A Case Study of Gender and Literacy Performance
in an Early Elementary School Classroom:
Beyond the Binary

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Abstract

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With federal gender equity mandates in place, some may assume that schools are now havens were children are protected from discrimination based on failure to conform to stereotypical notions of masculinity and femininity. Yet, research suggests that the school literacy curriculum serves as a site that privileges gender performances consistent with the binary gender order. This pattern has been observed such that school literacy practices reproduce the binary gender order through text, talk, and disciplining of the body. Informed by post structural feminist perspectives on discourse, power, and performativity, this qualitative case study employed feminist methodology to explore how power flowed through performances of gender within the context of one second grade literacy classroom. Data sources included participant observation field notes, informal student and teacher interviews, video and audio recordings, and the collection of literacy related objects/documents.

Results of the analysis suggest that there were two distinct literacy spaces within the classroom: the teacher-controlled official literacy space and the student-governed unofficial literacy space. Within the official literacy space, particular teaching moves made at the intersection of gender and literacy could later be linked to particular students’ gender performances. In the unofficial literacy space of the classroom, some students’ gender
performances diverged greatly from those they performed in the official literacy space thus making *visible* how power operates within embodied acts. Lastly, in looking across the two distinct literacy spaces of the classroom, it was revealed how the flow of power through performances of gender and thus, the discursive practices that hold existing gendered structures in place, were *more visible* in unofficial literacy spaces than in official literacy spaces. Therefore, results of the analysis suggest that looking to unofficial literacy spaces will provide invaluable guidance when reconceptualizing how official literacy spaces might better support gender equity within the early elementary literacy classroom.
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E. D.
Dedication

for dad
Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Literacy is not a neutral practice. Moving away from viewing literacy as primarily a set of cognitive skills, scholars have shown the ways in which literacy teaching and learning is a social, cultural, and political practice through which individuals come to know and understand their place within the social ordering of the world (Davies & Saltmarsh, 2006; Street, 2016). Therefore, literacy is never just about literacy.

Prior to the 1990s, literacy was considered to be a skills-based, neutral practice. For example, reading instruction was primarily focused on decoding and understanding an author’s intended meaning (Commeyras, 1999). While some attention was paid to sex differences in reading comprehension (Thompson, 1975), it wasn’t until the 1990s that scholars turned toward examining the sociocultural influences on literacy and literacy learning. By situating literacy within social relations and cultural institutions, this turn not only broadened notions of what constitutes literacy and the literate individual (e.g., multimodality), but also made gender relevant to literacy. As focus began to shift toward viewing literacy as gendered social practice (Orellana, 1995), researchers turned a critical eye toward texts and started to examine the ways in which gender identity and performance are influenced by social messages embedded within narrative structures (Davies, 2003a). At the same time, others were exploring how school literacy practices produce and discipline gendered bodies consistent with the binary gender order (Luke, 1992). More recently, literacy theorists and researchers have turned to bodies and feminist theories of embodiment to imagine and explore how “literacy might be (re)defined when literacies and bodies are seen as inextricably linked and intertwined” (Johnson & Kontovourki,
As Siegel (2016) suggests, “bodies as signs are still largely absent from literacy scholarship” (p. 33). Thus, it is this latest theoretical turn that has opened up avenues for investigating how multimodal communicative acts might be read as interrupting and critically questioning the dominant gender discourses that “construct the field of literacy education” (p. 33).

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to investigate the discourses of gender circulating in and through one early elementary classroom as they were performed by the teacher and students within the context of the daily literacy curriculum. I explored how discourses of gender were regulated, disrupted, and/or negotiated. It was my hope to contribute to a growing body of work that addresses literacy from a poststructural feminist perspective by integrating attention to how bodies communicate and provoke questions about masculinity and femininity.

Before moving forward, I feel it is important to provide definitions for a few of the terms I utilized throughout this dissertation. Within the scope of this study, *sex* refers to the biological features that differentiate males from females. *Gender* is understood to be a social construct held together by elements of discourse where the dominant gender discourse maintains a social order predicated on females performing in ways perceived to be feminine and males in ways perceived to be masculine (Dressman, 1997). *Gender performance* is a stylized practice in which words and actions based on cultural norms of masculinity and femininity shape the individual. In other words, the gendered subject is constructed by the performance (Bettie, 2003). The *binary gender order* refers to the strict either-or option of males performing in ways that are perceived to be masculine or females in ways that are perceived to be feminine. *Heteronormativity* means the only acceptable form of sexuality is heterosexuality. *Gender equity* refers to protection of individuals from practices, whether consciously or unconsciously enacted, that marginalize,
oppress, silence, and/or discriminate based on gender identity or failure to conform to stereotypical notions of masculinity or femininity.

**Background to the Study**

**From Sex to Gender Equity as Situated Within U.S. Public Schooling**

In 1979, Congress passed Title IX, a law intended to end sex discrimination in American education. Sex bias was outlawed in “school athletics, career counseling, medical services, financial aid, admissions practices, and the treatment of students” (Sadker & Sadker, 1994, p. 35). Female students who faced social and cultural biases that limited their opportunities to engage in the activities and educational routes they wished to pursue now had a “legal weapon to fight schools that refused to treat girls fairly” (p. 36). However, many schools did not take the law seriously. For example, schools typically continued to spend more on boys’ sports than on girls’ sports, award more college scholarships to males than to equally qualified females, and segregate vocational programs with “cosmetology and secretarial courses for women and electrical and automotive courses for men” (p. 36). Perhaps most egregious was the continued practice of pregnancy being grounds for expelling teenage mothers but not teenage fathers. Despite numerous complaints lodged against schools for noncompliance with Title IX, “no school lost a single dollar of federal funds because of sex discrimination” (p. 36). Sadker and Sadker (1994) suggest that refusal to hold schools accountable can be attributed to backlash against feminism by the Reagan-Bush Department of Education. Throughout the administration’s 1981-1989 tenure, the equality of women was not desired within the department because “increasing the achievement and encouraging the career potential of girls was seen as a threat to the family … the patriarchal family with a husband and father at its head” (p. 37). As a result, research was defunded, programs shut down, and Title IX, “the paper tiger, was
declawed” (p. 41). But the seed had already been planted and taken root. Parents and teachers had become aware of sexism within schooling and looked for ways to fight back.

The late 1980s saw teachers establishing “gender-inclusive” classrooms, where biological sex was not to be the determinant of what children should or should not do (Rennie, 2003, p. 52). Gender-inclusive classrooms were intended to be places where boys and girls shared equally in teacher interaction and worked cooperatively in situations where all were equally involved. By the late 1990s, focus shifted from gender, which had been associated with girls’ education, to include other social variables, such as race, class, and disability. Thus, gender became enveloped within a broad definition of inclusivity, one in which inclusive education was considered to be a force for confronting “all forms of discrimination as part of a concern to develop an inclusive society based on social justice, equity and democratic participation” (Baglieri et al., 2011, p. 2126). Yet, as research has revealed, inclusion did not guarantee equity (Sadker & Sadker, 1994). Female students were still more likely than males to be invisible members of the classroom. Teachers were shown to interact more frequently with males, “ask them better questions, and give them more precise and helpful feedback” (p. 1), which adversely affected girls’ self-esteem, achievement, and career options.

Research suggests gender-inclusive classrooms are ineffective at supporting gender equity because the concept of gender is an unclear notion to teachers (MacNaughton, 1998). Understandings of gender as being an effect of biology and not that of a social construction of biological sex differences have led to interchangeable usage of the terms sex and gender, as if they were one in the same (Blaise, 2005b). This is not surprising, as the distinction between sex and gender is one that is often “obscured in much popular and professional literature” (Orellana, 1995, p. 678). Nonetheless, the United States Department of Education’s (US DOE, 2015) recent
revision of Title IX points the way toward an uncoupling of the concept of gender from
normative definitions of sex within educational institutions. Students are now guaranteed legal
protection from “discrimination based on gender identity or failure to conform to stereotypical
notions of masculinity or femininity” (p. 1). Yet, the available literature on school culture
indicates that schools remain institutions where performances of gender consistent with the
heteronormative binary gender order are privileged over all others (Levy, 2016; Liu, 2006).

**Gender as Situated Within School Discourse**

Lahelma (2014) suggests there are two dominant discourses on gender circulating
throughout the institution of schooling. The *gender equality discourse* emphasizes the position of
girls and works to ensure that social and cultural biases do not limit girls’ opportunities to engage
in activities and educational routes they wish to pursue. This echoes the sentiment behind the
1972 enactment of Title IX, which, as previously argued, does little to promote gender equity.
The *boy discourse*, on the other hand, places emphasis on “gender gaps in attendance,
achievement and behavior in school” (p. 172), which suggests that “boys are the actual losers in
education” (p. 174). The literature on school culture indicates that identity issues such as those of
gender, no matter how gender is understood or defined, “tend to be submerged by overriding
managerial discourses concerned with school effectiveness” (Liu, 2006, p. 423). Thus, schools’
main focus with regard to gender equity appears to be on improving the academic achievement
of boys. While teachers are under pressure to ensure that students reach particular levels of
academic achievement, they are also expected to comply with government mandates regarding
gender equity, which now extend to ensuring protection for those who may not conform to
stereotypical notions of masculinity and femininity. Nonetheless, research has found that, even
when teachers *do* take up the notion of gender equity or neutrality within their classrooms,
literacy teaching and learning remain part of a system that reinforces inequitable, heteronormative gendered stereotypes (Levy, 2016).

**Gender Equity as Situated Within the Early Elementary Classroom**

When situated within the early elementary classroom, the concept of gender equity in education has been largely ignored (Walkerdine, 1990; Yelland, 2002). Robinson (2005) suggests this may be due to modernist dominant discourses of childhood and sexuality, which “construct children as innocent and pure; as asexual, immature, and undeveloped beings, with no control over their bodies” (p. 22). This suggestion supports the argument that there exists a common lack of understanding of the distinction between gender and biological sex difference (Orellana, 1995). Consequently, when understood to denote sex or sexuality, gender becomes a construct that is not only considered to be irrelevant to children’s lives, but also “a ‘taboo’ subject in their education” (Robinson, 2005, p. 21). Nevertheless, the process of gendering, an integral part of the politics of everyday life (Connell, 1996), is one to which young children are not immune. Similarly, some believe young children are incapable of participating in any effective form of critical questioning about inequalities of power or deeply embedded belief systems. Despite doubts regarding young children’s ability to engage in such critical practice, they have been shown to be curious about power structures and question unfairness, which suggests that young children are, indeed, capable of taking up topics related to social (in)justice, such as those associated with gender (Kuby, 2013; Vasquez, 2014).

**Statement of the Problem**

There appears to be an assumption that schools are now institutions where students no longer face differential treatment based on gender identity or performance. As social recognition of historically marginalized ways of performing gender have evolved, so too have gender equity policies. The United States Department of Education’s 1972 enactment of Title IX was a law
intended to end sex discrimination against female students. In 2015, the law was revised, and Title IX regulation 34 C.F.R. Part 106 now guarantees that students are protected from “discrimination based on gender identity or failure to conform to stereotypical notions of masculinity or femininity” (U.S. DOE, 2015, p.1). Schools must now grapple with how this revised gender equity mandate impacts their institutions. Efforts to comply have been met with some resistance, as in the highly publicized disputes over who should be allowed to use which restroom. Nonetheless, with federal gender equity mandates in place, some may assume that schools are now havens where children are protected from discrimination based on failure to conform to stereotypical notions of masculinity and femininity.

Yet, scholars have shown that schools continue to reflect the dominant gendered culture of wider society in which males are expected to perform in ways that are perceived to be masculine, and females in ways that are perceived to be feminine (Connell, 1996). Research suggests that the school literacy curriculum serves as a site that privileges gender performances consistent with the binary gender order (Alverman et al., 1997; Davies, 2003a; Levy, 2016). This pattern has been observed such that school literacy practices reproduce the binary gender order through text, talk, and disciplining of the body (Davies & Saltmarsh, 2006). The division of the world into male and female is a consistent ordering device in children’s texts, and it is through these narratives that children learn to recognize themselves and others as located within the binary gender order (Davies, 2003a). While disciplinary control during literacy teaching and learning produces docile bodies (Foucault, 1977), it also produces gendered bodies. For example, girls, more often than boys, are reprimanded for relaxed bodily movement and comportment, and are told to be quiet, or use a “nicer” voice (Martin, 1998). Students also participate in the regulation of their peers’ gendered behaviors by letting them know when they are failing to “do”
their gender right (Butler, 2007; Davies, 2003a). However, gender norms are neither universal nor static. What counts as acceptable gender performance may differ across societies, social class, ethnic groups, and generations. For example, between the years of 1918 and 1940, the generally accepted rule within American culture was that pink was a strong color suitable for boys, while blue was daintier and more appropriate for girls. Similarly, until the 1920s, young children, whether male or female, wore dresses and long hair. More recent shifts in gender performance can be traced to changes in the ‘traditional’ American nuclear family, with women working outside of the home and an ever-growing number of stay-at-home dads. However disruptive of the gender binary and social order these developments may have been, today we are experiencing increased social awareness of the less visible discourses of gender circulating throughout society. This is evidenced by a reality television program documenting a child’s journey of transitioning from male to female, gender nonconforming characters in popular graphic novels, pop stars who present themselves as gender fluid, and a fancy-ribbon, diamond-ring-wearing pink male dinosaur in a video game for young children.

There is striking tension between the gender discourses that circulate within school, and teachers and students are greatly implicated in how discourses of gender are mediated within the context of the daily literacy curriculum. This is especially significant within the early elementary classroom, as the major portion of young children’s instructional day is devoted to the teaching and learning of literacy. Studies exploring how historically marginalized performances of gender are mediated through the early elementary literacy curriculum are largely absent from the literature, which limits understanding of how school literacy practices currently influence gender (in)equity within the lives of young children.
Statement of Purpose and Research Question

Informed by a poststructural feminist framework, this qualitative case study (Dyson & Genishi, 2005) aimed to investigate the discourses of gender circulating in and through one early elementary classroom as they were performed by the teacher and students within the context of the daily literacy curriculum. As Davies and Saltmarsh (2006) assert, school literacy practices produce “students as simultaneously both gendered and literate” (p. 236). However, schools do not exist in a vacuum and therefore cannot be considered as operating independently of the world outside their walls (Liu, 2006). Thus, I approached this project with the assumption that participants’ understandings of gender are subject to broader social, political, and cultural influences. In other words, participants’ ways of performing, or “doing,” gender are informed by both school literacy practices and the world beyond the classroom (Dyson & Genishi, 2005).

Given the U.S. Department of Education policy mandating gender equity within U.S. public schools, increased social awareness of less visible circulating discourses of gender, and decades of research establishing how school literacy practices reproduce the binary gender order (Davies, 2003a; Luke, 1992; Orellana, 1995; Wohlwend, 2012), there is a need for research that examines how discourses of gender are mediated within the context of the daily literacy curriculum.

In this study, I explored how early elementary students and their teacher navigated gender discourses within the context of the daily literacy curriculum. In doing so, I employed qualitative data collection methods such as observations (recorded in fieldnotes and video-recordings), informal conversations with participants, and artifact analysis to investigate the ways in which gender was performed, regulated, disrupted, and/or negotiated within the early literacy classroom. I included seven focal students to look more specifically at how children used language and their bodies to perform gender during the formal literacy block of the classroom. I
argue that young children are agents in the construction, maintenance, questioning, and disruption of gender (Davies, 2003a; Thorne, 1993) and therefore merited inclusion in this study. My hope was to contribute to a body of work that addresses the problem of gender performance in school literacy curricula from a poststructural feminist perspective (Blackburn, 2003; Oppenheim, 2016) by integrating attention to how bodies communicate and provoke questions about masculinity and femininity (Johnson, 2011; Martinez, 2013), which has been largely unexplored within the early elementary literacy classroom.

I position early elementary students and their teachers as having a unique and vital role in helping to see gender and literacy in new ways within an educational context where the binary gender order is privileged over other conceptions of gender. On one hand, students are protected from discrimination if they fail to conform to stereotypical notions of masculinity or femininity (U.S. DOE, 2015). On the other hand, students who do not fit easily into the gender molds that shape schools’ literacy curricula risk being viewed and dealt with as deviant. To investigate this complex intersection of gender and literacy, I asked the following research question: How does power flow through performances of gender within the context of an early elementary literacy classroom?

Rationale

A study that works against the notion of literacy as a neutral skills-based practice highlights the importance of expanding notions of what constitutes literacy and the literate individual by understanding that literacy and the body are inextricably linked and intertwined (Leander & Boldt, 2013). Taking up this stance makes visible not only the ways in which bodies are gendered through school literacy practices, but also how bodies, through movement, gesture, and talk (Enriquez et al., 2016; Leander & Boldt, 2013; Siegel, 2016) can be read as engaging in
critical questioning of the gendering that occurs within the institution of school for young literacy learners. This works against the notion that literacy is a neutral practice and instead positions it as a complex social and political practice (Enriquez et al., 2016; Janks, 2010).

Given the paucity of research exploring how increased social recognition of historically marginalized ways of performing gender influence early literacy teaching and learning, this study contributes to a growing body of empirical research that attends to the multiple ways in which individuals make meaning, are read, and “may be read anew in complex sociopolitical contexts” (Enriquez et al., 2016, p. xi). Much of the existing literature within this field of literacy scholarship does not provide accounts of how young students’ bodies perform in ways that complicate and critically question the gendering that occurs through school literacy practices. Johnson (2011) suggests this may be due to lack of “teacher and researcher discursive repertoires for seeing and hearing it in practice” (p. 31). Therefore, this study gave focus to the ways in which young children’s embodied performances critically engaged with the gendering that occurred through school literacy practices.

We are living in an era of expanding social recognition of non-dominant discourses of gender and a political environment mandating equitable treatment of all, regardless of gender performance or identity. Empirical studies that explore and document how gender is performed, regulated, and/or disrupted within the context of the daily literacy curriculum are needed to better understand how school literacy is, or could be, leveraged in pursuit of gender equity. Such studies are especially needed within the early elementary literacy classroom, as gender differences established during the early years continue to emerge over the course of life, throughout which different sets of gender-based societal expectations serve to limit potential and restrict opportunity (Aina & Cameron, 2011; Blaise, 2012).
Theoretical Framework

I situate this study within a poststructural feminist theoretical framework. In taking up this perspective, I argue that gender and literacy are inextricably intertwined social constructs that are susceptible to subversion and, therefore, changeable. To understand the complex intersection of literacy and gender, I will draw on conceptualizations of literacy as gendered social practice (Orellana, 1995) and unpack this notion by combining tenets from poststructural feminist perspectives on the constitutive force of discourse (Davies, 2003a) with feminist conceptions of how identity/subjectivity is constructed through performativity (Butler, 1988). While the former illuminates how school literacy practices influence gender identity construction, the latter foregrounds the ways in which literacy learners negotiate established meanings of both gender and literacy. Taken together, these perspectives help understand literacy and gender as interwoven constructs that are discursively produced within the context of the daily literacy curriculum.

The perception of literacy as gendered social practice is grounded in the assumption that it is through the teaching and learning of literacy that individuals come to know the social ordering of the world (Davies, 2003a). While categories of social organization may differ across societies, social class, ethnic groups, and generations, gender tends to be a common organizing discourse (MacInnes, 1998), with the majority of societies privileging males, and the perceived masculine behaviors associated with males in that society, over females and their perceived feminine characteristics and behaviors (Francis, 2006). Scholars suggest that dominant gendered practices have become so ingrained over time, and are so deeply embedded within history and culture, that they come to be seen as natural and normal and thus “‘common-sense’ prescriptions for living” (Davison & Frank, 2006, p. 154). Consequently, the naturalization and normalization
of the binary gender order that occurs through discourses and practices of literacy have become virtually invisible (Alvermann et al., 1997; Davies & Saltmarsh, 2006). Poststructural feminists contend that by challenging and deconstructing the discursive practices that hold existing structures in place, the seemingly stable, invisible power of such practices can be made visible (Davies, 2003a). Therefore, taking up a poststructural feminist framework necessitates that normalized constructions of both gender and literacy be understood as neither static nor absolute. Thus, the possibility and opportunity for change are always present.

**Affordances of Taking up Poststructural Feminist Perspectives**

A central concern in the examination of gender and literacy within education is how literacy constructs gender, and gender literacy (Orellana, 1995). Poststructural feminist perspectives on literacy, as well as work in the areas of critical literacy and embodiment, provide a lens for understanding this process by locating both gender and literacy within particular social, cultural, political, and historical contexts. Moving away from conceptions of literacy as primarily a set of cognitive skills associated with the reading and writing of print-based text, perspectives within this area focus on the ways in which “literacy learning is mediated by language and accomplished in a context in which social actors position, and are positioned by, each other in verbal, non-verbal, and textual interaction” (Larson & Marsh, 2010, p. xxix). What this implies is that school literacy lessons also teach children about gender performances, and thus literacy is not a neutral practice. Rather, literacy is a practice that is inextricably linked to cultural and power structures in society, and the ways in which literacy is taught are inherently political (Janks, 2010; Street, 1993). Literacy, therefore, can be understood as a practice that produces particular types of social subjects upon whom differences are (re)inscribed through text, talk, and body.
The aforementioned perspectives on literacy mirror those of the New Literacy Studies, which frame literacy as “a social and cultural achievement centered in social and cultural practices” (Gee, 2015, p. 35). While sociocultural theories of literacy have been critiqued for their lack of focus on the productions and workings of power (Lewis et al., 2007), the New Literacy Studies worked to expand sociocultural views of literacy to include larger ideological issues and dimensions of social life (Carrington & Luke, 2003; Gee, 2001; Luke, 1994). As argued by Gutierrez (2007), when taking up a sociocultural lens, capturing the complexity and dimensions of literacy requires expanding one’s theoretical toolkit to include emphasis on issues of power and identity. This stance is echoed by Lewis et al. (2007), who contend that drawing on a range of theoretical perspectives helps to make visible the “ideological underpinnings of language and representation that often remain unexamined in sociocultural research” (p. 7). Thus, sociocultural studies of literacy that have utilized multiple theoretical perspectives have advanced understandings of power relations by illustrating how children are “socialized to particular literacy practices [as] they are simultaneously socialized into discourses that position them ideologically within the larger social milieu” (Razfar & Gutierrez, 2010, p. 56).

