the study and understood that there would be no reward for participation nor any punishment for non-participation. Even if a student's parent signed the consent form, students were asked multiple times if they wanted to participate in the study, and they provided assent immediately before their initial interview (see Appendix C). Both the University of Saskatchewan Behavioural Ethics Review Board and the local school division approved this consent and assent process.

At the conclusion of the study, as a way of "giving back" to the teachers and students involved in the study, Ms. Green's class as well as the other grade five/six class at QPS attended a full day field trip at the Physical Activity Complex at the University of Saskatchewan. During this day, students participated in a variety of physical activities taught by students in the College of Kinesiology.

**2.2.3 The field.** Quinte Public School is a Kindergarten to grade eight school with approximately 450 students. The first time that I entered QPS was at the end of a school day, during the familiar hustle and bustle of home-time. Some students were running onto the four busses parked along the less-busy side of the school while many more were walking home hand-in-hand with their younger siblings, playing on the outdoor playground, and hanging out with friends. I stepped off the trendy café and restaurant laden street into the front foyer which was packed with parents chatting, some in French and some in English, both with each other, and to their children, “S’il vous plaît allez trouver votre moufle”... “Please go find your mitten”.

I walked through the library to get to the stairs that lead me to the second floor of the old school building. Like each grade in the school, there was a French section and an English section of books in the library. I moved past the grade seven and eight portables, and up the stairs, where I arrived at Ms. Green’s grade five/six classroom. The first thing that I noticed was the bulletin board full of masks in the shape of animals beside the door. As Ms. Green walked up behind me, she said, “They turned out SO good! We made them at camp a few weeks ago!” As she invited me into the room to hear about her class, I noticed that her cheeks were rosy and she explained that they had just returned from an outdoor skating field trip.

Ms. Green beamed with pride when she talked about the 24 grade five and six students in her class, bragging about how “welcoming, accepting, and supporting” they were of one other, not despite, but because of the cultural, religious, and economic diversity within the room. With African, Vietnamese, Chinese, Afghan, Indian, First Nations, as well as Caucasian students, Ms. Green claimed that this class was so different and unique from others that she has taught in her 10 year career, and in fact, very different from the grade five/six class next door in the French Immersion program.

The class schedule was taped to each student’s desk. When I looked for physical education, I saw that the students had three 50-minute physical education classes per week. Ms. Green also scheduled a 40-minute “in-motion walk” for the last period on Wednesdays, allowing students to have scheduled physical activity opportunities on four out of five school days.

At QPS there is one gymnasium and, weather permitting, there is a large outdoor yard with a play structure suitable for physical education class. However, given the long Saskatchewan winters, it is often necessary to combine classes in the gymnasium to ensure every class achieves the 150 minutes (weekly) mandated by the Saskatchewan Ministry of Education.



QPS has a physical education specialist, Mr. Smith, who teaches physical education to most grades at least once per week. Mr. Smith is a 20-year teacher with a background as an elite athlete and coach. He has been the full-time physical education specialist for the six years that he has taught at QPS.

For the majority of my time at QPS, Ms. Green's class combined with the French streamed grade five/six class for two of their three physical education periods per week. When the classes were combined, Mr. Smith would join Ms. Green and they would teach the class together. During my time at QPS, the French Immersion grade five/six teachers were not present during physical education class. Usually, the combined class would walk to a nearby secondary school to use the larger gymnasium facilities. Thus, I was fortunate that my field of study included many combined and some separate physical education classes in the gym at the secondary school, the gym at QPS as well as the outdoor field space at QPS.

From my observations, the physical education program was heavily games-based, with some focus on personal fitness improvement. A typical physical education class consisted of a cardiovascular-based warm-up such as tag, followed by a low-organizational game; often it would be a version of dodgeball, capture the flag, or kickball. On some Monday mornings, students would participate in a 12-station fitness circuit performing strength and cardiovascular exercises, as well as occasionally taking note of their own heart rates.

In this section, I have included the information that I have deemed necessary to get a sense of the physical and social environment in which the participants in this study experienced their physical education classes. However, a key purpose of performing ethnographic studies, and certainly of this study, is to describe a culture-sharing group in an in-depth way, as it relates to the research questions. Thus, a more thorough description of Ms. Green's grade five/six physical education class, as it relates to the research questions, is provided in the results and discussion section of this thesis.

**2.2.4 Regarding gender in this document.** Deciding how to discuss gender with students, and how to discuss student gender in this document was a significant consideration, and a decision that I did not take lightly. There is a risk that by discussing the experiences of boys and of girls in Ms. Green's class, I am perpetuating the binary and homogenous thinking that I have previously discussed as problematic. In the beginning stages of this project, it was my intention to use Queer Theory to approach the research questions, and to guide all aspects of this

study. However, I soon realized that, when performing ethnography, in order to truly provide a thick, rich, and accurate description of the culture-sharing group, it is necessary to meet participants at their level of understanding. Upon entering the field, it was clear that students and teachers operated on an understanding of binary gender including the use of gendered pronouns, so that is the way that our discussions around gender in physical education were framed.

Throughout data collection, I often struggled with how I was describing participants and events, and my use of gendered terms. In the first few weeks I was in the field, I wrote the following in my research journal:

I am still struggling with the idea of generalizing and treating students as if they all have the same (gendered) characteristics. I write things in my field notes like “The boys are invested in the game...the girls are doing this”. Even while trying to highlight that these problematic assumptions happen in physical education classrooms, I am doing it and seeing it. It’s so hard to piece apart the things that are learned and projected onto “all girls” and the individual behaviours of students. They already cannot be separated here. Furthermore, I often had to reflect on the critical way that I sometimes viewed situations. I felt tension between criticising “problematic” stereotypical gendered behaviours, and celebrating experiences that are uniquely feminine or celebrate femininity. Again, I took to reflective journaling to navigate this tension and often concluded that, in part, it was up to the participants to decide if something was problematic for boys, or for girls, and redirected my tension into questions to explore the perspectives of the participants.

Throughout the remainder of the paper, I do refer to “boys” and to “girls”, and sometimes make reference to the shared experiences of “the boys” and “the girls”. This was a difficult decision to make, however, it was the language being used by teachers and students, and I believe that it is still in line with my social-constructivist worldview. Experiences shared by multiple participants who identify as either a boy or a girl, are sometimes a result of, not in contrast to, the way that they all learned similarly, how to perform their gender in social and academic situations such as physical education. Throughout the results and discussion section of this paper, I attempt to make clear the way cultural ideas and values may have functioned to shape these shared experienced of students of the same gender.

## **2.3 Data collection.**

The goal of ethnographic research is, "...to provide rich, holistic insights into people's views and actions, as well as the nature (that is, sights, sounds) of the location they inhabit" (Reeves, Kuper, & Hodges, 2008). To accomplish this goal, it was necessary for me to collect multiple forms of data while in the field through methods such as observations, interviews, document analysis, and artefacts (Buch & Staller, 2014; Reeves et al., 2008).

For four months, I engaged in fieldwork with Ms. Green's class. Generally, I would be present in the classroom for the entire morning or afternoon (approximately three hours) during which a physical education class was scheduled, usually totalling three to four half-days each week.

During this time, I engaged in extensive observation of physical education classes as well as other subjects, keeping field notes and recording my initial thoughts. I also collected data via semi-structured interviews with Ms. Green, Mr. Smith and consenting students. Using my cellular phone as a camera, I occasionally collected artefacts from QPS such as photos of the gymnasium space, posters in the classroom and students participating in physical education. Throughout and at the conclusion of data collection, the Saskatchewan Ministry of Education's Provincial Physical Education Curriculum was analyzed to better understand expectations and class content.

**2.3.1 Observation.** A main source of data for many ethnographers is their field notes, which emerge from careful observation of the environment and those participating in it (Buch & Staller, 2014). Reeves et al. (2008) suggests that in order to achieve the holistic description desired in an ethnography, observations should be recorded in field notes around nine observational dimensions: Space, Actors, Activities, Objects, Actions, Events, Time, Goals, and Feelings. Furthermore, one's field notes should also include reflections, and initial interpretations of the data being collected (Delamont, 2007).

Equipped with my notebook, three-column chart and number two pencil, I set forth to create field notes based on my observations around those nine dimensions, while including immediate and reflective thoughts about what I was seeing in the field. It did not take long for me to realize that the task of detailed observation and effective field notes was challenging for me, a beginning ethnographer. During reflective sessions, I noticed that my field notes had a tendency to focus on teacher-behaviours, social interactions among students and the actions of

female participants in physical education. I believe that my not-so-long ago participation in a teacher education program coupled with my only other observation experience (studying the actions of teachers) led me to be hyper-focussed on the actions of Ms. Green and Mr. Smith. Similarly, the literature that I was reading, media that I was viewing and consequently my knowledge and interests were dominated by inequities faced by girls and young women in sport and physical activity settings. That is not to say that there are not inequities for boys and young men in the physical education classroom; rather it is to say that my identity as a woman researcher, teacher and student undoubtedly shaped what I was seeing in this class. After reviewing the purpose of the study and reflecting on my research questions, I began to approach some observation sessions with a specific goal such as focussing on space, focussing on the social interactions of boys, or on the purpose of participant actions. I believe that this practice helped me to expand my focus, and allowed me to describe the culture of this class in a more holistic way.

While in the field, I assumed an observer-participant role: Ms. Green, Mr. Smith and all the students understood that I was observing and collecting data for a research study. Occasionally, I would participate in physical education classes by helping to set-up, or leading an activity but it was always important to me that I was as unobtrusive and non-disruptive as possible. This was not only out of respect for the teachers and students but also to allow classes to proceed as they usually would.

During the data collection process, my field notes were particularly useful in generating talking points with students during their interviews. Using my early observations, I was able to ask students about certain everyday practices such as sitting separated by sex in the gymnasium, and participant-specific questions, such as asking someone to explain their personal strategy during a game. Following data collection, my field notes were a valuable tool for generating detailed descriptions of the gyms/fields, and routines, as well as highlighting differences between participant beliefs (as expressed in conversation) and their behaviour (as recorded in field notes).

**2.3.2 Semi-structured interviews.** In conjunction with observation, interviews are used in ethnographic research to collect information about the culture-sharing group (Buch & Staller, 2014). Specifically, “Interviews allow ethnographers to explore participants’ explicit understandings and compare these with their observations of behaviour” (Buch & Staller, 2014, p.134). By conducting interviews with students as well as Ms. Green and Mr. Smith, I was able

to better understand multiple points of view and gain context, or explanations about the behaviours I was seeing in the physical education setting.

Included in the semi-structured interview guides for Ms. Green and Mr. Smith were questions in which I used the terms culture, and gender. In recognizing that these terms are complex, and understandings may vary from person to person, I felt it was necessary to establish a working definition of these terms. When discussing culture with teachers, I first explained the way that classrooms can be thought of as a culture, and then provided a visual image meant to prompt teachers to think about culture as including many different aspects. The image had culture in the middle surrounded by the following aspects of culture: attitudes, beliefs, language, customs, rituals, behaviour, faith/religion, relationships, and space. Ms. Green and Mr. Smith had the opportunity to respond to the image before we began discussing classroom cultures. When it came to discussing gender with teachers, I first asked Ms. Green and Mr. Smith to share their understanding of the term with me. However, understandably, both teachers expressed some discomfort in being “put on the spot” to define a term that is still debated even by those who closely study the construct. I then provided teachers with the following definition of gender, “...the socially constructed roles, behaviours, activities and attributes that a given society considers appropriate for men and women. Gender is not biological sex.” (Human Rights Campaign Foundation, 2012 para. 13). Again, I then allowed both teachers to respond to this definition before engaging in any discussions about gender. During interviews with students, I purposefully did not use the terms culture, and gender, but rather asked questions that were meant to elicit discussion around the many aspects of culture. For example, I would ask students how classmates treated one another, about routines and social rules, and what was important in physical education. When it came to discussing gender with students, I chose to use the terms boys and girls. Having observed and conversed with students and teachers ahead of interviews, I noticed that the terms “boy” and “girl” were often used in this culture-sharing group and were even used as organizing terms. Therefore, I was confident that I was using the language and terms that would be familiar and meaningful to students, and therefore I believe the students opinions and perspectives were not impacted.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted for all initial, or “first-round” interviews and focus groups. When conducting a semi-structured interview, the researcher has a list of written questions that she wishes to cover during the interview, but the researcher is not overly concerned

about the order these questions are asked in, and has little control over the participants' responses (Hesse-Biber, 2014). My use of semi-structured interviews meant that I was also free to respond to what students and teachers were telling me was important to their physical education experiences by asking newly formed questions and/or not asking previously prepared questions (Hesse-Biber, 2014). The interview guides used during the initial interviews can be found in Appendix D (student interview guide) and Appendix E and Appendix F (Ms. Green's interview guide, Mr. Smith's interview guide respectively).

Ms. Green's class consisted of 24 students of which 14 (nine girls and five boys) consented to be interviewed. Both Mr. Smith and Ms. Green also agreed to participate in individual interviews. After being given the option, half of the student participants chose a one-on-one interview while the other half chose a focus group. Interestingly, all the boys requested an individual interview while seven of the nine girls requested a focus group interview. Both teachers participated in individual interviews. I asked Ms. Green to help group the students for focus groups, based on her more intimate knowledge of the students in her class. Gallagher (2009) suggests that children enjoy, and are more comfortable when working with their peers, and asserts that using pre-existing friend groupings is an advantage when organizing children for focus group interviews. I believe that Ms. Green's recommendations did allow students in focus groups to feel comfortable and even enjoy their focus groups as they were permitted to talk amongst friends about their experiences, peers, and teachers. With the help of Ms. Green, the seven students requesting a focus group were split into one group of three and one group of four, based on their existing friendships. All seven students agreed to the composition of their respective focus group prior to participation. All 14 participants were initially interviewed. One focus group, and five individual students participated in second round interviews. Ms. Green also participated in a second interview. One of the focus groups participated in two interview sessions but it took both sessions to cover the talking points from the initial interview guide. The other focus group was able to move through both interview guides in two focus group sessions. Among the students who participated in individual interviews, one did not want to participate in a second interview and another was unable due to scheduling and a lack of time. All interviews were tape recorded and transcribed verbatim.

The purpose of using focus groups as well as individual interviews was, first and foremost, to allow students to discuss their experiences in the most comfortable, least-threatening

environment. Creswell (1998) suggests that when participants are alike and friendly, a focus group can be a valuable source of information. Furthermore, there is strength in numbers and I wanted student participants to feel safe to discuss their thoughts and feelings despite the formal and powerful “interview” label (Hill, 2006). For some students, feeling safe and comfortable meant an individual interview. In this case, I employed other strategies such as sitting beside rather than across from them in an informal, relaxed position, “warming then up” by first talking about current media and entertainment, other schoolwork etc., and fully explaining the process and procedure, to put my participants at ease (Gallagher, 2009).

After the initial round of student interviews, I found, for a number of reasons, that some were richer than others when it came to students opening up and really discussing their experiences. I believe that I sincerely underestimated my role as a female researcher with the boys and young men in the class. Despite the fact that I had what I would consider good rapport with boys in the class, that rapport was different in nature to that which I had with many of the girls. In interviews with the boys, many of them provided short, predictable answers, or in the case of one student, was defensive and refusing to discuss some of my talking points. This is not surprising given the literature suggesting that participants who are men often provide different answers to the same questions depending on the gender of the researcher asking the questions (Pini, 2005). Sallee and Harris (2011), found that this was especially true when talking to university aged men about gender, masculinities and social interactions. Furthermore, Pattman and Kehily (2004) discuss the way a young man participating in their study picked up on the caring relationship that was developed with a researcher who was a man, allowing him to put aside his hard masculine behaviours to talk more freely about gender. Thus, it is likely that my identity as a female researcher impacted the responses of some boys in the class. One way that I attempted to reconcile this gender effect during the second round of interviews was by having something for the students to “do” (a card sort activity discussed below), and framed their participation in the activity as very helpful to me. If interviewing boys regarding their conceptions of gender in the future, I may consider the use of an interviewer who displays a more traditionally masculine appearance.

I also noticed that some students seemed to be uncomfortable in the individual interview situation. It has been suggested that when interviewing children, it is often better for them to have something to *do*, an activity over which they can have control, and talk about more freely

than answering a string of questions. As such, the follow-up or “second round“ interviews were reworked to accomplish two things: member check the initial interviews, and allow students to do a ‘card-sort’ activity designed to elicit their feelings about appropriate behaviours in their physical education class. A “card-sort” or “pile-sorting” activity, “...requires individuals or groups to organize cards with phrases or pictures into clusters or categories based on a perceived shared dimension” (Heary & Hennessy, 2002, p. 54). This type of interview method has been effective in use with children as it is a concrete task that can be used to encourage children to express themselves (Neufeld, Harrison, Rempel, Larocque, Dublin, Stewart, & Hughes, 2004). The cards for this sort can be found in Appendix G. Each card had a behaviour, action or attitude that I had observed during physical education class. Students were asked to sort the cards into whatever and however many groups, or categories made sense to them. While I did not explicitly state to do so, most students sorted the cards into “like’ categories. Afterwards, I asked students to tell me about the groups that they had created, and I took a photo of their groups so that I could refer to it later. My intention with the card-sort activity was to increase comfort of the participants, and to encourage them to think beyond the activities done in their physical education classes, to the behaviours, attitudes, and roles of their peers. Like the initial interviews, I found that this method of interviewing varied in the way that it sparked discussion among students. The card-sort was particularly effective in generating discussion with the focus group, as the girls debated amongst each other where cards should go, providing definitions and examples as they decided. The method also proved effective with one boy who took the task very seriously, thinking aloud as he organized his cards. Unfortunately, for the other three boys whose interview was happening during lunch or recess, the activity was separating them from their recess time, and therefore they tended to rush through the sort, giving the cards little thought.

**2.3.4 Document analysis.** To further supplement observations, ethnographers often collect artefacts and documents directly from, or related to the field in which they are studying with the goal that they may help to extract meaning and foster a deeper understanding about the research questions (Bowen, 2009; Buch & Staller, 2014). In order to “collect” social artefacts from the gymnasium walls, whiteboards, and desks of students, I often took photos of the artefact so that I could easily retrieve them later during analysis (Buch & Staller, 2014). My collection of artefacts and documents was particularly helpful in addressing the research question related to understanding the political, social and physical aspects of the physical education environment. I



often took photos of the gymnasium itself and the posters around the gymnasium to better understand the physical environment. Photos of groups of students in physical education class helped to explore relationships among students and teachers, providing me with a better understanding of the social environment. Finally, student schedules and the Saskatchewan Ministry of Education's Physical Education Curriculum (2009; 2010) helped to shape the political environment in which the teachers and students were operating.

Of particular interest during data collection and analysis was the Saskatchewan Ministry of Education's Provincial Physical Education Curriculum document (2009; 2010). Buch and Staller (2014) assert that, "...items that structure the processes being studied...can be analyzed to understand how powerful institutions like governments...shape social life" (p. 135). The Saskatchewan Ministry of Education produces curriculum documents that outline the desired outcomes of schooling by providing the following: official aims and goals, outcomes and indicators, guidelines around effective teaching, characteristics and philosophical foundations of physical education programs and specific content to be taught in each grade (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2009; 2010). In other words, this curriculum theoretically shapes the physical education environment being experienced by students. Thus, the physical education curriculum documents for grade five and six were used to better understand pedagogical decisions made by Mr. Smith and Ms. Green (such as content used in their classes) and also to better understand the perceptions of the teachers related to the outcomes provided in the document.

Content analysis was performed through the processes of skimming, reading and interpreting the curriculum documents (Bowen, 2009). During analysis, I looked through the curriculum documents in order to identify passages and aspects that were meaningful to the research questions, my observations, and participant experiences (Bowen, 2009). Interestingly, this process revealed inconsistencies between the beliefs and actions of teachers and the curriculum expectations, but consistencies between student needs and wants and curriculum expectations. This process also helped to inform my observations, allowing me to see some events differently, as teachable moments in light of the curriculum expectations.