Gender socialization theories have also been critiqued for their lack of attention to productions and workings of power, especially with regard to children. The problem with socialization frameworks is that they view gender as a natural expression of biological sex difference and assume that within individuals are preexisting dispositions waiting to unfold within particular social contexts (Thorne, 1993). Therefore, children are understood to learn sex and gender roles through modeling, imitation, and reinforcement (Aina & Cameron, 2011; Blaise, 2012). This not only maintains notions of who should perform in ways that are perceived to be masculine and who in ways that are perceived to be feminine, but also positions children as
passive agents who are pressed into relatively fixed forms (Davies, 2003a). Poststructuralist theory, which recognizes the “complex and contradictory ways we are continually constituting and reconstituting ourselves and the social world through the various discourses in which we participate” (p. 6), challenges socialization explanations of gender. As the work of both Davies (2003a) and Thorne (2010) illustrates, children are active agents in taking up, resisting, reworking, and creating gender boundaries. Thus, socialization frameworks are not useful in making sense of how children become gendered as they position adults as the more powerful who socialize, and children as the less powerful incomplete adults-in-the-making who get socialized (Thorne, 2010). Taking up a poststructural framework provides the conceptual tools necessary to gain insights into the discursive practices that hold existing structures in place, see the constitutive force of discourse, and turn a “critical gaze towards the press of patterns of power and powerlessness” (Davies, 2003a, p. 203).

Building upon poststructural concepts of power and discourse, poststructural feminists focus on gender and investigate how constructions and performances of gender may differ along dimensions of other discursive productions such as race, class, sexuality, ethnicity, and ability (Ahmed, 2004; Davies, 1994; Walkerdine, 1990). Drawing on the theoretical paradigm of intersectionality allows for making visible the interlocking structures of oppression and privilege that shape individuals’ lives and experiences. Through an intersectionality lens, difference is not questioned; rather, there is an assumption that individuals will experience common events differently. Therefore, identities are analyzed in relation to one another. As described by Dill and Kohlman (2012), intersectionality “seeks to ascertain how phenomena are mutually constituted and interdependent [by understanding] one phenomenon in deference to understanding another” (p. 169). Feminist poststructuralists also attend to the body—how the body is disciplined, and the
ways in which embodied performances bring individuals into existence and shape their subjectivities (Kamler, 1997, Oppenheim, 2016). Two theoretical concepts are particularly useful for understanding how meanings of both gender and literacy are constructed and destabilized: discourse and performativity.

**Poststructural Perspectives on Discourse: Truth, Power, and Knowledge**

A poststructural reading of discourse helps to understand how meanings of gender and literacy are discursively constructed and mediated through school literacy practices, as well as the ways in which those practices circulate throughout wider society. Poststructuralists contend that individuals are constituted through discourses that are linked to systems of knowledge that come to be regarded as *true* and, thus, govern how individuals understand and inhabit the world (Foucault, 1980). Poststructuralists further maintain that the truths produced through discourse are historically and culturally contingent and that it is over time and through repetition that discourses are reinforced, stabilized, and become taken-for-granted aspects of the societies in which they evolved (Davies, 1989; Foucault, 1997). Gee (2008) suggests thinking of discourse as “an ‘identity kit’ which comes complete with the appropriate costume and instructions on how to act and talk so as to take on a particular role that others will recognize” (p. 51). However, in Weedon’s (1987) interpretation of Foucault, discourses are constitutive of more than ways of thinking and acting so as to present oneself as a socially recognizable subject. Discourses also “constitute the ‘nature’ of the body, unconscious and conscious mind and emotional life of the subjects they seek to govern” (p. 105). Furthermore, the ways in which “discourses constitute the minds and bodies of individuals is always part of a wider network of power relations, often with institutional bases” (p. 105).

So as to unveil and disrupt the discursive practices that place limits on ways of knowing and being, a central tenet of feminist poststructuralist theory is to raise questions regarding the
nature and location of knowledge and the processes for its legitimation, (Davies, 2003a; St. Pierre, 2000). In Foucault’s (1981) work, fixed, universal meanings cannot be abstracted from history. As expressed by Weedon (1987), meanings “always take the forms defined for them by historically specific discourses” (p. 104). Discourses, therefore, “are ways of constituting knowledge, together with the social practices, forms of subjectivity and power relations which inhere in such knowledges and the relations between them” (p. 105). While power and knowledge are understood to be inextricably linked (with knowledge an exercise of power and power a function of knowledge), poststructural theory rejects frameworks that define power as that which is held by certain groups and individuals. Rather than viewing power as hierarchical and static, poststructuralists take up Foucault’s (1980) notion of power relations, and conceptualize power as mobile, reversible, and unstable. Power, in Weedon’s (1987) interpretation of Foucault, is “a dynamic of control, compliance and lack of control between discourses and the subjects constituted by discourses, who are their agents. Power is exercised within discourses in the ways in which they constitute and govern individual subjects” (p. 110). While discourse is understood to transmit, produce, and reinforce power, Foucault (1981) contends that discourse also “undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it” (p. 101). Therefore, taking up a poststructuralist stance provides a framework through which to explore and analyze occurrences of resistance (Weedon, 1987). Indeed, as argued by Foucault, “if there was no resistance, there would be no power relations … so resistance comes first, and resistance remains superior to the forces of the process; power relations are obliged to change with the resistance” (quoted in Fillingham, 1993, p. 151).

Performativity in Poststructural Feminist Thought

St. Pierre (2000) argues, “Discourse can never be just linguistic since it organizes a way of thinking into a way of acting in the world” (p. 485). As previously argued, it is not only our
ways of thinking, but also our whole beings, including our bodies, that are constructed through discursive power. As Butler suggests, “discourses do actually live in bodies. They lodge in bodies: bodies in fact carry discourses as part of their own life-blood” (quoted in Meijer & Prins, 1998, p. 282). These perspectives highlight how poststructural feminism does not value linguistic structures of discourse at the expense of the body (Gannon & Davies, 2012). Rather, poststructural feminists broaden the notion of individuals as discursively constituted subjects by integrating attention to the ways in which words and actions shape us, such that “the subject is constructed by the performance” (Bettie, 2003, p. 53). To unpack this further, I will utilize Butler’s (2007) theory of performativity. While this theory is commonly utilized in the examination of gender subjectivity/identity construction, I will also take up Kontovourki’s (2009) notion for how this theory might be applied to better understand the processes by which meanings of being literate and doing literacy are established. To illustrate the significance of performativity within this study, I will focus on two main tenets: (a) that subjects are brought into existence through a series of repeated, culturally contingent performances/acts, and (b) the possibility for change is located in the cumulative effect of variations in and/or failures to perform acts as expected.

A central concept of Butler’s (2007) theory of performativity is that repeated bodily performances bring subjects into existence and thus serve as the determinants for how subjectivities/identities are shaped and perceived. While performance refers to individual, specific acts, performativity refers to the repetition of those specific acts. In Butler’s words, performativity is the “repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (p. 45). When performances successfully reiterate socially and culturally dominant
norms, they are considered to be performative accomplishments that both the audience and actors believe to be true (Butler, 1988). Hence, it is the performances that render “social laws explicit” (p. 526). Yet, as Morison and MacLeod (2013) note, it is the compulsion, or necessity of having to engage in repeated performances of cultural norms, that reveal them to be “unoriginal and imitative in nature … and therefore potentially changeable” (p. 566). Since a condition of performativity is that repetitions of norms are not always identical, it follows that momentary discontinuities in the repetition of specific acts will occur (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012). Butler (2007) contends that, over time and through the cumulative effect of variations of performances and/or failures to repeat as expected, resistance and shifts in discourses are brought to the fore. Thus, within the theoretical concept of performativity, the destabilization of normative subjectivities is conceptualized as operating within the course of reiteration.

The concept of destabilization occurring from within the course of reiteration raises questions regarding the location and nature of agency. For poststructuralist feminists, agency does not presume freedom from the constitutive force of discourse (Gannon & Davies, 2012). As Butler (2007) asserts, “I am not outside the language that structures me, but neither am I determined by the language that makes this ‘I’ possible” (p. xxvi). Kontovourki (2009) notes how some might misinterpret Butler’s claim to mean subjects may indeed be free from discursive constitution and regulation and, thus, capable of consciously working to undermine the cultural norms that delimit their performances. However, in Kontovourki’s interpretation of Butler, the “argument that individuals are not determined by discourse talks more of the possibility for agency within gaps and ruptures of arbitrarily connected repetitive acts” (p. 32). Therefore, the possibility for agency is conceptualized as located within the variations of performances and/or failures to repeat as expected. Here, it is helpful to note how poststructural understandings of
subjectivity are positioned within performativity. As posited by Weedon (1987), subjectivity is “precarious, contradictory, and in process, constantly being reconstituted in discourse” (p. 32). Butler (1992) argues, since individuals do not exist independent of the ways of thinking and being that are made available to them though the discourses to which they are exposed, unstable subjectivities are a necessary precondition of agency. This mirrors the Foucauldian notion of power as inextricably linked to resistance. In each instance, engagement of the subject in determining their own ways of knowing and being is dependent upon the existence of unstable, non-static structures of both power and subjectivity.

**The Embodiment of Literacy in Poststructural Feminist Thought**

Increasingly, literacy scholars have called for expanding perspectives on literacy by taking up embodied lenses and giving greater emphasis to the ways in which individuals embody and perform literacies as they are “concurrently inscribed and ‘othered’” (Enriquez et al., 2016, p. ix). The term *embodied*, as understood by Blackburn (2016), means to “represent or take up in bodily or material form” (p. 171). This particular conceptualization of embodiment aligns with multimodal theory, which attends to how individuals utilize speech, writing, gesture, image, etc., to communicate meaning. However, as Johnson (2011) notes, multimodal theory neglects to analyze the “social interactions and context[s] surrounding their production” (p. 30). Performance theory, on the other hand, focuses on the ways in which power operates within multimodal communicative acts and analyzes how those acts might be understood as identity performances that not only discursively produce subjectivities, but also provide opportunities for their destabilization (Butler, 2007; Johnson, 2011). It is within this particular framework that literacy practices and events can be conceptualized as embodied literacy performances that have the potential to both disrupt and replicate inequitable power dynamics, as well as the ability to shape and make known individuals’ identities (Blackburn, 2003). Researchers who have taken up
the notion of literacy as performance have been able to illustrate the ways in which multimodal modes of communication are utilized to navigate, resist, and question the multiple discursive subjectivities produced by institutions for literacy learners (Johnson, 2011). For example, when giving particular attention to the body, both Johnson (2011) and Martinez (2013) illustrate how gestures, bodily movements, and shifts in volume, might be understood as participatory, communicative acts that raise questions about authority, privilege, and limits to certain types of knowledge. Oppenheim (2016) suggests that these types of embodied performances are evidence of critical literacy performance. As she and others (Blackburn, 2002; Janks, 2010) note, critical literacy, “with its focus on issues of power and its ability to expose inequitable practices, has the potential to disrupt dominant discourses and enact real-world transformation” (Oppenheim, 2016, p. 208). Taken together, these poststructural feminist perspectives on literacy and embodiment provide a framework for understanding embodied literacy performances, and the ways in which such performances might present opportunities for the renegotiation of gendered subjectivities. It is within this growing field of literacy scholarship that I locate this study.

These theoretical perspectives framed how I investigated and understood the discourses of gender circulating in and through one early elementary classroom as they were performed by the teacher and students within the context of the daily literacy curriculum.

**Significance of the Study**

Decentering the cognitive aspects of literacy and centering the body in literacy research, theory, and practice provides opportunities to explore how the gendering that occurs through school literacy practices might be made visible. While school literacy practices continue to privilege and reproduce the binary gender order (Davies & Saltmarsh, 2006), attending to the body opens up possibilities for making visible the ways in which movement, gestural, and speech
modes might be read as communicative acts meant to destabilize values constructed through classroom literacy practices, and/or attempts to make known, or in other words make visible individuals’ identities (Blackburn, 2002). In other words, the otherwise unseen ways in which students critically engage with the gendering that occurs through school literacy practices become seen. This study documented, in-depth, the discourses of gender circulating in and through one early elementary literacy classroom as they were performed by the teacher and students within the context of the daily literacy curriculum. This positioned the school literacy curriculum as a site of tension where discourses of gender intersected and were mediated through school literacy practices. While this study offers just one case, the particularities of this one case can lay the foundation for discussion around the potential of centering the body in school literacy teaching and learning, especially with regard to gender (in)equity. Therefore, this is not only an issue of schools’ compliance with gender equity mandates, it is also about the ways in which literacy and the literate individual are conceptualized within the institution of schooling.
Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

This review of research aims to identify what is known about the gendered discursive processes with which students and teachers engage when in the literacy classroom, and the ways those processes shape students’ gender and literate identities. Given the theoretical framework I constructed, three interrelated bodies of research seem most relevant in contextualizing and building a rationale for my study. The first body of research relates to ways gender performance is constructed, maintained, and disrupted through text, specifically through children’s picture books as well as students’ preference in the selection and crafting of text. The second body relates to the study of gender performance through talk around text, and how that talk is representative of gendered power relations within the literacy classroom. The third area of research relates to the body and embodiment—how the body becomes gendered, the embodiment of literacies, and ways embodied performances might be read as critically questioning the discursive subjectivities produced by the institution of schooling for young literacy learners.

In choosing literature to review, I focused mainly on qualitative studies of early elementary classrooms (Pre-K through second-grade) as well as qualitative studies of students in those classrooms. However, I also included a few studies of older students and their teachers when they contributed to the theoretical and methodological considerations for how discourses of gender circulating in and through an early elementary literacy classroom can be examined. When possible, I chose studies that focused on ways gender performance is constructed, maintained, and disrupted within the early elementary literacy classroom. While some of the studies I review do not specifically examine the ways in which literacy constructs gender, and gender literacy, I
chose to include them because they explore students’ embodied literacies and performances. Most of the studies represented in this review are qualitative in design and are situated within poststructural feminist theory and feminist theories of embodiment, which helps to ground and rationalize the theoretical and methodological framework for this study.

Text

[While] the traditional narrative structures are extraordinarily difficult to think or feel beyond, we must nevertheless attempt to develop a new narrative form if children are to take us seriously when we tell them that bipolar oppressive male-female patterns are neither essential nor acceptable. (Davies, 2003a, p. 44)

Gender Performance as Depicted in Children’s Texts

The past several decades have seen scholars scrutinize the ways in which children’s texts and stories construct gender and thus serve as a primary means for making known the gendered ordering of the world (Davies, 2003a; Ladd, 2011). As argued by Gibson et al. (2000), storytelling is the way “we compose our lives; all identity, all social construction begins with narratives” (p. 71). For example, the fairytale narrative reveals a clear division of the world into male and female; where females are portrayed as incompetent victims who need to be rescued by competent male characters and are then banished to the role of housewife, mother, and sex object within the protective confines of the home. Examining fairytales through a critical lens reveals sub-textual guidelines for gender performance, and a dominant theme about women, which Tuchman (1978) argues may “lead girls, in particular, to believe that their social horizons and alternatives are more limited than is actually the case” (p. 53). Davies (2003a) claims it is through these types of narrative structures that children learn to position themselves and correctly perform as males or females, “since that is what is required of them in order to have a [recognizable] identity within the existing social order” (p. 14). While myriad social and cultural dynamics influence notions about gender performance, children’s texts, especially picture books,
are often one of the earliest vehicles utilized for presenting and conveying societal and cultural norms and values (Council on Interracial Books for Children, 1976; Ladd, 2011).

When taking both illustrations and text into account, Weitzman et al. (1972) found female characters to be woefully underrepresented in titles, book covers, and main roles. Additionally, when studying the ways in which characters performed, females were found to be passive, while males were found to be more active. Nearly a decade later, Kolbe and LaVoie (1981) found the overall ratio of female to male characters within children’s texts had improved. Nevertheless, gendered performances remained much the same, with females positioned as affectionate, nurturing individuals who are dependent upon the more self-sufficient, aggressive males. By the early 2000s, the overrepresentation of males within children’s texts had fallen dramatically (Kok, 2006). However, as Evans and Davies (2000) discovered, males were still more likely to perform in aggressive and competitive ways, while females were relegated to performing the nurturing and understanding roles. In a more recent study, Ladd (2011) reported similar findings when reviewing eleven picture books that feature characters who perform math within the course of the plot. Ladd’s (2011) analysis revealed that, while the ratio of females to males has continued to improve (albeit slightly), female characters are more likely to be positioned as helpers, while males perform the role of problem-solvers. Ladd notes how eight of the eleven authors of the reviewed titles are women and questions why so many female authors would choose to “people their books with predominately male characters” (p. 12). Sutherland (1985) speaks to this very point when describing the “politics of assent”:

As I am defining it, “assent” is an author’s passive, unquestioning acceptance and internalization of an established ideology, which is then transmitted in the author’s writing in an unconscious manner. The ideology subscribed to is a set of values and beliefs widely held in the society at large which reflects the society’s assumptions about what the world is. When this received ideology informs and shapes a literary work, that work becomes a vehicle expressing it. Most readers (sharing this ideology with the
author) will not recognize its presence in the work, for the work will reflect back their own assumptions about what the world is and simply reinforce them in their beliefs. Nor is the author consciously aware of the ideology informing the work. Since neither author nor readers can conceive the world as being otherwise than what the ideology claims, the ideology—when expressed in a published literacy work—is persuasive because it tends to support and reinforce the status quo. As such, its expression is political: the book promulgates and promotes a particular ideology (to the exclusion of others); and, by its reinforcement of widely held views, inhibits change. (pp. 151-152)

Yet, children’s texts that present alternate representations of gender performance do exist. Such texts, Davies (2003a) contends, are invaluable resources for the “imaginative construction of subject positionings outside of traditional gendered relations” (p. 49). However, as Davies found, merely exposing children to counter-narratives does little to sway their notions of what constitutes socially and culturally acceptable gender performance. Davies spent two years talking with, observing, and playing with four- and five-year-old pre-school students so as to gain a better understanding of how the male-female binary is established and maintained. Specifically, she explored the concept of gender identity and positioning as the children attempted to situate themselves within the school literacy environment. In the first year of the study, Davies examined the ways in which narrative structures of texts, such as fairy tales, create and sustain correct genderedness (i.e., the heteronormative male-female binary) in the early childhood classroom. In addition, Davies sought to understand how presenting pre-school-aged children with a text that contains alternate images of conventional configurations of gender might encourage them to imagine and construct “subject positionings outside of traditional gendered relations” (p. 49). For example, The Paper Bag Princess (Munch, 1980) tells the story of Princess Elizabeth, who is robbed of her beautiful clothes, castle, and fiancé by a fierce, fire-breathing dragon. Determined to right the wrongs that have been done, Elizabeth dons a paper bag and marches off to conquer the dragon and rescue her prince, only to realize he is not worthy of her efforts when he scolds her for being dirty and tells her to go away and not come back until
she looks like a real princess. Davies (2003a) found that few children understood the story’s feminist message of disrupting the male/masculine-female/feminine binary they were most familiar with. Rather, the children rejected the counter-narrative and heard the story “as if it were a known story line in which males are heroes and females are other to those heroes. Elizabeth therefore becomes … a princess who just got things a bit wrong” (Davies 1989, p. 231; italics original).

In a more recent study, Namatende-Sakwa (2019) explored how gender is both explicitly and implicitly constructed in texts considered to be progressive with regard to gendered representations. Initial readings revealed explicit performances of gender that work against normative gender constructions. However, follow-up readings through a poststructural feminist lens exposed implicit discourses that construct gender performance in ways that correspond with dominant gender discourses. For example, despite the explicit depiction of Strega Nona, the main female character in Tomi DePaola’s (1975) *Strega Nona*, as a wise, knowledgeable leader in a position of power, a poststructural feminist reading revealed how the text works to maintain male dominance and a gendered hierarchical binary. Namatende-Sakwa’s (2019) textual analysis shows that while Strega Nona helps single women find husbands, she does not find wives for single men. This not only implies that women do not have agency in the selection of their own husbands, but also reinforces the dominant discourse in which marriage is important to women (Sunderland, 2004). Furthermore, Strega Nona, while constructed as a powerful witch doctor, is simultaneously produced using “familiar ‘wicked witch’ discourses which are intertextually linked to the wicked step-mother narratives in children’s stories” (Namatende-Sakwa, 2019, p. 7). Thus, the text “re-inscribes discourses which associate evil/wickedness with women rather than men” (p. 7).
Sunderland et al. (2001) found that teachers ignore progressive textual representations of
gender within the classroom and thus argue that such texts can be taught in ways that subvert
their progressive message. Namatende-Sakwa (2019) reports similar findings, as teachers were
observed to give focus to the officially prescribed curriculum’s requirement of teaching
traditional literary elements (e.g., plot, setting, problem, solution, etc.) while ignoring how
gender was explicitly produced through the text. Through a poststructural feminist lens,
Namatende-Sakwa reveals how teachers subvert the explicit progressive constructions of gender
within the text by repeatedly enacting implicit gendered classroom practices, such as calling on
boys more often than girls and assigning active roles to the boys and passive roles to the girls
when engaging in reenactments of texts. Namatende-Sakwa concludes that dominant scholarship
on the construction of gender, particularly in children’s texts, has ignored the interpretative
community and in doing so has made the “assumption that fixing the text necessarily fixes how
readers take it up, guaranteeing gender sensitive classroom practices” (p. 73). Indeed, as argued
by Skelton (2010), “simply presenting various images of masculinity and femininity is not
enough; rather, children need to question conventional gendered characterizations” (p. 175).