## 2.4 Analysis

Analysis of the data began immediately upon entering the field and was ongoing and iterative (Buch & Staller, 2014). Each observation, discussion, interview and new paper read engaged me in the analytical process. To keep a “paper-trail” of these analytical moments, I kept a research journal. Lamb (2013) suggests that a research journal, “...is an important qualitative research method to learn about the experience of research and gather invaluable data” (p. 90). Furthermore, it is suggested that use of a research journal helps to “...validate the authenticity of research data collected” (Lamb, 2013, p.90). In addition, a research journal is used to record the personal experience of the researcher including their feelings about what has gone well, been challenging, and learning points (Lamb, 2013). However, a research journal is also meant to engage the researcher in critical reflection about the data set as a whole, and provide deeper analysis regarding the culture-sharing group being studied (Lamb, 2013).

Different from my field notes, which recorded observations, my research journal served as a place to discuss, in writing, my emerging thoughts and questions about the data set as a whole, as well as challenges and successes of the research project. It was in this research journal that I discussed, for example, my struggle with writing about gender, my emerging questions about what became a prominent sub-theme in this document and reflections on my ability to observe.

Throughout the data collection process, a more formal analysis occurred so that data could be used to prepare for interviews and data return, in conversations with my supervisor and to guide observational foci. While this iterative and ongoing approach is a key analytical step for ethnographers, Buch and Staller (2014) point out that eventually “...all ethnographers are faced with the nearly overwhelming prospect of returning to all their data...and somehow mak[ing] sense of it all” (p. 136). At the end of my data collection phase, I certainly had the overwhelmed feelings that Buch and Staller (2014) discuss, and eventually decided that the best way to begin was to refresh my memory of all the data collected.

To accomplish the task of reviewing all of the data, and to begin the more formal analysis process, I began by transcribing all interviews and focus groups, verbatim, into a word document. Where I deemed it necessary to understanding the meaning of the words, participant tone of voice, and extended pauses were included in the transcripts. Individual interviews were labelled with the participant’s pseudonym. Where focus groups were used, the pseudonym of the

participant was indicated in brackets following their contribution. All transcripts, field notes, memos, and photos were uploaded to the NVivo software (NVivo, Version 10). I also typed my hand-written field notes into a word document, which was uploaded to NVivo, along with the photos taken including photos of each card short (NVivo, Version 10).

I then engaged in thematic analysis of transcripts, field notes, and photos via the use of thematic networks (Attride-Stirling, 2001). The goal of the process of thematic networking is to help the researcher structure and depict themes so that they are clear and concise (Attride-Stirling, 2001). Thematic Networks are web-like depictions of data that begin with many “Basic Themes” which are grouped to help describe multiple “Organizing Themes” which are attached to a single “Global Theme” (Attride-Stirling, 2001, p. 388-389). To do this, I followed Attride-Stirling’s (2001) “Steps in Analyses Employing Thematic Networks”. Each of these steps is listed below with a description of how it was performed to analyze the data in this study.

***Analysis stage A: Reduction or breakdown of text.***

*Step 1. Code Material.*

Attride-Stirling (2001) stresses the importance of rigorous initial coding to ensure success in the subsequent analysis steps. Following recommendations from Bailey (2007), I engaged first in coding and memoing to get a sense of the data as a whole and begin to identify potentially useful sections for further analysis. Using the analysis program NVivo, I read through all of the data and assigned codes to almost every line of each transcript and field note. The NVivo software automatically collects the lines of data under each code while leaving the initial transcript intact. This allowed for easy retrieval of data belonging to a code, and helped me to see which transcript or page of field notes a chunk of data originated from.

While I did not have pre-determined codes, I tend to agree with Bailey (2007) and with LeCompte and Schensul (1999) that “emergent” is a misleading term when it comes to coding ethnographic data. Codes, and eventually themes do not truly emerge from the data by chance, rather, “Ethnographers are sensitized to specific items and ideas because of the conceptual framework within which they work” (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999, p. 46). Thus, the codes that were used in this first step of analysis were informed by my research questions, my understanding of gender, ideas about the purpose of physical education and ideas generated during data collection.

Initially coding each and every piece of data collected led to “simultaneous coding” (Saldaña, 2016). This method is used to detail the complexity of cultural environments and allows data to belong to many possible codes, at the same time (Saldaña, 2016). When I created a new code, I would re-read previously coded data, looking for pieces of data that may belong to that new code. At the end of this coding process, 1907 lines of data belonged to one or more of 48 codes. The codes included “Attribute Codes” (sometimes referred to as “Descriptive Codes”), “Emotion Codes”, and “Value Codes” (Saldaña, 2016).

Attribute codes identify descriptive information regarding the setting, and participant demographics, and function to describe the topic being discussed in that line of data (for example, I used the descriptive codes, “Activities Done in Physical Education”, and “Talk About Intramural Sports”) (Saldaña, 2016). Emotion codes identify the emotions or feelings experienced or inferred in a line of data (for example, I used the affective codes, “Feelings of Pressure”, and “Specific Negative Feelings about Physical Education”) (Saldaña, 2016). Value codes refer to participant’s “values, attitudes, and beliefs, representing his or her perspectives or worldviews” (Saldaña, 2016, p. 131). An example of a value code that I used is, “Importance or Purpose of Physical Education”.

Some codes were then deemed too broad, as they housed huge amounts of data (almost 300 individual lines of data). Sub-coding was used to thin out the data, and therefore better understand the different aspects within a code. The NVivo software allows the user to make analytical notes directly on photos and other uploaded media (NVivo, Version 10). Making use of this option, I revisited transcripts referring to the card sort activity, and made notations on each card sort photo. Other photos were also “coded” to highlight their importance during this step. Throughout the coding process, analytic memoing was used to think critically and reflexively about the data, making connections, asking questions and solving problems (Saldaña, 2016). By doing this in writing within the NVivo software, I was able to add, change, and combine memos as the data began to tell a story. Indeed, this was a useful step in the data analysis process, as many memo’s ended up informing themes in the next steps of analysis.

### *Step 2. Identify themes.*

In the second step of this analytical procedure, I identified basic themes. Basic themes come directly from the textual data and are considered the lowest-order theme (Attride-Stirling, 2001). Attride-Stirling (2001) explains, “Basic themes are simple, premises characteristics of the

data, and on their own say very little about the text or group of texts as a whole” (p. 389). These themes are discrete (non-repeating) but they are broad enough that they contain multiple “lines” of coded material (Attride-Stirling, 2001). Some basic themes that were identified during this step include “Low teacher value of skill development”, “Development of skills in the curriculum”, and “Games-based physical education program”. Each basic theme was written on a small, square piece of paper. In preparation for step 3, these basic themes were pinned to a large bulletin board.

*Step 3. Construct thematic networks.*

In this analytical step, the basic themes are used to create thematic networks. First, I rearranged the basic themes into groups based on the issue or idea underlying each basic theme. These groups of basic themes are labelled as an Organizing Theme. Organizing themes are described as, “categories of basic themes grouped together to summarize more abstract principles” (Attride-Stirling, 2001). Using the examples from step 2 above, I grouped the basic themes “Low teacher value of skill development”, “Development of skills is in the curriculum”, and “Games-based physical education program” together, creating an organizing theme which I labelled, “Lack of opportunity for skill development” The organizing themes were written on a piece of paper slightly larger than the basic themes, and pinned to my bulletin board, surrounded by the corresponding basic themes.

Next, organizing themes that were related were grouped around a central global theme which, “... present[s] an argument, or a position or an assertion about a given issue or reality” (Attride-Stirling, 2001, p.389). A global theme is the “core” of the thematic network. Staying with the example used above, I grouped the organizing theme, “Lack of opportunity for skill development” with two other organizing themes: “Students do not enjoy a highly competitive environment”, and “Student’s perceptions of their own skills”. I labelled this global theme, “Opportunities are being given away” (see Appendix H). These global themes were written on a piece of paper and served as the centre of the Thematic Networks. At the end of this process, I had three global themes: “Strong Girls”, “Giving Opportunities Away” and “Our Class”.

***Analysis stage B: Exploration of text.***

*Step 4. Describe and explore thematic networks.*

The purpose of step 4 of this analytical process was to describe and explore each of the thematic networks that had been created. To do this, Attride-Stirling (2001) suggests describing

each network in detail and attaching segments of text to support your description while simultaneously taking note of underlying patterns within each network. In order to accomplish this with my thematic networks, I created highly detailed mind-maps on large pieces of paper. With the global theme in the centre, I worked outwards to recreate the thematic network using statements and more detailed explanations of the organizing and basic themes. As I worked through this process, I returned to the original transcripts, field notes and document analyses for textual evidence to support each of my new statements. By returning to the original data, I was better able to refine and contextualize the themes at each level.

*Step 5. Summarize thematic networks.*

The last step of stage B is to, "...summarize the principal themes that began to emerge in the description of the network, and to begin to make explicit the patterns emerging in the exploration" (Attride-Stirling, 2001). While this process certainly began during step 4, Attride-Stirling (2001) urges researchers not to discredit the importance of succinctly and explicitly presenting the thematic networks to an audience. To accomplish this step, I made use of a critical friend as the audience to whom I described the thematic networks.

Critical friends are used to help ensure validity in qualitative research by monitoring the performance of the researcher by "...act[ing] as sounding boards, and offering challenges, ideas and encouragement" (Appleton, 2011, p.6). It is suggested that by questioning the researcher's processes, interpretations, and findings, a critical friend engages the researcher in critical reflection, and increases the integrity of the findings (Appleton, 2011).

The person who acted as my critical friend is a former physical education teacher and accomplished researcher in the areas of physical education and physical activity, with a research interest in girls and young women. She is versed in qualitative research methods, and was aware of my research questions, methods and field of study.

During step 5 of the analytical process, I presented my themes to my critical friend. Using a whiteboard, I mapped out each global theme, addressed organizing and basic themes, and provided textual evidence to support each. Throughout the process, the critical friend asked questions that forced me to rethink, clarify, and refine my themes. Her previous knowledge challenged me to think differently about the themes, and to revisit the transcripts and field notes in search of alternative meanings and viewpoints. By questioning why I had made the decisions I did, my assumptions were revealed, and challenged, thus strengthening the link between the

themes and the texts gathered during data collection. For example, in the thematic network described above, there is an organizing theme called, “Students do not like a competitive environment”. Drawing on her knowledge and experience, my critical friend questioned whether a competitive environment led to giving opportunities away because of more than just not wanting to let the team down. With her guidance, I came to understand that, according to previous research, there might also be a gendered aspect to competition that was influencing the behaviours of Ms. Green’s students.

### ***Analysis stage C: Summarize thematic networks***

#### ***Step 6. Interpret patterns.***

The final step in Attride-Stirling’s (2001) thematic network process is to “...take the key conceptual findings in the summaries of each thematic network, and pool them together into a cohesive story by relating them back to the original questions and the theoretical grounding of the research” (p. 402). I consider this the step in which the story of Ms. Green’s physical education class was written to be shared with others. As I wrote each theme, the key ideas were related back to the research questions, and viewed through a feminist lens, paying close attention to the way that the issues were shaped by social constructions of gender. Throughout this step, I also returned to existing literature to help explain the themes that I was discussing. Although I was writing this document during this process, analyses of the data continued as the theoretical constructs guiding the research led to more exploration of the data and possible meanings. It was during this step that the Saskatchewan Ministry of Education’s Physical Education Curriculum (2009; 2010) was analyzed to support the findings and contribute to discussion. While I had read, and was familiar with the grade five and six curriculum prior to, and during collecting data, I found myself drawn to the documents during this step in order to satisfy questions about expectations regarding content, pedagogy, and assessment. I revisited the curriculum documents, and viewed the introductory pages, outcomes and indicators through the lens of my findings, making notes in my research journal as I moved through the documents. This analysis was then embedded into the results and discussion section.

### **2.5 Verification procedures.**

The use and effectiveness of verification techniques to assess the rigour of qualitative research continues to be debated amongst scholars (Morse, 2015). Given my grounding in social constructivism, the nature of gender, and the goals of ethnographic work, I do not claim that this

story of Ms. Green and the students in her class can possibly be the same as any other classroom. Furthermore, I cannot claim that the whole of a young person's experience can be measured, expressed, or captured in this document or otherwise. However, I do not dispute the importance of rigour in qualitative research and acknowledge that researchers must engage in some sort of processes and considerations to address the question posed by Creswell (1998), "How do we know that the qualitative study is believable, accurate, and 'right'?" (p.193). Qualitative researchers often address one or more of Lincoln and Guba's (1981) constructs of credibility, transferability, confirmability, and dependability to demonstrate the rigour of their study. Connelly and Clandinin (1990) remind researchers that they "...must search for, and defend, that criteria that best apply to his or her work" (p.7). For ethnographers, use of thick rich description, prolonged engagement in the field, triangulation, a critical friend and transparent reflexivity are considered particularly important measures of a rigorous ethnography (Creswell, 1998; Fetterman, 2010; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007).

**2.5.1 Thick, rich description.** Shenton (2004) suggests that researchers can enhance the credibility of their study through thick, rich description. Thick description is providing the most detailed description of the research setting as possible, with hopes that the reader will be able to "see" the research setting and contexts (Shenton, 2004). Ethnographic research, as a method, produces data that is descriptive in nature, and ethnographies, as a product, include rich, thick descriptions. I have provided a thick description not only within the results and discussion sections of this document, but also within the participants and field of study in an attempt to better help the reader to "see" the reality of Ms. Green, Mr. Smith and the participating grade five and six students. When possible, I have provided a description of the situation as well as some participant words, or excerpts from my field notes in an attempt to make the descriptions as rich, and vivid as possible for the reader.

Thick, rich description can also aid in establishing transferability of a study. While transferability, or generalizability is not always considered the gold standard for measuring the rigour of a qualitative study, it is my hope that the reader finds the results of this study worthy of their attention. I acknowledge that all classrooms are shaped by a multitude of factors and so, "...each individual reader determines whether the research findings are transferrable [and]... the degree of transferability can vary depending on the experience, awareness, and knowledge of the reader." (Bailey, 2007, p. 183). Stake (1995) refers to this type of transferability as "Naturalistic



Generalizability” (p.85). Thick, rich description can also aid the reader to determine the level of transferability they find within this study and its findings. I have used thick description throughout the document so that readers may have more characteristics on which to compare the situation to their own, to those they have read about, and to potential situations that they may encounter. Shenton (2004) suggests that it is particularly important to communicate to the reader the boundaries of the study in order to help the reader determine a level of generalizability. It has been suggested that to establish the boundaries of a study, the researcher should address, using thick description, the number of organizations and their general location, any exclusion criteria, the number of participants, and the methods and length of data collection (Shenton, 2004). In describing the field of study, Quinte Public School, the participants, each method of data collection used and the approximate times of data collection, my hope is that the reader has an adequate understanding of the boundaries of this study and can therefore make a judgement about the level of generalizability applicable to their situation.

**2.5.2 Prolonged engagement in the field.** Another way that credibility is established in ethnographic studies is through prolonged engagement in the field. Prolonged engagement in the field not only aids in creating thick, rich descriptions, but also helps to establish rigour by strengthening the relationships between researcher and participants, and increasing opportunities to triangulate data (discussed below).

I was able to engage in data collection for almost 4 months. During that time, I made a point to remain in the field before and after physical education classes, during special occasions including sports days and cultural events such as concerts in hopes to build my understanding and therefore the richness of my descriptions.

Shenton (2004) asserts that one of the benefits of prolonged engagement in the field is the strengthening of relationships with participants before, during, and after data collection. I was able to spend several weeks in Ms. Green’s classroom becoming acquainted with the class as a group, and spent some time talking with students on an individual basis, before the beginning of data collection. By doing this, I feel that I was able to enter data collection with a knowledge not only of the routines of the school and classroom, but also of students’ characteristics, friend groups, and interests. Additionally, I worked to build trust with students by being consistently present, by making conversations with students during their free time, and by making an effort to listen and respond genuinely when they initiated conversations. Through these strategies, I

believe that a positive, trusting relationship was formed between the participants and myself prior to data collection. This helped to increase credibility by allowing me to have a better understanding of the social group when preparing for data collection.

Morse (2015) suggests that with prolonged engagement and the resulting stronger relationships, participants engage in more honest and in-depth interviews and conversations with the researcher. However, to ensure that participants continued to feel this way during their interview, it was important to me to outline for students that their shared information was confidential. At the beginning of the study, and at the start of any interview or focus group, I reminded students that there were no wrong answers to my questions, that they may skip any question, that they may drop out of the study at any time, that their grades would not be affected, that a pseudonym would be used and that nobody (including parents and teachers) would know what they said. By doing this, it was my hope that students felt comfortable to share their genuine physical education experiences without fear of embarrassment, or other negative repercussions. I believe that students understood this, as they often discussed classmates, and their teachers, sometimes in a negative way, and some exercised their right to skip certain questions during their interviews.

### **2.5.3 Triangulation**

Another way to ensure credibility of ethnographic research findings is through the triangulation of data. Triangulation is, “the checking of inferences drawn from one set of data sources by collecting data from others” (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007, p. 183). Triangulation helps to establish credibility and confirmability by ensuring that multiple pieces of data support a single inference, or finding within the study (Shenton, 2004). There are multiple ways to triangulate data: method triangulation, data-source triangulation, and respondent validation (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007).

Method triangulation involves comparing data that was collected using two different techniques, in order to check for consistency in interpretations (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). This type of triangulation is based on the idea that a method such as interviewing has different and unique threats to validity compared to another method such as observation (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). In most ethnographies, including this one, the researcher collects data from many different sources including interviews, observations, and document analysis, making method triangulation ideal. I used method triangulation to match what I was seeing during

observation to what students and teachers were saying during their interviews. Sometimes, this triangulation happened naturally, meaning that I didn't have to ask specific questions, or look for specific behaviours, as they already existed in the data collected. Other times, I purposefully used method triangulation by asking students questions about an observation that I had, or vice versa.

According to Hammersley and Atkinson (2007), data-source triangulation: involves the comparison of data relating to the same phenomenon but deriving from different phases of the fieldwork, different points in the temporal cycles occurring in the setting, or the accounts of different participants (including the ethnographer) differentially located in the setting. (p.183)

One way that I used data-source triangulation to ensure credibility was through the accounts of multiple participants. For example, when I heard students in multiple, separate interviews discussing the impact that the other class had on their physical education experience, I knew that this was a topic of concern for more than a single student in the class. Because I was engaged in the field for over 4 months, I was also able to use data-source triangulation to check for consistencies across time. For example, while observing students sitting separated by sex on the first day of recording field notes was interesting, I could not infer any conclusion about student behaviour based solely on this observation. However, when recording the same student behaviour 3 months later, and during every observation period in between, I could be confident that this behaviour was persistent and potentially meaningful.

Finally, respondent validation can be thought of as a form of triangulation in ethnographic studies (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest that an important measure of the validity of ethnographic findings is the degree to which the participants recognize the findings as describing their experiences. During the second round of interviews, I presented each participant with a summary of our initial interview. This summary used a combination of student words and phrases, my paraphrasing, as well as my early analysis of their experiences, behaviours, thoughts and beliefs. I would verbally share this summary with the participant(s) and encourage them to clarify, correct, or add to anything that I was saying. While this was tape recorded, I also kept a record of student changes by writing them directly beside my initial summary to be sure that the context of the correction was not lost. While very few students claimed that I misinterpreted their words or behaviours, this process of respondent validation

served a useful tool for encouraging students to expand, or further explain their initial thoughts. I provided a copy of Ms. Green's transcript to her and while she made no changes, our continual, open dialogue allowed her to verbally reflect, modify or change opinions over my prolonged engagement in the field. These changes were recorded in my research journal and/or field notes.

The use of triangulation helped me to be sure that my understandings were an accurate representation of the culture-sharing group. Of course, my attempts at triangulation did not always "align". There were times when student behaviour changed over time, or when my assumptions about a situation were in opposition to a student's perspective of the same situation. When this occurred, I felt that the analysis had to move beyond thick description to a line of questioning about the disagreement (What was I missing? How were my perspectives influencing my observations? For what reasons might student behaviours disagree with their attitudes?). I believe that engaging in this line of reflective questioning further enhances the trustworthiness of the study.

**2.5.4 Critical friend.** To be sure that my findings "rang true" for an expert in the field, I engaged in ongoing conversations with the same critical friend discussed in the data analysis section. This type of dialogue is recommended especially for new researchers to check for bias, aid in summarizing the data, and conceptualizing themes (Morse, 2015). Essentially, a critical friend serves the purpose of supporting the rigour of the research project from start to finish.

**2.5.5 Transparent reflexivity.** In addition to the comments and questions posed by a critical friend, a researcher should regularly engage in self-reflection about the ongoing study in a critical way (Shenton, 2004). Furthermore, making transparent, or reporting to some degree, reflections about the successes, challenges, and changes to the methodology helps to establish validity of the research project (Shenton, 2004).