**Gender Performance Through Preference in the Selection and Crafting of Text**

Dressman (1997) argues for conceptualizing preference as a construct. In other words,
rather than being determined by biological characteristics, literacy learners’ preferences are
understood to be constructed as they “interact with social and environmental factors, such as
home and school literacy practices” (p. 320). Therefore, taking up Dressman’s notion of
preference as a construct allows for understanding how children’s desire for, ways of relating to,
and crafting of certain types of texts can be seen as performances that proclaim their identities as
members of a particular gendered social category.
Children often talk about books as either girl books or boy books, thus verbally constructing dichotomous gender boundaries around reading preference. When working with fifth grade students, Dutro (2001) found that boys, more so than girls, closely guarded the gendered boundaries of their reading within the public space of the classroom. For example, when required to read a book about a girl, boys were observed to verbally protest, roll their eyes, and lay their heads down on their desks. Girls, on the other hand, expressed “willingness, even eagerness, to transgress gender boundaries” (p. 379) when given the opportunity to select a boy book. Dutro observed a hierarchy of masculinity within the classroom, where boys with more stereotypical attributes of masculinity attempted to intimidate those who were less stereotypically masculine. When students were called by turn to choose a book for their book group from a small section of texts, and it appeared as though the less stereotypical masculine boys might pick the last available boy book, one of the “intimidators” whispered toward the “intimatees,” “You better not pick that basketball book, boy; you better not do it” (p. 378). The verbal threat was successful, and the less stereotypically masculine males eventually opted for a book that was the “least gendered book of the bunch” (p. 378). Dutro’s findings of the girls’ enthusiastically selecting a boy book versus the boys’ actively working to avoid having to select a girl book illustrates Sunderland’s (2000) claim that “girls can cross gender boundaries with impunity, whereas boys cannot” (p. 168).

Despite differences in willingness to cross gender boundaries, when it comes to the role gender plays in reading preference, Dutro (2001) found that children’s actions often contradict their words. Boys who privately revealed they would happily read a book about girl were the same who openly refused books about girls when in the public sphere of the classroom. Dutro notes how research suggests that boys’ rejection of things feminine may be due to their
awareness of how things associated with “girls and women are devalued by society and thus … it is important that they define themselves against those things” (p. 377). Dutro notes how boys’ rejection of things associated with girls is firmly entrenched by the second-grade and points to the ways in which homophobia plays a role, as “young boys quickly learn that one sure way of appearing ‘wimpish’ is to engage in activities that are associated with girls” (p. 377).

Similar to the ways in which gender is a central tension in children’s reading preferences, gendered patterns of performance have been shown to be represented in children’s written work. In analyzing stories crafted by first, second, and third graders, Orellana (1995) found that children performed their gendered identities through the topics they choose to write about. For example, girls preferred to write about rainbows, flowers, and butterflies. They wrote stories about friends and family living within a peaceful, beautiful world. Boys, on the other hand, took up a problem resolution framework and preferred to write stories of the struggle between good and evil forces. Depicting young males as the main protagonists, boys’ action adventure stories included characters such as superheroes, bad boys, monsters, ghosts, and vampires. Orellana’s findings are similar to studies analyzing children’s drawings. Whereas girls were found to prefer drawing animals, flowers, and serene scenes of family, friends, and romance, boys preferred to draw images of villainy and violence, with plots constructed around power, destruction, and victory (Flannery & Watson, 1995; Golomb, 2004; Wilson & Wilson, 1982). These findings reflect those regarding gender performance as depicted in children’s picture books, where males perform as aggressive and competitive problem-solvers while females perform as the nurturing, passive helpers who are responsible for taking care of the family and home. Orellana (1995) found that most students, whose friendships were divided along gendered lines, got the ideas for their stories from the stories that their friends had written and therefore argues for emphasizing
the role peer culture plays in the crafting of text. In her words, “gender, as expressed through peer relations, was used to construct literacy and … literacy in turn served to construct gender” (p. 696). Thus, the children’s preferences for the ways in which they went about crafting their texts created a decidedly gendered environment within the literacy classroom.

These studies illustrate how children’s preference around the selection and crafting of text is grounded in traditionally excepted performance of masculinity and femininity. However, rather than being an indication of inherent characteristics, these studies also show how children’s reading and writing preferences are constructed as they work to signify membership within a particular gendered social category (Dressman, 1997). As the findings presented in this section suggest, children experience gender in multiple ways. Thus, it is vital children be provided with opportunities to talk about their preferences as well as safe spaces to challenge the naturalized assumptions about gender that construct and reinforce boundaries in both the selection and crafting of text (Dutro, 2001).

**Talk**

When students discuss, there are tacit language conventions for holding the floor, interrupting others, introducing new topics, and the like. These conventions, bound as they are in certain gendered discursive practices, become practically invisible to teachers and students over time. (Alvermann et al., 1997, p. 75)

**Gender Performance Through Talk Around Text**

According to Guzzetti (2001), many teachers are unaware of any gender bias within their classrooms. Yet, studies examining talk within the classroom have identified language patterns that serve to marginalize and silence females (and some males) during classroom discussions (Alvermann, 1995; Moore, 1997). For example, when observing high school students, Guzzetti (2001) found that discussions were dominated by males who routinely interrupted females, shouted out answers, and mocked females’ contributions in order to gain and hold control of the
Females, on the other hand, were observed to participate through listening and taking notes. Cherland (1992) had similar findings when sixth grade boys during classroom discussions of fictional texts were observed to perform their gender by utilizing verbal teasing as a strategy for demonstrating power and gaining dominance over girls.

The silencing of girls through talk around text was also reported by Davies (2003b) in a study in which she attempted to teach fifth and sixth grade students to deconstruct their gendered realities. As Davies discovered in her earlier work with pre-school aged children, simply presenting alternate images of masculinity and femininity is not enough; rather, the children need to question normative gendered characterizations (Skelton, 2010). Therefore, by providing fifth and sixth grade students access to poststructural theory, Davies (2003b) hoped they might be positioned to catch “texts in the act of shaping them” (p. 66). Three study groups, each comprised of five to six students, met for approximately 1½ hour per week over a 12-month period. Children shared and discussed their ideas and beliefs about gender and how those ideas and beliefs were encoded in their bodies and media images. The concepts of discourse, power, and powerlessness were made accessible to the children by using the phrases “discourse of the good child and discourses of resistance” (p. 4). The children examined texts to see the ways in which gender is constituted through text and were asked to write stories that resist dominant discourses. It was found that the children’s talk around and the crafting of texts was trapped in the masculine and feminine, and revealed the destructive ways in which the boys repeatedly engaged in practices that sexualized and oppressed the girls. This led Davies to conclude that, even when given access to discourses of resistance, an “oppositional and hierarchical gender order is constituted in violent ways, and in patterns of relentless reiterations of male dominance” (p. 66). Alvermann et al. (1997) reported similar findings when examining high school teachers’
attempts to guide students toward thinking about gender as a social construct. Despite teachers’ efforts, student talk about texts’ gendered messages was found to continuously fall into “stereotypical patterns reflective of gendered heterosexist thinking” (p. 90).

In a follow-up to the Alvermann et al. (1997) study, Commeyras (1999) sought to understand why, despite teachers’ attempts to alter and interrupt gender inequities in classroom talk, student talk around texts seems to consistently fall into gendered heterosexist patterns. Commeyras’s findings indicate that one factor may be rooted in teachers’ (mis)understandings of how gender gets constructed. In a random sampling of 1,530 literacy educators from across the United States, it was found the majority believe the “behavior of boys and girls is determined as much by biology and physiology as by social and cultural factors” (p. 355), while only a minority were found to view gender as “representative of the social and cultural meanings attributed to the real or perceived behavioral differences between males and females” (p. 356). Additionally, Commeyras notes how some teachers may be reluctant to take up issues of gender, as it takes considerable courage to engage students with issues that may inevitably cause controversy. As research has shown, such controversy may stem from essentialist notions of gender; where females are understood to be biologically constructed to behave and talk in one way and males in another (Stanley & Wise, 1993). Yet, as the studies in this section demonstrate, attempts to change patterns and content of gendered discussions around texts might be better understood as interventions that attempt to change power relations among students. Thus, as Alvermann et al. (1997) contend, it is “easier to think about changes [in] classroom practices than it [is] to actually make them” (p. 95).

Critical Literacy Practice

As discussed earlier in this chapter, research has illuminated the ways in which stories are a primary means used to make known to children the social ordering of the world, and how
careful analyses of how stories are told, or not told, is essential to children’s developing a critical awareness of the social messages emanating from the stories they read, view, and are told (Davies, 2003a). As some have argued, engaging children in critical literacy practice or, in other words, the critical deconstruction of texts will not only enable them to see how texts work to shape their identities, but also better position them to make informed decisions about how they choose to live their lives (Alvermann et al., 1999; Vasquez, 2014).

Janks (2010) writes, “Critical literacy works at the interface of language, literacy, and power” (p. 22) and focuses on the “ways in which meanings are mobilized in the defense of domination” (p. 13). Critical literacy in the classroom, as described by Vasquez (2014), is a theoretical and pedagogical framework for teaching and learning that reaches beyond simple comprehension to disrupt and think deeply about texts to uncover underlying meanings through asking questions such as: “What is this text trying to do to me? Whose interests are marginalized or privileged by this text? Whose account of a particular topic is missing? Whose voices are silenced or dominant?” (p. xiv). It is argued that through such deconstruction of texts, children will come to recognize and understand the effects stories have on how they construct knowledge of the world and their own reality. (Davies, 2003b; Johnson, 2001; Vasquez, 2014). Embedded within this framework is the assumption that once children are able to recognize the social and political dimensions of texts, they will be able to write and speak into existence new discourses that disrupt the power relations surrounding normative gender boundaries and identities. However, the critical questioning and deconstruction of texts has been shown to be ineffective in disrupting dominant gender discourses. As the Davies (2003b) and Alvermann et al. (1997) studies discussed earlier illustrate, despite efforts to guide students toward thinking about gender as a social construct, student talk around texts continued to fall into patterns reflective of
stereotypical gendered heterosexist thinking. Campano and Damico (2007) suggest this may be due to failure to move children from understanding how discourses and discursive practices influence identity toward some form of social action focused on disrupting and ending social injustices.

Research focused on the examination and analysis of patterned classroom literacy practice has shown that teachers, who are circumscribed by school rules, prescribed curricula, education policies, media, and politics, are afforded little if any curricular space to engage students in deep critical analyses of gendered texts (Johnson, 2011; Namatende-Sakwa, 2019). Yet, when teachers do attempt to engage students in such analysis, they lack the pedagogical skills and strategies necessary for engaging in critical literacy practice (Commeyras, 1999). For example, Johnson and Vasudevan (2012) found that teachers’ attempts to engage students in critical analysis of texts resulted in multiple perspectives on gender being privileged over critical perspectives, which indicates that school literacy was not positioned and recognized by the teachers as a gendered social and ideological practice, but rather as a neutral practice (Johnson, 2011; Orellana, 1995; Street, 1995). Similar inquiries into classroom critical literacy practice have found that, despite curricular goals for promoting gender equity, analysis of teacher talk around texts reveals a positioning of masculinity and heterosexual norms as superior (Boutte et al., 2011). What these studies indicate is that teachers must first learn to frame teaching from a critical perspective, which requires that they become critical within their own lives and understand how they themselves are privileged and disadvantaged within different contexts (Vasquez, 2014).

The Body and Embodiment

The body has gradually become more visible in research across contexts and disciplines as a construct for understanding the nuances of everyday literacy practices by
paying attention to how those are shaped by sedimented understandings of learning and being, but also by providing a lens to consider how movement and redefinition are possible. (Enriquez et al., 2016, p. ix)

**Becoming a Gendered Body**

While research suggests the ways in which text selection, text crafting, and talk around text might be read as performance of one’s gendered identity, positioning oneself as a masculine male or feminine female is also a physical process (Davies, 2003a). As Siegel (2016) reminds us, children are surveilled and regulated through everyday pedagogical practices that specify “how to sit, how to stand, and how and when to use their voices” (p. 25). Yet, many theories that describe the regulation and disciplining that social institutions do to bodies have neglected the gendered nature of those processes (Martin, 1998). Martin argues feminist theories of the body give focus to the adult gendered body without considering how the body becomes gendered. Thus, if we are to gain insight into how bodies become gendered, “feminist theories of gendered bodies need ‘childrening’ … [as] gendering of the body in childhood is the foundation on which further gendering of the body occurs throughout the life course” (p. 495). The following studies illustrate why Butler (1990) contends, “We regularly punish those who fail to do their gender right” (p. 140).

Three times a week, over the course of eight months, Martin (1998) conducted field observations in five preschool classrooms of three- to five-year-olds in a Midwestern city of the United States. Throughout the observations, Martin focused on the children’s physicality—on everyday classroom physical behavior, interaction, and regulation. The findings suggest that while disciplinary control produced docile bodies (Foucault, 1977), it also produced gendered bodies. For example, it was found that teachers were more likely to reprimand girls than they were boys for relaxed bodily movement and comportment. Martin (1998) observed how boys “were allowed and encouraged to pursue relaxed behaviors in a variety of ways that girls were
not” (p. 501), such as sloppy posture and crawling on the floor during teacher presentations. Also noted was how teachers rarely told boys to change a bodily behavior. Whereas boys were told to end a bodily behavior with little or no suggestion for alternate behaviors, teachers’ instructions to girls were more substantive and directive, “telling girls to do a bodily behavior rather than to stop one” (p. 506). Sadker and Sadker (1994) report similar findings with hand raising, where boys were more likely than girls to call out without raising their hand:

Sometimes what they [boys] say has little or nothing to do with the teacher’s questions. Whether male comments are insightful or irrelevant, teachers respond to them. However, when girls call out, there is a fascinating occurrence: Suddenly the teacher remembers the rule about raising your hand before you talk. (p. 43)

Martin (1998) also found that voice, “an aspect of bodily experience that teachers and schools are interested in disciplining” (p. 503), is highly gendered. Girls were observed to be told to be quiet, or use a ‘nicer,’ quieter voice, three times more often than were the boys. Such disciplining of girls’ voices, Martin argues, causes girls to be less physical. In other words, “toning down their voices tones down their physicality,” thus teaching girls that their bodies are supposed to be “quiet, small, and physically constrained” (p. 504), These findings led Martin to conclude that by limiting voice, “teachers limit one of girls’ mechanisms for resisting others’ mistreatment of them” (p. 504), which, in turn, positions girls as powerless subjects within the classroom community.

As Davies’s (2003a) work with pre-school children demonstrates, teachers do not operate alone in the gendered regulation of students’ bodies within the classroom environment. Children also participate in the regulation of their peers’ gendered performance. Davies found that once children have taken up the bodily, emotional, and cognitive patterns of the dominant male and the subordinate female, it is difficult for them to imagine, accept, or participate in any alternate gendered social structure. Davies observed that when a child stepped outside of the dominant
male or subordinate female pattern, it was perceived by peers as “incompetence, even immorality” (p. 21). The children then engaged in “category-maintenance work” (p. 31), where those who had deviated from expected, normalized gender performances were subjected by their peers to nastiness and teasing. Such teasing, Davies argues, serves to clarify an aggressor’s own social competence: “I am male, the way you are behaving is not the way males behave” (p. 31).

While Davies (2003a) argues that deviation from normalized gender performance does not effectively change but rather enforces gender category boundaries, Martin (1998) speculates that such deviation might signal resistance to gendering and, thus, give credence to the notion that gendered physicalities are neither natural nor easily and straightforwardly developed. For example, Martin observed preschool girls to resist the gendering of their voices when they took the opportunity to be loud, as their teachers were paying less attention to them while trying to get the boys to settle down. Both Martin’s observations of children engaging in resistance to the hidden school curriculum of gendered disciplining of the body and Davies’s (2003a) findings of children deviating from expected gender behaviors indicate that research on the gendering of student bodies needs to give focus to the agentive nature of children and thus the ways in which they attempt to convey their gendered identities.

**Perspectives on What Constitutes Literacy and the Literate Individual**

What counts as literacy and who counts as literate are situated within particular social, cultural, political, and historical contexts (Street, 2003). Thus, the concepts of literacy and literate are not as fixed as some might believe. As Levy (2016) notes,

Western societies did not begin to perceive or discuss concepts of ‘illiteracy’ as a concern much before the nineteenth century, because up to this point, an absence of ability to read and write printed text was regarded as a cultural norm while literacy skill was an exception to this norm. Even into the early twentieth century, attitudes towards ‘illiteracy’ were less condemnatory than became apparent a few decades later, and indeed exist strongly today. (p. 282)
Therefore, the necessity to be literate is a rather recent phenomenon, as the ability to read and write has now become the norm. When historically situated, it is evident why constructions of literacy within school discourse pertain largely to the reading and writing of print-based text (Levy, 2016; Wohlwend, 2009). While there has been movement toward expanding notions of literacy to include multimodal literacies, multimodality has remained on the peripheries of school-based literacy teaching and learning experiences (Sanford, 2005). Yet, research has shown that children respond to literacy experiences with their entire bodies, thus making it vital to consider bodies when interpreting what children are attempting to communicate (Enriquez, 2016; Guitierrez-Gomez, 2005; Johnson, 2011).

Braidotti (2011) writes of how the body and embodiment have become key terms in the feminist struggle for redefining subjectivity as a “socially mediated process of entitlements to and negotiations with power relations” (p. 18). This necessitates that the body be understood as “neither a biological nor a sociological category, but rather as a point of overlap between the physical, the symbolic, and the sociological” (p. 127). As such, Braidotti argues for a nomadic vision of the body, one defined as “multifunctional and complex, as a transformer of flows and energies, affects, desires, and imaginings” (p. 25). This theorized notion positions the body as being everywhere, ever present, and in a constant state of flux, which, in turn, renders it not easily (if at all) reducible and/or codifiable. Similarly, literacy researchers have turned toward bodies and embodiment to imagine and explore how literacy teaching and learning might be reconceptualized when literacies and bodies are seen as inextricably linked and intertwined (Johnson & Kontovourki, 2016). The theoretical turn toward viewing literacies as embodied provides a framework through which to problematize and disrupt dominant discourses surrounding literacy and the universalized ideal literate subject by arguing against
understandings of literacy as primarily a set of cognitive skills. This perspective attends to the multiple ways in which individuals make meaning, are read, and “may be read anew in complex sociopolitical contexts” (Enriquez et al., 2016, p. xi). Indeed, when literacy is understood to be a social and ideological practice (Ghiso, 2016; Martinez, 2013), it becomes impossible to universalize and thus codify what constitutes literacy and the literate individual. Consequently, as with the body, literacy is “just as impossible to pin down as it is impossible to know how someone truly feels, thinks, lives, is” (Johnson & Kontovourki, 2016, p. 3).

Johnson and Kontovourki (2016) write of two predominant theoretical perspectives on embodiment. Discursive theories of embodiment (Luke, 1992) posit, when bodies engage with texts, ideas, and one another, the ways in which literate subjects are produced and then disciplined can be analyzed so as to connect “local practice to broader institutional and ideological mechanisms” (p. 2). Post-discursive theories of embodiment, on the other hand, place emphasis on the “sensations and movements of the body in the moment-by-moment unfolding or emergence of activity” (Leander & Boldt, 2013, p. 22). Johnson and Kontovourki (2016) argue that both perspectives must be taken up together—that the boundaries between discursive and post-discursive theories must be seen as “permeable, generative, and … necessary if we are to understand the embodiment of literacies” (p. 3).

The Path to Embodied Reader Response

The multiple and varied ways in which literacy learners interact with texts are often missed when educators are preoccupied with obtaining a given answer to a particular question. The Initiate-Response-Evaluate (IRE) model of questioning is a teacher-led style of questioning; a verbal test looking for one “right” answer. The teacher asks a question, a student answers, and the teacher evaluates whether or not the answer is correct. While this model may be effective in assessing comprehension of a single fact, it does not offer opportunity for discussion where
opinions or alternate views are put forth. Furthermore, the IRE model positions the teacher as the
decider of what is correct or, in other words, what knowledge is valued within the classroom. In
practice, the IRE model of literacy instruction puts focus on the text while obscuring the reader.
Rosenblatt (1978) reimagined the possibilities of reader response to literature by shifting focus to
the reader as an active participant in the reading event. Rosenblatt’s transactional theory of
reader response differentiates efferent reading, where the reader’s attention is focused on
acquiring information, from aesthetic reading, where a reader’s opinions, emotions, enjoyment,
and personal connections made throughout the act of reading influence the meaning that is made.
Sipe (2002) builds upon Rosenblatt’s notion of aesthetic reading with the concept of expressive engagement. Sipe’s typology of expressive engagement attends to how young children perform in response to texts by (1) spontaneously dramatizing the story in verbal and non-verbal ways, (2) talking back to the story or characters, (3) critiquing or controlling by suggesting alternatives in plots, characters, or settings, (4) inserting themselves or friends into the story, and (5) taking over the text and manipulating it for one’s own purpose. Sipe (contends that “children who make such responses seem to view stories as invitations to participate or perform” and claims that “these five types of responses not only show children actively engaging with stories, they show children making stories their own” (p. 479; italics original). However, as Sipe acknowledges, such embodied performances are not always welcomed within the literacy classroom, as they may be considered “too out of control, too subversive, too transgressive, too viscerally pleasurable” (p. 481).

Embodied Literacy Performance

Enriquez (2016) suggests, if we are to understand how “regulation of performative response … [takes] hold in a student’s trajectory as a reader, embodied performance must be considered in terms of iteration” (p. 44). In other words, taking up Butler’s (2007) notion of
performativity provides a lens through which to understand how a frequently repeated embodied act “becomes naturalized and normalized and therefore assumes a permanent characteristic of one’s identity” (p. 44). However, Butler’s (2007) theory of performativity also accounts for moments when an embodied act is not repeated or performed as expected and therefore challenges an inscribed identity. As Enriquez’s (2016) work illustrates, both Sipe’s (2002) focus on students’ “attempted re-engineering of printed text” and Butler’s (2007) focus on the “attempted challenge to perceived identity” are relevant to literacy learners and occur “through moments of critical embodied performances” (Enriquez, 2016, p. 44).

While observing a kindergarten read aloud, Enriquez (2016) found that solicitation and suppression of particular embodied performances of reader response revealed discourses that worked to “condition students’ bodies to engage with texts as outlined by classroom and school norms” (p. 46). For example, prior to sharing Tomie DePaola’s (1979) Oliver Button is a Sissy with the class, the teacher, whose intent was to engage students in discussion about gender roles and gender equity within the text, reminded students that they should remain quiet and show their responses to the story through silent gestures, such as raising their eyebrows and widening their eyes. However, at the point in the story where Oliver is called a sissy for wanting to become a dancer, a male student, Roger, stood up and began to sway his hips back and forth as he giggled and laughed. The teacher immediately intervened and punitively moved Roger to another area on the rug. Enriquez (2016) notes that while Roger did not perform as expected, in terms of Butler’s (2007) theory of performativity, it was Roger’s failure to perform as expected that carried the potential to oppose the identity of the quiet, still, and independent reader that was being inscribed upon his body. Roger’s embodied performance was also viewed by Enriquez (2016) through Sipe’s (2002) notion of performative response, where a taking over of the text is
“almost always deeply humorous and subversive” (p. 478). While the teacher considered Roger’s performance to be off-task and disruptive, it did signify his transaction with the text as “his laughter and imitation of dancing attested to his entering the world of the text” (Enriquez, 2016, p. 49). Enriquez’s analysis further suggests that Roger’s embodied performance might be read as reaffirming his hetero-masculine identity, assuring himself and his peers that males who exhibit perceived feminine qualities deserve ridicule, which echoes Dutro’s (2011) findings that boys feel compelled to define themselves against all things feminine. Thus, the regulation of Roger’s performance illustrates how “it is not just the material body, but also the thoughts, feelings, and discourses giving rise to embodied performances that are subject to surveillance” (Enriquez, 2016, p. 49).

Moments of critical embodied performance have also been documented by researchers working with high school students. For example, Martinez (2013) observed how bilingual high school students constructed within their classroom “a hybrid social space in which bilingualism and hybridity were the norm” (p. 286). Martinez notes how the students’ creation of this space enabled him to understand the “classroom as a space of ideological contestation” (p. 286), where the students’ use of Spanglish on a daily basis could be seen as a “counter-hegemonic response” (p. 286) to the school’s imposition of English monolingualism. As defined (and observed) by Martinez, counter-hegemonic responses consist of the movements, gestural, and speech modes students utilize to communicate and provoke questions about authority and limits to certain types of knowledge during classroom literacy practices and events. In essence, Martinez’s notion of counter-hegemonic response aligns with the notion of critical embodied performance, where the repeated failure to perform as expected signifies opposition to the literate identities inscribed upon literacy learners through the institution of schooling.
In a related study, Johnson (2011) observed the ways in which a tenth grade student, Simone, utilized multimodal means of communication to navigate, resist, and question the multiple discursive subjectivities produced by myriad institutions for young literacy learners. Drawing on multimodal theory, post-structural performance theory, and critical literacy, Johnson suggests that Simone’s shifting from “speech modes to embodied gestural modes, and … addressing particular audiences at particular junctures” (p. 26) is evidence of her identity as a critically literate individual. Simone, who was observed to be routinely “ignored, censored, and silenced” (p. 40) within the classroom, is described by Johnson as one who was steeped in “sticky literacy practice” (p. 27) and as such was forced to resort to performing less audible and visible critical literacies (e.g., whispering and eye rolling), as critical voices were not privileged in the classroom. While labeled differently, Enriquez’s (2016) notion of critical embodied performance, Martinez’s (2013) notion of counter-hegemonic performance, and Johnson’s (2011) notion of critical literacy performance share the perspective that students’ embodied performances can be read as critically questioning the imposition of pre-defined, normative models of the ideal literate subject.

Conclusion

In this review of the literature, I have attempted to provide a critical synthesis of a small selection of work most relevant to the ways in which the school literacy curriculum serves as a site that privileges gender performances consistent with the binary gender order (Alverman et al., 1997; Davies, 2003a; Levy, 2016). The work reviewed within this chapter illustrates how school literacy practices reproduce the binary gender order through text, talk, and body (Davies & Saltmarsh, 2006). While many of the reviewed works explore how both teachers and students participate in the reification and normalization of the heteronormative binary gender order,
findings also indicate that students attempt to question and disrupt normative constructions of both gender and literacy through critical embodied performance.

After reviewing the literature, I believe there is a need for additional research dedicated to understanding the ways in which young students’ embodied performances question the gendering that occurs through school literacy practices. As evidenced in much of the examined literature, exploration of students’ ability to take up a critical stance toward the gendering that occurs through school literacy practice is limited to examining aptitude in deciphering the gendered nature of texts (Davies, 2003b). As the literature suggests, rather than focusing on how students take up and apply “assigned” critical perspectives in the crafting and analyses of texts (Davies, 2003b), conducting research that explores students’ embodied performances will place emphasis on the agentive nature of students and thus reveal the multiple and varied ways in which they might provoke questions about authority and limits to certain types of knowledge.

What has become clear throughout my review of the literature on the body and embodiment is that multimodal modes of communication have not only the potential to destabilize values constructed through classroom literacy practices and events, but also the ability to shape and make known individuals’ identities (Blackburn, 2002). However, as Johnson (2011) cautions, recognition and understanding of the ways in which embodied performances are participatory, communicative acts are dependent upon “teacher and researcher discursive repertoires for seeing and hearing it in practice” (p. 31). Virtually absent within this area of inquiry are empirical works focused on exploring the ways in which young students’ embodied performances are utilized in the navigation, resistance, and questioning of the gendered subjectivities produced through and within the institution of school for young literacy learners. This is a critical omission, as gender differences that are established during the early years
continue to emerge over the course of life, throughout which different sets of societal gendered expectations serve to limit potential and restrict opportunity (Aina & Cameron, 2011; Blaise, 2012).

The turn toward viewing bodies and literacy as inextricably linked and intertwined has opened up new avenues for literacy research, especially within the realm of gender studies in early childhood. It is a turn that has not only disrupted notions of the universal ideal literate subject by broadening perspectives and understandings of what constitutes literacy and the literate individual, but also has made visible how students are already positioned to work toward social change. As argued by Blackburn (2003), they arrive ready to “reveal, interrogate, destabilize, and challenge inequitable power dynamics” (p. 487).
Chapter 3: Methodology

There is no such thing as a feminist method (Harding, 1987). Rather, it is the feminist lens through which the research is conducted, and beliefs about the nature and location of knowledge that impact how methods are utilized. In other words, feminism provides a methodological and epistemological lens for “the doing of research methods” (Pillow & Mayo, 2012, p. 189). Throughout this qualitative case study, the ways in which I approached qualitative methods of data collection and analysis were situated within a poststructural feminist framework. Thus, this study aimed to take a feminist approach bound within a case study protocol.

What makes the feminist approach to data collection and analysis unique is how feminists think, reflect, and write about their relationships with research participants (Pillow & Mayo, 2012). Therefore, I considered more than how I went about studying research participants and analyzing school policies. I also thought about how to produce good research so that my work might make life better for people. Dillard (2000) contends that good research is grounded in viewing research as a responsibility, one that requires researchers to be “answerable and obligated to the very persons and communities being engaged in the inquiry” (p. 663). As Park (1993) suggests, this means conducting research for and with participants rather than on and about them. Park further contends that, if research is to be beneficial, it must live on in the “critical consciousness and … emancipatory practices of each participant” (p. 15). With these perspectives in mind, I endeavored to conduct good research by committing to work that promotes social change, aims to transform rather than describe (Reinharz & Davidman, 1992), and is beneficial to participants both throughout the research process and beyond. However, as
Hostetler (2005) cautions, “good intentions do not guarantee good research” (p. 17). Hostetler suggests that by foregrounding the well-being of participants, good intentions might be better positioned to lead toward good research. The notion of attending to participants’ well-being aligns with issues that are key to feminist research. Therefore, throughout the entire process of this study, my ways of doing qualitative methods of data collection and analysis focused on giving attention to the relationships I had with the participants, as well as the politics of power, representation, reciprocity, and voice (Pillow & Mayo, 2012).

Goldstein (2002) asserts, “Power imbalances are inherent in any research situation” (p. 156). Researchers, therefore, must be aware of the challenges that arise from such imbalances, especially around those of exploitation. Researchers must also be concerned with reciprocity and reflect on what they take from their research participants as well as what they give to them. Alcoff (1991) points to how feminists believe that speaking for others is “arrogant, vain, unethical, and politically illegitimate” (p. 6), as the social location and identity of the speaker has an “epistemically significant impact on that speaker’s claims” (p. 7). How, then, could I be confident that my understandings represented participants’ thoughts, behaviors, and experiences? As Jipson and Jipson (2005) suggest, I aimed to increase confidence by (1) utilizing multiple methods to collect data, (2) looking for converging evidence with my findings and other research, (3) looking for disconfirming evidence about my data and interpretations, and (4) attempting to replicate or disconfirm my own work. Yet, I do understand how increasing confidence is not to be confused with having my understandings accurately represent participants’ perspectives, as differences and tensions between data sources may not only prove to be generative, but also better reflect participants’ complex ways of knowing and feeling.
I recognize that as I conducted this qualitative case study, who I am figured into how I collected, analyzed, and interpreted data. In other words, my researching self was “essential within the case” (Dyson & Genishi, 2005, p. 56). In fact, researchers themselves are so much a part of the complexity in qualitative research, their work can never be neutral (Brizuela et al., 2000). Hesse-Biber (2012) suggests that the transparent intertwining of one’s own identity throughout their work helps manage this complexity, dispel the notion that research is a neutral practice, and avoid the production of work that presents little more than a “view from nowhere” (p. 17). Therefore, I engaged in an ongoing process of self-reflexivity. I kept a daily research journal where I wrote of my ongoing critical exploration of my researcher positionality and the intersecting identities I brought to every stage of the research process (Green, 2011). I considered the historical and social situatedness of the discourses that framed my own understandings, experiences, and positioning as well as those of the participants with whom I worked. However, rather than using reflexivity as a tool to validate the truthfulness of my research, I strove to engage in a what Pillow and Mayo (2012) describe as a “reflexivity of discomfort,” which “makes the work of reflexivity visible and interrupts the … desire to know, to name, and to claim, asserting that not knowing is often as powerful as knowing” (p. 198).

My hope was that throughout the course of this qualitative case study I would produce work that might have implications for the potential of decentering the cognitive aspects of literacy and, instead, centering the body in literacy teaching, learning, and scholarship. Therefore, what I sought to accomplish through this work was to provide detailed, complex, thick descriptive accounts of the embodied performances that occurred within one early elementary literacy classroom. In doing so, I hoped to demonstrate the possibilities for how reconceptualizing what constitutes literacy and the literate individual might help to make stable,
invisible power differentials around conceptions of gender visible. As argued by Brizuela et al. (2000), qualitative inquiry aims to understand the world by working to make the unseen seeable.

**Overview of the Research Design**

Qualitative case studies aim to make sense of the world. They explore the “messy complexity of human experience” (Dyson & Genishi, 2005, p. 3) by focusing on one or more social units (e.g., group, place, activity) for a set period of time. As a case study researcher, I am particularly interested in how young students and their teachers construct and perform their gender and literate identities within the context of the daily literacy curriculum. To understand this, I immersed myself within a small, yet complex, early elementary classroom to study in-depth for approximately 8 weeks. Using qualitative data production methods, I observed the gender and literacy performances of participants and provided opportunities for participants to share with me what knowledge of gender and literacy they wanted me to know. Based on themes and patterns that arose within the produced data, I constructed narratives, or in other words cases, to help make sense of how gender constructed literacy and literacy gender within one early elementary classroom. Yet, as Orellana (1995) reminds us, “it is important to recognize that classroom cultures are dynamic ones, not frozen in time as is suggested by written reports” (p. 705). Therefore, while this case study presents my interpretations of a particular phenomenon, that occurred in a particular context at a particular time with particular participants, it is my hope that this work will have implications for how literacy teaching and learning is currently conceptualized within early education. With current United States Department of Education policy mandating gender equity within schools, increased social awareness of less visible circulating discourses of gender, and decades of research establishing how school literacy practices privilege and reproduce the binary gender order (Davies, 2003a; Luke, 1992; Orellana,
1995; Wohlwend, 2012), there needs to be examination of how current school literacy practices are, or could be, sites that protect students from “discrimination based on gender identity or failure to conform to stereotypical notions of masculinity or femininity” (U.S. DOE, 2015, p. 1). To understand how literacy teaching and learning might be reconceptualized so as to address issues of gender (in)equity, I first had to study the ways in which both gender and literacy were performed within the literacy classroom. I utilized methods for producing qualitative data to gain understanding of the socially situated gender and literacy practices that participants engaged with over the course of approximately two months. Conducting this study within the first half of the school year provided an opportunity to explore how meanings of gender and literacy within the classroom were initially constructed, and the ways in which the teacher and students (re)negotiated those meanings over the subsequent months.

I approached this qualitative case study with both poststructural feminist theory and feminist theories of embodiment, situated within conceptions of literacy as gendered social practice. The purpose of this case study was to explore how early elementary students and their teacher navigated discourses of gender within the literacy classroom. Through a poststructural feminist lens, I understood gender and literacy to be intertwined social constructs that are discursively produced through systems of power and knowledge that govern what is upheld to be true. In foregrounding this theoretical framework, I explored how gender constructs literacy, and literacy gender, for as Davies and Saltmarsh (2006) assert, school literacy practices produce “students as simultaneously both gendered and literate” (p. 236). Additionally, I took up an embodied lens (Blackburn, 2016) and utilized the notion of performativity (Butler, 2007) to explore how participants’ embodied performances might complicate and disrupt understandings of both gender and literacy as fixed constructs. I documented and constructed descriptions of
events to illustrate how participants constantly constituted and reconstituted themselves and the social world through the gender and literacy discourses in which they participated. Because I contend that both gender and literacy are performative, I sought to incorporate throughout my work the ways in which participants utilized multimodal modes of communication to navigate, resist, and question normalized conceptions of both gender and literacy.

While case study methodology provides a framework for conducting examination of the meaning people make of their lives within particular contexts, researchers must also disrupt the boundaries of their case to consider the “wider societal context … within which … everyday interactions take place” (Erickson, 1986, p. 120). As Dyson and Genishi (2005) remind us, individuals’ lives are complex. Therefore, taking up Erickson’s (2002) notion of “the daily round” as a unit of analysis helped me understand how participants drew on multiple sources of knowledge as they participated in classroom literacy practices and events. In Erickson’s (2002) words:

We can observe and document the entire succession of social situations engaged in by an individual on a daily basis—the full cycle of differing communities of practice that the individual encounters. In finer grained analysis we can study the person in a particular situation, identifying the specific interactional practices in which the person participates in specific interactional events in a specific local community of practice. We can identify the practices themselves, considered as real-time, continuous social action, and we can also identify the social participation structures—the configurations of social roles in interaction within the group (that is, what listeners do while speakers are speaking, how attention is shown by a speaker to various audiences within the group, and how the desperate audiences point themselves out, ‘contextualize’ themselves, as distinct subgroups). (p. 304)

With Erickson’s words in mind, I attempted to collect data to help me understand the influence wider social networks have on participants’ understandings and performances of gender and literacy. For example, observing students outside of their classroom during school library visits, school-wide assemblies, and/or on the playground during recess revealed ways in which their gender and literacy performances were either similar or dissimilar to those observed within the
literacy classroom. I agree with Johnson and Kontovourki (2016), who argue, “As the body is everywhere, so is literacy” (p. 3). Similarly, I aligned myself with Boldt’s (2011) claim that “there is nothing that can’t be turned into a performance of gender” (p. 78). Thus, I understood the messy complexity of the intertwined constructs of gender and literacy extended beyond the classroom.

**Researcher Positionality and Role**

I came to this study embracing Milner’s (2007) notion that qualitative work consists of an interweaving of both researcher and “others’ cultural systems of coming to know, knowing, and experiencing the world” (p. 388). Acknowledging that I could not dissociate my research from my own experiences, intersecting identities, and educational values and beliefs necessitated that I attend to the complexities and tensions involved when creating narratives of participants’ thoughts, behaviors, and experiences. Therefore, throughout every phase of this study, I worked with the fabric of my own life as I explored the cultural and discursive threads revealed in the stories of how the participants and myself came to be the gendered and literate beings that we are.

**What I Carried into the Classroom as a Teacher**

I can be described as a middle-class, Caucasian cisgender woman who has worked as an elementary school library media specialist for 15 years. Prior to becoming a librarian, I was a 3rd, 4th, and 5th grade classroom teacher. Throughout the years, I have seen a continued narrowing of the literacy curriculum, which has not only reduced teacher autonomy in deciding how to teach literacy, but also has placed limits on what counts as literacy and who counts as literate. However, teaching is my second career. My first career was in the performing arts. During my years in the field, I performed in stage productions in New York City and throughout the country, worked as a studio musician recording vocals for new musicals, served four years as
managing director of a theatre company in NYC, conducted workshops for grades K-6 in various metropolitan area schools, and designed and ran various theatre arts programs for children and adults. When I entered into teaching, I carried with me a deeply embedded belief that teaching and learning are performative and what constitutes literacy and the literate individual extends far beyond the mechanics of reading and writing.

**What I Carried into the Classroom from My Childhood**

Davies (2003a) writes of how the world is made knowable to children through the discourses of the social groups to which they belong. As a child, the loudest discourse pulsating throughout my world was that of the *good girl*. It was the major source of knowledge for how to be(come) *me* within the two most important worlds I inhabited, home and school.

As the eldest of three children living in a cramped Brooklyn apartment with my mother, father, and ever-present immigrant grandparents, I became keenly aware that each family member was assigned a specific gender role they were expected to play. In Western European tradition, I was groomed to take up the conventional female roles of homemaker, wife, and mother. “Someday you’ll be married and produce an heir and a spare,” the adults used to say. I was taught to knit, sew, bake, change my baby sister’s diaper, and speak with a Scottish brogue. Embedded within my training was the notion that a *good girl* should not want for much and be grateful for what she has. Since we did not, in fact, have much, I would occasionally complain. After being told to stop my bellyaching, I would be reminded of how fortunate I was to be living in America, a country where, if you follow the rules and show respect for authority, you can go far. I read and interpreted the landscape of home and understood that, in order to become a coherent member of my family, I would need to embody and perform femininity within that space.
Education was a nonnegotiable in my family. I was expected to attend school, do well, and go on to college. My grandparents, despite neither having attended school beyond the elementary grades, saw education as the key to family stability, happiness, and success. While Granny completed only a few years of formal schooling, Grand Pop made it through the 5th grade before leaving to help support his 11 brothers and sisters by working in the shipyards of Greenock, Scotland. This family story was the source for a powerful discourse of family: that one’s first allegiance is to family, a commitment that includes ensuring that each generation will do better than the one before. For my grandparents, this meant emigrating to America and then requiring their two daughters to complete their schooling. When it came time for me enter school, I was reminded by the adults at home to be a good girl, follow the rules, and respect those in authority.

When relocated within the institution of school, the discourse of good girl, the one that had mattered at home and had seeped into my identity, was useless. I realized that in order to survive, I would need to quickly read and interpret this new landscape of the classroom and find ways of including within my identity repertoire the discourse of the good school-girl. I learned that in the cold, militaristic space of my first-grade classroom, a good school-girl never questions the authority of the teacher, lest she desire to be smacked across the back of her hand with a wooden ruler. She also sits up straight, crosses her feet at the ankles, keeps her hands folded on her desk, keeps her eyes straight ahead, never raises her hand (but instead waits to be called upon), wears her hair back, keeps her blouse tucked into her skirt, knee socks pulled up, shoes tied, face clean, body still, and voice silent. The over-regulation of my body left me terrified. But I complied, because I wanted to be a good school-girl. Eventually, my parents pulled me out of that school. Yet, the three months I spent there as a six-year-old made enough of an impact on
me that for years afterward, I never spoke up or otherwise tried to make my presence known in another classroom. By the time I reached 8th grade, my guidance counselors and teachers were so concerned over my silence that I was scheduled into a drama class. It was there that I eventually found both my voice and a passion that led to my first career. Along the way, I married and, yes, produced an heir and a spare; just as I had learned a good girl should do.