Shenton (2004) suggests that a thorough discussion of methods, and their effectiveness helps the reader to trust that the researcher used a dependable process. Thus, I have included in this methods section, not only the most accurate and detailed descriptions possible, but also some reflections on successes and challenges related to the method of ethnography. By including reflections about, for example, my struggles keeping detailed and focussed field notes, and connecting with some young participants, a reader can understand not only the intended methods but also the ways in which the reality of the methods strayed from those intended.

In addition to thoroughly describing the research methods, including their weaknesses, I have made my personal background and philosophical underpinnings transparent from the outset of the document. It is my hope that by doing this, the reader can better understand the links between findings, participant perspectives, behaviours and actions, and theory. While some weaknesses related to the method have been discussed in this section, the strengths and limitations of the study as a whole are addressed more thoroughly, following the results.

Throughout this chapter, I have outlined all methodological decisions and challenges, with the goal of helping the reader to understand the processes that led to my findings. By drawing attention to the detail in which I have considered the trustworthiness of my findings, I hope that it is clear how the results and discussion that follows are a window of understanding shaped by my interpretations of Ms. Green's grade five and six class.

## Chapter Three

### 3.1 Results and Discussion

Within this chapter, I present and discuss the results of the study. Woven throughout three themes, I aim to shed light on the guiding research questions with which I began: (1) How do students view and describe the overall culture of their physical education class, and their personal experiences within that environment; (2) Does gender play a role in student perspectives, experiences and behaviours within the physical education classroom; (3) What are the perceptions of the classroom teacher about the culture of their physical education class and the role that gender plays within that environment and; (4) How might the political, social, and physical aspects of the physical education environment contribute to the shaping of culture within the classroom? The objective of this study was to better understand the culture of a middle years physical education class, with a focus on the role that student gender may play in their physical education experiences. In order to best address the purpose of this study, the results are presented with discussion woven throughout, rather than in two separate sections. The first theme, “Our Class”, begins with a focus on describing the overall culture of Ms. Green’s class, as is encouraged in ethnographic work. It is my hope that this initial description of the culture-sharing group helps to put further findings and discussion into context. The second theme, “Giving it Away” explores the many reasons for inequitable, and gendered participation opportunities in Ms. Green’s physical education class. Finally, in the third theme entitled “Strong Girls”, the multiple meanings of this term are explored, ending with a discussion around the potential for social justice education.

#### 3.1.1 “Our Class”

It makes me proud that I’m with my class and people I can trust, but when the other class comes in, oh... -Amina

This theme discusses the classroom culture deliberately constructed by Ms. Green and her grade five and six students as well as what happens when “our class” is combined with the “other class” for physical education.

##### 3.1.1.1 “There’s no barriers.”

When we’re playing PE with our class, they cheer you on even if you do the wrong thing...they keep on cheering you on...it feels good to be in this class.

-Layla

When I met Ms. Green, she told me about her class, highlighting that they were a unique group and that, "...they come from such a range of backgrounds". Ms. Green explained that in her 10 years of teaching, she had never had a class that was as diverse and multicultural as this class of grade five and six students. As I began to observe and interact with the students, I learned that of the 24 students in the class, 8 had a first language other than English, 9 were either new or first generation Canadians, and 4 self identified as Indigenous. In addition, Ms. Green told me that the socioeconomic status and education levels of students and their families spanned a great range.

Ms. Green embraced the diversity of students as an important part of her classroom culture and felt that it was a strength that unified her students. Having observed the class both in physical education and in other subjects, I saw many instances where students demonstrated how their differences could bring them closer to one another. Just one example of how the students appreciated the diversity of their classmates is reflected in the following scene, summarized from my field notes. Having just come back from visiting his family in China, Randy was surrounded by students welcoming him back with hugs and high-fives and wanting to hear stories about his trip. Later in the day, I saw a student quietly explaining a difficult concept that Randy was having a tough time understanding. The diversity among students was both celebrated, and understood as a need to "look out" for one another, and help each other within Ms. Green's classroom culture. Celebrating and caring for one another seemed to create a team environment where students, and Ms. Green were all "in it together". According to Bacharach (2011), one of the best ways to create a classroom culture where diversity is the students' biggest asset is for the teacher to embrace the diversity, sharing with students that life is not one-size-fits-all. Teachers seeking to develop a classroom culture that values diversity should encourage students to ask questions about others, and provide truthful and respectful answers. Ms. Green described and demonstrated her commitment to a classroom culture of diversity by regularly engaging in these practices recommended to aid in creating a classroom that was open, respectful and appreciative of differences. I often wrote in my field notes that lessons in Ms. Green's class felt like a conversation among friends, in which Ms. Green was kind, honest and realistic with the students.

Ms. Green frequently discussed the way that her class was different from other classes in the school because of how they treated one another. With pride, she enthusiastically described her students, "...they're so welcoming and accepting and supportive...there are no barriers to

who is friends in here” (Ms. Green). Students also recognized this important characteristic of their class. When I asked students how their peers treated one another, they used words like “supportive”, “friendly”, “respectful” and “cheerful”, to describe peer interactions. Some students attributed these positive interactions to the fact that many of them have been together since Kindergarten, but even students who joined Ms. Green’s class after the start of the year talked about how easy it was to be included and make friends upon arrival. Layla, a grade five student from India who had been living in England, arrived during my time at QPS. When I asked her about her experience when joining Ms. Green’s class she said, “It felt good to be in *this* class. In our class, people treat you very well” (Layla).

It was clear to me that Ms. Green and her students intentionally created this positive social classroom culture. I asked Ms. Green to help me understand how such an inclusive environment is created and she directed me to the front of her classroom. In the middle of the wall, hung a poster with the title, “Ms. Green’s Class Expectations”, outlining characteristics demonstrated by the students in her class: respect and safety, inclusion/having fun, responsibilities, and positivity. Ms. Green attributed the behaviour and relationships among her students, in part to the development and visibility of the poster. She explained:

At the start of the year, we created that poster and I didn’t just say here it is. We, together, talked about all the different things that we think are important in a classroom and they all came up with that...so I think also, involving them, in what you want your class culture to look like, I think is important.

Ms. Green herself, reinforced the expectations by making it very clear that bullying, or mean behaviours were not tolerated in the classroom, and by acknowledging positive, pro-social and responsible behaviours in her students. Following an assembly one day, Ms. Green made a point to acknowledge how well behaved her students were during the performance and thanked them for being so respectful to the presenters, after which her students beamed with pride. French, Henderson, Lavay and Silliman-French (2013) have discussed the value of teacher-initiated positive social reinforcement in classrooms as beneficial not only to increase learning and performance but also to develop a sense of belonging within the classroom.

Ms. Green highly values and works to develop her relationship with students saying, “I think relationships are number one in having a positive culture, number one in student learning”. I observed Ms. Green working to develop these relationships through informal, non-academic



conversations with students about their weekends, extra-curricular activities, and peer relationships. I wrote in my field notes about a time when Ms. Green came in from lunch and asked a student in the front row to check her teeth for food, as one might ask a close friend. While the student took her request earnestly, it also led to some giggling and smiling on the part of the student.

I learned that at the beginning of the school year, the class went to “camp” together, where they participated in team building and communication exercises for a week. The purpose of attending camp at the beginning of the year is for students and their teachers to spend a significant amount of time together outside of the school to learn about one another and develop social, respectful relationships. Both Ms. Green and her students mentioned this experience when discussing feeling comfortable around their classmates. When I asked students to explain to me what it means to feel comfortable, students highlighted feeling free to be authentically themselves. Maci, a grade six girl explained, “...to me, it means that you’re like, ok to be yourself around the environment you are in or who you are around”.

While in class, students would often offer their opinions, respectfully disagree, take risks, and support one another. Students expressed positive feelings about being at school and Ms. Green felt that there were no barriers when it came to student relationships. When I asked Ms. Green to further explain this statement, she told me that while students had friends with whom they would spend more time, all of the students in the class were friends and they were happy to work, and play with one another.

Both Ms. Green and Mr. Smith recognized that Ms. Green’s students and their classroom culture was unique. While the diverse group of students played an integral role in creating this shared classroom culture, the positive results did not simply emerge because of a great group of diverse kids. This classroom culture can also be viewed as a result of hard, intentional work on the part of Ms. Green. From a pedagogical standpoint, it is important to recognize and acknowledge the impact that Ms. Green’s purposeful decisions about and approaches to teaching had on this culture-sharing group.

### ***3.1.1.2 “The other class”***

People from their class have a different point of view than our class people.

-Layla

Students attending QPS are enrolled in either French Immersion (a minimum of 50% of classes are taught in French), or in the English stream, (all classes except core French are taught in English). Schools that are set up in this way are often referred to as “Dual Stream Schools”. Each English stream class at QPS has a French Immersion counterpart. Students in Ms. Green’s class commonly referred to their French grade five/six counterparts as “the other class”. During interviews and focus groups, students in Ms. Green’s class often discussed feeling tension when the two culture-sharing groups combined for physical education.

While I wasn’t initially seeking a dual-stream school, deciding on Ms. Green’s class as the culture-sharing group for this ethnography meant that I would be observing a large, combined physical education class for two of the three classes each week. With only one gymnasium in the school, it was necessary for classes to combine in order to achieve the required amount of physical education on weeks when the weather was not suitable for outdoor classes. When Ms. Green’s class combined with the other class, they walked to a nearby secondary school to use their larger gymnasium. Originally, I didn’t expect the combining of classes to have an impact on the experiences and perceptions of students in Ms. Green’s class. However, as the study progressed, I realized that the “the other class” was a recurring discussion point for students when talking about their physical education experiences. Due to the ethnographic method of this study, I was able to respond to this emergent issue being presented by participants and observe more purposefully the effects of both the separate and combined physical education classes on the experiences of the students in Ms. Green’s class.

The French Immersion grade five/six class may have been typical of other French Immersion classes in Canada. A report by the Toronto District School Board, the largest school board in Canada, indicated that the following groups are less likely to enrol in French Immersion Programs: minority, immigrant, single-parent, low-income and low-education households (Sinay, 2015). Statistics Canada reported similar disparities related to socioeconomic status, and also gender, with more girls enrolling in French Immersion programs than boys, Canada-wide (Allen, 2004).

Visibly, the French Immersion class at QPS was significantly less ethnically diverse than Ms. Green's class, and it was reported by Ms. Green that there were also socioeconomic differences between the two classes, with a higher socioeconomic status among families with students in the French stream. Furthermore, classroom instruction of the other class was split between two part-time teachers, rather than one teacher such as Ms. Green. Ms. Green felt that students in the French Immersion class participated in far more extracurricular activities including sports and other physical activities outside of school, compared to the students in her class. As Ms. Green co-taught with Mr. Smith while the two classes participated in physical education together, she indicated that the other class had more "strong athletes", likely due to the fact that they were involved in more extracurricular activities outside of physical education. As a result of all of these differences, the other class had a classroom culture that was very different to that of Ms. Green's.

Students in Ms. Green's class indicated they enjoyed physical education more when they were not combined with the other class. For some students, like Brooke, the combining with the other class affected her participation opportunities. She explained:

I like doing gym class with mostly our class because we get more turns. [With the other class] we have a whole class of students to go through and then another whole class of people to go, so it's faster and we get more turns with just our class.

Often, when classes were combined, Ms. Green and Mr. Smith would provide the opportunity to play a large group game. The game often required low organization of students, including the use of only one piece of equipment. Brooke tends to be an active and usually confident participator in physical education so she is expressing frustration with having to wait for more than 40 students to take a turn before she can participate. Oliver had similar sentiments. He explained that he didn't like the "chaos" with that many people and he didn't enjoy playing "the same games" over and over when combined with the other class. Rink (2006) would suggest that Brooke and Oliver's complaints are related to the games selected by their teachers. Large group games with one piece of equipment does not allow for maximum student activity, and in the case of Oliver and Brooke, they were left bored, distracted and unmotivated (Rink, 2006).

In addition to complaints about the structure of their combined physical education classes, students reported social tensions as well. When I asked students in Ms. Green's class what physical education was like when the two classes were combined, Jake, a grade six boy said, "I

feel like there is a bit of conflict between the two classes...I think there is a bit of rivalry. I don't think people entirely like each other". Layla, a grade five girl, explained "...people from their class have a different point of view than our class people". Layla went on to discuss the way that the students in Ms. Green's class cheer each other on unconditionally, while students in the other class may engage in teasing behaviour in order to look "cool". This rivalry, or difference in perspective had an impact on how Ms. Green's students experienced their physical education classes when they were combined with the other class.

From the moment that students entered the gym for a combined physical education class, it was clear to me that there was a division between the two classes. The routine for entering the gym from the change room was that students sit on the circle in the centre of the gym. From the mezzanine above the gym, I was able to observe that students did not sit just anywhere on the circle, but that there were invisible barriers between students in Ms. Green's class and students from the other class. I wrote in my field notes:

I thought that it was just all the girls on one side of the circle and all the boys on the other side of the circle but here, [at the high-school, where students are combined], all the boys from the other class sit together, very separate from the boys in Ms. Green's class. The girls are separated by class too, but some are chatting with one another, and the physical separation is not as clear as it is among the boys.

Overall, Ms. Green's students felt more comfortable and reported higher enjoyment when participating in physical education with their own class. Students in Ms. Green's class expressed that they didn't know students in the other class as well as the students in their own class and this had an effect on their enjoyment. I got the sense that, with the exception of a few close female friendships, the students in Ms. Green's class and the students in the other class were mere acquaintances. Ms. Green helped to explain the division between the classes:

We do field trips and things together [with the other class] but it's not constant and it's not every day, meanwhile our class is constant. These kids in my class have been together, for some of them since Kindergarten. Yeah the two five/six classes are in the same school but not everybody has the philosophy that the two classes should work together. (Ms. Green)

Ms. Green indicated that the consistency of her class being together for all classes, and for many years combined with a school-wide separation between the French and English streams made it difficult to form a culture-sharing group with the other class.

Students in Ms. Green's class reported experiencing more teasing and excluding behaviours when physical education was combined with the other class. Mateo felt that in a game of tag, for example, instead of "going after" everyone, students from both classes only chased their friends from their own class, excluding others from participation in the game.

Layla reported seeing her peers teased by the other class about their skills, and other behaviours. She explained the difference between the two groups "...in our class people cheer on, even if we do something wrong, but in their class they start laughing and teasing" (Layla).

These types of tensions seem to be the result of not knowing students in the other class as well as the students in their own class. This is perhaps not surprising, as physical education classes can sometimes be a very personal and vulnerable time for students and may elicit feelings that we do not often wish to share with mere acquaintances. Additionally, given Ms. Green's focus on creating a strong, socially inclusive classroom culture, it is not surprising that her students did not feel as close to students in the other class, who have not been active in creating the classroom culture that exists in Ms. Green's class.

These findings support those of Cox, Duncheon and McDavid's (2009) study of middle school physical education students, in which they found peer acceptance to be more important than the quality of close friendships when it came to students overall feelings of relatedness and motivation. While Ms. Green's students had strong relationships to others in *their* class, the presence of a less accepting group of mere acquaintances (the other class) had serious implications for their feelings of relatedness, and in turn motivation, and enjoyment in physical education (Cox et al., 2009). While Ms. Green cultivated an inclusive classroom culture and provided the type of relationship building activities that facilitated a strong sense of belonging among her students, these same activities were not done while combined with the other class. It could be suggested that Ms. Green and Mr. Smith did not consider the implications of combining two classes, each with a different culture without first developing positive relationships that took students beyond acquaintances. Cox et al. (2009) suggest "...students may benefit from more opportunities to interact and form relationships with many different students as well as creating an atmosphere of acceptance and mutual respect" (p.771). Having gone to camp to engage in

relationship building, and given Ms. Green's commitment to an inclusive and respectful classroom environment, it is not surprising that her students feel comfortable among one another in their physical education classes. However, the students in Ms. Green's class have not had the opportunities to build those same relationships with their French Immersion peers, and thus feel tension when participating in physical education together.

Some of the boys in Ms. Green's class reported that when the classes were combined, they felt more competitive, and sometimes dominated by boys in the other class. Adam, a grade five boy explained that he felt more pressure to win when participating with the other class, even though he was not generally a competitive person. Mateo, too felt more competitive when the classes were combined and provided an example of the way the other class differed from Ms. Green's in their treatment of one another: "Someone in the other class will throw a ball and then when he sees someone with a ball, he immediately demands that they give him their ball". Here Mateo is expressing his frustration with the behaviour of some very aggressive and competitive boys from the other class. Students in Ms. Green's class reported that when certain boys in the other class are on the same team, they get "cocky", "aggressive" and sometimes cheat in order to win. These behaviours displeased Ms. Green's students. Ms. Green agreed that some of the more athletic students from the other class can behave poorly during games and mentioned that some of the boys in her class cannot "hold their own" when classes are combined. Ms. Green discussed her belief that for some boys in the other class who play organized sports many nights of the week, their status as athletes was becoming an important part of their identity. This was clear to me while out at recess or in the hallway when these boys could be easily identified by their matching team jackets and splash pants. There were no boys in Ms. Green's class who matched. The presence of these matching sporting identities is significant because they represent strong ties to both sport-based physical education and to the policing of hegemonic masculinities (Anderson, 2012).

Traditionally, competitive team sports occur in environments where boys and men could prove their masculinity through physical dominance (Brackenridge, Allred, Jarvis, Maddocks, & Rivers, 2008). With some physical education programs (including Mr. Smith and Ms. Green's) based almost exclusively on team games requiring physical abilities, the masculine proving ground has been extended from sport into physical education environments. Thus, physical education has often been referred to as a "masculinity vortex" (Connell, 2008), with a hierarchy

of privilege in which boys who are competent in sports (and therefore display hegemonic masculine behaviours) sit above boys with alternative masculinities, and above all girls (Anderson, 2012). Jachyra (2014) describes the boys at the top of this hierarchy as having "...physical cultural capital...an intangible resource or tool that is associated with power/privilege, practices and governing logics imbued with physical cultural fields dictating corporeal practices and subjectivities" (p. 47). Closely related to my findings from this ethnographic study, Jachyra (2014) explains that each physical cultural field (such as a physical education class) "...is inextricably tied to the 'desired' form(s)...[and] expression(s) of gender and social hierarchies that reproduce power and privilege to the dominant actors within" (p. 47). Boys, such as those from the French Immersion class who were displaying their membership to competitive sports teams, enter the physical education environment with the highest level of physical cultural capital. By wearing their team jackets, and exhibiting behaviours such as aggression, competitiveness and by attempting to dominate game play, these boys are successfully proving their sporting prowess and, in turn, their hegemonic, traditional masculinity (Connell, 2008). Thus, the tension among boys that occurs when classes combine may be related to a struggle among boys for membership at the top of that social hierarchy in physical education.

Some boys in Ms. Green's class sometimes coped with their negative feelings through the use of avoidance strategies and hiding in the gym. In Tischler and McCaughtry's (2011) study of non-dominant boys in high school physical education, they found that boys who embodied non-dominant masculinities used strategies to avoid participating among their dominant, hegemonic masculine peers. However, these non-dominant boys were happy to engage in physical activities together once removed from their larger physical education classes (Tischler & McCaughtry, 2011). Similarly, some boys in Ms. Green's class who I often observed actively participating in physical education when the classes were not combined, were seen avoiding participation once combined with the other class. These observations mimic those found among older boys and young men when it comes to masculinity in physical education such as Tischler and McCaughtry's 2011 study and Jachyra's 2014 ethnography.

Despite reporting dislike for their combined physical education classes due to the hyper-masculinity of some boys in the other class, some boys like Adam and Mateo appeared to engage in a type of cultural assimilation-adopting the hegemonic masculine attitudes of the boys in the other class. Both Mateo and Adam told me that they felt more competitive, and aggressive when

they were participating in physical education with the other class, although they also expressed displeasure in feeling this way. Through his studies of masculinity in physical education within an all-boys school, Jachyra (2014) explained that adoption of certain behaviours in physical education may be because "...hegemonic masculinities [are] a significant marker of power, privilege and a mechanism of HPE [healthy and physical education] engagement/participation" (Jachyra, 2014, p.127). Thus, boys like Mateo and Adam could be adopting the dominant expressions of masculinity, as they are behaviours that will allow them to be at the top of the social and participatory hierarchy in their combined physical education classes. Indeed, it has long been reported that schools, and particularly physical education classes are spaces where gendering processes exist-where students learn how to "properly perform" their gender according to hegemonic ideas (Gramsci, 2009; Hill, 2015; Penney & Evans, 2002).

It is particularly concerning to see these young boys conforming to hegemonic, masculine behaviours in order to gain social inclusion or privilege, despite admitting that they don't enjoy, or naturally express those behaviours. This type of learning at a young age feeds into a larger, problematic conception of gender roles and behaviours in physical activity settings. Students may come to adopt the idea that there are no spaces in physical activity settings for people who embody alternative forms of masculinity. Thus, many students may miss out on discovering or participating in a favourite physical activity based on their perception that their gendered behaviours will not be accepted. Alternatively, young people may alter their behaviour on a regular, permanent basis at the expense of their true identity in order to participate in physical activities.

While the boys may have changed their behaviour in order to appear more traditionally masculine, Ms. Green felt that social interactions also changed for the girls in her class. Ms. Green explained that girls in her class were beginning to develop "crushes" on the boys in the other class and that the impact of these crushes was particularly prevalent in physical education. When talking about the athletic and intense boys, Ms. Green said "...that's who the girls in this class are gravitating to in the other class...it's not like, the smart kids, and not saying that [the athletic boys] are not smart either, but it's like who the girls can chase and make it a chase". Girls in Ms. Green's class reported altering their behaviour in physical education because they did not want to look silly in front of their "crushes" from the other class. Ms. Green alluded to the idea that the girls in her class were attracted to the boys in the other class *because* these boys



possess characteristics of hegemonic masculinity, such as being athletically skilled, strong, aggressive and powerful.

Ms. Green may be discussing the way that hegemonic gender roles are so closely tied to the concept of heteronormativity. In his working definition, Heffernan (2010) explains “...heteronormativity will include the practices and institutions which privilege heterosexuality as the ‘natural’, fundamental, and morally superior order for social relations” (p. 15). Furthermore, Heffernan (2010) stresses that normative (hegemonic) gender is inextricably linked to heteronormativity. Often a culture of heteronormativity is not explicit, rather it is unconscious within the members of a community, much the way that gender is quietly, socially constructed. The students, specifically some of the girls in Ms. Green’s class may be curious and/or learning about romantic relationships through their social world, including their school. However, as a result of a heteronormative society, they may understand these relationships as exclusively between a boy and a girl (despite a knowledge of lesbian and gay relationships). Because heteronormativity is very much related to hegemonic gender roles and behaviours it may not be surprising that these young girls are attracted to what they believe defines masculinity (the aggressive, athletic and competitive behaviours displayed by boys in the other class). It is interesting to note that the girls frequently reported being more nervous, not wanting to embarrass themselves and they tended to “give away” the ball and other participation opportunities to boys. This is problematic as the result is less participation on the part of some girls in Ms. Green’s class during a crucial time for developing physical activity skills, and behaviours.

While Ms. Green and her class have created an inclusive classroom culture that celebrates diversity among students, this environment is altered when combined with their French Immersion peers for physical education. Part of this shift comes from combining two classes who are, for the most part, mere acquaintances without providing opportunities for relationship building between the two classes. The students in Ms. Green’s class also reported changes to the social environment when they combined classes. When discussing the ways that they would change their behaviour when combined, some girls suggested it was to align with ideas about hegemonic gendered behaviour and heteronormativity. Some boys in Ms. Green’s class discussed increased feelings of competitiveness and aggression when combined with the highly masculine, sport-playing boys in the “other class”. With the addition of boys in the other class

displaying highly traditional masculine behaviours, the participation of some girls in Ms. Green's class also changed. Some girls reported that they had "crushes" on the sporty boys in the other class, and that they got nervous and didn't want to look silly during physical education class. As discussed later in this document, this anxiety regarding performance in physical education has very serious implications for these girls future participation in physical activities.

### **3.1.2 "Giving it Away"**

Girls always pass it on. The girls always throw it to the boys. I've noticed that.

-Maci

This theme explores the way that some students in Ms. Green's class could often be seen "giving it away" during their physical education classes. I first became aware of this theme when I observed some girls consistently giving the ball away to somebody else to throw, kick, or to run across the line. As I explored this idea further, and discussed it with students in the class I realized that along with the ball, girls were giving away opportunities for meaningful participation and chances to improve their skills. As a result, some students were also giving away their chance to become comfortable, confident and competent participants in physical education.

I came to understand that feeling low-skilled and having minimal chances to develop skills were related to students' feelings of anxiety regarding the use of their skills. Many girls reported not wanting to look silly, let their team down or be perceived as "bad" at physical education. Additionally, some gendered ideas and behaviours, on the part of both boys and girls, contributed to feelings of pressure to give away those participation opportunities.

#### ***3.1.2.1 Student perceptions of skill levels.***

People, in a way, expect us to drop it...a lot of the boys are better at either kicking, or throwing or catching than the girls are.

-Natalie

In my discussions with both boys and girls, it was clear that there were gender differences when it came to students' perceptions of their own skill level in physical education class. I was encouraged to hear many male participants speak confidently about their own skills and focus on their abilities within the physical education environment. When Mateo, a grade five student, mentioned a weakness in his physical education ability, he "sandwiched" this weakness between acknowledging his strengths:

I'm good at deking and dangling...I'm really good at that. But I'm not very good at like, shooting, scoring. But I'm really good at deking and stuff like that. Even Wayne, he plays actual soccer and I can deke him out sometimes.

It was very typical for the boys in Ms. Green's class to express positive perceptions of their own skills, and to identify themselves as "good" at physical education class.

When girls discussed their skill levels, they sometimes had low perceptions of their own abilities, but most often they discussed the abilities of the "girls" as a group, and in comparison to the boys in their class. In her focus group, Natalie shared the following "...a lot of the time, a lot of the boys are better at kicking, throwing, catching...than a lot of the girls are", and Maci echoed this perception in her interview by saying, "I think the girls are really like almost all on the same level. The boys are too, but the boys have a little bit better throwing and catching skills than the girls do" (Maci). So, while the boys had high perceptions of their own skills, the girls seemed to have low perceptions of their own individual skills, and low perceptions of the skills of all girls, compared to all boys. Using the Perceived Athletic Competence (PAC) subscale of the Harter Self-Perception Profile for Children (SPPC), Cairney, Kwan, Velduizen, Bray and Faught (2012) found that students with higher perceived athletic competence scores enjoyed physical education more, and that girls with low perceived athletic competence enjoyed physical education significantly less than boys who also had low perceived athletic competence. Furthermore, Telford, Telford, Olive, Cochrane, and Davey (2016) also found that the girls in their study reported 9% lower physical education competence than their male peers at age 8 and 12. This is problematic as Gibbons, Temple, and Humbert (2011) explain:

Girls who do not feel competent in their skills in PE will look for ways to avoid participation (Gibbons, 2008; Rudgers, Fazey, & Fairclough, 2007). Such avoidance will in turn limit a student's opportunity to practice and improve her skills (and the potential to feel more competent), ultimately catching the student in a negative cycle. (p. 21)

While there are biological differences such as increased height, fat-free mass, and strength that may predispose post-pubescent men to an athletic advantage over post-pubescent women, the physiological differences in pre-pubertal boys and girls is minimal (Vealey & Chase, 2016). Vealey and Chase suggest then, that differences in skill and athletic ability in pre-pubertal children can be attributed, in part, to gender socialization. This study was not concerned with sexual maturity or biological age; however, visibly, the girls in Ms. Green's class were, on

average larger and stronger than the boys. Since the average age at which sexual maturation occurs for girls is 12 years and 14 years for boys, it is likely that the girls in Ms. Green's class were closer to puberty than the boys were (Malina, Bouchard, & Barr-Or, 2004). Despite their physical advantage and being more mature, the girls in Ms. Green's class felt that there were gender differences when it came to the skills used in their physical education classes. Again, while this study did not specifically measure the motor or fundamental movement skills of the students in Ms. Green's class, other studies have shown that there are gender differences when it comes to motor, or fundamental movement skills (see, for example, Busse, Thomas, & Weiller-Ables, 2012). However, I did not observe there to be a great difference in abilities between the boys and the girls. Of course, some students had higher skill levels than others but I saw both boys and girls performing skills poorly and competently.

While the girls failed to notice these individual differences, some boys seemed to acknowledge them. Both Mateo and Oliver mentioned that the people in the class who are "good" at physical education could include both boys and girls. When asked if there was a difference in skills amongst his peers, Oliver said, "They're pretty even [boys and girls]...If I ranked them, I think the first girl would get fourth or third, and the first two spots would probably belong to Wayne and Mateo". Mateo mentioned that different students are good at different activities. He shared "...there are different activities that they [my peers] are good at. Brooke, Alisha, Donny, and Tyler are good at mat races but for tag games, it's me, and sometimes Tiana and Layla because they don't really get tagged" (Mateo). Thus, there may be a problem in the way that girls *perceived* their own skills, and not necessarily in their actual physical abilities. Research on perception of competence in physical activity skills consistently demonstrates gender differences, with boys reporting higher perceived competence compared to girls (Kalaja, Jakkola, Liukkonen, & Watt, 2010; Lyu & Gill, 2012).

One reason that some girls in this study did not have high confidence in their skills may be the expectations of others. Some girls indicated that they felt others did not have overly high expectations for their athletic abilities. Natalie explained about her physical education classes, "People kind of, in a way, expect us to drop the ball...sometimes people kind of expect you to not catch it, so they will try to pass to someone who they know will catch it" (Natalie). In a separate interview, Layla echoed Natalie's thoughts when she told me, "I think people think that boys are more skilful than girls". When I asked Layla's focus group if they thought that her

statement was true, they seemed to have some difficulty deciding, eventually answering with “maybe” and “I think so”. Thus, another layer to some girls’ feeling low skilled may be the “self-fulfilling prophecy” of low-expectations. While Ms. Green indicated that she had high expectations regarding the skills of her female students, many girls indicated feeling as though other members of their culture-sharing group did not share her feelings.

Girls in this study may feel that expectations of their physical skills are low because they continue to be underrepresented in the sport and physical activity system in Canada (Canadian Association for the Advancement of Women in Sport, 2012). In order for students to engage in and feel that their learning is authentic, they must “see themselves” in the curricular content (Rink, 2006). During a games, or sports-based physical education curriculum-in-use (such as the one experienced by the students in this study) students may model their performances after, and strive to be similar to athletes seen in popular media coverage of professional, and elite level sports.

For the boys in Ms. Green’s class, they can turn on their television any night of the week and see men playing in a National Hockey League, Major League Baseball, National Football League or other professional sports broadcast. Despite a record number of elite women athletes breaking records at an unprecedented rate, most studies have shown stable or decreasing coverage of women’s sports, in all forms of media (Fink, 2015). Trolan (2013) asserts that on the rare occasions when women athletes are covered by the media, there continues to be a focus on the body, rather than athletic skills, and that, “The media’s analysis of sporting events and athletes serves to reaffirm gender differences and the gender order” (p. 216). While it is certainly acceptable and encouraged for girls and women to participate in sport, it is not valued in the same way, and thus expectations for girls and women are very different than they are for boys and men. At the 2016 Summer Olympics, a meeting of the most skilled athletes in the world, some woman athletes were identified by the media in relation to their male partners rather than as athletes in their own right. It is perhaps not surprising then, that students in Ms. Green’s class (both boys and girls) felt that expectations of girls’ physical skills were lower than the boys in their class.

Regardless of actual skill level, and expectations of others, students’ low perceived competence may have serious implications for girls’ enjoyment of, and participation in their physical education class. In their study of grade four to grade six students in Ontario, Cairney et al., (2012) found perceived athletic competence to be a direct correlate to physical education

enjoyment. Students who feel more competent in their skills, enjoy physical education more. Furthermore, among students with high perceived athletic competence, no gender differences existed when it came to physical education enjoyment (Cairney et al., 2012). However, among students with low perceived athletic competence, girl's enjoyment levels of physical education were lower and declined to a greater degree across grade four to grade six when compared to their male peers (Cairney et al., 2012). The girls in Ms. Green's class expressed feeling that their skills were at least lower compared to the boys in their class, and many expressed feeling that certain skills were "bad". Even though the girls in the current study reported that physical education is "fun", and that they usually enjoyed the class, the trend of declining enjoyment among girls with low perceived athletic competence shown by Cairney et al., (2012), would suggest that their low perceived competence is worrisome for their future physical education enjoyment.

Results in this theme contribute to an understanding of the way students' feelings of competence contribute to participation in physical education. While I did not observe the ability levels of the students in Ms. Green's class to vary based on student gender, I did perceive the boys in Ms. Green's class to be participating in physical education in a more engaged way and I would often see girls giving away their opportunity to be fully involved.

In a game of capture the flag, "giving it away" took the form of girls tossing the beanbag away to someone else to run across the line; in dodgeball, "giving it away" meant playing very defensively, passing the ball to someone else to throw over the line; and in kickball, "giving it away" simply meant taking up position, or "hiding" in the areas where the ball was never kicked. In all cases, girls were strategically putting themselves in positions where they did not have to perform those physical skills, or did not have to be on display in front of their peers, all while following directions and appearing to be engaged in the game play. A girl in the French-Immersion class, Amanda, demonstrated an interesting use of this avoidance strategy. Students in Ms. Green's class described Amanda as the most athletic girl; one girl even referred to her as a "Rock Star" at sport. She is tall, mature, muscular and co-ordinated. On track and field day, she easily won every event. However, in physical education, even she, along with other "athletic girls" avoided the "spotlight" of physical education by giving away her opportunities to participate. While I do not know Amanda's feelings towards her athletic competence or physical education, her avoidance of participation in physical education may be an example of

problematic gender differences in perceived competence that do not necessarily match actual physical abilities.

The strategies used by the girls in Ms. Green's class to avoid participation are not new. Tousignant and Siedentop (1983) coined the phrase "Competent Bystander" in their physical education research in the early eighties, and explained, "The 'competent bystanders'...knew how to use the class format to hide their low level of participation within the task structures" (p. 49). The girls in this study recognized and willingly discussed their roles as competent bystanders and often attributed their actions (or lack thereof) to their feelings of low competence. Competent bystanders don't cause problems, don't draw attention to themselves, and sadly, they often go unnoticed during physical education class. As such, opportunities to develop their confidence and competence are given away.

Many girls identified "worrying" as something that happens often in their physical education class. Maci, a grade 6 girl explained, "I feel like, from what I know, most of the girls get really nervous before they kick or before they throw" (Maci). When I asked other girls why they would feel nervous, or what they would worry about in physical education, they told me "...not being able to catch the ball...missing a throw" (Teagan); "...missing a shot" (Natalie); "...throwing to get someone out...dodging things" (Brooke); "...not getting the ball across the line" (Amina); "...not getting someone out" (Brooke). Almost all of the girls indicated that low confidence in their physical abilities was the source of their worry and stress in physical education. This worry, or nervousness about skills led them to "give it away": the ball, their participation, and their opportunities to improve. When asked if she had seen people in her class giving away the ball, Amina told me, "Yeah, I do that because I'm scared that I won't get it across the line. I really wanted to do it, but there's people around me, so I just pass it to other people". In my field notes, I wrote about a game of "Chaos", a combination of kickball and dodgeball:

It seems like it is always the boys who are grabbing the ball once it is kicked. It is now 10 or 15 minutes into the game, and I have not seen any girls touch the ball, other than to kick it when their name is called. Both classes are here so there are at least 45 students in the gym. The girls are also bunched together along the two outer edges of the gym. Is this so that they don't get hit with the ball either?

When I asked Brooke, a grade 6 girl about this event, she nodded in a way that indicated understanding and explained to me, “Yes, that happened to me the other day! I was thinking, you know I could try to catch that but then I decided not to...I was worried that I wouldn’t catch it or get a person out”. Furthermore, girls reported that feelings of worry and nervousness led to even poorer performance of the skills that they were worried about.

Interestingly, Mateo, a grade 5 boy also reported “getting butterflies” in his stomach before performing certain skills in physical education. While he said that his kicking skills are “probably worse” when he feels nervous, he was also able to channel his anxious feelings to perform better. He used the example of the 800 metre run to demonstrate this, saying “...sometimes I think I can’t really do it and then I just start thinking confident and then I just do it. And I get a fast time. I lap people and the person that’s second is always far from me” (Mateo). While feelings of anxiety and worry around performing skills are not unique to the girls in Ms. Green’s class, responses from male participants indicate that they channel and deal with those feelings in a more positive way than their female peers. This may speak to deeply rooted ideas related to hegemonic masculinities and femininities suggesting that boys are confident, and capable in this environment while girls are nervous, worried and less competent.

### ***3.1.2.2. Teacher value of skill development.***

I don’t really care how well they can throw something, how well they can catch... I’m more concerned with how they interact, what their effort is like, that they’re feeling safe in that environment.

-Mr. Smith

From my discussions and observations, neither Ms. Green nor Mr. Smith placed great value on the development of skills in their physical education classes. Both teachers felt that not focussing on skill development and assessment were strategies for keeping students motivated, and enjoying physical education. When asked about the purpose of her physical education classes, Ms. Green listed many of the social and affective goals that are outlined in the curriculum before adding “...and I guess skill development”. She went on to explain:

I don’t know if maybe some physical education teachers wouldn’t think the same, but to me, skill development is kind of the least important part of physical education...I think the activity part is most important, and that kids are having fun and wanting to be active.

(Ms. Green)



Ms. Green's strong focus on physical activity, and limited focus on skill development may be, in part, a reflection of her personal experiences. As a generalist, or classroom teacher (not formally trained in physical education), Ms. Green may be focussing on the current conversations about physical inactivity happening in the popular media. With increased inactivity, overweight and obesity in young people, media outlets often stress the importance of physical activity for children. However, it is a misconception that developing fundamental skills and being physically active need be mutually exclusive activities. In fact, the concept of physical literacy suggests that through opportunities to learn fundamental movement skills, young people can become confident in using those skills, leading to increased participation in physical activities (Hands, 2012). Rink (2006) states "children who have established or are establishing skill in fundamental motor patterns are more likely to be physically active and more likely to continue to seek opportunities for both physical activity and continued skill development" (p. 19). Furthermore, Rink (2006) stresses the role of physical education as "...a major factor affecting the degree to which children acquire [fundamental movement] skills" (p. 19). Hands (2012) suggests that many middle years students do not have the fundamental skills necessary to play the team games expected of them as adolescents. She encourages:

...individually designed activities in predictable environments and which build on principles of motor control and learning are most likely to be effective with this group. When the skills are mastered, responses can be automated, allowing the individual to process the extraneous demands of playing in a team. (p.13)

Thus, by avoiding instruction of fundamental movement and sport skills in order to increase student physical activity, Ms. Green may actually be decreasing their ability to be active in future situations and endeavours.

Mr. Smith was slightly more direct when offering his perspective on skill development in his physical education classes:

We're supposed to evaluate and assess skills, but I don't believe in that...I shouldn't say I don't care...I'm just less concerned about what they are able to do...I will say, I don't really care how well they can throw something, how well they can catch...If a kid can't skip in kindergarten, I'm not overly worried...If I'm their teacher for the next three years, by the time they are in grade 5, they can move well enough because we do it all the time.

Mr. Smith demonstrates his knowledge of the Saskatchewan Ministry of Education's Physical Education Curriculum, when he acknowledges the expectation that skills are developed and assessed. The grade five and six physical education curriculum includes 26 outcomes, 10 of which explicitly address the development of physical skills (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2009; 2010). Mr. Smith's reasoning for excluding assessment of skills is rooted in his passion for instilling a love for physical activity in his students. He explained:

If I assess students and it's on their report card that they're not meeting a skill set of some sort, that's a real negative. I don't want to push anything negative about what I do. I want students to be drawn to physical education. I want them to be turned on to it, so I don't really assess those skills to be honest.

Mr. Smith is highlighting the possibility that, if he assessed and reported student skill level, some of his students' performances would warrant "negative" assessments of their skills. Mr. Smith is showing compassion, and a desire to motivate his students when identifying that some of them would be negatively impacted by a poor assessment of their skills. However, many students, particularly girls indicated that they already have negative perceptions of their own skills.