**Insider or Outsider?**

Campano and Damico (2007) suggest that marginalized individuals’ experiences and social realities can lead to epistemic privilege, a concept they describe as being grounded in the belief that “those with the least power [are] best positioned to understand inequality” (p. 223). In conducting inquiry into the gendering of young students, I came to the process with a small degree of epistemic privilege. In as much as I was once a young girl subjected to myriad gendered discursive practices that placed limits on access to certain types of knowledge and opportunity, I am an insider. However, on the continuum of researcher positionality, I am more of an outsider. Since experience is highly contextual, I was wary of using my own life as the basis to universalize the experiences of others. Rather, I remained cognizant of how the notions of childhood and teaching that I brought from my own experiences of childhood and teaching could project particular understandings onto my interpretations of participants’ experiences. Time, space, race, class, and gender, as well as social, cultural, political, and educational frameworks, all contribute to how each individual uniquely experiences every moment within their worlds. This applies not only to participants’ lived experiences, but also to the ways in which I observed, took up, and analyzed those experiences. Consequently, I attempted to produce delicately balanced analyses—where there was a revealing of self, without the imposition of self upon the participants.
Implications from Mini-studies for the Current Study

I conducted two mini-studies which focused on exploring the intertwined nature of gender and literacy within the early elementary classroom. Much of what my findings revealed were reflected in the literature. For example, I found that (1) literacy was narrowly defined as having the ability to read and write print-based text; (2) teachers held an essentialist view of gender, where female students were understood to be biologically constructed to behave and talk in one way and male students in another; (3) teacher talk around text continuously fell into patterns reflective of stereotypical gendered heterosexist thinking; (4) teachers’ regulation of students’ bodies appeared to be gendered in nature, with females more closely surveilled and disciplined than males; and (5) some students resisted the regulation of their bodies by occasionally performing in ways that were in opposition to teachers’ directives. Yet, when interviewed, both teachers who participated in the mini-studies professed to be committed to gender equity within their classrooms.

Methods of data production for the two mini-studies included participant observation field notes and semi-structured interviews with the classroom teachers recorded on audio. In addition, student-created artifacts, photographs of the classroom spaces, and curricular and school documents were collected. What I learned from the mini-studies influenced both the methodological and theoretical design of the current study. In an effort to gain deeper understandings for how school literacy practices inscribe gender and literate identities upon bodies, and how students’ embodied performances might be read as questioning the identities inscribed upon their bodies, this study was designed to include (1) informal conversations with focal students, (2) expansion of my theoretical framework to include Butler’s (2007) theory of performativity, and (3) utilization of video-recording as a method of data production.
Integrating Informal Conversations with Focal Students

Including informal conversations with the focal students added new dimensions and considerations to the study of how gender is performed within the context of the daily literacy curriculum. In the mini-studies, I utilized a poststructural feminist framework and focused on theorizing how the teachers understood gender within the context of literacy teaching and learning. At the time of the mini-studies, I was most interested in the teachers’ thoughts and beliefs about gender as it pertains to literacy. During an informal conversation with a second-grade teacher, she spoke of how, in her experience, boys always select nonfiction texts because they are “knowledge-based” and girls always select fictional texts because girls are “dramatic” and enjoy reading “fluffy stories.” Conversations with the teacher helped me gain insight into her personal and professional histories. Combining what I learned from our discussions with observation field notes allowed me to better understand how, in this teacher’s particular case, the discourses of gender and literacy circulating throughout her life positioned her to believe biological sex difference governed her students’ text selections. However, contrary to the teacher reporting boys in the class always selected nonfiction while the girls always selected fiction, I observed a few girls to select “knowledge-based” nonfiction while a few boys selected “fluffy” fiction. Missing from my analysis were the students’ perspectives on text selection. Speaking with the students would have provided an opportunity to explore the processes by which they constructed their text preferences, especially those whose selections crossed the gender boundaries as reported to me by the teacher. Therefore, this study sought to broaden the scope of my inquiry to include the perspectives of students. By including informal conversations with focal students, I hoped to foreground their experiences and knowledge. In doing so, I was able to think more deeply about how literacy constructs gender and gender literacy, and the ways in which participants’ gender performances informed one another.
The Addition of Butler’s Theory of Performativity

In taking up a poststructural feminist framework, my two mini-studies focused on understanding gender as representative of power relations. I examined the ways in which gendered hierarchal power structures of the larger society were mirrored within the classroom. While giving focus to the teachers, I explored how spoken and unspoken rules and conventions that govern gender were enacted within the context of literacy instruction. Simply put, I was attending only to the ways in which gendered bodies were produced through surveillance and discipline. However, the field note data and student-created artifacts revealed multiple instances of students engaging in multimodal communications that might be read as critically questioning the gendering that occurred within the context of the daily literacy curriculum. This not only prompted me to rethink how I was conceptualizing power, but also my understanding of the ways in which meanings of both gender and literacy are constructed and destabilized. Therefore, in this study, I expanded on my work with gender and literacy by integrating Butler’s (2007) theory of performativity to better understand how participants’ embodied performances might complicate and disrupt understandings of both gender and literacy as fixed constructs.

The Addition of Video-recordings

One of the goals of this study was to contribute to a body of work that addresses literacy from a poststructural feminist perspective by integrating attention to how bodies communicate and provoke questions about gender. While neither of my two mini-studies was designed to give focus to the body, I did attend to constructing thick, descriptive field notes that contained both verbal and nonverbal interactions. During data analysis, themes and patterns around students’ multimodal communicative acts began to emerge. As my focus started to shift, I made attempts at analyzing students’ embodied gender and literacy performances. However, I quickly became frustrated with the data. I needed more. I knew there had been much more activity within the
classroom than I was able to capture with my hand-written notes alone. Therefore, video-recording the activity within the literacy classroom was essential to the current study, as it provided an opportunity for close analysis and accurate portrayal of participants’ embodied performances. As Dyson and Genishi (2005) assert, video-recordings help capture unspoken language that might otherwise be missed. Guitierrez-Gomez (2005) echoes this assertion with the claim that video-recording is especially useful when working with young children, as they respond to literacy experiences with their whole bodies.

**Research Site**

The site for this study was a K-5 public elementary school located in an upper-middle class suburban community in northern New Jersey. Over the academic year 2019-2020, the school served approximately 470 students enrolled in Kindergarten through Grade 5. Among its 470 students, 64.8% were White, 7.9% Hispanic, 1.5% Black or African American, 16.5% Asian, and 9.2% were two or more races (NJ DOE, 2020). Enrollment trends by student group were 46.5% female, 53.5% male, <1% non-binary/undesignated gender, 1.1% economically disadvantaged, 15.2% students with disabilities, and 2.6% English learners. Enrollment by home language was 88.2% English, 2.1% Korean, 1.9% Chinese, 1.7% Japanese, 1.7% Russian, and 4.3% other. The school was one of nine (six elementary schools, two middle schools, and one high school) in a high-performing district, with this particular school’s academic performance ranked as very high when compared to both the other elementary schools within the district and elementary schools across the state of New Jersey. Included within the school district’s mission statement was the notion that all of the schools provide learning environments that enable students to maximize their unique potential to become life-long learners and productive, responsible citizens. The mission statement of the school in which this study took place built
upon the district’s mission by noting how they strive to create an environment that encourages appreciation for cultural diversity, while developing self-confident individuals who are problem solvers and risk takers.

**Participants**

Recruitment of the teacher for this study was by means of purposeful sampling. The teacher selected was a second-grade classroom teacher who was both familiar with the school literacy curriculum and took up the notion of gender equity within her classroom. The criteria for selection of the teacher were important, as I believed the problem to be explored should be one that participants were affected by and “whose interest demands that it be solved” (Park, 1993, p. 8). The students selected for this study were second-grade students. This met the inclusion criteria, as the major portion of young children’s instructional days are devoted to the learning of literacy. Prior to embarking upon this study, I met with both the district superintendent and school principal to discuss the goals of the study, which included a focus on exploring how gender was performed within the context of the daily literacy curriculum. Once I received IRB approval, the participating teacher and I scheduled and conducted two information sessions where I introduced myself and explained the research project to the families of the students. After securing informed consent from the teacher and parents/guardians of the students, I introduced myself to the students, explained the study, and secured their assent (Appendices E, F, G).

**Data Production**

The primary sources of data for this dissertation study were participant observation fieldnotes, casual conversations, and video-recordings. Because my research was epistemologically situated within a framework that understands knowledge to be both socially
situated and produced (Harding, 1993; Mohanty, 2018), I did not collect data, but rather produced data. As explained by Ramazanoglu and Holland (2002), data collection implies that “facts are lying around waiting for the researcher to spot them” (p. 148). On the other hand, data production implies that “information gathered by the researcher is produced in a social process of giving meaning to the social world” (p. 148). Therefore, while I aimed to represent participants’ knowledge of gender and literacy, my epistemological and theoretical perspectives influenced what I deemed to be important and focused on within the collected information. Even though audio and video-recordings captured interactions, emotions, and body language, analysis still necessitated a process of selection and organization guided by my assumptions and conceptual frameworks. I thus produced data through a process of seeing patterns, making sense, and giving shape to the collected information.

**Participant Observation and Field Notes**

At the core of qualitative research are the interconnected activities of participant observation and the written accounts that attempt to capture that participation (Emerson et al., 2011). As a participant observer, I sought to join as a member of the classroom community while critically observing the ways in which gender was performed, regulated, disrupted, and/or negotiated within the context of the daily literacy curriculum. As a member of the classroom community I, at times, became a participant by taking on the role of teacher (e.g., assisting students with their writing). Other times I was a strict observer, sitting on the periphery of the action. There were also occasions when I took on the role of participant observer by responding to students’ requests for assistance and completing tasks for the teacher all while simultaneously taking observation notes. Green (2011) suggests that moving between the roles of participant, observer, and participant observer is a methodological strategy for producing authentic work, as it invites reflexivity, relevance, and reciprocity. Additionally, I was explicit with participants
when I was switching from participant to observer. This not only made the research process less mysterious (Brayboy et al., 2000), but also showed respect for the participants as they did not have to wonder, “What is she doing now?” Participant observations were conducted in the classroom at least three days a week for the 2-month (approximately 8-week) duration of the project (December 2019 through the end of January 2020). During the first week, I spent the entire school day with the participants. After I became familiar with the site, participants, and their daily routines, the number of hours per day were reduced so I could concentrate on giving focus to particular instructional blocks. For example, math instruction and specials (i.e., art, music, physical education, and library) typically occurred in the afternoon after lunch. Therefore, I eventually reduced my time in the classroom to 8:00am through 1:00pm. This allowed me to be present for all literacy instruction (reading, writing, read alouds, and word study) as well as morning and lunch recess periods. There were, however, a few exceptions when I returned in the afternoon to join the students during their school library visits and holiday concert rehearsals.

Field notes are the foundation of qualitative case studies, as researchers rely upon them to construct the case (Dyson & Genishi, 2005). Taking up Emerson et al.’s (2011) “participating-in-order-to-write” (p. 23) approach allowed me to construct a detailed record of observed events as they unfolded within the classroom. In attending to the ongoing activities within the classroom, I occasionally made mental notes that I later expanded into full field notes. However, the majority of my notes were in the form of jottings, which Emerson et al. describe as quick “scribbles about actions and dialogue” (p. 29) that help jog the memory of significant details when later creating detailed, thick descriptions of scenes. Depending on the situation, I recorded my jottings either by hand or on an iPad. My notes were recorded on a double-sided protocol with descriptive notes on one side and reflective notes on the other. My descriptive notes attended closely to
participants’ bodies and talk. I engaged in the systematic noting of behaviors and events, both verbal and nonverbal. I recorded the nature, location, and duration of each event, as well as who was involved. Each day after leaving the field, jottings were converted into detailed, descriptive fieldnotes. My field notes were also reflective, which helped me remain cognizant of my positionality and how it influenced what I deemed to be interesting and significant within the data (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Marshall & Rossman, 2011; Milner, 2007). In addition, my reflective notes included methodological and theoretical notes, as this helped me consider my methods and how my theoretical lens influenced every stage of the research process. To protect confidentiality, all named individuals within the field notes were given pseudonyms.

**Informal Conversations and Transcriptions**

Conversations with participants allowed for foregrounding their experiences and knowledge, and produced data that deepened understanding of what was observed in the classroom. Recording participants’ views in their own words allowed me to interpret observed activities from their perspectives (Dyson & Genishi, 2005). To better understand how literacy constructs gender and gender literacy within the lives of participants, I engaged in informal conversations with the classroom teacher and seven focal students. Since my goal was to allow participants to let me know what they would like me to know, I aimed to listen deeply and keep the conversations narrative in style (Brayboy et al., 2000; Dyson & Genishi, 2005). What was communicated nonverbally by the participants was also important. Therefore, I made jottings that noted participants’ nonverbal communications (e.g., gestures and expressions), which later aided in converting conversations into full field notes. Topics of conversation arose primarily from observed events. For example, I often asked the teacher if she could tell me more about something I had noticed happening the day before. With focal students, I asked them to draw pictures of what happened during particular events and then had them tell me about their
drawings. In addition to topics that arose from observed events, I looked for opportunities to ask the teacher (Appendix C) and focal students (Appendix D) questions meant to prompt conversations around literacy and/or gender.

Informal conversations with the classroom teacher took place in the classroom during times that were convenient for both the teacher and myself. We often sat and talked before the students arrived in the morning, while the students were on the playground during outdoor recess, and over lunch. Conversations with the seven focal students took place either in the classroom during independent work time, indoor recess, or in the hallway outside of the classroom. Conversations with the classroom teacher and focal students were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Being able to listen back to conversations was important, as it allowed for a more accurate portrayal of participants’ words and inflections. Additionally, any nonverbal communications noted in the conversation field notes were inserted into the transcripts as closely as possible to the verbal communications they overlapped (Rogers & Wetzel, 2013). To protect confidentiality, all named individuals within the transcripts were given pseudonyms.

**Video-recordings and Transcriptions**

One of the goals of this study was to contribute to a body of work that addresses literacy from a poststructural feminist perspective by integrating attention to how bodies communicate and provoke questions about gender. Video-recording the activity within the literacy classroom was therefore essential to this study, as it provided an opportunity for close analysis and accurate portrayal of participants’ gestures, bodily movements, and shifts in volume. As Dyson and Genishi (2005) assert, video-recordings help to capture unspoken language that might otherwise be missed. Video-recording was especially useful, as the students responded to literacy experiences with their whole bodies (Guitierrez-Gomez, 2005).
Video-recordings were taken of only certain activities and interactions, and centered on the classroom teacher and focal students. During classroom observations, I was on alert for when it might be beneficial to begin video-recording. Specifically, I aimed to video-record select events in which the gender binary or gender order was reinscribed, disrupted, and/or questioned by the teacher and/or focal students during the literacy block within the classroom. Being selective in where, when, what, and who to video-record not only helped to focus my inquiry, but also controlled the amount of data to be indexed, transcribed, and analyzed. Video-recordings taken during observations were viewed and transcribed. Similar to the transcribed informal conversations, video-recording transcriptions included both verbal and nonverbal communications. To protect confidentiality, all named individuals within the transcribed video-recordings were given pseudonyms. Additionally, video and photo editing programs were used to further protect the identities of any recorded participants by blurring faces. All participants who provided consent/assent were included in the video-recorded data.

**Artifact Collection**

To further deepen understanding of what was observed within the classroom, student work, photographs of student artwork, and other classroom materials were photocopied, scanned, and/or collected. The artifacts had no identifying information, but included pseudonyms. Artifacts were collected from all students whose parents/guardians provided consent.

**Curricular and School Documents**

All relevant curricular documents used in the classroom were collected. Public information regarding demographics, school information, and other pertinent public records were also collected and examined. No private information about individual students was solicited. Collection of curricular and school documents helped provide insight into how what was
observed within the classroom was influenced by school rules, prescribed curricula, education policies, media, and politics.

**Data Production Timeline**

Dyson and Genishi (2005) recommend that researchers first “case the joint” (p. 19). In other words, researchers should take time to understand how the site in which the inquiry is being conducted is rendered meaningful to the participants. Therefore, I spent the first 2 weeks in the classroom as a participant observer. During that time, I collected information about the classroom space, schedules, participants, and the activity that occurred within the classroom. During week 2, I started to engage the teacher in informal conversation. To gain deeper understanding for how the classroom space was physically utilized by participants, during weeks 3 and 4 I video-recorded some of the general activity within the classroom. During week 4, I identified seven focal students and started engaging them in informal conversation. During weeks 5 through 8, field notes and video-recordings focused on the teacher and focal students. What I learned from the informal conversations with the teacher and focal students was used to guide my observations as well as where and when to video-record.

This study was originally designed to include several additional classroom visits about a month after my day-to-day classroom observations came to an end. My intention was to use those visits to conduct follow-up conversations and provide participants with the opportunity to view some of the video-recordings so as to share their interpretations. However, by that time the country had entered into its nation-wide Covid-19 shutdown. While I had hoped to perhaps conduct the follow-up conversations via Zoom or another virtual platform, at the time it was logistically impossible. All of the teachers within the district, including myself, were working
tirelessly day and night to create and deliver live and recorded online instruction to our students who were already learning remotely from home.

Table 1. *Data Production Timeline*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week</th>
<th>Participant Observation</th>
<th>Informal Conversation</th>
<th>Video-recording of selected events</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Field notes of whole class</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Field notes of whole class</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Field notes of whole class</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>General activity within classroom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Field notes of teacher and focal students</td>
<td>Teacher Focal students</td>
<td>General activity within classroom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Field notes of teacher and focal students</td>
<td>Teacher Focal students</td>
<td>Focal students and teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Field notes of teacher and focal students</td>
<td>Teacher Focal students</td>
<td>Focal students and teacher</td>
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<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Field notes of teacher and focal students</td>
<td>Teacher Focal students</td>
<td>Focal students and teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Field notes of teacher and focal students</td>
<td>Teacher Focal students</td>
<td>Focal students and teacher</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Methods of Data Analysis**

Data analysis is a process that cannot be separate from data production and writing (Dyson & Geneshi, 2005; Horvat, 2013; Pillow & Mayo, 2012). While formal analysis and interpretation should be left until most of the data have been produced, some analysis must take place during production, as this helps give focus and direction to the study as it moves forward (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Therefore, I approached data analysis as an ongoing, recursive process that began when I started producing data and returned to throughout the entire course of the study. My analysis throughout the data production period was conducted through insights, questions, and hunches that were grounded in the produced data. However, as Dyson and Genishi (2005) assert, “researchers’ efforts are not simply ‘grounded’ in data” (p. 81). How I
approached, considered, and interpreted the data was shaped by both my theoretical positioning and my own life experiences (Dyson & Genishi, 2005). Because “interpretive research is reflexive” (p. 81), I engaged in writing analytic memos throughout the data production period. As Horvat (2013) recommends, I used these memos to capture my thoughts as I thought through the data to confirm or disconfirm hunches, reflect on my positionality, and consider the ways in which my theoretical positioning, methodology, and methods influenced every phase and aspect of my work. These analytic memos not only provided direction and focus for the study as it proceeded, but also became essential components of my formally presented analyses.

Once data production had officially ended, I took time to ensure I had organized all documents, transcripts, memos, photos, video clips, and samples of student work. Then, I read through all of produced data in chronological order. I then constructed another researcher memo to record my initial reactions and thoughts about emergent themes. As Dyson and Genishi (2005) suggest, as pieces of data are organized, and their natures and interrelationships are explored, new questions may arise. Thus, my work was further driven by curiosity, and I was “on the case” (p. 81).

**Unit of Analysis: Events**

The primary data and thus the primary focus of my analysis was selected events, (i.e., moments and interactions) in which the gender binary or gender order was reinscribed, disrupted, and/or questioned during the literacy block within the early elementary classroom. Because my unit of analysis was events, it is important to make a distinction between what are commonly referred to as practices and events. According to Hornberger (2001), practices are “both observable patterns of behavior across events” and the less visible ideological aspects “underlying norms, values, and conventions” (p. 344). In other words, an event is a singular occurrence, while a practice is a repeated sequence of a particular occurrence in which
sociocultural values reflected in the occurrence are foregrounded. However, Burnett and Merchant (2018) maintain that the concept of event as a singular occurrence is problematic “because of its boundedness in time and space” (p. 3) and therefore argue for a different conceptualization of event; “one that sees event as fluid and elusive, and allows not just for what happened, but for what might have been, and in doing so accounts for potentialities” (p. 5). Similarly, Blackburn (2003) finds potentialities in events by bringing Butler’s (1999) notion of performativity to her analyses, where repeated performance of a particular act (occurrence) “serves not only to solidify but also destabilize … because in each performance are slight variations among the previous, the current, and the prospective performances” (p. 469).

Conceptualizing the event as unbounded from time and space allowed me to analyze not only the ways in which literacy reinforced but also held the potential to interrupt power dynamics around the inscription of gender and literate identities.