In reflecting on this dilemma, I wondered if the girls in Ms. Green's class could benefit from explicit formative assessments, or feedback, rather than a summative assessment that may turn them off of physical activity. An important distinction to make here is the difference between formative assessments and summative evaluations in education. Formative assessment, referred to in the Saskatchewan Provincial Curriculum as "assessment for learning" and "assessment as learning", can be used for a number of purposes including, supporting and improving student learning, informing instructional practices, encouraging teachers to differentiate their instruction, providing feedback to students and parents about learning, and involving students in their own learning and critical thinking (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2009; 2010). Perhaps most importantly, there is a very strong link between assessment and learning (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2010). Thus, summative assessment of skills would give students a measure of their current level of ability to perform that skill. Summative assessment is the type of assessment that Mr. Smith indicated might appear on a report card, and may leave students feeling dejected about their physical education abilities. However, formative assessment may allow students to have a better understanding of their progress towards mastery of the skill, including areas for improvement. Assessment of one's

own skill is an integral part of developing content for learners and it could be explicitly built into skill development progressions (Rink, 2006). Although Mr. Smith does not assess skill in a summative way, formative assessments may not only improve the skill levels of the students in his class, but also may help the girls in Ms. Green's class to develop more accurate, positive perceptions of their own skill level. With improved skill, and higher self-perceptions of those skills, girls may begin to feel more confident and motivated to fully participate in games during physical education (and elsewhere).

When asked why the boys in their class had better fundamental skills such as throwing, catching, running and dodging, girls in Ms. Green's class overwhelmingly indicated it was because they practice these skills more when they are active at recess. My observations of recesses indicated that boys did in fact, tend to use their running, catching, throwing and dribbling skills while playing kickball, soccer, and football at recess. The girls in Ms. Green's class often spent their recess time engaged with activities such as gymnastics, or relaxing and chatting together.

Interestingly, girls suggested skill development and practice of skills were the main reasons that boys' skills were better than theirs. In fact, when asked what an all-girls physical education class would be like, Maci suggested:

I feel like the girls would have more strong suits because it's focussed just on the girls and their abilities. So we would have more things that we could do like throwing and catching, because we're not very good at that right now.

The girls in Ms. Green's class understood that improving their fundamental skills would come from practice, and in some cases, even suggested that was something they needed in their physical education classes. However, they failed to acknowledge in any way, that learning skills like throwing, catching, and running required more than just practice, but instruction of these skills (including opportunities for assessment and feedback). I noticed that students were expected to play games that required the use of fundamental skills, but I seldom observed explicit teaching of these skills. It has been suggested that in order for students to learn skills, those skills should be broken down into manageable parts, each part assigned a meaningful cue, and practiced while receiving feedback (Rink, 2006).

Ms. Green's understanding of movement skills has been informed by her personal experiences with re-learning skills after an injury. She explained

...everybody is going to find their own way to do something...I don't run properly anymore because I've had like, a million surgeries that have changed that...and it is the same with my students. They are going to learn what works for, like, their body type.

-Ms. Green

However, with the exception of students with exceptionalities, it is understood that there is a correct way to perform the fundamental movement skills that students need in order to be considered physically literate (Canadian Sport for Life, 2016).

For the most part, students participate in large group games, often with only one piece of equipment shared amongst almost 50 students. Even when the classes are separate, Ms. Green's learning activities are predominantly games. As some students confirmed, this type of class structure makes it very easy for students with low perceived athletic ability to act as competent bystanders. Furthermore, this class structure provides little to no opportunities for students to develop their skills, or to recognize their abilities, particularly if they are not being assessed by the physical education teachers.

### ***3.1.2.3 Competition.***

Some boys are way more competitive and it's not really fun when they're competitive 'cus like Wayne, when he loses, he'll like freak out and get mad.

-Teagan

Yeah and if somebody's really like competitive, say they threw something that hit somebody but Ms. Green didn't call it and they get a little bit frustrated and its like, its just a game.

-Natalie

A focus on games, combined with the traditionally masculine environment of physical education led to the creation of a competitive environment during physical education. At one point during her focus group, Natalie acknowledged the difficulty of seeing past the competitive aspects of physical education in order to put into perspective the real purpose of the class. Although she identified having fun, and being active as purposes for participating in physical education, she explained "...but like when you're in the game, its not a life or death situation, but it kind of is" (Natalie). When talking to students about competition in their physical education class, they indicated that their dislike of a competitive environment might also be related to their feelings of low competence, and a lack of participation

opportunities. The heightened pressure and stress that accompanies a “high-stakes” team competition led to some familiar avoidance strategies among students. Furthermore, gendered ideas about appropriate behaviour could be informing the way that girls and boys experience and react to competitive environments differently.

There was a recurring discourse among participants that focussed on the competitiveness of the boys in Ms. Green’s class. When asked if she noticed any gender differences in her class, Ms. Green shared the following:

I would say competitiveness. I would see that more from the boys, even though it wouldn’t be all of them, I see that more from the boys than the girls. I see more encouragement from the girls, like they’re the ones that are starting the chants, or the cheers. I think it goes back to the roles of the girls as like, the cheerleader role, they’re maternal and nurturing.

Interestingly, Maci identified gendered behaviours very similar to those of Ms. Green. She indicated that there were competitive girls as well as boys, but that girls channelled their competitive spirit in a different way. She explained, “I feel like the girls are really competitive too, but they still are like, cheerful to the other players. Like some of the boys are too, but some of them get all in your face about it”. In my observations of competitive situations, while many boys were aggressively fighting to achieve the goal of the game, the girls seemed to gravitate towards close friends, and defaulted to a more supportive role. On multiple occasions, I made notes about girls making a point to cheer, high five, and encourage their teammates.

For girls and young women, experts agree that competition is often less about winning and losing and more about “coming together with their peers” (van Daalen, 2005). In discussing the promotion of physical activity among girls and women, The Canadian Association for the Advancement of Women and Sport and Physical Activity (CAAWS) claims, “The ‘challenge of competition’ is a significant factor in that some women and girls tend to place a lot of importance on relationships and perceive that competition jeopardizes relationships-someone can be hurt emotionally...or physically” (Humbert, 2005, as cited in CAAWS, 2012, p. 13). While it seems as though the girls in Ms. Green’s class have chosen to nurture their social relationships rather than engage in forced competition, one has to wonder whether the environment can be structured in such a way that students can engage in healthy, sport-like competition, without risking their social relationships. While the pro-social behaviours displayed by the girls in Ms. Green’s class

are arguably an important aspect of physical education, learning to compete in a healthy way is also an important skill that can be developed through physical education.

Some of the boys in Ms. Green's class who "get carried away", by the competition may be on a quest to prove their masculinity, by displaying physical dominance. Meanwhile, many of the girls, equally immersed in a physical education culture encouraging traditional gender ideals, are assuming a social, relationship-driven, cheerleader role. These traditional ideas about how to appropriately perform one's gender may damage the learning opportunities for boys to develop pro-social, inclusive teamwork habits, and for girls to experience success in healthy competitive environments.

Mr. Smith also had opinions about the competitiveness of the boys in Ms. Green's class: I find that generally, the boys are more competitive. Generally. There are individual girls that are competitive. I have one at home that's really competitive and she'll hold her own out of all the boys and its awesome. But generally, the boys assert themselves in ways that make them really competitive and they can exhibit some poor sportsmanship at times, and that can turn the girls off right away.

Mr. Smith acknowledges the impact that the overly competitive behaviour of some boys had on the participation of girls in his class, but also fondly discusses his sport loving and competitive daughter. As both Mr. Smith and Ms. Green acknowledged the negative impact of competitive and aggressive boys in the class, I wondered if there are not teachable moments through which the overly competitive and aggressive attitudes and behaviours could be addressed, while meeting curricular outcomes.

The Saskatchewan Provincial Physical Education Curriculum (2009) includes the following learning outcome for grade six students:

Apply personally developed plan for progressing through the five levels of social skills continuum that begins with irresponsible behaviour and progresses through self-control, involvement, self-responsibility, and caring for others to support personal growth in making positive connections to others, while participating in movement activities.

(p. 40).

Through teachable moments related to competition and appropriate social skills, Mr. Smith could achieve this curricular outcome. He explained that he expects the more competitive and athletic students to assume a leadership role and there is great potential in this expectation for personal

growth among all students. If students are helped to understand what responsibility, leadership and participation may look like in the gym, the overall class culture could be improved so that skilled students could be leaders in both skill development and fair play. Through the teaching of social skills along with movement skills, there may be potential to make the gym a safe and enjoyable learning environment for less skilled students as well.

Some students felt that a competitive environment limited their opportunities to participate in physical education class. Bernstein, Phillip and Silverman (2011) found that, among grade six to grade eight students, skill was considered a necessary part of competitive activities, however, skill level also dictated opportunities to participate and improve. Bernstein et al., (2011) also explain, “Those with skill had many opportunities to apply skills during game play. Conversely, those without skill in certain activities had very few opportunities” (p. 76). Perhaps not surprising given their low self-perceptions, girls in this study also expressed feeling pressure during competitive situations to give away participation opportunities to someone with better skills. Maci suggested that there are some boys who are “in it to win it” (Maci), and Natalie confirms that some of her classmate even get upset at the person responsible for losing the game. As a result, those with high perceptions of their own skills want to be as involved as possible (for a greater chance of team success), and those with low perceptions of their own skills do not want to be that last person standing. Brooke explains what this feels like for her in a game of capture the flag, “Normally, Moe and Wayne and Mateo and Liam and Greg are always up in your face telling you to pass, and you can’t go anywhere because they are all surrounding you. So you just have to throw it to them, and I just feel like, ok, I’m done”. Many girls discussed feeling overwhelmed and pressure from some boys in their class to give away the ball, or the beanbag, or the football during game-play. Indeed, I observed many occasions when a girl would be holding a ball, or a beanbag, and immediately be pressured by a more competitive player to do something with the ball. Alisha shared that often the pressure was for girls to pass to someone else, ostensibly, someone more capable of achieving success for the team. She said “...when a girl gets the ball, the competitive people will all be like, “They’re gonna score soon! Come on! Just give it! Give someone the ball! Give Max the ball! He is fast! Come on they’re gonna score soon!”. I often observed this to be an intense and perhaps anxiety inducing situation for girls, whereby the easiest and quickest solution was to pass the object off to a teammate. Bernstein et

al., (2011) found that enjoyment of competitive activities in middle years physical education was dependant on the player's individual skill level. They assert:

[Competitive] activities conclude that continuation of play is dependent upon success, or the ultimate skill of the player or student. Therefore in many competitive activities having skill can facilitate participating in the competitive activity presented. Not having skill can hinder participation. (Bernstein et al., 2011, p. 70).

Thus, the importance placed on competition, and therefore winning, and the legitimate fear of letting teammates down contributed to a willingness of girls to "give it away" in physical education.

Some girls in Ms. Green's class also explained that during competitive activities, their opportunities were limited by the aggressive behaviours of some boys in their class who were dominating the playing space. When asked about participation during competitive games, Teagan explained, "Well the only reason why sometimes they [boys] catch the ball is because they go in front of a girl when they're about to catch the ball...they'll just jump in front of us and grab the ball" (Teagan). Fuelled by their competitive attitude, and more confident in their sports skills, boys were often observed casually taking away participation opportunities from girls during competition. During a game of dodgeball, I wrote the following in my field notes:

Two girls (Addison and Teagan) are stretching and reaching to get a ball that is just out of reach on the other teams side for quite a few seconds (rules state that you are not allowed to cross the line). They are respecting the rules of the game by not crossing the line. Don comes up beside them, walks across the line, simply steps over it and grabs the ball. The girls have their hands out as if to say 'Here! The ball we have been trying to get' but Don just takes it himself, and throws it. He hit no one and was not really even aimed at anyone. The girls do not protest, or say anything. They simply move on.

Interestingly, in instances such as these, it was not out of malice, or even on purpose that the boys would intrude on another person's participation opportunity. It would often appear that students didn't even realize that they were in another student's space. Oliver, a grade six boy explained to me that the boys simply "...get themselves more aggressively there". Perhaps the lack of aggression to "get there", or to protest when their opportunities are taken away are a product of a traditionally gendered environment in which girls are expected to be less aggressive, competitive and forceful, combined with a lack of confidence in one's skills. Within a program that is



dominated by competitive activities, it is difficult for girls to negotiate the pressure to perform their femininity while meaningfully participating in physical education (Cockburn & Clarke, 2002).

The pressure from teammates to give away the ball during competition and a lack of aggressive behavioural tendencies amongst girls were both related to a real or perceived lack of skill. Girls in Ms. Green's class recognized that they had significantly fewer opportunities to practice and improve on those skills when compared with their male peers. Natalie discussed the impact of the two factors on their skill development saying "...we don't get a chance to play and then we don't really get any better but they [the boys] get better at catching and throwing and stuff". Furthermore, both Mr. Smith and Ms. Green provided reasons for avoiding explicit skill development, possibly reducing the opportunities for girls to develop and feel more confident in their fundamental sports skills. Thus, some students may be trapped in a cycle of feeling low skilled which leads to minimal participation, which leads to fewer opportunities to develop skills, and continued feelings of low skill.

### 3.1.3 "Strong Girls"

You gotta have good, strong girls-not just athletically, but academically and socially.

—Mr. Smith

Ms. Green, Mr. Smith and many girls in the study all discussed the notion of "strong girls" during their interviews and focus groups. However, both teachers and the student participants all had different ideas about what this term meant, and how it was displayed during physical education.

**3.1.3.1 "Strong girls" are the key to a good year.** It was Mr. Smith who initially alerted me to the emerging theme of "strong girls". While reflecting on his many years of teaching, he explained the following:

I have always thought about this age, that you have good years and you have bad years, you have hard years and easier years, and to me, the key to having a good year is strong girls...you gotta have good, strong girls-not just athletically but academically and socially. If you don't have that, and it's the boys that are kind of dominant, it creates tougher times...my best years of teaching have been with, and my most favourite kids have been the girls I've taught because they're the ones that make or break the class. I

think in this environment [Ms. Green's class], there's a lot of great girls that really make it better.

After hearing from many girls in the class that they felt their physical activity skills were weak, I was somewhat surprised to hear Mr. Smith discussing the girls in Ms. Green's class in this way. Mr. Smith, too admitted that in the beginning of his career, he would not have expected the characteristics of the girls in the class to be so important to having an overall "good" class.

As I explored this theme further, and reflected on participant comments, I began to understand the role of "strong girls" as a complicated and fluid, yet important aspect of this culture-sharing group. Many girls in Ms. Green's class were a strong presence in their classroom. During classes such as math, language, health and social studies, I observed that many girls were more confident and vocal than their male peers. When answering questions in class, girls would often correct or question the responses of boys and girls when they felt that they were inappropriate, mean or incorrect. While there were some boys who engaged in class conversations, these discussions were frequently dominated by the girls in the class. When Ms. Green asked her class a question, the hand of almost every girl in the class would shoot into the air with excitement to respond, answer, or share their opinions. Ms. Green agreed with my observations, and felt that she had more strong and confident girls in her class than boys. Ms. Green even went so far as to suggest, "I would think if we had a girls against boys thing, I would say that our girls would be stronger in most things that they would do" (Ms. Green). However, when I asked about "strong girls" in physical education, Ms. Green felt that the environment changed, and the strength of girls in the class was limited. She explained:

Well... the whole risk thing, and I just don't know how to put it into words...so when they're in the classroom, and their answer is wrong, well it's just something they have said or tried. Whereas in the gym they're acting something out, everybody's standing around looking at them like they're the show versus in the classroom, it's just sitting at a desk and two people turning around versus all the eyes in the gym. (Ms. Green)

Here, Ms. Green may be referring to what feminist researchers have labelled "the gaze", and she has identified, as scholars have, that this gaze is reported more often by girls, and experienced differently in physical education than it is in other classrooms. Girls in physical education classes have long reported discomfort and under-participation resulting from feelings of being "on display", watched, and judged (Cockburn & Clarke, 2002). Webb, McCaughtry and

MacDonald's (2004) interpretation of Foucault's conceptualization of "the gaze" suggests that, "subjects being watched or who felt they were being watched internalised the gazes and regulated their behaviours and identities toward a norm" (p.210). Physical education can be a highly normative environment when it comes to gender roles, identities, and behaviours. Students in Ms. Green's class held some stereotypic ideas about gender in physical education (boys are more skilled, competitive and aggressive), and some girls reported feeling anxiety related to their performance in front of others. Thus, it makes sense that feelings of "the gaze" by girls in the class may result in a behaviour shift among the "strong girls" in the class. If they are shifting behaviour towards the "norm", or what is expected of them as Foucault suggests, then the girls are likely behaving in a more hegemonic feminine way-one that contrasts with their otherwise "strong" behaviours.

### ***3.1.3.2 "Strong girls" are united.***

The girls are so strong with each other...like a support for each other.

-Ms. Green

Both Ms. Green and the girls in her class discussed close female friendships, and working together within the context of "strong girls" in physical education. Maci, a confident grade 6 girl, described for me the female friendships within her class, "Well a lot of the girls in the class are really comfortable with each other. We're basically best friends in here". For many girls in the class, these close, comfortable relationships served as social, political and physical support during sometimes gendered and difficult physical education experiences. The girls in this class were "strong girls" for each other.

Some girls discussed the way that their female friends cheer for other girls when the boys would only cheer for one another, and that the support was really beneficial to their physical education experiences. Amina, a grade six girl explained, happily of her female peers, "They were encouraging me to like run myself...I wasn't doing that, I was giving it away so [the girls] would give it to me every time, so that I could have a chance" (Amina). This social support was certainly the most noticeable type of support to me, as an observer. I often watched girls giving one another high-fives, and hugs after successes, cheering loudly, and consoling each other if they were upset in physical education. Alisha explained the way that these affectionate gestures by girls in her class differed from those of the boys:

Lets say you get hit by a ball in the face, the girl that hit you will come running and asks if you are ok, if you need help, if you need to sit down, what they can do and they say, 'I'm sorry, please forgive me, are we still friends?'. When a boy hits you, they don't care, they just keep running.

These close female friendships were also used physically and politically by girls to "take a stand" against a dominating male presence in physical education. Addison, a grade five girl, giggled when telling me about a time when the girls, frustrated with not being meaningfully involved in the game, were only passing to other girls. Amina noticed the effect that it had on the boys in the class, claiming, "Mateo and Adam were saying, 'you always give it to her, why not us...of course the girls will give it to the girls' [all in a mocking, whiny voice]". Brooke also explained an event that had happened the year before when the girls in the class, after being relegated to defensive positions by the boys, came together and refused to play defence anymore, resulting in a positive shift whereby the boys stopped telling the girls where to play. Thus, at times, "strong girls" in physical education refers to a strength in numbers approach to seeking equitable physical education experiences. The girls in Ms. Green's class highlighted their close, female friendships as a tool that allowed for a united front during physical education class.

Interestingly, this social support extended beyond girls supporting girls. Some girls discussed situations where they felt it was important to also support boys in their class who displayed a less dominant form of masculinity. One of these boys is Kai, a small, timid, grade five boy whose speech and language is delayed. Kai was a boy who would be overwhelmed to the point of tears if he were chosen to be "it". In their focus group, Teagan, Addison and Natalie identified Kai as a boy they should support during physical education:

Teagan: None of the boys trust Kai with the ball...The girls would say, 'Pass to Kai, like come on, he's also playing the game' and the boys would only pass to him like twice. So whenever we'd get a touchdown, we'd always just give it to Kai because he deserves it because he is a good sport.

Natalie: He never really complains and doesn't brag too much about winning.

These girls described Kai positively, but in opposition to the way they talk about other, more traditionally masculine peers. It is as if these girls have recognized that boys like Kai are not afforded the social privileges, and comfort that other, more traditionally masculine boys are; they have realized that although he identifies as a boy, he is not afforded the top spot on the physical

education hierarchy with other boys. He is one of them, and in need of social and political support, just as they are. That Natalie, Addison and Teagan noticed this injustice and could identify and begin to discuss Kai struck me as quite profound and progressive.

Ms. Green also commented on the value of close female relationships to the culture of her class, “I think the girls in this class...they’re so strong with each other that I think they’re a support for each other; they’re more willing to take risks in physical education”. However, Ms. Green identified the close relationships among the girls in her class as a “double-edged sword” when it came to participation in physical education. She felt that these close relationships were related to a “caring, maternal instinct”, and high value on social inclusion which could lead to underperformance in physical education. She explained, “Girls want to be with their friends so I think that sometimes holds them back because they don’t want to be better or try harder, anything that might make their friend look bad or be better or stand out”. Ms. Green further explained that the need to maintain these relationships with female peers sometimes led to extra pressures for girls to be on the same “level” as their friends. Maci, a grade six girl touched on this issue when she explained that girls like to be on the same team as their female friends so that they don’t have to “get their friends out” of the game, and start drama, a conflict that she reported happens often. When I asked if that type of conflict happens amongst the boys in the class, Maci laughed and shook her head, “no”. While discussed at length earlier, it is important to place Maci and Ms. Green’s comments here within the context of a competitive physical education environment. It has been reported that girls feel mandatory competition is in conflict with their desire for friendship, and threatens the high value that girls place on their social relationships (van Daalen, 2005). However, even when practicing the 800 metre run, a competitive but individual event, I noticed girls gently elbowing one another and asking their friends, “Lets run together. Will you run with me? Lets run at the back”.

Underperformance of girls in physical education is not a new idea, as athletically skilled adolescent girls have reported feeling forced or choosing to underperform when playing games with boys in physical education class in order to maintain their femininity (Fagrell et al., 2012). However, it is Ms. Green’s opinion, and reported by some girls in this study that underperformance in physical education was sometimes a strategy to maintain friendships with their girl friends.

Within hegemonic masculinities, competition, rough play, and physical altercations are often considered integral parts of friendship between boys, sometimes even referred to as “signs of affection”. While this hegemonic thinking of “boys will be boys” is problematic, it is also concerning that those same events (competition, rough play, and physical superiority), have the opposite social repercussions for girls by taking a toll on their strong female friendships. Ms. Green specifically referred to the stereotypical feminine qualities of maternal, and caring as “instincts”, suggesting that they are a natural result of being born female. Shen, Rinehart-Lee, McCaughtry and Li (2012) suggest that, “Girls are aware of the social expectation placed on them in terms of participation in physical activities and sports (e.g., being docile, polite, non-aggressive, etc)” (p.325). Thus, just as some of the boys in the class conformed to hegemonic masculinity to maintain social status with the other class, girls, too must choose hegemonic gender characteristics in order to maintain their social currency of friendships and likeability with their female peers. However, the girls in Ms. Green’s class had indicated that this need for strong female relationships in physical education was not simply for popularity, or to chat with one another, but in fact, a strong political tool for moving towards more equitable physical education. Thus, the importance of maintaining friendships should not be scoffed at, or not taken seriously by teachers wishing to engage girls in their physical education classes. Rather, it may be a signal to teachers to listen critically to students, and engage in the transformative and critical pedagogies suggested by Enright and McCuaig (2016).

The girls in this study demonstrated that “strong girls” was a fluid term, the meaning of which depended on the situation or context, and the person using the term. Perhaps most importantly, this theme of strong girls positions middle years girls not as passive objects of victimization in physical education, but as active subjects in the story of their physical education culture. Enright and McCuaig (2016) have suggested that narratives of girls in physical education have told the same story for many years: “[Physical Education] privileges hegemonic masculinity and this has resulted in girls’ alienation and disengagement from [Physical Education] and physical activity” (p. 83). I have found this same story within the physical education culture of Ms. Green’s class. However, perhaps the strong girls in Ms. Green’s class are ready to move past this story, into an area of social justice praxis wherein they are involved in recreating the gendered culture of their physical education environments. In his own way, I think this is the essence of Mr. Smith’s conceptualization of “strong girls”. Given the space to

critically discuss their experiences, many girls in this class were assertive in identifying and discussing the inequities in their physical education class. They were strong supporters of one another, and occasionally, worked together to prove a point to their dominating male peers. They were not willing to be actors in the repetitive story of girls in physical education. The girls had a sense of the need for change as Maci suggested, “I think the girls in general, we need to feel like we can do it too...because I know I can throw the ball well”. While their approach was sometimes problematic, and worked to reproduce a gender binary (passing only to girls), their strength transcended this same binary when they recognized the importance of supporting boys with non-dominant masculinities.

However, I would agree with Ms. Green when she expressed, with disappointment, that “strong girls” were limited in the historically masculine environment of physical education. Findings from Hill’s 2015 study of high school girls eloquently reminded me of the middle years girls in this study:

While the girls challenged boys’ dominance and called for equal opportunities in their talk, they struggled to not also reiterate boys’ dominance in sport (through embodied strength and ability) and the surveillance of girls’ bodies...Although these girls demonstrate the difficulty of resisting, they indicate moments of positioning themselves against norms that suggest the possibilities of shifting the boundaries or overcoming aspects of gendering processes in physical education. (p.680)

Thus, it is my opinion that multiple ideas about “strong girls” presents an opportunity for physical educators to capitalize on these strong female relationships and enter the world of social justice education. Some of the girls in this study sensed inequities in their physical education classes, and expressed a desire to help one another (boys and girls) to create change. However, they sometimes acted in a way that reproduced rather than challenged these inequities. While some of the girls in the class can recognize important issues impacting their physical education opportunities, they may benefit from some help acting on those feelings. They may benefit from guidance around how to advocate for themselves without oppressing others. Importantly, these teachings in a co-educational physical education class can have a positive impact on students of all genders because hegemonic ideas about gendered behaviours can have negative impacts on both boys, and girls in physical education.

A social justice focus in physical education may help to redefine “strong girls”, and to help both teachers and their students, regardless of gender identity, recognize injustices and advocate for themselves and their peers. Rooted in critical pedagogy, social justice education is a term that has not and likely, cannot have a definition that is agreed upon by all who wish to discuss or apply the concept (Robinson & Randall, 2016). However, among the many definitions and approaches, scholars agree that the purpose of social justice education is to “...aspire to identify, understand, analyze and disrupt existing power relations so as to ensure equity, freedom and justice for all” (Robinson & Randall, 2016, p. 4). It is believed that this can happen through critical questioning and dialogue amongst teachers and students in their classrooms.

During this study, Ms. Green, Mr. Smith and many of their students have identified and are beginning to understand some of the inequities that exist in their physical education classrooms related to gendered power imbalances. Some of the girls in the class have even made efforts to disrupt the power imbalances that they experience. However, realizations, or at least verbalization of these inequities occurred during interviews that took place in private and safe locations that ensured anonymity, rather than as an educational tool during physical education class. For participants in the study, particularly for teachers, these interviews seemed to serve as a time for critical reflection not usually afforded in the busy schedules of physical education practitioners. Some participants appeared to be discovering things for the first time as they shared their physical education experiences. While I, and seemingly the participants in the study, value the protection that a private interview ensures, McEnright and McCuaig (2016) highlight that “...producing knowledge in collaboration with girls can support them in transforming oppressive practices within their local physical education and physical activity contexts” (p. 85). Thus, by entering a classroom space designed for social justice education where all students, and both teachers are asking and answering critical questions and having important discussions together may help the “strong girls” in this study to move forward in creating a more equitable physical education culture.



## Chapter Four

### 4.1 Conclusion

Physical education environments are often regarded as highly gendered spaces. While there is substantial literature discussing the experiences of secondary school students, significantly less is known about the gendered experiences of middle years students in physical education classes. If gendered ideas of middle years students are contributing to discomfort, dislike or a less meaningful experience in physical education, as they sometimes do for secondary students, it is important to seek an understanding of these students' experiences. By increasing our knowledge about middle years students, it is hoped that we can provide a less gendered environment in which all students can experience the joy of movement while benefitting from the social, emotional, mental, and physical health benefits that are gained from physical activity.

The purpose of this research was to better understand the experiences of students in a middle years physical education class, and the impact that gender had on those experiences. Specifically, I sought to answer the following research questions: (1) How do students view and describe the overall culture of their physical education class and their personal experiences within that environment; 2) Does gender play a role in student perspectives, experiences, and behaviours within the physical education classroom; 3) What are the perceptions of the classroom teacher about the culture of their physical education class and the role that gender plays in that environment; and 4) How might the social, political, and physical aspects of the physical education environment contribute to the shaping of culture within the classroom? In order to address these research questions, I was given an incredible opportunity to work with Ms. Green, her grade five and six class, and the physical education specialist, Mr. Smith for approximately four months. Quinte Public School, an urban school in a trendy neighbourhood welcomed me with open arms, just as Ms. Green's class has welcomed each of the diverse students in their class. Due to a lack of gymnasium space, I was also able to observe Ms. Green's class combined with the French stream grade fives and sixes for many physical education classes.

Because gender is very much a cultural, learned construct, and a classroom can be thought of as a culture of its own, an ethnographic method was employed to help answer these questions. Using a feminist ethnographic method that included observation, interviews, and document analysis, I collected and analyzed data to shed light on the research questions that guided my work. Below, I will address each question within the context of the study's findings.

The first research question sought to understand, from the students' perspectives, the culture of this physical education class as well as their personal experiences in that subject. Overall, students reported positive feelings toward physical education. Students felt lucky to belong to their class and explained that their peers treated one another with respect. They understood that the goal of physical education was to be active, to use good teamwork, and to participate, although their behaviours in physical education class sometimes indicated that, occasionally they did not, or couldn't meet these purposes.

Students overwhelmingly reported that the culture of their class changed when they were combined with the French Immersion grade five and six class. All students in the study discussed enjoying physical education more without the presence of the other class, and some students even described tension, and having different perspectives than the other class. I too observed that the culture of the other class, and that of the combined class was quite different than that of Ms. Green's class alone.

The second research question aimed to explore how students' gender, and ideas about gender may impact their personal experiences in physical education. Both boys and girls in this study indicated that their gender had an impact on their physical education experiences. The boys in Ms. Green's class felt an increased pressure to conform to hegemonic masculine behaviours when they were combined with the sportier, more aggressive boys in the other class. While they didn't enjoy the class as much, some boys reported changing their behaviour, becoming more aggressive themselves when classes were combined. Others, as Ms. Green put it, "couldn't hold their own", and were sidelined when classes were combined.

For the girls in Ms. Green's class, opportunities to participate and learn were impacted by a number of factors related to their identities as girls. All of the girls who participated, as well as many of the boys had lower perceptions of the girls' skills, and this made them favour underperformance, giving the ball away and participating as a competent bystander. Girls were also "turned off" by the high competition levels created by the games-based program being taught at QPS. Consistent with other research, high competition levels put girls in this study at risk of "blowing it" for their team, but also were reported to cause social problems amongst the strong female friendships found in Ms. Green's class. Despite occasionally leading to underperformance, the "strong girls" and their friendships were highlighted by Ms. Green, Mr. Smith and the girls in the class. While the girls lost some of their individual strength when

entering the gym, the strong friendships and desire to support one another also served as encouragement and occasionally, resistance to social expectations in physical education.

The third question that guided this research dealt with the perceptions of the classroom teacher, Ms. Green and the physical education specialist, Mr. Smith, regarding the culture of Ms. Green's grade five and six class. Findings suggest that Ms. Green actively worked to build a culture of respect, valuing diversity and honesty in her classroom, and that the students in her class helped to create a positive class culture. However, Ms. Green acknowledged that this culture changed when entering the gym for physical education. She expressed that while the girls in her class are, as a group, strong and supportive, this is somewhat lost in physical education. Ms. Green explained the importance of strong female friendships, and the desire not to lose social status led the girls in her class to underperform so as not to outshine their friends, or get them "out" (eliminate them from the game). Ms. Green also attributed a shift in the behaviour of girls in her class to the presence of the other grade five/six class, where the girls "crushes" were present. Contributing to the complicated social environment, the boys who were the crushes of the girls were actively displaying their masculinity via sporting prowess while in physical education. Ms. Green also acknowledged the difficulty of some of the boys in her class to "hold their own" when combined with the highly masculine, sport-playing boys in the other grade five/six class. Like many of her students, Ms. Green values getting active and moving while in physical education, but she may have some misunderstandings about the value of learning physical skills to accomplish this objective.

Mr. Smith was more straightforward and direct when discussing the gendered culture of Ms. Green's physical education class. He acknowledged that some of the activities that he chose to use in his physical education class can turn the girls, "and some boys too" off of physical activity. Mr. Smith suggested one reason for this is the overly aggressive boys who sometimes do not show appropriate social skills in the class. When discussions turned to the development of skills in physical education, Mr. Smith felt that if he were to evaluate student skills as the curriculum suggests, students would be further turned off of physical activity by the poor evaluations they would receive.

Finally, the fourth research question addressed the way that the social, political, and physical aspects of physical education contribute to the shaping of culture in the classroom. The Saskatchewan Ministry of Education's Physical Education Curriculum document for grade five

and grade six was created with the goal to explicitly help shape the content and structure of physical education in the province. Interestingly, the outcomes for grade five and six mention on multiple occasions the need to develop physical movement skills in students at this age. However it became apparent that both Ms. Green and Mr. Smith placed a low value on skill development and therefore included a limited amount of skill development in their classes (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2010; Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2009). Because this physical education program is dominated by team games where there is a clear winner and loser, having the skills needed to help one's team win has become highly valued in the class culture. Many students often mentioned that perceptions of their own skill level and those of their peers acted as barriers to a fully inclusive and enjoyable physical education class. In particular, many girls felt that they lacked specific skills compared to their male peers, and that the lack of confidence to use said skills restricted their participation.

The curriculum document also includes an outcome that requires students to take personal responsibility in making a plan to move along a social skills continuum that includes self-control, caring for others, self-responsibility, personal growth and making positive connections with others while in physical activity settings (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2009; 2010). Many of the negative aspects that students mentioned when talking about the culture of their physical education class were related to students who were in violation of these social skills, by not sharing, not using respectful communication skills, and not allowing others to become involved in games and activities. Thus, if Mr. Smith and Ms. Green were to explicitly address this outcome, or to use it as a teaching point when they noticed poor social skills of students during class, it may have a positive impact on the culture of their physical education class, and therefore the experiences of students. However, a teacher trained in elementary education, as opposed to physical education, may not necessarily have the specialized knowledge and skills needed to recognize the power that physical activities have for developing social skills and responsibility in young students. It is possible that the curriculum has excellent outcomes that are well-intentioned, however inaccessible by teachers who are not formally trained in the pedagogy of physical skills and physical education.

The lack of space for physical education classes at QPS is a physical element that certainly impacted on the culture of this physical education class. Due to this lack of space, the two grade five/six classes were often combined for physical education. Students felt that because

they weren't as familiar with the students from the other class, and had not worked together to create and/or redefine a class culture with them, that physical education was less enjoyable. In particular, boys in Ms. Green's class reported feeling more aggressive and competitive with the other class, while girls reported increased teasing and bullying, and changing their behaviour in order to not be embarrassed in front of their "crushes". In part, this change in culture may be a result of students coming from different backgrounds, one being a French Immersion class, the other, Ms. Green's English stream grade five and sixes. However, there is also some responsibility on the teachers to ensure that two classes who will be working together, come to an understanding of appropriate behaviours when they are together in physical education.

Finally, though it was not mentioned in the results and discussion section of this thesis, there was a positive response from the teachers and students regarding the interview process. Both teachers and students indicated that they enjoyed the time and safe space provided to think critically about and discuss their physical education experiences. Their positive and sometimes surprised responses suggest that current political, social and physical teaching and learning conditions do not allow for a great deal of self, or shared-reflection. Teachers are encouraged to be reflective practitioners, to think critically about their work and engage in lifelong learning (Danielson, 2007). However, the reality of teaching is fast-paced, sometimes hectic, and involves more than planning, delivering and assessing. It is sometimes not an environment conducive to sitting down with a peer and critically reflecting on one's own pedagogy. Similarly, students are rarely asked to think critically and honestly discuss their schooling experiences beyond their achievement of curricular goals.

During their interviews, both teachers suggested that engaging in the interview process provided a safe space for reflection and realization. Regarding his teaching practices, Mr. Smith mentioned "...and I never really thought until, sitting here right now, I haven't thought about how that affects [the students]...maybe that's even worse?". Later when I asked about professional development (or lack thereof), he expressed "...just even in this conversation we've had, I've been thinking about different things". Ms. Green expressed similar feelings about the interview process, commenting the following on different occasions: "I've never necessarily thought of that", "I'm now wondering...", "...this just popped into my head...", and "That's interesting. I haven't really noticed that until now".

As much as I, as a researcher, appreciate the way that the teachers opened up and shared with me, I believe that they also appreciated the time and safe space made for them to reflect on their own practice, to be asked to think about and notice things that they do not normally have time to do during their hectic career. In the same way that qualitative researchers are encouraged to use a critical friend, I believe there is value, and potential for improvement in practice if teachers are given the time, space, and safe friend to critically reflect with others on their practice throughout their career.

Students also engaged in reflective thinking about their physical education experiences during the interview and focus group process. At the beginning of each interview or focus group, I would use some “warm-up” questions to engage students in thinking about physical education generally. Some of these questions were meant to address whether students enjoyed physical education, what they thought the purpose of physical education was and what made someone “good” at the class. Almost all students started out by telling me that physical education was “fun”, that physical education was the same for boys and for girls, and that the purpose of the class was to participate, to try your best, to be active and, to co-operate with others. However, as the interviews went on, students began to discuss and think differently about their physical education experience, sometimes expressing the opposite of what they stated at the beginning of the interview. It was not that students were changing their answers; rather they were able, perhaps for the first time, to really think critically about their experiences in schools and feel a sense of agency over what happens in physical education. It is my opinion that the interview process provided not only teachers but also students a chance to think differently about their physical education classes, and consider their feelings beyond the traditional dinner table question, “How was school today?”.

**4.1.1 Limitations.** The main limitations of this study come from my position as a novice researcher. These limitations were evident in the data collection phase of the research project. While I followed recommendations for the organization and recording of observations in my field notes, they were lacking in the depth and detail that are needed for an ethnographic study (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). In part, negotiating my “place” in the space of the teachers and students, contributed to this lack of depth. I was perhaps overly cautious not to be intrusive to the teacher and her plans, or to make students feel uncomfortable. Although everyone knew that I was collecting data, I often felt it rude, or distracting to be taking copious notes in the gymnasium

while Ms. Green or Mr. Smith was teaching. I was very sensitive to the possibility of students feeling dehumanized as “subjects”. As a result, much of my field notes and observations occurred after the fact, and are not as detailed as I would have liked. The result of this limitation is an ethnography that uses more of the participants’ explicit descriptions, feelings and explanations than my own observations of the social landscape to describe the studied culture.

A second limitation addresses the difficulty discussing gender with young people. During the interview and focus group process, I significantly underestimated the impact that my gender identity would have on my position as a researcher. At the outset of the project, I optimistically believed that the relationships I formed with students prior to the interview process would negate my identity as a woman. However, I found that the girls who participated in the interview process were more willing to express their feelings regarding physical education, than were the boys in the class. By being explicit about the purpose of the research, all participants understood my belief that physical education should be a place where all students are treated equally, and that I was focussing on how boys and girls experience the subject. As such, it is possible that there was hesitation in the responses of the boys to responding truthfully and/or fully during interviews, for fear that I would not approve of what they were saying. Additionally, some boys likely felt pressure to demonstrate the characteristics of hegemonic masculinity (competitive, aggressive, enjoying a sports environment), and did not want to discuss physical education in a way that would put their “masculinity” in question. These issues likely impacted my ability to fully understand the experiences of the boys in Ms. Green’s class. The result is an ethnography, which sheds more light on the experiences of the girls in this culture-sharing group, than the boys.

Finally, some participants were interviewed twice, while others were only interviewed on one occasion due to constraints related to time and space as well as willingness of students to be interviewed. Despite many opportunities for more informal conversations, ethnographic studies really benefit from multiple interview opportunities that come with a prolonged amount of time in the field (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). Those who could be interviewed on multiple occasions were able to reflect on the first interview, participate in physical education class, and then respond to old and new questions during the second interview. This was beneficial, as many students seemed to discover things during their interview that may have changed the way they approached physical education class. However, those who were interviewed only one time did

not benefit from this process. Had all participants been interviewed on multiple occasions, a stronger set of data would have been collected, increasing the trustworthiness of the findings.