**Analytical Tools**

The analytical tools I utilized throughout the process of data production and analysis were informed by the theoretical perspectives that ground this study. Situated within these theoretical perspectives, I read classroom interactions, gender performances, and literacy performances through particular lenses. Following Kontovourki’s (2009) model, Table 2 shows how I turned theoretical constructs into analytic tools. This helped guide my inquiry while in the classroom as well as throughout the data analysis and writing process.
Table 2. *Theoretical Constructs as Analytical Tools*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theoretical Construct</th>
<th>Analytic Tool: What I will look at:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender Performances</td>
<td>The ways in which multimodal modes of communication (both physical and material) make visible the performance of gendered identities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literacy Performances</td>
<td>The ways in which engagement with classroom literacy practices make visible the performance of gendered identities (as well as race, class, sex, and ability)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Power Circulation</td>
<td>How literacy and gender performances make visible the ways in which control is negotiated; power is mobile, unstable, and productive.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subject Positioning</td>
<td>How text, talk, and disciplining of the body position individuals as particular types of social subjects.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subversive Repetitions</td>
<td>Performing differently from what is expected</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literacy Practices</td>
<td>The ways in which reading and writing activities within the classroom connect to broader curricular, social, and institutional structures.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Indexing the Data**

The purpose of indexing all of the data was so I could locate events I wanted to analyze in greater depth with my analytical tools. Beginning with my first day of observations, I constructed an index of the events I observed each day. This initial index included information on the date, duration of my stay, the lesson or teaching point, and any artifacts that were collected. At the same time, I typed up and expand jottings and hand-written field notes into full detailed and descriptive field notes. Field notes were indexed in terms of my initial hypothesis about how gender and literacy were performed in particular events, and what stood out about those performances (e.g., how the teacher responded to or initiated an interaction, how a focal student performed gender within the literacy block, etc.). Guided by my analytical tools and experiences as a participant observer in the classroom, I read though the data to identify and
bracket words, phrases, and patterns of behavior that seemed significant. Then, in the margins, I assigned a word or phrase to describe what has been bracketed. I kept a running list of all the assigned words and phrases as well as the pages where they were recorded. Later, these words and phrases were reorganized to reveal emergent themes and patterns, which helped me locate events to analyze in greater depth. I also recorded my thoughts and reflections in my daily research journal, which I continually used to engage in self-reflexivity and the writing of analytic memos. These reflections and memos were indexed by date, which allowed for correct alignment with the indexed data. Informal conversations were also indexed and included information on the date, time, duration, participant, and brief description of the conversation content. Issues raised by participants during conversations were used to guide and focus my observations. For example, when the teacher revealed to me information about a student, it caused me to pay more attention to that particular student’s performances and how she or he was positioned within the literacy classroom. Similarly, video-recordings were indexed with date, time, duration of observation, and brief descriptions of major activities and events.

Once data production was complete, I created a second, detailed index of all my observations. In addition to including information about the date and duration of observations, I included summaries of the major events, descriptions of the participants who were observed, and notes on how observations were connected to my research question and emergent themes. Utilizing this index, I started to construct memos around emergent themes. Then, based on observational field notes, video and audio-recordings, what was said during informal conversations, and examination of participant-created artifacts, I started to construct thematic case studies. As I created the thematic case studies, I included events that highlighted not only what has already been established with regard to the intertwined nature of gender and literacy,
but also provided new insights into the ways power flowed through performances of gender within the context of one early elementary literacy classroom.

**Feminist Poststructuralist Discourse Analysis**

As Ramazanoglu and Holland (2002) argue, “feminist concerns with unjust power relations require analysis of the interconnections between language, relationships and the material grounding of power” (p. 147). Because I aimed to investigate gender and literacy as simultaneously discursive, institutionalized, and material (i.e., physical), I included discourse analysis of the written language in school documents, students’ written work, and the spoken language used throughout the study. However, as Gee (2011) suggests, no one theory or method of conducting a discourse analysis is “universally right or universally applicable” (p. ix). Depending on the type of data and lens through which the data are to be analyzed, some methods may work better than others. Therefore, to serve the needs of this study, I drew on elements of Baxter’s (2008) method of feminist poststructuralist discourse analysis (FPDA).

Because I situated this study within a poststructural feminist theoretical framework, Baxter’s (2008) FPDA offered analytic tools that served my discourse analysis needs. From a poststructural perspective, this method of discourse analysis views language as a social practice through which identities and relationships are performed through social interaction. Therefore, my analysis focused on how participants were positioned by different and competing discourses. Since the FPDA method is informed by Foucault’s (1980) notion of power relations, I attended to how speakers shifted between power and powerless positionings as they engaged in speech and nonverbal interactions within particular contexts. The feminist component of FPDA considers gender to be the dominant discourse among competing discourses. This aligns with research that has established gender to be a common organizing discourse across societies, social class, ethnic groups, and generations (MacInnes, 1998). While my main focus was on gender, I
also attended to how constructions and performances of gender differed along dimensions of other discursive productions such as race, class, sexuality, ethnicity, and ability. My goal of conducting research that aims to transform rather than describe aligned closely with Baxter’s (2008) notion that FPDA does not have an emancipatory agenda, but rather a transformative agenda. Unlike critical discourse analysis, which has an emancipatory agenda that tends to polarize subjects of a study into two categories (i.e., the more powerful and the less powerful), FPDA strives to give “space to marginalized or silenced voices” (p. 3). Finally, with regard to the overall design of this study, FPDA is well-suited to “small-scale … case studies in which subjects have some degree of agency to change their conditions” (p. 3).

**Intersectionality as a Heuristic: An Analytic Tool**

While qualitative case studies aim to explore the messy complexity of human experience, intersectionality provides a way to understand and analyze that complexity. As Collins and Bilge (2016) argue, using single-focus lenses on social inequality leaves little space to address complex social problems. Utilizing intersectionality as an analytic tool helps illustrate how events and conditions of social life are not shaped by any one factor. Rather, many factors are revealed to work together in varied and interrelated ways. Collins and Bilge (2016) suggest that researchers find intersectionality’s core insight to be useful: “namely, that major axes of social divisions in a given society at a given time, for example, race, class, gender, sexuality, dis/ability, and age operate not as discrete and mutually exclusive entities, but build on each other and work together” (p. 4). Below, I explain how I attempted to integrate into my research Collins and Bilge’s (2016) six core ideas for using intersectionality as an analytic tool: Social inequality, power, relationality, social context, complexity, and social justice.

1. **Social inequality**: “Intersectionality encourages understandings of social inequality based on interactions among various categories” (p. 26). Therefore, as I analyzed data, I
attempted to move beyond seeing social inequality through a gender-only lens. Rather, I made an effort to understand and analyze the diverse and mutually influencing ways gender and other discursive productions such as race, class, age, and dis/ability worked together in shaping participants’ subject positionings.

2. **Power**: Collins and Bilge (2016) highlight two important points about the understanding of power within intersectionality. First, “intersectional frameworks understand power relations through a lens of mutual construction” (p. 26). For example, gender and race gain meaning in relation to one another. Second, power relations should be “analyzed both via their intersections … as well as across domains of power” (p. 27; italics original). Collins and Bilge (2016) define the four domains of power as follows:

A. **The interpersonal domain of power** “highlights the nature of individual identities and how varying combinations of categories differently position each individual (p. 8). Thus, I attempted to draw attention to how participants related to one another and the ways in which they were advantaged or disadvantaged within social interactions.

B. **The disciplinary domain of power** attends to how “different people find themselves encountering different treatment regarding which rules apply to them and how those rules will be implemented” (p. 9). Here, I attempted to draw attention to how gendered hierarchies of privilege and power within the literacy classroom shifted depending on context.

C. **The cultural domain of power** “helps manufacture messages that playing fields are level, that all competitions are fair, and that any resulting patterns of winners and losers have been fairly accomplished” (p. 11). Thus, in my analyses, I attempted to
bring focus to issues around the (in)equitable treatment of boys and girls within the literacy classroom.

D. *The structural domain of power* questions how intersecting power relations of class, gender, race, etc. shape institutions. Examination of state, district, school, and curricular mandates revealed how gender and literate identities are initially framed by institutional structures.

3. *Relationality:* “Relational thinking rejects *either/or* binary thinking” and instead “embraces a *both/and* frame” (p. 27; italics original). Therefore, rather than “analyzing what distinguishes entities, for example, the differences between race and gender” (p. 27), I strove to examine their interconnections.

4. *Social context:* Collins and Bilge (2016) contend that we must think about social inequality, relationality, and power relations in a social context. Thus, I contextualized my analyses and arguments by attending to the ways in which particular historical, cultural, and political contexts shaped participants’ performances.

5. *Complexity:* Because the core themes of social inequality, power, relationality, and social context are intertwined, this introduces an “element of complexity into intersectional analysis” (p. 29). While utilizing intersectionality as an analytic tool was challenging, I believed it had the potential to add great depth and complexity to my research.

6. *Social justice:* While social justice is not a requirement for intersectionality, Collins and Bilge (2016) note how people who use “intersectionality as an analytic tool and people who see social justice as central rather than as peripheral to their lives are often one and the same” (p. 30). Because I am critical of, rather than accepting of, the status quo of literacy teaching and learning, I believed that by utilizing intersectionality as an
analytical tool, there was potential to produce work that may influence how both scholars and practitioners might (re)conceptualize and examine literacy and gender.

**Data Production Alignment with Research Question**

Table 3. *Data Production Alignment with Research Question*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How does power flow through performances of gender within the context of an early elementary literacy classroom?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Observation Field Notes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher Informal Conversations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Informal Conversations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Video-recordings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom artifacts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curricular and School Documents</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Research as Response-ability**

Taking up research as *response-ability* necessitates shifting from an individualistic approach toward one in which relationships matter. In other words, as researcher, I aimed to move away from thinking of myself and participants as discrete entities separated from each other. Rather, who we are, have been, and will become is, was, and will be produced through entangled processes of co-constitution or, in other words, *becoming-with*. Bozalek et al. (2018) argue that becoming-with is “a way of staying with the trouble in terms of problematizing conventional positionalities of race, class, gender, and power differentials of other established categories” (p. 107). Below, I explain how I drew on elements of Barad’s (2007) notions of *attentiveness* and *responsibility* as a way of moving toward a research methodology grounded in response-ability.
Barad (2007) defines attentiveness as “the ongoing practice of being open and alive to each meeting … so that we might use our ability to respond … to help awaken, to breathe life into ever new possibilities for living justly” (p. x). In Bozalek et al.’s (2018) interpretation of Barad, attentiveness requires “respectful and care-full engagements with whatever one is examining” (p. 102). In this way, attentiveness leads to a becoming-with the Other rather than focusing on self or the Other in a binary manner. Attentiveness, therefore, requires openness to the Other. Bozalek et al. (2018) suggest that openness includes creating spaces where conversations can occur. In this study, my participation as a member of a classroom community provided multiple opportunities to engage in informal conversation and the sharing of stories with participants. Storytelling, in particular, is a means of knowledge creation. As Haraway (2016) argues, “we need stories … that are just big enough to gather up the complexities and keep the edges open and greedy for surprising new and old connections” (p. 101). Storytelling allows for a listening that is attentive or in other words “an extension of the self towards, and even care for the other” (Bozalek et al., 2018, p. 105).

Responsibility is a response after recognizing a need for care. In Bozalek et al.’s (2018) understanding of Barad, being accountable means recognizing how we are bound to and indebted to the Other. However, responsible research involves more than being accountable for what the researcher and participants know. Responsible research requires foregrounding how researcher and participants actively become-with each other. Put differently, “being accountable means that we are responsible for positionalities that we enact and that also enact us, as discourses are both material and performative” (p. 107). Therefore, focusing on performativity of race, class, gender, etc. is central to being responsible. Since responsibility requires conscious accountability of mutual becoming, I engaged in an ongoing questioning of my own enactment of socially just
research. In my researcher journal and memos, I took a critical stance toward my efforts to be accountable to participants. I reflected on how the non-innocence of my own social location and asymmetrical power relations between myself and the participants might be managed in a responsible and accountable manner.

As discussed earlier in this chapter, foregrounding the well-being of participants better positions researchers to conduct good research. Research as response-ability reflects how feminist research attends to participants’ well-being by shifting from an individualistic approach toward one where there is an ongoing awareness of what matters in our entanglements. Therefore, integrating Barad’s (2007) notions of attentiveness and responsibility into my work provided a framework for producing not only good research, but also socially just research.
Chapter 4: Contextualizing the Literacy Classroom and Curriculum

This chapter aims to describe what being a student looked like in one early elementary classroom in Woodland Elementary school. I begin by locating the school within the district’s demographics and policies, followed by examples of how I experienced everyday life in the school throughout the two months of the study. Transitioning to the classroom, I will describe the physical environment of the classroom and how this environment shaped particular practices. I then provide an overview of the literacy curriculum and instructional day and I conclude by introducing the study’s key participants.

Crestwood Public School District

Woodland Elementary is part of the Crestwood Public School District which is located in an upper-middle class suburban community in northern New Jersey. While this particular school is located in a historically White community, the past decade has seen the student body become increasingly diverse. According to local real estate websites, the median listing price for a single-family home in the Woodland Elementary district hovers around $850,000 with many home values estimated to be at or above 2.5 to 3 million dollars. In addition to these homes, the neighborhood includes several newly constructed apartment complexes and condominiums, which have both attracted many new residents to the area while helping to meet the town’s fair share of the growing need for affordable housing in New Jersey.

The Crestwood Public School District is the largest single town school system within the northern New Jersey region in which it resides. The district is comprised of ten schools: one preschool (infant-pre-K); six elementary schools (K-5); two middle schools (6-8); and one high school (9-12). Over the academic year 2019-2020, the district served approximately 5800
students enrolled in pre-kindergarten through Grade 12. Recent statistics indicate that among its 5800 students, 61.7% were White, 10% Hispanic, 1.1% Black or African American, 19.7% Asian, 0.1% Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, and 7.4% were two or more races (NJ DOE, 2020). Enrollment trends by student group were 49% female, 51% male, <1% non-binary/undesignated gender, 2.1% economically disadvantaged, 13.8% students with disabilities, 2.3% English learners, 0.1% homeless students, and 0.6% military-connected students.

In the most recent NJ School Performance Report for the district (NJ DOE, 2020), it is noted that due to the cancellation of statewide assessments and a federal waiver as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, statewide assessment results for the New Jersey Student Learning Assessments (NJSLA) were not available and therefore not reported for the 2019-2020 school year. However, examination of previous years’ reports reveals that when compared to districts with similar characteristics, the Crestwood Public School District is recognized as a high-performing district that consistently meets or exceeds expectations set by the NJ DOE for its public schools.

The district’s policy with regard to gender echoed the United States Department of Education’s (US DOE, 2015) revision of Title IX, which stipulates students are guaranteed legal protection from “discrimination based on gender identity or failure to conform to stereotypical notions of masculinity or femininity” (p. 1). At the time of this study, the district and each school had started to form Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) committees. The committees were tasked with exploring how the district might become a more diverse and equitable workplace. In addition, they started planning for how to be in compliance with a new law. On March 1, 2021 the governor of New Jersey signed into law Chapter 32. Starting with the 2021-2022 school year New Jersey schools were mandated to begin teaching age-appropriate lessons about diversity and
inclusion to students in Kindergarten through Grade 12. The law called on schools to highlight
and promote “economic diversity, equity, inclusion, tolerance, and belonging in connection with
gender and sexual orientation, race and ethnicity, disabilities, and religious tolerance” (State of
NJ, 2021, p.1). The law also required schools to “examine the impact that unconscious bias and
economic disparities have at both an individual level and on society as a whole” (p.1).

Woodland Elementary School

Woodland Elementary is a public school located in an upper-middle class suburban
community in northern New Jersey. Over the academic year 2019-2020, the school served
approximately 470 students enrolled in Kindergarten through Grade 5. Recent statistics indicate
that among its 470 students, 64.8% were White, 7.9% Hispanic, 1.5% Black or African
American, 16.5% Asian, and 9.2% were two or more races (NJ DOE, 2020). Enrollment trends
by student group were 46.5% female, 53.5% male, <1% non-binary/undesignated gender, 1.1%
economically disadvantaged, 15.2% students with disabilities, and 2.6% English learners.
Enrollment by home language was 88.2% English, 2.1% Korean, 1.9% Chinese, 1.7% Japanese,
1.7% Russian, and 4.3% other. Woodland Elementary’s academic performance ranked as very
high when compared to both its peers and schools across the state. The school’s mission
statement notes that Woodland Elementary strives to create an environment that encourages
appreciation for cultural diversity, while developing self-confident individuals who are problem
solvers and risk takers. Included in Woodland’s 2020 New Jersey State Report Card is the
following passage, which was provided to the state by the school.

Parents and teachers work together to provide an academically challenging
curriculum and culturally rich environment for our children. Recognizing that the ability
to read and write is the foundation for success in all academic disciplines, developing a
literate student body is a primary focus of the educational program and staff development
initiatives. Teachers collaborate with one another to differentiate language arts instruction
using the workshop model. Using literature and informational texts as guides, students
learn the skills necessary to become truly literate readers and writers. Children publish personal narratives, memoirs, essays, realistic fiction, and informational pieces. (NJ DOE, 2020)

Evident in the above passage is how literacy is positioned by the school as a practice of decoding, comprehending, and crafting printed text. The focus on conventional meanings of literacy as print literacy discounts broader understandings of what constitutes both literacy and the literate individual.

Arriving at the School

Each day when I arrived at Woodland Elementary, I felt like I was coming home. Twenty years earlier, I worked in the Woodland school library as a full-time clerk. I often referred (and still do refer) to Woodland as my happy place, as my time there was full of warm, enriching, and supportive experiences, both personally and professionally. While I remained in the position only a few years before accepting a teaching and then the school library media specialist position at one of the district’s other elementary schools on the opposite side of town, my fondness for Woodland never waned. In late August of 2019, two days before the students’ first day back after summer break, I helped Mrs. Alden (all names are pseudonyms) to set up her classroom for the new school-year. As we struggled to arrange desks, tables and chairs, label and fill student supply boxes, organize the classroom library, and hang a variety of inspirational posters and charts, we engaged in friendly conversation about our families and children, our professional lives, and shared our thoughts and opinions about the ways in which teaching, learning, students, the administration, and the district had changed over the past 20 years. During the following three weeks I visited 2-Alden six times without collecting data or officially observing for the purpose of research. Those visits afforded me the opportunity to acclimate myself to the rhythm of the school-day, assist Mrs. Alden with anything she requested, and familiarize myself with the layout and organization of the school and classroom.
Once my proposed research was approved by the Institutional Review Board, I started visiting Mrs. Alden’s second-grade classroom three to five days a week to officially observe and collect data. Typically, I arrived at the school a little before 8:00 a.m. Arriving early allowed me to secure a parking spot close to the school and time to chat with Mrs. Alden before the students arrived. Teaching Assistants (TAs) manned the front doors to the school in order to keep students who arrived before the 8:35 bell out of the building. As early birds arrived, the TAs lined them up outside on the front blacktop in grade level order. TAs were also responsible for making sure parents and other adults unassociated with the district without an appointment were not permitted to enter the building. I never experienced any issues getting past the aides as I wore my district ID when I visited Woodland. Often, after entering the building in the morning, I would swing by the school library before heading to the classroom. There I would have quick chats with the librarian, who would fill me in on what was happening within the district library department during my leave. Walking past the main office toward the classroom, the principal’s secretary and I would wave and say “Good morning!” to each other. Occasionally, she would beckon me in to the office to ask how my children and husband were doing, and then share updates on her own family.

Arriving at 2-Alden

Past the office, down the hall beyond the cafeteria, and to the right of the kindergarten classrooms is where the second-grade wing was located. As I walked toward 2-Alden, I could not help but notice how bright and cheerful the hallway was. As I looked up, I saw that a spattering of the bright white ceiling tiles had been decorated with what looked to be student-created, colorful paintings of suns, moons, stars, and flowers. On the shining white tiled floor were decals of colorful feet, spread out in such a way as to invite anyone passing by to hop, skip, and jump their way down the hall. Even the air smelled sweet. I immediately started to
experience some feelings of jealousy because my school on the other side of town was a dark, older building, certainly not as bright, airy, and cheerful as Woodland. A little further down the hall, hanging outside the classroom from the ceiling was a black sign with white lettering that read, *Mrs. Alden – Grade 2.* As I walked toward the sign, I stopped to look at the bulletin board display outside the classroom. On top of the display were large, colorful letters that read, 2A LOVES TO READ! Attached to the bulletin board were colorful sheets of construction paper, each with two cut out images of books. Inside one book, students had written why they like to read. Inside the other was written where they like to read. As I looked at the board, I began to chuckle as most had written the exact same thing: *I like to read for fun* and *I like to read in a tree.* Then, Mrs. Alden stuck her head out the door and said, “I thought I heard you out here! Come on in!” (Memo, 12/05/19)

**The Instructional Day**

The instructional day for 2-Alden began at 8:45 a.m. and ended at 3:00 p.m. In 2-Alden, when the 8:45 a.m. the bell rang, it was time for the morning meeting. Depending on the topics covered and the discussions they generated, morning meetings would run from 15 to 30 minutes, and typically followed the same routine. Mrs. Alden would loudly announce that it was time for the morning meeting. The students then made their way to the Reading Workshop gathering area and, along with Mrs. Alden, formed a large circle while sitting on the rug. Every week or so, each student was assigned a position as a classroom helper (i.e., line leader, pencil sharpener, paper passer, etc.). During morning meetings, the calendar helper announced the date, which was then repeated by the teacher and other students. Next, the meteorologist read the weather report. Then, using hand signs to represent each symbol, the day counter would lead the group in chanting the Roman numerals for the day of the month on the calendar. For example, on the
twelfth day of the month, XII would be represented by crossing the index fingers of the right and left hands while reciting, “X,” followed by twice raising the index on one hand while reciting, “I, I.” The final part of the chant was, “twelve.” Students would repeat this verbal and physical combination three times: “X, I, I, twelve!” Then, the day counter would move to the center of the circle with a pile of index cards, each of which had a number written on one side. The day counter would spread the index cards out on the rug and then arrange a combination of cards to represent the number 12. For example, the day counter would pull out two cards with the number 6 and say, “Six plus six equals 12!” Then the entire class would repeat, “Six plus six equals twelve!” Three to four other students would then volunteer to pull index cards to show and lead the class in a chant of alternate combinations of numbers that added up to 12. Following the math activity, a large, soft ball that was decorated like a globe was tossed around the circle. When the ball reached an individual, it was their turn to share something on a topic that the teacher had selected, such as, what are you looking forward to this weekend? Next on the morning meeting agenda were the students’ sharing of jokes and facts. Many of the students prepared for this most favored part of the morning meeting by earlier selecting a book from the classroom library. Any student who wished was given the opportunity to read a joke or riddle to the class. This was followed by the final activity. Students who wished were given the opportunity to share what they believed to be an interesting fact. This was often the most fascinating portion of the morning meeting to observe as some of the facts shared by the students, such as it used to be illegal for girls to wear pants, sparked lively discussions. Then, it was time for the official school day to begin.