#### **4.1.2 Strengths**

The strong and genuine relationships that I formed with Ms. Green, Mr. Smith and their students can be considered a strength of this study. I spent quite a few weeks getting to know Ms. Green and her students before beginning the formal data collection process. I believe that having pre-established these trusting and friendly relationships helped to make interview and focus group environments comfortable, and safe spaces. Students indicated that they felt comfortable sharing their experiences with me, despite the tape-recorder and newness of the interview setting. Indeed, I often felt privileged and so appreciative of the raw, and genuine way that students shared their feelings with me. The way that Mr. Smith and Ms. Green explored their own understandings, and acknowledged their confusions about gender, pedagogy and physical education was hard and emotional professional development and I am so grateful to them for engaging in that process. While the relationships formed with participants helped me to collect rich, and authentic data, I believe they were also, in part, what encouraged me to be so keenly attuned to “my place in their space” as discussed in the limitations section. However, the relationships formed combined with my reflective nature has led to a thesis that is shaped by tough ethical decisions.

Initially, this thesis contained an additional sub-theme within “Our Class”. This deleted section highlighted a student with a particular and obvious difference when compared to their peers. This student shared with me a uniquely negative experience of physical education. In their own words, this negative experience was directly linked to their specific form of diversity. However, once written, it became clear to me that the section made the student too easily identifiable. While the student and their parents both signed the consent forms, and they were aware that interviews were being tape-recorded, I decided it was not ethical to include their story in this thesis. This is another strength of the study. Admittedly, I was disappointed that I was not able to share this student’s story with readers, but the safety, anonymity, and future physical education experiences of this student are more important. Over time, I have come to appreciate their story as one that strongly changed me as a researcher, but mostly as a teacher. I value that I can share the knowledge gained from their story in less formal ways through my own interactions with students.



Finally, the number of students willing to participate in this study is also a strength. In terms of qualitative work, fourteen students and two teachers is considered a fairly large sample size. Being able to observe the entire class, combined with hearing about the experiences of 16 members of this culture-sharing group allowed me to gain a holistic and realistic understanding of this class' physical education experiences.

**4.1.3 Recommendations for future research and practice.** As I climbed from the mezzanine overlooking the gym to the hardwood courts one day, Ms. Green said to me, “You must be able to see everything that’s going on from up there!” and I suddenly realized what a privileged position I was in. It is important, particularly when making recommendations for teacher practice and training that I acknowledge the fact that my conclusions, and therefore recommendations come from the mezzanine view, that of an “outsider” to this class and, ultimately, a privileged position. Unlike the teachers in this study who are at any given moment participating in instructional strategies, assessment, classroom management, safety precautions, and whatever social drama is occurring that day, my only purpose was to participate, listen, and observe. I then was able to spend many months reflecting on each lesson and interaction and had time to make connections to literature and theories, which is not afforded to the teacher running from the gym to the science room to teach her next class. As such, I recognize that the emerging recommendations to practitioners are idealized, and perhaps seen as yet another pair of shoes for a teacher to fill. However, a main criticism of critical pedagogy research is the tendency to describe and criticize in a theoretical way without mobilizing, or providing alternative solutions for practitioners (Enright & McCuaig, 2016). Thus, it is my responsibility to attempt to turn what I have learned from Ms. Green and her students into valuable, tangible recommendations for physical education teachers foremost, but also other researchers, teacher educators, administrators and consultants. As Ladda (2014) asserts “...for our profession [physical educators and researchers] to be socially just, we must not only offer opportunity in theory but also ensure a commitment to diversity and inclusion in practice” (p.3). Below I outline four major recommendations for those involved in teaching physical education to middle years students, followed by recommendations for future research.

#### ***4.1.3.1 Recommendations for practice***

*Physical literacy as a tool for equity in physical education.* While neither teacher in this study discussed physical literacy, many students addressed their need to feel competent and confident in performing basic fundamental movement skills. As such, I believe it is important for middle years teachers to adopt physical literacy as the goal of their physical education classes. Physical and Health Education Canada asserts, “Individuals who are physically literate move with competence and confidence in a wide variety of physical activities in multiple environments that benefit the healthy development of the whole person” (Physical and Health Education Canada, 2010). Students in this study reported avoiding participation (having a lack of motivation) because they did not feel competent or confident to perform the fundamental skills needed to participate in the games being played. Some girls even explicitly expressed their need to work on skills such as throwing, catching, and kicking, because the boys were currently better than they were. While engaging in this research project, I have come to wholeheartedly agree with Ladda (2014) when he asserts, “Physical Literacy is a social justice issue!” (p.3). The opportunities to become physically literate have been provided unequally to young people (depending on such things as sex, socioeconomic status, and geographical location) and it is the responsibility of physical educators to provide diversity and inclusion in their practice, to bridge this gap (Ladda, 2014). Specific to this study, a multitude of factors have left students feeling as though the skills of girls do not compare to those of the boys. Regardless of whether there is truth in skill level disparity or whether it is the perception of students, a physical literacy program that focuses on skill development, and includes appropriate feedback and application tasks can improve both actual skill levels (competence), and the confidence of students to perform those skills (Sport for Life Society, 2016). Furthermore, a curriculum infused with physical literacy concepts will not only help to improve the competence and confidence of all students in the class, but it will also help students to understand that not all of their peers are at the same point in their physical literacy journey. As such, it may also help students to move along the social skills continuum mentioned in the curriculum by helping students to be empathetic and inclusive of students whose skills do not yet match theirs.

*Accountability to the curriculum as a tool for varied movement experiences.* The repetitive, competitive, games-based activities in Ms. Green and Mr. Smith’s physical education classes was a source of much discussion by the students during my time at QPS. In addition to

limiting skill development opportunities, a physical education class dominated by games may lead to a competitive, high-stakes environment in which it is both desired and easy for students to be competent bystanders. Furthermore, students may not be exposed to the full range of physical activities that may benefit their health. The Saskatchewan Ministry of Education's Physical Education Curriculum outlines goals for each grade in the following three domains: Active Living, Skillful Movement, and Relationships (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2010). In order to meet each of these goals, outcomes for grade five and grade six physical education are numerous and varied in their content addressing social skills, outdoor activities, individual pursuits, leisure activities, injury, fitness, skill development and artistic movements, to name a few (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2009; 2010). The curriculum is designed for students to participate in various activities beyond traditional team games, encouraging the discovery of enjoyable physical activities. Providing students an opportunity to engage in novel and unique activities may also create situations that challenge the gendered and abilities based hierarchy that often exists in physical education classes. Thus, it is important that teachers use, and are held accountable for using the curriculum as a resource for their teaching and to ensure that they are meeting the needs of all students, and addressing all of the outcomes in order to properly prepare their students for future physical activity endeavours.

*Classroom culture as a tool for safe and caring physical education environments.*

Establishing a positive, safe, and caring classroom culture has been increasingly discussed as an important process for teachers and students to engage in together. In elementary and middle years classrooms, teachers have been doing wonderful things at the beginning of the year and throughout to maintain a culture of respect, diversity and learning. Strategies through which to create a positive classroom culture include co-constructing class guidelines, implementing character education, and discussing current media events. However, the nature of physical education (a new physical environment, bodies on display, gender stereotypes, competitive situations etc.) may make it difficult for students to transfer the values that underlie their classroom culture to this new and, sometimes challenging environment. It may be beneficial for teachers to reinforce and remind students about their classroom culture, specifically as it relates to physical education, and behaviours in the gymnasium. In doing this, teachers could address the curricular outcome related to the social skills continuum, and also discuss with their students issues such as ability levels, respect in the gymnasium, appropriate behaviour, inclusiveness,

gender stereotypes, expectations, and assessment criteria. By including students in recurring discussions about a positive environment in physical education, students may be encouraged to critically reflect on their experiences and may be given a space to advocate for themselves and others.

*Social justice education as a tool for diverse gender expression in physical education.*

While the previous recommendations for practice all address in some way, a form of critical social justice education, I believe that this pedagogical approach is deserving of consideration of its own. While I have previously defined critical social justice education, I find it particularly useful to highlight the shared principals of critical social justice education to aid in understanding what this pedagogical approach may look like. Sensoy and DiAngelo (2012) list these principals as the following:

- All people are individuals, but they are also members of social groups;
- These social groups are valued unequally in society;
- Social groups that are valued more highly have greater access to the resources of a society;
- Social injustice is real, exists today, and results in unequal access to resources between groups of people;
- Those who claim to be for social justice must be engaged in self-reflection about their own socialization into these groups (their “positionality”) and must strategically act from that awareness in ways that challenge social injustice;
- This action requires a commitment to an ongoing and lifelong process.

(p. xviii)

Based on the findings of this study and others, groups such as girls and young women, ethnic minorities, boys who do not display a hegemonic form of masculinity, and those who are not skilled in sports are valued less than other groups, and therefore afforded limited access to resources (participation, learning, confidence, safety) in physical education settings. A teacher practicing critical social justice education would reflect on the groups within her class who are valued less, examine her role in determining who has access to resources and taking action to make her class a more socially just environment. Furthermore, by making visible to her students which groups of people are privileged in physical activity settings and encouraging them to question the legitimacy and source(s) of these dominant ideas, students can also be engaged in

the structuring of a more socially just physical education environment (Enright & McCauig, 2016). Critical social justice education encourages the type of reflection, discussion and debate that many participants in this study appreciated during the interview process. As Enright and McCauig (2016) point out, when engaging in social justice pedagogies, “These debates arise as students work to name, negotiate and sometimes overcome oppressive body norms and other self-identified barriers to their own and others’ participation” (p. 86). I believe teachers and students, together can begin to structure a physical education culture where, for example Mateo doesn’t need to feel threatened by boys in the other class, where the girls feel confident to use their skills to score points, where Kai feels included in the games despite his disabilities, and where Alisha feels comfortable in her body, and her femininity.

#### ***4.1.3.2 Recommendations for future research.***

Based on the findings from this study, situated within the current literature, I have several recommendations for future research. The first is continued research on masculinities and physical education. Girls and young women have long been considered the “problem” in physical education research (Oliver & Kirk, 2016). However, scholars such as Jachyra (2014), and Tischler and McCaughtry (2011) have shown that for many boys and young men, physical education is a disengaging, uncomfortable, and sometimes unsafe environment. While I am not suggesting that work related to girls and young women in physical education cease, I believe that increased knowledge about the impact of hegemonic gender ideas including masculinities, will aid in our understanding of gender, and not boys and/or girls, as problematic in physical education settings.

I also echo Azzarito’s call for intersectional research on gender in physical education settings (2009). This study has reminded me that young people’s identities are not solely based on their gender identity but include a number of other factors including their socioeconomic status, race and ethnicity, sexuality and other privileging and oppressive characteristics. Thus, studies examining gender, alone, only provide a piece of the puzzle when it comes to individual inequities in physical education classrooms.

Finally, there is criticism of the body of research to which this study contributes suggesting that scholars are stagnant in a “reproductive cycle [of description] that has done little to improve the current situation for girls” (Oliver & Kirk, 2016, p. 324). My research, specifically my discussion around the girls in Ms. Green’s class adds to this reproduction, or

retelling of the same old story. While it is important and significant to highlight that the gendered culture of physical education has not progressed as much as some would like, I believe that it is time to move forward with action. As such, I recommend that researchers begin to explore strategies through which to dismantle current hegemonic gender ideas in physical education, rather than continuing to describe and explain them. One way to accomplish this is for future research to adopt an activist approach toward working with students to change their physical education landscapes (Oliver & Kirk, 2016). Applying this approach specifically to research addressing girls in physical education, Oliver and Kirk outline the following 4 critical elements for activist research:

a) that teachers be student-centred in their pedagogical practices; (b) that teachers create spaces in their curriculum for girls to critically study their embodiment; (c) that physical education be inquiry-based and *centred in* action and; (d) that there is sustained listening and responding to girls over time. (p. 317)

Using this activist approach outlined in their 2016 article, Oliver and Kirk assert,

We believe that an activist approach that focuses specifically on girls' experiences provides essential spaces for them to identify, critique and negotiate their self-identified barriers to valuing a physically active life. We see these forms of pedagogy as means of challenging rather than reproducing gender divisions. (p. 314)

It is important to note that while Oliver and Kirk are personally interested in an activist approach with girls and young women, they encourage similar work be done with boys and young men to address masculinities in physical education.

Staying with the theme of moving towards action in the field, I recommend that future research address the impact that strategies such as physical literacy, and critical social justice education can have on expanding the behaviours, attitudes and dispositions of young people of all gender identities. As such, future research in physical education classes should also explore the use of methods like participatory action research and interventions. According to Bergold and Thomas (2012):

Participatory research methods are geared towards planning and conducting the research process *with* those people whose life-world and meaningful actions are under study. Consequently, this means that the aim of the inquiry and the research questions develop out of the convergence of two perspectives—that of science *and* of practice. (para. 1)

Thus, this methodology would involve teachers and students in the entire research process through which they could move deeper in understanding the role of physical education in shaping, contributing to, and disrupting ideas about gender. An intervention would involve examining student experiences before and after the use of a recommended strategy such as physical literacy, critical social justice education or character education.

#### **4.1.4 Personal Impact**

*“The more I learn, the more I realize how much I don’t know.” –Albert Einstein*

*“Ah, Children...Such a great way to start adults!” –My Mom*

When I started this journey, fresh out of teacher’s college I remember thinking, “I want to learn *more!*” and the “logical” place to do that was as a masters student, being guided by some of the most experienced teachers and researchers in gender and physical education. Now, at the end of my journey, almost a master, I’m having very similar thoughts: “There’s so much I don’t know!”. However this time, it is the students from whom I need to listen, learn, and be guided.

The entirety of this project has reminded me of the thoughtfulness, wisdom, empathy and ideas that can come from listening to the young people whose lived reality includes physical education. For that, I must thank the students who welcomed me into their classroom and shared their thoughts and feelings with me. I have learned so much from them, and they have inspired me to finally spend some time teaching and learning in a school setting. Had I entered the classroom as a teacher prior to this project, I would not have valued the opinions and feelings of my students in the same way that I am now determined to do.

The first few times that I left Quinte Public School, I remember thinking to myself that I’d stumbled upon a very unique group of students. I had never before seen a class working together as well as these students did. At first, I chalked this up to a regular “classroom” environment, rather than the physical education classes that I am used to. However as soon as I started talking to Ms. Green, I realized that it was her passion and hard work that had united this unique group of students in a very special, positive and productive classroom culture. I admired the way that she spoke to students like they were friends, while simultaneously instilling the importance of knowledge, critical thinking, and learning. Her approach to teaching and the relationships that she had developed with her students gave me a renewed interest in middle years students. I hope that I am so fortunate to learn from her again in the future.

Finally, like Einstein suggests, what I have really learned is how much I don't know. Gender, socialization, teaching, learning, and culture are all very complicated. I can't know everything about those topics, and they depend on each individual's perceptions, experiences, and values. Learning from Ms. Green and Mr. Smith's interview experiences, I have discovered that when it comes to good pedagogy, it is less important to know exactly what, for example, gender means, and more important to know how to be reflective about the impact of gender in my classroom. By reading the articles, and textbooks, and knowing all of the theories, I can be prepared, but without reflecting on how my actions as a teacher are impacting each of my students' learning, feelings, and ideas, I cannot be effective in practice. Previously, I may have considered dwelling on the past and worrying about things that I cannot change but I now understand that it is precisely the opposite: contemplating and taking responsibility for the things that I can change.



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## Appendices



**Appendix A**  
**Teacher Consent Form**



**CONSENT FORM (Educator)**

**Project Title:** Exploring the Role of Gender in Student Experiences of Elementary School Physical Education.

**Principal Investigator:**

Dr. Louise Humbert  
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**Student Investigator:**

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**INVITATION**

We would like to ask for your assistance with a study that is being carried out by the College of Kinesiology at the University of Saskatchewan. This project is designed to a) gain an understanding of the culture of a grade 6 physical education classroom, students' experiences in that classroom and the role that gender may play in those experiences and (b) to better understand your perspective of the culture of your class and the role that gender may play in the experiences of your students. We anticipate that the student-centred information and teacher perspective may provide unique insight into how to support the creation of inclusive physical education environments.

**WHAT'S INVOLVED**

*Observations*

To understand more about the environment of the physical education classroom, the student researcher will be present for the morning or afternoon during which your physical education class occurs. During these times, you will teach your classes as you usually would. No special pre-planning or considerations will be required. I will record notes about the physical and social environment, interactions among students as peers and with you as the instructor.

*Interviews*

To better understand your perspective of your class environment and the possible role that gender plays in students' physical education experiences, I will ask your permission to perform 2-3 interviews with you over the course of data collection, approximately 3 months. These interviews will take about 15-20 minutes and will occur at a time and place that is convenient for you. With your permission, I will audio-record the interviews before transcribing them verbatim.

Removing any possible identifiers such as your name, the school name, and all student names will ensure your identity remains confidential to those outside of the study. During these interviews, I will ask about your personal physical education experiences, teacher education and seek your opinion on the role that gender plays in your physical education classes as well as the instructional strategies that you use. I may also seek your opinion and feelings about specific events observed during your classes. You can request that the interview be terminated at any point, refuse to answer a question, and you can also request the audio recording device be shut off at any point. If you select the option below, you will be given the opportunity to review the transcript of your interview, and to add, alter, or delete information from the transcripts as you see fit.

I will also be interviewing students from your classes who volunteer, in a series of one-on-one interviews and focus groups of 4-6 students. These interviews will take between 20 and 30 minutes. All students will be required to obtain consent from a parent/guardian as well as give written and verbal consent themselves before they may participate in the study. Consenting students will be given the choice as to what type of interview they would like to be involved in. In all analyses and reporting, students will be assigned a pseudonym to ensure their confidentiality. I may ask for your input on appropriate groups of students for focus groups. Together with you and the school principal, we will find times and locations within the school to speak with students in a way that minimizes loss of instructional time and interruptions to you and your classes. Students will have the option to request that the interview be terminated at any point, refuse to answer a question, and they can also request the audio recording device be shut off at any point. In lieu of engaging in the transcript release process with student participants, the student-researcher will clarify themes of the interview and/or discussion with participants shortly after the interview occurs. Student will also be asked if there is anything they have disclosed that they would not like reported.

### ***POTENTIAL BENEFITS AND RISKS***

Possible risks that may occur through this research project are:

- Students may feel psychological or emotional stress or discomfort during certain interview questions.

How these risks will be managed:

- Every effort will be made to ensure that students know they can pass on any question that is asked and can choose to not participate in the discussion.
- Students who do feel upset or uncomfortable during as a result of the interview process will be provided information on how to access their Elementary School Counselor for guidance.

The benefits likely to be gained through this research project are:

- A greater understanding of the experiences of middle school students in the physical education classroom.
- A greater understanding of the role that gender may play in student experiences.
- An awareness of a teacher's perspective on gender in the physical education classroom.
- Increased understanding on how to support the creation of inclusive physical education environments.

## **PUBLICATION OF RESULTS**

The aggregate results from this project will be made available to the researchers, school administrator, parents, and community members. The aggregate results may also appear in printed or published reports such as journal articles and may also be presented at conferences. The final report for this project will be given to you after the study is completed.

## **CONFIDENTIALITY**

The interviews will be recorded and transcribed. No names will be associated with your interview including yours, the school or the names of any student-participants. All information you provide will be considered confidential. If we choose to use a quote you have provided when we disseminate the results you have the option of being provided a pseudonym and we will not use quotes that make you easily identifiable to those who do not already know about your participation in the study. Because you are the only teacher involved in the study, your peers, principal and anyone else with whom you have shared information about your participation in the study may be able to link information to you.

Access to interview data will be restricted to the Principal Researcher, Dr. Louise Humbert, and myself, Nicole Cameron. Your name will not appear in any thesis or report resulting from this study. All data will be kept in a locked filing cabinet in the office of Nicole Cameron. After analysis of all data, Dr. Louise Humbert, College of Kinesiology, will assume responsibility for data storage for five years upon completion of the study.

## **VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION**

Participation in this study is voluntary. If you wish, you may decline to answer any questions or participate in any component of the study. Further, you may decide to withdraw from this study at any time and may do so without any penalty. If you decide to withdraw, the information you have shared with us will be withdrawn and deleted. Your right to withdraw from the study will apply until the data has been disseminated. After this it is possible that some form of research dissemination will have already occurred and it may not be possible to withdraw your data.

## **CONTACT INFORMATION AND ETHICS CLEARANCE**

If you have any questions about this study or require further information, please contact the principal investigator or the student researcher.

This research project has been approved on ethical grounds by the University of Saskatchewan Behavioural Research Ethics Board. Any questions regarding your rights as a participant may be addressed to that committee through the Research Ethics Office [ethics.office@usask.ca](mailto:ethics.office@usask.ca) (306) 966-2975. Out of town participants may call toll free (888) 966-2975.