Monday through Friday, the students received 45 minutes of reading instruction, 45 minutes of writing instruction, 30 minutes of word study, and 45 minutes of math instruction.
Three days a week, the students listened to a 15-minute read aloud. Twice a week they had 30 minutes of either science or social studies instruction and, once a week, the students received 15 minutes of Spanish instruction. In addition, the students attend one special each day; art, music, physical education, or library. Lastly, five days a week the students were given a 15-minute morning snack/recess break and a 45-minute lunch/recess break.

**Literacy Curriculum**

Like every public school district in the state of New Jersey, the Crestwood Public School District was required to design and implement an English Language Arts (ELA) curriculum that aligned with the New Jersey Student Learning Standards (NJSLS) in reading, writing, language, and speaking and listening. According to the New Jersey Department of Education’s (NJDOE) website, the standards for ELA reflect the skills and knowledge students need to succeed in college, career, and life, and the importance of foundational skills in the early grades, as students learn to read, cannot be overstated. In addition, the state recommends students in grades kindergarten through fifth-grade receive 90 minutes of uninterrupted literacy instruction each day. To foster and ensure compliance, the NJDOE provides access to myriad documents, which they refer to as a toolkit, aimed at assisting districts in developing “high-quality, standards-based, curriculum, instruction, and assessment” (NJDOE, 2020). The toolkit includes four detailed instructional units containing student learning objectives (SLOs), which identify the skills and concepts students are expected to master in order to meet the expectations of the NJSLS in ELA. For example, in the Grade 2 unit *Reading and Writing Narratives*, each of the 24 standards covered throughout the unit are broken down into one, two, three, or four individual SLOs. The unit planning template provided by the state refers to the SLOs as WALTs. The purpose of a WALT, an acronym for *we are learning to/that*, is for the lesson objective to be written in
student-friendly language. While the units provided by the state have a particular order and arrangement, districts are given flexibility to modify them to fit the particular needs of their student populations. For instance, if needed, the state stipulates that units can be modified to repeat SLOs/WALTs to ensure mastery.

The Crestwood Public School District adopted the basic model ELA curriculum designed by the state. Through multiple professional development programs and curriculum work done by teams of district teachers and administrators, a highly detailed, scripted, and calendar-bound ELA curriculum was developed. The district took a balanced literacy approach to reading and writing instruction. The components of balanced literacy consisted of Reading Workshop, Writing Workshop, Word Study, Read Aloud (interactive), Shared Reading, and Shared Writing. According to the district website, the workshop model was utilized as a differentiated pedagogy to empower students to make choices and set goals through practice and application of skills-based lessons. The district website also made clear that the workshop model was not curriculum; rather, it was a structure that outlined teachers’ time. The district dictated that the time frames for each of the components of the second-grade workshop mini-lessons were to be as follows:

1) mini-lesson, 10 minutes; 2) independent reading/writing, conferring and small group work, 35 minutes; 3) mid-workshop teaching to extend the mini-lesson, 3 minutes – to be conducted during independent reading and writing time, and; 4) whole class share and closure, 3 minutes.

The district utilized a curriculum mapping and management tool to provide teachers with instructional scheduling that dictated how and when specific skills were to be taught. For example, the second-grade ELA writing unit for realistic fiction was broken into 30 lessons to be taught over a six-week period. All pre- and post-assessments, vocabulary to be taught, materials to be utilized (texts, graphic organizers, rubrics, etc.), virtually everything needed throughout the
unit was provided to teachers. Perhaps most constrictive of teachers’ autonomy were the dictated daily teaching points. Despite the state’s allowance for repeating teaching points to ensure mastery, the district’s official literacy curriculum was designed so that each new day brought a brand-new teaching point. Mrs. Alden was not a fan.

I struggle with this thought that every lesson every day needs to be a new teaching point. And that is … not how learning happens. We as educators know how learning happens. Learning does not happen the first time, right? It takes many times with a concept for a skill to be integrated into your repertoire. And yet, umm … people will look at our plan books and say, *why is this teaching point continuing for several days?* or *why are you having the children do this activity? They’re not supposed to do activities.* (Interview transcript, 1/23/20)

It was during the early 2000s when the district started to shift from a whole language approach to literacy teaching and learning toward a program where the instruction was more scripted and explicit. This shift included the district piloting a number of word study programs with the district ultimately landing on Orton Gillingham, a multisensory strategy for teaching spelling, decoding, etc. While Mrs. Alden was a fan of shifting to a more explicitly taught word study program, she was not as enthusiastic about the shift that occurred with the reading and writing programs.

In our quest to have things be more explicit … we swung in the direction of it being incredibly dictated … so that somebody could open up a book and teach reading and writing in a workshop format…. In our district it kind of became codified…. *We’re gonna do it this way, this is what we’re calling it, this is how we’re doing it, this is how we are training our new teachers in it, this is what we expect….* Administrators will say that a good mini-lesson has to be “x” minutes long and everything is timed out and if you’re under or over that’s kind of a demerit and, umm, I don’t think that is what good teaching is … as a teacher it feels very uncomfortable to be timed. And I used to be able to tease our old principal and say, *get that stopwatch off your neck, mister!* and we would laugh about it. But if you look at how, umm, observations are written up, they are written up to the minute and if you are under or over, they will say, *you were under/over on your teaching point or … your conversation with the children was too inclusive of their thoughts and ideas…. And I think that ultimately, we need to teach teachers to be good facilitators … of learning. And that doesn’t happen by a stop watch. No. I struggle with that a lot! (Interview transcript, 1/23/20)
Mrs. Alden was further circumscribed by a block schedule. The schedule provided to Mrs. Alden dictated not only how long each instructional block was to last, but also when during the course of the day she and the students were expected to be engaged in the teaching and learning of a particular subject. This was a district-wide measure because at any time an administrator from somewhere across the district might want to “pop in” (unofficially and unannounced) to observe what was happening in the classroom. Thus, if the “visitor” desired to observe a reading lesson in action, they would know when that lesson was supposed to be occurring in the classroom. The dictated daily schedule also ensured that every instructional minute was accounted for. Furthermore, the blocked schedules kept a grade level (all second-grade classes across the district, for example) learning the same skills and strategies at the same time.

Most of the analysis presented in this dissertation was derived from events observed during one reading unit and one writing unit that ran concurrently for six weeks. The reading unit, Character: Creating Partnerships, expected students to: 1) identify characters and notice what they think, say, and do so as to understand them better; 2) think deeply about their characters; 3) form opinions about their characters and back their opinions up with evidence; 4) elaborate on their ideas about characters in writing and share them with a partner. The writing unit, Realistic Fiction Picture Books, expected students to: 1) develop characters that are similar to themselves; 2) spend time rehearsing for their stories by storytelling, sketching, and getting feedback from their partners; 3) develop small moment scenes where characters unsuccessfully attempt to solve their troubles; 4) reread their writing often and use all they know to elaborate a many-moment story.
The Environment

The classroom was exceptionally bright and visually stimulating. Floor to ceiling windows lining the far end of the room formed a glass wall that allowed the room to be filled with an abundance of natural light. Even the rugs on the floors of the Reading Workshop and Writing Workshop gathering areas, with their bright, multi-colored circle designs, gave the room a feeling of cheerful exuberance.

Physical and Material Design of the Classroom

The physical arrangement of the classroom was designed to facilitate particular literacy practices (e.g., literacy mini-lessons, independent reading and writing). Figure 1 represents the classroom as I observed it on my first day of official observations. There were three hexagonal student tables (the yellow table, red table, and green table) and one set of five student desks grouped together (the desk group). Typically, the names of the tables were not used to identify and differentiate the groups. Rather, the teacher would call the name of a student sitting at a particular table to let the rest of the table know that it was time for them to transition to a new activity, quiet down, or move to a different place within the classroom. There was no discernible method for determining which students sat at which table other than the teacher trying to maintain an even distribution of girls and boys. The hexagonal teacher table housed an assortment of supplies such as a stapler, highlighters, pens, pencils, paperclips, and post-its all of which were also made available for student use. The teacher table was the meeting place for guided reading sessions. Six “sproingy” chairs, perhaps the most popular classroom item, were stored behind the hexagonal teacher table and distributed each day by the teacher drawing popsicle sticks bearing a student’s name, from a jar. The spring-like stools, which allowed sitters to bounce up and down as they sat, were used by students in place of their regular chairs. The teacher table in the Writing Workshop gathering area housed a document camera and a desktop.
computer for projecting onto the Smart Board. Tucked underneath the teacher table was a large red “lockdown bucket” with LET’S DO THIS printed on the side. The bucket, which was filled with sand, was meant to be used in the event of a student (or teacher) needing to use the restroom during an active shooter lockdown. Behind the Writing Workshop gathering area was a single student desk and chair that was referred to by the teacher and students as the “private office.” Though it rarely occurred, students who were being particularly disruptive would be sent to the “private office” so they were better able to concentrate on their work. Three long, double-shelved units surrounding the Reading Workshop and Morning Meeting gathering area housed the leveled classroom library. Baskets, teeming with books, filled the shelves and tops of the units. Most of the baskets were labeled with reading levels so students would know where they were allowed to shop for books to keep in the book bags hanging off the backs of their chairs. Several of the baskets were labeled according to genre, area of interest, or a particular author.

The Reading and Writing Workshop areas served as the meeting places for reading and writing mini-lessons. The teacher would ask the students to grab any materials needed for the lesson (e.g., clipboards, pencils, worksheets, etc.) and meet her on the rug. The transition of moving from table seats to the rug for workshop was never quick nor quiet. Loud conversation and jockeying around the rug in search of spots would often last for a few minutes before Mrs. Alden calmly asked the students to settle down. There were no assigned rug seats for the students as the teacher believed students should be responsible and learn how to make good choices. Therefore, the students did not sit in rows with their legs crossed and hands in their laps. Rather, they would take on more relaxed bodily comportments such as sitting up on haunches, sitting shoulder-to-shoulder with another, leaning back on a bookcase, stretching belly down on the floor, or popping up to sit in a nearby chair. Mrs. Alden constantly reminded students that during
discussions they must take turns, stay on topic, and pick up on signals for when it was time to stop their talk. Still, the inevitable calling out and talking over the teacher did occur. Student interruptions of teacher talk were entertained, but only after the interrupters were reminded to next time raise their hands. When comments, questions, or conversation veered off topic, Mrs. Alden acknowledged that while what had been contributed was interesting, it was not related to what they were supposed to be concentrating on. She would then provide prompts to steer conversation back toward the lesson’s teaching point. When whole class instruction concluded, students were sent off for partner, small group, or independent work. Students were routinely permitted to choose where in the classroom they would like to work. While Mrs. Alden controlled the talk that took place on the rug during explicit instruction, students were often given the opportunity to participate in student-initiated, student-controlled talk around the work they engaged in after mini-lessons. During this time, students were expected to work independent of the teacher as she conferenced with individual students at her table. Invariably, the noise level would progressively rise. Multiple students would call out or go to Mrs. Alden to ask for assistance, advice, or approval. She would repeatedly remind students to lower the noise level and be mindful of the fact that it was impolite to interrupt her while she was working with another student.
Figure 1. Classroom Diagram

The walls and bulletin boards were filled with an array of student work, posters, and teacher-created charts representing the subject areas of reading and writing. For example, displayed on the Writing Workshop bulletin board were examples of students’ work (e.g., KWL charts, fact webs, diagrams with labels, draft writing of long paragraphs) which represented their progress through the planning stages of writing non-fiction “expert books”. Charts hanging above the bulletin board were meant to help guide students through their writing processes. The Reading Workshop bulletin board had big colorful letters on the top saying, READING ROCKS! Attached to the board were small posters listing the features of nonfiction texts: captions, headings, index, glossary, diagrams, etc. In the center of the bulletin board was a teacher created
chart describing how to identify main ideas and supporting details. On the easel was a teacher-created chart that listed what Reading Workshop should look and sound like: *Everyone is REALLY reading their books* and *Everyone is Quiet*. Another colorful bulletin board served as the word wall and displayed words studied around the topics of beginning consonants and beginning blends and digraphs. Prominently displayed charts encouraged adherence to norms of accepted school behaviors. From any position within the classroom a posted message related to respect, kindness, acceptance, and/or learning habits was clearly visible. For example, above the sink was a teacher created chart that read, “*In this class we ... Listen ... Share and take turns ... Say we are sorry ... Try our very best ... Use manners ... Help one another ... Learn a lot!*” Immediately below, attached to the cabinets above the sink, were small posters addressing dangerous and destructive behaviors, the school listening look, problem-solving steps, and tips on how to give compliments.

As evidenced in the above descriptions, the students had some degree of choice in their reading and writing. However, their choices were circumscribed by standards, rubrics, and reading levels. Throughout my time in 2-Alden, I never observed the students to be engaged in either visual or digital literacy. Although, based on my knowledge of the district’s official curricula, the teaching of digital literacy fell to the elementary school librarians while the teaching of visual literacy was the responsibility of the elementary school art teachers. Therefore, reading bodies and faces was not part of the official ELA curriculum, which was focused on conventional meanings of literacy as print literacy. Also evident above is how the physical configuration of the classroom was constructed so as to connect particular practices to the ways in which students were expected to perform as readers and writers. The Reading and Writing Workshop model taken up by the district expected students to gather on the rug in an orderly
manner, listen to the teacher with their best school listening looks (sitting on bottoms with legs crossed, hands in lap, eyes on teacher, ears listening, and mouths quiet), and participate in demonstrations of new literacy skills and strategies to use during their independent reading and writing work. Yet, as described earlier in this chapter, Mrs. Alden afforded the students more freedom during literacy instruction than might have been sanctioned by the district and its administrators. Some of the effects of these practices had on students’ gender and literacy performances are discussed further in the upcoming chapters.

Classroom Participants

Mrs. Alden was no stranger to me as she had been teaching at Woodland Elementary during my brief employment there as the school’s library clerk 20 years earlier. I recalled that during my time at Woodland, Mrs. Alden had always exhibited care and concern not only for her students but also for all those who worked within the building, no matter in what capacity. Emailing, texting, and meeting with Mrs. Alden prior to and beyond the official onset of my dissertation research served to not only confirm my suspicions that she met the research criteria, but also provided me with the opportunity to develop a closer relationship with her throughout the course of the study. My selection of focal students was a complex process driven by both my methodological decisions and positionality as a researcher. In my criteria for the selection of focal students, I stated that the parent’s/guardian’s consent would be central. Of the 22 students invited to participate in the study, eighteen participated: nine females and nine males. Given the limitations set by consent procedures and other demands (e.g., student absences) there were seven students on whom I focused my observations. Following are descriptions of Mrs. Alden and the focal students.
The Teacher: Mrs. Alden

Mrs. Alden could be described as a White, middle-class woman, who resided outside the neighborhood of the school. At the time of this study, Mrs. Alden was an experienced elementary school teacher who had been teaching second-grade at Woodland Elementary for 23 years. At Woodland, she served as a team leader in the design and implementation of multisensory and differentiated instruction across all content areas. She also worked closely with the Child Study Team and school resource educators to work toward integrating students with special needs into the general education classroom. Mrs. Alden held a Bachelor’s Degree in International Affairs and Economics and a Master’s Degree in Early Childhood and Elementary Education. Prior to dedicating herself fully to Woodland, Mrs. Alden worked as an educational consultant in the field of conflict resolution, mediation, and diversity.

Mrs. Alden recalled that early in her career at Woodland, the school’s literacy curriculum was based on the whole language approach. When the district decided that more explicit instruction was needed, they transitioned to a workshop model of balanced literacy. Mrs. Alden recalled that while many of the professional development providers were excellent, the way in which the district interpreted, codified, and required how the Reading and Writing Workshop model of instruction was to be implemented indicated how the pendulum had swung from taking a wholistic approach to literacy teaching and learning to an instructional model that was overly scripted and didactic. Mrs. Alden said she didn’t think “that’s what good teaching is” and then added, “teachers need to be given the concepts and then, let them do their own thing” (Interview, 01/23/20).

The Students

2-Alden consisted of a somewhat diverse population of students. While the majority of students were White, there were also students of Indian, Korean, Russian, Azerbaijani,
Japanese, Jamaican, and Malaysian ethnicity. Of the 18 students participating in the study, 9 were female and 9 were male. In particular, there were 7 White females, one whose parents were immigrants from Russia and Azerbaijan; 1 Japanese-Malaysian female; 1 Indian female; 6 White males; 1 Japanese-Jamaican male; 1 Korean male, whose parents were immigrants; and 1 Indian male who was born in India and immigrated to the United States with his parents. Among the students, 2 received basic skills support for math; 1 received extra support in Multisensory Reading (MSR); and, 2 received extra support in phonics.

**Carli**

Carli, a White female with blond hair, blue eyes, wide smile, stocky build, and very loud voice that could be heard over the noisiest of situations, immediately drew my attention. Her vivaciousness seemed to broadcast a well-grounded self-confidence. As mentioned earlier, Mrs. Alden positioned Carli as an unmotivated yet extremely bright and capable student. More often than not, during independent reading and writing time, Carli was observed to be easily drawn off task by a table mate. Off task behaviors typically involved drawing pictures of puppies and constructing paper fortune tellers. However, Carli seemed to successfully attend to the wishes of her table mate while simultaneously tending to the assigned reading or writing work at hand, as one who strives to please everyone might do. Carli was also the sole female to routinely inject herself into any all-male-grouped recess or free time activity, which she did with free abandon. It was this quality coupled with her physical attributes that reminded me of my sister when she was Carli’s age. My sister not only resembled Carli at 8 years old, but also preferred to climb trees and make mud pies with the neighborhood boys to playing house and Barbie dolls with the neighborhood girls. My sister also became the first girl to play on a baseball team in the town little league. As a result, I continually felt compelled to observe Carli.
Adeline

Adeline, a White female with brown hair, brown eyes, and a big voice (although not quite as big as Carli’s) was positioned by Mrs. Alden during one of our early conversations as a “know it all” who tries to impress everyone with her knowledge. (Field Notes – DATE). Indeed, Adeline was always the first to raise her hand and when called on, would give a drawn out, lengthy speech, peppered with facts and details that were often incorrect. Unwilling to accept correction, she would forcefully argue that her ideas were correct and true. Adeline’s personality and presence were very strong, and somewhat intimidating. She liked to get her way, and did not hesitate to exert power, both verbally and by moving in physically, over the other females in the classroom, including the teacher, Mrs. Alden. While I was not initially focused on Adeline, as time went on, I started to observe how she was drawn to, or to be more precise, obsessed with Carli. Hence, many of the notable events I observed involving Carli also included Adeline.

Van

Van’s beautiful big mop of wavy black-brown hair was impossible to miss. Van, a physically small, brown-skinned Japanese-Jamaican male, was quiet and unassuming. He would frustrate Mrs. Alden as he routinely arrived to school without having completed his homework. When questioned as to why he had not done his homework, he would just look at her with his big brown eyes and mouth something so quietly, that I could never hear what he said. Mrs. Alden described Van as a student who lacked motivation and required someone to sit next to him providing encouragement as he worked through every step of his reading and writing work, thus positioning him as a low-achieving literacy learner. Based on my observations, Van appeared to be a child who did not show a great deal of emotion. While he did not appear to have many close friends, he did appear to have a strong physical and emotional attachment to Jason. During one of my casual conversations with Van, he proudly told me that he was an expert on pianos and
was an experienced pianist. Van was absent quite a bit and when he returned Mrs. Alden often asked if I would help catch him up on the work he had missed. Once, when he returned to school after being out for several days, his beautiful mop of long hair was gone. While his short haircut was cute, I must admit that I preferred his longer locks.

**Jason**

While Van was the smallest, quietest male in the classroom, Jason was the largest, both in body and personality. Jason, a White male with brown eyes, flaming red hair, a freckled face, and a wide toothy smile accented with dimples exuded a presence in the classroom that was ever present and thus impossible to miss. Mrs. Alden told me she could not understand why all of the boys in the classroom were attracted to Jason as they would all rush to the gathering areas to be able to secure a spot next to him on the rug. Yet, I never observed such competition between the boys for Jason’s company or attention. What I did observe was Jason and Van appearing to be attached at the hip whenever the class was in one of the gathering areas. It would not be a stretch to describe Jason as boisterous and bombastic. He was in constant motion. He interrupted, disrupted, called out, and at least once a day, loudly and animatedly regaled the class with a nonsensical story he had written or a tall tale about a happening in his life. Still, it seemed to me that Mrs. Alden was greatly amused by Jason and positioned him within the classroom as a hard-working, desirable individual. While she did occasionally quell Jason’s disruptive performances by asking him to go work at the “private office” desk, she also often highlighted and held up his work as an example to the other students.

**Sean**

Sean, a White male with fair skin, blue eyes, and thin straight brown hair with bangs reaching his eyebrows, was the youngest student in the class, by almost an entire year. During my initial observations, Sean appeared to be an “under the radar” type of student. He was not
disruptive, did not stand out, and rarely spoke up or raised his hand to join in on full-class discussions. During full-class meetings in the gathering areas, he was often observed to be either curled up on the floor in a fetal position or crouched on the ground with his head hidden in his hands. For the most part, Sean was a loner, keeping to himself both inside and outside of the classroom. However, when he did join in with others during recess or free-time activities it was usually with a group of girls playing tag or sitting at a table drawing and coloring. Early in my observations, I thought that Sean might also be a “runner”, as one day during the morning meeting he casually stood up, left the room, and never returned. I watched Mrs. Alden’s eyes follow him as he left the room and then, over the next several minutes, observed her to alternately check the clock on the wall and then the classroom door. Eventually, she stood up from the circle, told the students to continue sharing what their plans were for the coming weekend, and left the room. A moment later she came back into the room with Sean, looked at me and rolled her eyes, and then both of them rejoined the morning meeting circle. I later learned from Mrs. Alden that she had found Sean hiding in the hall coat closet. She explained that while he was an extremely bright, high reader, Sean needed to be constantly reminded to stay on task with his classwork. Due to his young age, Mrs. Alden positioned Sean as a student whose social immaturity made it difficult for him to navigate the second-grade classroom environment. Yet, during independent reading time, I would often observe Sean sharing what he was reading with his table mates both by reading sections aloud and pointing to illustrations and sections of text. These observations seemed to indicate that Sean’s identity and performance as a strong reader served as his social anchor within the classroom.