Thank you for your assistance in this project. Please keep a copy of this form for your records.

## Consent to Participate

I have read and understand the description of the research study provided above. I have been provided with an opportunity to ask questions and my questions have been answered satisfactorily. I agree to participate in the study described above, understanding that I may withdraw my consent prior to the dissemination of the results. A copy of this consent form has been given to me for my records.

I would like the opportunity to review my transcripts: Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Signature of Participant)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Date)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Signature of Researcher)

**Appendix B**  
**Consent (Parent/Guardian)**



**CONSENT LETTER (Parent)**

**Project Title:** Exploring the Role of Gender in Student Experiences of Elementary School Physical Education.

**Principal Investigator:**

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**INVITATION**

Your child is invited to participate in a study being run in your child's classroom, by the University of Saskatchewan.

The project is designed to:

- a) Better understand how students experience physical education in schools
- b) Explore the role that gender may play in student physical education experiences.

**WHAT'S INVOLVED**

*Observations*

- The student researcher will be present during the morning or afternoon of your child's regularly scheduled physical education classes.
- The class will proceed as usual, with routines, content and instruction remaining unchanged.
- The student researcher will record notes about the physical and social environment.

*Interviews*

- Students may choose to be interviewed "one-on-one" *or* in a small peer group (focus group) with the student researcher for 20-30 minutes per interview
- Purpose of interviews and focus groups:
  - a) To understand how students feel about and behave in their physical education class
  - b) To explore whether gender plays a role in student physical education experiences.
- The questions your child will be asked address the following topics:
  - How they feel about physical education class
  - Their likes, dislikes, and any changes they would make to the class
  - Their future physical education plans
  - Their ideas about how student gender impacts their physical education class

- Interviews will happen in a private place and will not happen at a time when your child would miss important class content.
- If your child says it is ok, their interviews and focus groups will be audio-recorded and later transcribed word for word.
- Every effort will be made so your child understands that they can:
  - Request to stop the interview at any point
  - Refuse to answer a question
  - Request the audio recording device be shut off at any point.
  - Review and clarify the themes from their interview.

### ***POTENTIAL BENEFITS AND RISKS***

*Observation:* None

*Interviews:* Small Chance of Psychological or Emotional Stress or Discomfort during interview questions

*How these risks will be managed:*

- We will tell your child that they can pass on any question and can choose not to participate in the discussion.
- If your child does begin to feel upset or uncomfortable during or after their interview, we will provide information on how to access their Elementary School Counselor for guidance.
- Focus groups will be made purposefully for the comfort of all students. The student researcher and Ms Gibson will work together and consider:
  - Cooperation
  - Comfort levels
  - Communication styles
  - Peer-relationships
  - Ability to respect the opinions of others

### **CONFIDENTIALITY**

- Your child will be assigned a pseudonym (different name) that will be used when their words, actions and behaviours are recorded during observation and interviews
- All information will be considered confidential and only the Principal Investigator and the student researcher will have access to data.
- If your child chooses to participate in a focus group interview, the student researcher will keep the discussion confidential. We will ask all other students in the focus group to respect the confidentiality of their peers by not disclosing the contents of the discussion outside of the meeting, but cannot guarantee that students will not share.
- All data will be kept in a locked filing cabinet in the office of Nicole Cameron. After analysis of all data, Dr. Louise Humbert, College of Kinesiology, will keep the data for five years upon completion of the study.

### **VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION**

- Your child's participation is voluntary.
- You may decline to have your child participate in this study.

- If you do decide to have your child participate in this study you may withdraw your child from this study at any time, without any penalty. If you or your child withdraws, their data will be withdrawn and deleted.
- Your child's participation or non-participation in this study will have no effect on their participation in physical education class or their grades.
- Your right to withdraw your child from the study will apply until the study findings have been shared. After this it is possible that some form of research dissemination will have already occurred and it may not be possible to withdraw your child's data.

### ***PUBLICATION OF RESULTS***

The aggregate results from this project will be made available to the researchers, school administrator, parents, and community members. The grouped results may also appear in printed or published reports such as journal articles and may also be presented at conferences.

### ***CONTACT INFORMATION AND ETHICS CLEARANCE***

If you have any questions about this study or require further information, please contact the principal investigator or the student researcher using the contact information provided above.

This research project has been approved on ethical grounds by the University of Saskatchewan Behavioural Research Ethics Board. Any questions regarding your rights or your child's rights as a participant may be addressed to that committee through the Research Ethics Office [ethics.office@usask.ca](mailto:ethics.office@usask.ca) (306) 966-2975. Out of town participants may call toll free (888) 966-2975.

Thank you for your assistance in this project. Please keep a copy of this form for your records.

### **Consent to Participate**

I have read and understand the description of the research study provided above. I have been provided with an opportunity to ask questions and my questions have been answered satisfactorily. I understand that I may withdraw my consent to have my child participate at any time. A copy of this consent form has been given to me for my records.

I, \_\_\_\_\_ give permission to allow \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_ to participate in this study conducted by the College of Kinesiology.

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Signature of Parent/Guardian)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Date)

### **Contact Information**

I prefer to be contacted by (Please circle one and provide the appropriate information):

phone: \_\_\_\_\_ email: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Signature of Researcher)



## Appendix C Assent (Student)



### Assent for Participants (Students)

**Principal Investigator:**

Dr. Louise Humbert  
College of Kinesiology,  
University of Saskatchewan  
(306) 966 -1070  
louise.humbert@usask.ca

**Student Investigator:**

Nicole Cameron, Msc Student  
College of Kinesiology  
University of Saskatchewan  
(226) 228-7559  
n.cameron@usask.ca

You are being invited to take part in a study we are doing to learn about your physical education class. This form tells you about the study. If there is anything you don't understand, please ask your parent or guardian, Ms. Gibson, or Nikki.

**Why are we doing this project?**

This study is going to help us understand what it's like to be you in physical education class, including what you like and dislike, things you would change and plans for taking phys-ed in the future. We also want to see whether those things are different if you are a girl or a boy.

**What will happen during the study?**

For the first little while, I will be sitting in on your classes including your physical education class and you are just going to do what you usually do with your teacher. You don't have to change anything about the way you usually participate.

After I have been in your class for a few weeks, I might ask you to talk to me about your experiences in phys-ed class-I will ask you about what you like and dislike, about your future plans to take PE and whether you think being a boy or a girl has anything to do with how you experience phys-ed class.

Your teacher will not be in the interview and they will never know what you say. If you do want to talk to me about these things, you can choose to do it by yourself (just you and me) or you can do it in what we call a focus group. A focus group would be you and 4 or 5 of your classmates, having a discussion with me at the same time.

**Who will know what I did in the study?**

The information about what you do in class and what you tell me in the focus group will not be shared with anyone. The only people who will know what you said in your interview and did in the gym will be myself and one person at the University (my teacher). No other kids at the

school or your teacher will see your information. Your name will never be on any papers that we share with other people. All of the information we get in the study will be kept on a computer with a password that only my teacher and I know.

The things that I see you doing in the gym and the information you tell me in the interviews will be put together and written in a paper. It may also be presented at a conference, but no one will know that it was you who participated.

**What are the good things about taking part in this study?**

The information that you give us about how you feel in physical education class might help other teachers and researchers like me make phys-ed class as enjoyable as possible for other kids.

**What are the bad things about taking part in this study?**

You may feel uncomfortable or upset during some of the interview questions. If this is the case, or you simply don't have anything to say, you can skip any questions at any time, or you can choose not to participate in the discussion at all. If you do start to feel uncomfortable or stressed out, I can set you up with one of your school counselor's to talk to.

**Do you have to be in the study?**

You do not have to be in the study. No one will be mad or disappointed if you don't want to do this. This study doesn't have anything to do with your usual schoolwork and you can still do all of the things you usually do in the class if you aren't in this study. Later on I will ask you by yourself if you want to participate. If you don't want to be in this study, just say no when I ask you.

We will also ask your parents if they would like you to be in the study. Even if your parents want you to be in the study you can still say no. Also, if you say yes now it is ok to change your mind later and not be in the study any more. If that happens we will delete all of the information that you told me as long as it's before we publish work. If any new information about the study happens, we will let you know as soon as possible.

**What if you have any questions?**

You can ask questions any time, now or later. When I ask you later if you want to be in the study I will ask you again if you have questions. Please ask as many questions as you like-questions are a good thing!

**CONTACT INFORMATION AND ETHICS CLEARANCE**

If you have any questions about this study or want more information, please contact the principal investigator or the student researcher using the contact information provided above. This study has been reviewed and received ethics approval on November 10, 2015 through the **Research Ethics Office at the University of Saskatchewan (306-966-2084)**. If you have any comments or concerns about your rights as a research participant, please contact the Research Ethics Office.

Thank you for your assistance in this project. Please keep a copy of this form for your records.

**Consent to Participate**

I have been verbally presented with the study and understand the description of the research study provided above. I have been provided with an opportunity to ask questions and my questions have been answered satisfactorily. I agree to participate in the study described above, understanding that I may withdraw my consent prior to the dissemination of the results. A copy of this consent form has been given to me for my records.

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Signature of Participant)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Date)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Signature of Researcher)

## Appendix D Student Participant Interview Guide

### *Initial Semi-structured Interview Questions for Student-Participants*

#### **Introduction:**

- I would like to ask you a few questions about your experience in physical education class.
  - There are no wrong answers and I really want to know what you think, even if you think I won't like it. To me, everyone's opinion is really important.
  - If there is a question that you don't want to answer, that is ok too, you don't have to answer them all! As we go along, if you have any questions, please feel free to ask me. If you want me to turn off the tape recorder at any point, just ask!
  - Everything that you say to me today will be kept confidential. My teacher at the university and I will be the only people to see the thoughts and opinions that you share with me today.
  - (FOR FOCUS GROUPS: I ask that you be respectful to your classmates by not talking about this focus group once it is over. While we are here, I would like you to be kind to one another and respect everyone's opinions, even if it isn't the same as yours.)
- 1) How do you feel about physical education? Do you enjoy it?
  - 2) What is it that you like about physical education class? Your answers don't have to be specific activities; I want you to think about the class as the whole time you are in the gym!
    - a. Why do you like that aspect?
  - 3) Is there any part about physical education class that you really do not like?
    - a. Why do you dislike that aspect?
  - 4) Is there any part of physical education class that makes you feel uncomfortable?
    - a. Why does it make you feel uncomfortable?
    - b. What would make you feel more comfortable in that situation?
  - 5) If you could change one thing about physical education class, what would it be?
  - 6) What do you think is the most important part of PE class? (What is the purpose of PE class?)
  - 7) How is PE different from your other classes?
  - 8) How do you feel when you walk into the gym for PE?
  - 9) Do you think that physical education class is different for boys and girls? Please Explain.
  - 10) If you were a boy/girl (different gender), would you act differently in PE? Please Explain.
  - 11) If there were only girls or only boys in your class, how would PE be different?

- 12) When you go to High School, your PE classes in grade 9 will probably be all girls or all boys, but not both.
- What do you think about that?
  - Will you like that better or worse? Why?
  - If grade 10 PE is co-ed and you have a choice, will you still take that class? What if it is only girls or only boys?
- 13) Is there anything else that you would like to share with me about physical education or boys and girls, or your class?

## Appendix D Interview Guide (Ms. Green)

### *Initial Semi-Structured Interview Questions for the Participating Teacher*

**Introduction:** We really appreciate you participating in this interview because your opinions and experiences are very important to us. Our goal is to better understand your perspective on issues of gender in your physical education classroom.

#### **A few things about what will happen:**

- I have some questions for you; there are no right or wrong answers; it is your personal opinions and experiences that we are interested in;
- The tape recorder can be shut off at any time, please feel free to ask us to do so;
- Only the researchers will listen to the tape;
- I will assign a pseudonym that will be used in all formal reports, presentations and communications about the study;
- Some questions may sound repetitive, it is just me wanting to be sure that I understand what you are saying;
- Do you have any questions or concerns before we begin? Please feel free to ask any questions as we go along if something is unclear.

#### **Part A: General Questions**

- 1) How many years have you been teaching?
  - a. At this school?
  - b. At other schools?
  - c. Have you always taught your own Physical Education?
  
- 2) Do you enjoy teaching physical education?
  - a. Why/Why not?
  - b. What is it that you enjoy? Why?
  - c. Are there any aspects that you do not enjoy about teaching PE?
  
- 3) What is your background in physical education?
  - a. Certification?
  - b. Years of Experience?
  - c. Extracurricular?
  - d. Do you play sports, or participate in recreation or fitness activities?
  
- 4) What are the purposes of your PE classes? What do you think is important for students to learn/gain/experience?
  - a. Why is that important?
  
- 5) Did you enjoy physical education as an elementary and secondary school student? Why or Why not?

- 6) Do you think that physical education class has changed since you were in school? In what ways?

**Part B: Your Class**

I really value, and like to think about classrooms as being, or having their own culture. So for a few minutes, I would like to talk a bit about the culture of your class, in and out of PE.

- 7) How would you describe the overall culture of your class?
- 8) Was this a culture that you wanted to create, or worked to create, or did it emerge naturally?
- a. How? What are some of the things that you did at the beginning of the year, or throughout the year?
  - b. What is it about those things that were important for you and your class to do?
- 9) What role do you feel relationships play in creating this culture?
- a. Between you and the students?
  - b. Between students as peers?
- 10) Do you feel that this culture is evident across all your subjects?
- a. In PE too?
  - b. What about when you aren't the teacher, so when Mr. S or Mme B teaches?
  - c. What about when you are combined with another class? Does this impact the culture of your class? How?
- 11) What do you think the relationship between the overall culture that has been created and the culture of your class when they are in the gym for PE?
- a. Do you need to focus on any aspects more or less when you are in the gym?

Now I would like to talk specifically about physical education and about gender a little bit.

- 12) When I say gender, what do you think? So how would you define gender, or how do you conceptualize gender?

I like to use this definition: "The socially constructed roles, behaviours, activities and attributes that a society considers appropriate for men and for women".

- 13) Does that definition work for you? Is there anything about it that stands out, or is important or confusing to you?
- 14) When you think about the boys and the girls in your class, do you find that gender plays a role in the way that your students experience physical education?
- a. Participation?
  - b. Preferred Activities?
  - c. Social Interactions with Peers?
  - d. Social Interactions with you?
- 15) Do the relationships that we talked about earlier change depending on the gender of your students?

- a. Again, Peer relationships AND/OR the relationships that you have with your students?
- 16) Do you think that the things you just mentioned are unique to physical education, or to do classroom teachers also experience them in their classes?
- a. What about physical activity outside of PE (i.e. recess, intermural and intramural sports and activities etc...)
- 17) Do you think that your students feel pressure to behave a certain way in PE, depending on their gender? (Do they feel like they have to act according to those roles, behaviours, attributes that society says they should?)
- a. Where might those ideas about appropriate behaviours or pressure come from? Peers, Parents, Media...?
- 18) Do you know if the curriculum documents provide any guidance or information about gender in schools, or in PE class? Any other resources?
- 19) **\*\* (If Appropriate)** *What types of instructional strategies do you use to address the things that you are noticing about boys and girls in your PE class?*
- 20) **\*\* (If Appropriate)** *In terms of support, or resources, is there anything that you think would help to better address the things that you are noticing about gender in your classroom?*

Finally, I would like to ask you about a few things that I have seen while I have been here and just invite you to help me to understand them a little bit better.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.



## **Appendix F**

### **Interview Guide (Mr. Smith)**

**Introduction:** We really appreciate you participating in this interview because your opinions and experiences are very important to us. My goal is to better understand your perspectives on issues of gender in your PE classes, and particularly in middle years, the grade 5/6 classes.

A few things about what will happen:

- I have some questions for you but I want it to be **more of a conversation**; there are no right or wrong answers; it is your personal opinions and experiences that we are interested in;
- The tape recorder can be shut off at any time, please feel free to ask me to do so; Only the researchers will listen to the tape;
- I don't expect you to have an answer to all of them either, so feel free to say you aren't sure, or ask me questions about what I mean;
- I will assign a pseudonym that will be used in all formal reports, presentations and communications about the study;
- Some talking points may sound repetitive, it is just me wanting to be sure that I understand what you are saying...I may also write some things down as we go, just things to remember, or more talking points that I might want to explore.
- Do you have any questions or concerns before we begin? Please feel free to ask any questions as we go along if something is unclear.

#### **Part A: General Questions**

- 1) How many years have you been teaching?
  - a. At this school?
  - b. At other schools?
  - c. Have you always taught your own Physical Education/Been a PE Specialist?
- 2) What is your background in physical education?
  - a. Certification?
  - b. Years of Experience?
  - c. Coaching
  - d. Extracurricular?
  - e. Do you play sports, or participate in recreation or fitness activities?
- 3) Do you enjoy teaching PE? What is it that you enjoy about teaching physical education?
  - a. Why?
  - b. Are there any aspects that you do not enjoy about teaching PE? (why?)

- 4) What are some of the challenges that you have, as the PE specialist?
- 5) What are the purpose(s) of your PE classes?
  - a. What is important for students to gain, learn, experience through PE...? (specifically the middle years students-grade 5/6)
  - b. Why are those things important?
  - c. What kinds of strategies/activities do you use to address those things?
- 6) Do you think that physical education class has changed since you were in school? In what ways?

**Part B: Gender in Physical Education (generally)**

- Whenever I talk about gender, I find it important that we're on the same page re: what gender means. I like to use the following definition:

***“The socially constructed roles, behaviours, activities and attributes that a society considers appropriate for men and for women.” Human Rights Foundation***

- 1) Do you find that student's gender, or their ideas about gender play a role in PE class? Does it impact the way that that you teach a certain class, grade level or individual?

**Part C: Ms. Green's 5/6 Class**

- 2) Do you ever teach just Ms. Green's class, or is it always when the two classes are together?
  - a. If Yes, sometimes just the one class:
    - i. How would you describe that class in PE? (behaviour, participation, interests etc...)
  - b. Is there a difference with the way the class operates when both classes are in PE vs just a single class?
- 3) When you think about the boys and girls in Ms. Green's class, do you find that gender plays a role in the way that students experience physical education?
  - c. Participation?
  - d. Preferred Activities?
  - e. Social Interactions with peers?
  - f. Social Interactions with you?
  - g. Does that influence the way that you teach your PE classes?
- 4) Do you think that your students feel pressure to behave a certain way in PE, depending on their gender? (*SO, do they feel like they have to act according to those roles, behaviours, activities, attributes that society says they should?*)
  - h. What types of behaviours, attitudes might be related to students' ideas about gender?

- i. Where might those ideas about appropriate behaviours or pressure come from?  
Peers, Parents, Media etc...
- 5) Do you know if the curriculum documents provide any guidance or information on gender in phys-ed class?
- 6) **\*\* (If Appropriate)** *In terms of support, or resources, is there anything that you think would help to better address the things that you are noticing about gender in your classroom?*

**THINGS I'VE NOTICED (IF HAVE NOT YET BEEN ADDRESSED)**

Finally, I would like to ask you about a few things that I have seen while I have been here and just invite you to help me to understand them a little bit better.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

**Appendix G**  
**Cards Used in the Card Sort Interview Technique**

<b>Teamwork</b>	<b>Following Instruction</b>	<b>Trying Hard</b>	<b>Helping Classmates</b>	<b>Caring</b>	<b>Talking to Friends</b>
<b>Having Fun</b>	<b>Cheering on a Teammate</b>	<b>Helping to Set-up</b>	<b>Sharing</b>	<b>Including Others in the Group</b>	<b>Working Hard</b>
<b>Passing to a Teammate</b>	<b>Getting Embarrassed</b>	<b>Being Good at Skills</b>	<b>Worrying</b>	<b>Being Teased</b>	<b>Thinking about Own Ability</b>
<b>Trying to Keep up with Others</b>	<b>Feeling Confident</b>	<b>Worrying About What You Look Like</b>	<b>Sweating</b>	<b>Looking Good</b>	<b>Flirting</b>
<b>Teasing People</b>	<b>Judging the Skills of Others</b>	<b>Faking Injury or Sickness</b>	<b>Dominating the Game</b>	<b>Impressing Classmates</b>	<b>Winning</b>
<b>Showing Off</b>	<b>Being Competitive</b>	<b>Being Aggressive</b>	<b>Impressing Classmates</b>	<b>Dominating the Game</b>	

**Appendix H**  
**Thematic Network: Theme 1: “Giving It Away”**