**Macie**

Macie was positioned by Mrs. Alden as the class “mean girl.” The first thing I was told about Macie was that she was nasty, turned off the other kids, and needed to learn how to behave
nicely so as to have friends. Macie, a Japanese-Malaysian female with straight, shoulder length black hair and dark brown eyes, did not immediately catch my attention. She sat at the yellow table in the chair closest to the outside exit, which was the farthest point from where I typically sat at the teacher hexagonal table. According to my early observations, Macie seemed rather unassuming. Typically, she would sit toward the back of the gathering area rugs, remain quiet, and not create any disruptions or distractions. While I would occasionally observe her needling a table mate by tapping them on the arm or leaning over from her chair to peek at someone’s work, these actions seemed neither mean nor atypical of the other students’ behavior. After reading some of Macie’s work, I asked Mrs. Alden to tell me about Macie’s reading and writing. Instantly, Macie was repositioned as an incredibly smart and bright, high-level reader and writer. As I started to pay closer attention to Macie, I noticed that she was a stealth observer. Her seat at the yellow table in the farthest corner of the room provided her with the perfect position for scanning the room, so at any given moment she could pinpoint anyone’s location and activity. Macie also seemed to situate herself in a similar position by selecting to sit toward the rear of the gathering area rugs during Reading and Writing Workshop. During dictation and word study, Macie had an uncanny ability to follow directions and complete her work, quickly and accurately, while simultaneously poking her table mates. While Macie was never quick to raise her hand, as soon as Mrs. Alden’s eyes turned in Macie’s direction, up Macie’s hand would shoot. Then, like clockwork, as soon as Mrs. Alden’s glance turned away, down Macie’s hand would go. Even I was not immune to Macie’s powers of observation. She watched me like a hawk. As a result, when she did catch me observing or recording, she would give me a hard stare, a quick smile, and then alter her behavior as if to say, I’m a good girl who is listening and doing her work.
Ariana

Ariana, a Russian-Azerbaijani female with long brown hair and huge dark brown eyes, was the most petite student in the class. She was typically the first student to run into the classroom each morning while breathlessly announcing, “I am the first one here!” Ariana’s boundless energy, wide smile, and endlessly optimistic disposition were infectious, and I always looked forward to her 8:35 AM burst through the classroom door. Ariana was a well-behaved student who stayed on task with her work, was always kind to her classmates, and polite and respectful to adults. As a reader and writer, there was nothing unique about Ariana as she was positioned within the classroom as average-achieving, on grade-level second-grader. While I was not initially drawn to observe Ariana as a focal student, about half-way through my time in 2- Alden, I changed my mind. During a morning meeting, Mrs. Alden announced that she had recently learned something about Ariana that she wanted to share with the class: Ariana was a competitive ballroom dancer. The night before, Ariana’s mother had emailed Mrs. Alden photos and a video of Ariana’s most recent competition. The class gathered in front of the Smart Board to view the photos and video. Afterward, Mrs. Alden repeatedly referenced Ariana’s gracefulness, asked Ariana to demonstrate for the class how to make a curtsey, and then led the class in an exuberant round of applause. And just like that, Ariana was instantly repositioned within the classroom community. Rather than just an average, second-grade reader and writer Ariana was now positioned as the classroom’s beautiful, talented, and graceful girl to be applauded, literally, for her performance.
Prologue: Results of the Analysis

The results of my analysis are presented in two chapters. Chapter 5 attends to events that occurred in the official literacy spaces of the classroom while Chapter 6 attends to those that occurred in the unofficial literacy spaces of the classroom. The term *space* does not refer to a physically defined area. Rather, it refers to a space in time. *Official literacy spaces* were teacher-controlled spaces where official language arts lessons (i.e., the official literacy curriculum) were enacted. *Unofficial literacy spaces* were student-governed spaces (i.e., morning unpacking and indoor recess) where students engaged in self-selected, self-directed literacy activities unrelated to those of the official literacy curriculum. Additional *unofficial literacy spaces* occurred when the official literacy curriculum was disrupted. One such example is included in Chapter 6 and occurred during Book Character Day, a day when the official literacy curriculum was set aside in favor of having students engage in fun literacy-themed games and activities.

The primary data and thus focus of my analysis was on selected events (i.e., moments and interactions) where gender and literacy intersected and in doing so reinscribed, disrupted, and/or questioned the gender binary, gender order, and/or normative constructions of literacy and the literate individual. Thus, determining where to begin and end in describing each event was challenging. As argued by Burnett and Merchant (2018), the concept of event as a singular occurrence is problematic “because of its boundedness in time and space” (p. 3). Simply writing how a word or glance might count as an event that reinscribed or disrupted the constructs of gender and/or literacy would have been insufficient as my goal was to analyze not only how literacy reinforces but also holds potential to interrupt the power of the gendered order in school.
Therefore, in order to account for potentialities, I took up Burnett and Merchant’s (2018) concept of event as “fluid and elusive” (p.5) and crafted short stories that included what happened before and after each moment and interaction where an intersection of gender and literacy occurred. In doing so, I hoped to account not only for what happened, but also for what might have been.

When designing this study, I stated that the events I planned to analyze would be drawn from the data produced during the literacy blocks (i.e., official language arts lessons) within the classroom. However, I also argued that while case study methodology provides a framework for examining the meanings people make of their lives within particular contexts, I would work to disrupt the boundaries of my study so as to consider the wider societal contexts within which the students’ interactions took place (Erickson, 1986). Therefore, to better understand how students’ gender and literacy performances were either similar or dissimilar to those observed within the literacy classroom, I observed students outside of their classroom during school library visits, school-wide assemblies, and on the playground during recess. What I did not anticipate was a stretch of extremely cold weather which meant daily outdoor recess rapidly morphed into indoor recess. During indoor recess the students were free to engage in whatever type of activity they liked. With few exceptions, the majority would choose to engage in literacy activities. Other than to ensure no one did anything dangerous, there was little if any adult supervision or surveillance, and certainly no adult-directed curricular-aligned activities. The students were given complete freedom. It was throughout my time observing and analyzing the literacy events that occurred during indoor recess that I began to notice distinct differences between the way power flowed through performances of gender within the context of official language arts lessons and the way it flowed through the literacy activities students engaged in during indoor recess. That was the point at which I started the process of drafting the larger story I wanted to tell. The events
presented in Chapter 5 and Chapter 6 are not presented in chronological order by the dates and times they occurred. Rather, they are organized thematically so as to support my argument that looking to unofficial literacy spaces will provide invaluable guidance when reconceptualizing how official literacy spaces might better support gender equity in the early elementary literacy classroom.
Chapter 5: Performing Gender and Literacy in Official Literacy Spaces

All of the events recounted in this chapter occurred within the official literacy spaces of the second-grade classroom. This chapter is presented in two parts. Part 1 is comprised of literacy events that reinscribed normative constructions of gender and literacy. Part 2 draws attention to how brief, fleeting moments of performing differently than expected worked to resist, question, or disrupt normative constructions of gender and/or literacy.

Part 1: Reinscribing the Gender Order/Binary in Official Literacy Spaces

This part of the analysis attends to how literacy teaching and learning remain part of the system that reinforces inequitable heteronormative gendered stereotypes. Across three themes, I trace the ways in which the official school literacy curriculum continues to serve as a site that privileges gender performance consistent with the binary gender order. The events recounted here come together to tell the story of how normative meanings of gender, gender identities, and gender performances are constructed and reinscribed within the official literacy spaces of one second-grade classroom.

Theme: Shaping Gender Identity and Performance Through Text, Talk Around Text, and the Crafting of Text

The following events call attention to how student and teacher interactions with text and each other continue to normalize and reinscribe the gender binary/order within the early elementary literacy classroom. They illustrate how the division of the world into male and female is a consistent ordering device in children’s texts while shedding light on how talk around text and the crafting of text are vehicles utilized for presenting, conveying, and reifying societal
and cultural norms and values associated with gender discourses circulating throughout broader social and institutional structures.

**Event 1 - “She Couldn’t Waste Time or Explore for Fun Anymore”: Reinscribing the Gender Order**

Three days a week, Mrs. Alden conducts a read aloud where she reads one or two chapters from a chapter book. Today, the students and teacher have just returned from outdoor recess. As they stream back into the classroom Mrs. Alden crosses to the Reading Workshop gathering area and calls, “Come on back! We are going to read a little bit of *Gooseberry Park.*” *Gooseberry Park* by Cynthia Rylant tells the story of how a storm separates Stumpy the squirrel from her newborn babies and how her animal friends, most notably Kona the dog and Murray the bat, come to the rescue. The chapter most recently read aloud to the class implied Stumpy the squirrel had given birth. Thus, students are probably aware that the chapter they are about hear will address the topic of motherhood and babies.

As with every other read aloud session, Mrs. Alden sits in her chair while the students are permitted to select where they would like to sit on the rug. As the students scramble to find a place, they separate themselves by perceived sex/gender. While this is not an unusual occurrence, within this particular event it helps to underscore how knowledge of the text’s upcoming topic influences students’ gender performances. This is illustrated not only in the students’ self-imposed segregation by perceived sex/gender but also how and where each group decides to inhabit space on the meeting area rug. The majority of girls scooch up close to Mrs. Alden, indicating a type of communal affirmation that motherhood and babies are the serious stuff of “girl-ness”. Conversely, the majority of boys sit toward the back of the rug, which suggests communal affirmation that motherhood and babies are both unimportant to and the antithesis of “boy-ness”. As noted by Thorne (2010), “space, an especially valuable resource
in the crowded environment of schools, is the locus of one basic asymmetry between girls and boys” (p. 82). After allowing the students a few moments to settle down, Mrs. Alden proceeds to read aloud.

Mrs. Alden (reading aloud from the text): Chapter 6 ... The following several days were rather heady ones for the little red squirrel who had become a mother. Never has she received so much attention and praise. Never has she been so talked about. The birth of new babies is important news anywhere....

At this point several of the girls exclaim, “Ooh! Aww! Babies! How cute!” On the heels of the girls’ response to the text, several boys break out in laughter as they simultaneously elbow and make faces at each other. While the boys’ performance might be understood as an attempt to gain control of the floor through laughter, both Mrs. Alden and the girls thwart the boys’ attempt by ignoring their laughter. The girls remain focused on Mrs. Alden who continues to read aloud.

Mrs. Alden: (reading aloud from the text): Stumpy said it was hard work, being a mother to newborns. She couldn’t waste time or explore for fun anymore.... She had never felt so needed. She had never felt so tired. Still, she told Kona, she had never felt so happy.

When focusing on the text of the read aloud, there are clear subtextual guidelines for gender performance and a dominant theme about women that mirrors broader social and cultural gender performances. Women, as portrayed through the character of Stumpy, are positioned as being worthy of attention and praise only after giving birth. While motherhood may leave them exhausted and no longer able to engage in adventures, they, according to the text, will be the happiest they have ever been. Moreover, as the story progresses, it is Kona, the large, male dog, who executes Stumpy’s rescue, returning her to her home and newborn babies. This is a familiar pattern in many children’s texts, where females are positioned as incompetent victims who need to be rescued by competent males who then banish them to the role of housewife and mother within the protective confines of the home. It is through such narratives that children learn to
recognize themselves within the gender order and subsequently perform their gender right, which is further illustrated in the next event.

**Event 2 - “Let’s Write a New Book!”: Reinscribing Heteronormative Relationships**

Five weeks later, the class returns from outdoor recess and gathers in the Reading Workshop area to listen to a read aloud of the final chapter of *Gooseberry Park*. Mrs. Alden reads the final sentence, closes the book, places it in her lap, and smiles at the students.

Multiple students: (overlapping) That’s it? The book is over? Nooo! Read it again!

Mrs. Alden: You want to read it again? Haha! Guess what? You can! That’s the beauty of this. You know this story now and knowing a story doesn't ruin it for you at all. You can take it out of the library and you can read it again. I bet your mom would love to read this story with you.

Multiple students: (shouting) Yes! Yes! Yes!

Mrs. Alden: Or, maybe your dad even.

Jason: (calling out loudly) My dad wouldn’t!

Here, the act of reading aloud to children is initially positioned by Mrs. Alden as a female activity, which the students affirm with a raucous “Yes!” When Mrs. Alden makes an attempt to open up the possibility that dads might read the story to them, Jason immediately shuts down this notion, which demonstrates the power of broader social structures where reading is most frequently coded as a feminine activity. For example, it is mothers who frequently read to their children at bedtime, elementary school teachers and media specialists, who are primarily women, read to their classes. Additionally, reading, a rather sedentary, calm activity, is more suited to the bodily comportment expected of females. Males, on the other hand, are expected to take up space, be physically active, and engage in adventures. Therefore, boys and men don’t read. Instead, they do. The class conversation continues as Mrs. Alden introduces the idea of extending the story.
Mrs. Alden: For fun, you might think about writing your own chapter of another book. What would you do if you were continuing this story? Would it be fun to write your own chapter of a new book?

Adeline: It could be about the babies doing things.

Mrs. Alden: So, Adeline’s book would be about the babies. I somehow want to know more about Murray’s character. I think if I were going to write a new chapter of a new book about Gooseberry Park, I might have Murray be the main character, and I might try to build a story around him. Because he’s so clever and I think he would have a good time.

Adeline: Can Murray like the babies?

Mrs. Alden: Maybe.

This moment illustrates the power of text to shape gender identity and performance. Adeline’s suggestion that the new book be written about the babies indicates she is performing and inhabiting the world in the way Gooseberry Park positions females—as maternal figures concerned with babies. When Mrs. Alden directs the conversation away from writing a book about babies toward writing one centered on a male character, who she describes as “clever” and potentially having “a good time”, the talk falls into privileging male characters over female characters. Even Mrs. Alden’s “maybe” to Adeline’s “Can Murray like the babies?” suggests that while it may be possible for Murray to be involved with the babies, it might make for a rather uninteresting story. Whereas Stumpy and the babies are confined to the home and unable to have fun, Murray is clever, free to explore the world and have a good time. The class conversation continues with a suggestion of introducing marriage into the story line.

Maggie: What if Murray got married?

Multiple students: Murray gets married! Murray gets married!

Mrs. Alden: Oh, look at that! You came up with an idea and already named it. Murray Gets Married.

Jason: Stumpy and Murray Get Married!

Multiple students: Stumpy and Murray Get Married! Stumpy and Murray Get Married!
Mrs. Alden: OK! Let’s get ready for math.

This event concludes with talk around the crafting of text becoming trapped in the masculine and feminine. Rather than allowing Stumpy to remain a single mother, thus disrupting the gender order, the talk falls into a stereotypical pattern reflective of gendered heterosexist thinking that reinscribes broader social discourses associated with heteronormative relationships ending in marriage; or in other words, happy, fairy tale endings.

**Event 3 - “She Felt Safe and Warm”: Ignoring Alternate Representations of Gender**

The students gather on the rug in the Reading Workshop area for the day’s reading mini-lesson. Today, the students are learning to identify how a story’s setting influences a character’s actions. Mrs. Alden references several texts, familiar to the students through previous read aloud sessions, as she models and invites the students to actively engage in discussions of the texts.

The following event takes place during a discussion around the picture book, *Brave Irene*, by William Steig (1986). *Brave Irene* tells the story of Irene Bobbin, a dressmaker's daughter who braves a fierce snowstorm to deliver a new gown to the duchess in time for the ball. However, just as Irene catches a glimpse of the palace through the blizzard, she falls into a ditch and becomes buried in the snow.

Mrs. Alden: The setting of a story influences what that character does, and as we get to know our characters it's important for us to think a little bit about how the setting affects the characters…What about Brave Irene? Did the setting affect her? Can anybody remember a time where it affected her?

Multiple students: Yeah.

Mrs. Alden: Raise your hand if you can think of a time. (She points to Hailey)

Hailey: When she like… uhh… twisted her ankle?

Mrs. Alden: (gasps) When she fell and twisted her ankle. And the setting of the snow and the dark and the cold affected that fall and what happens.
At this point the conversation turns away from how the setting of the blizzard affects Irene’s actions. This is an interesting turn as the crux of the story is located in the choice Irene is forced to make when she finds herself buried in the snow. As the following passage from the text illustrates, Irene first questions her existence:

Even if she could call for help, no one would hear her. Her body shook. Her teeth chattered. Why not freeze to death, she thought, and let all these troubles end. Why not? She was already buried. (p. 17)

Then, as she contemplates the prospect of never seeing her mother again, Irene finds strength:

And never see her mother’s face again? Her good mother who smelled like fresh-baked bread? In an explosion of fury, she flung her body about to free herself and was finally able to climb up on her knees and look around. (p. 18)

In the end, Irene rescues herself and the gown, and bravely accomplishes her mission. At this point the class conversation turns toward discussing how the setting of the castle makes Irene feel.

Mrs. Alden: Can anybody think of another time in this story where the setting affected her? Ah! What do you think, Maggie?

Maggie: The castle?

Mrs. Alden: What about the castle?

Maggie: In the ball?

Mrs. Alden: In the ball. How did that affect Irene?

Maggie: She felt safe

Mrs. Alden: She felt safe and warm. Right! OK. Thank you.

Despite the explicit construction of Irene as brave, a performance of gender that works against normative gender constructions, both the talk around the text’s discourses construct gender performance in ways that correspond with dominant gender discourses. For example, after delivering the duchess’s gown, attending the ball, and spending the night at the castle, Irene is safely returned to her home by two large footmen and a bearded doctor. This handily shifts the
subject positioning of Irene from brave heroine to that of helpless female in need of rescuing by competent males. Additionally, the text implicitly reinforces the notion that rather than engaging in worldly adventures and performing heroic acts, women belong physically positioned within the safe confines of the home. Once again, this illustrates the power of text to shape and position individuals as particular types of social subjects, especially women. Consequently, girls may be led to believe their opportunities are less than are actually possible.

By not addressing the textual representation of gender in *Brave Irene*, the text is interpreted in a way that subverts its progressive message that women can be brave. Of course, teachers who are circumscribed by school rules, prescribed curriculum, and education policies are afforded little if any curricular space to engage students in deep critical analysis of gendered texts. Therefore, teachers must spend the time they have focusing on the officially prescribed curriculum requirement of teaching traditional literary elements, which unfortunately limits opportunities for fostering gender sensitive classrooms through gender sensitive literacy practices.

Despite both *Gooseberry Park* and *Brave Irene* containing alternate images of conventional configurations of gender, the talk around these texts never veered toward imagining and constructing subject positionings outside of traditional gendered relations, thus revealing the power of normative gender discourses circulating throughout this particular early elementary literacy classroom.

**Event 4 - “Blame it on Mom!”: The Discursive Construction of Women as Dangerous Social Subjects**

The goal of the current second-grade writing unit, *Realistic Fiction Picture Books*, is to have students create narratives that develop realistic experiences or events. The official curriculum also stipulates students should be able to identify what comprises good character in a
person and incorporate those traits into their stories. By the unit’s end, each student will have crafted their own realistic fiction picture book. The unit mini-lessons include shared writing experiences where the teacher and students work together to craft a class story containing the story elements of character, setting, problem, and solution. Prior to today’s mini-lesson the teacher and students have already engaged in several shared writing experiences where they have created a class character named Max. They have also determined that the story problem arises when Max sneaks into his sister’s room, takes her iPhone, and then accidentally breaks it. Today’s shared writing experience is devoted to teaching writers how to develop several small moment scenes where characters make unsuccessful attempts at solving their problems.

Mrs. Alden: So, this is a little tricky! Because, we as authors need to think about how not to solve our problem right away, right? I think that in the end, I want him to tell his sister the truth and together they look for it in his room and find it. So, I think I have an idea of where I want it to end. But I need to think about what might happen in between. So, you’re going to be thinking about your problem and if you think you already know how you might want your story to end, you could actually write how it’s solved, or you could describe it as you go along. This is our little organizer to help us do our writing. When we actually write our story, we’re going to add a lot of things already done and in place. What do you think he could do first that wouldn’t work? What could he do first that wouldn’t work? Let’s get some ideas.

Van: He, said, his dad took it.

Mrs. Alden: So, he blames it on someone else, what do you think?

Multiple students: Yeah!

Jason: Don’t blame it on the dad. Blame it on the mom.

Mrs. Alden: Blaming it on dad is pretty bold

Multiple students: Blame it on Mom! Blame it on Mom!

Mrs. Alden: Ok. But I’m thinking that maybe I want to use that later. I thinking right in the beginning…

Multiple students: (interrupting) Blame Mom! Blame Mom!
The classroom community has mutually agreed to victimize Mom by falsely accusing her of theft. The notion of accusing Dad is deemed too bold, perhaps even risky, which reinscribes discourses that link masculinity with exercising authority through control, assertiveness, and enforcement of discipline. Therefore, Mom, positioned as a powerless victim, is the safer bet for escaping reprisal. However, Mom, as an accused thief, is simultaneously constructed and positioned as evil, a discourse which is intertextuality linked to wicked stepmother narratives in children’s stories. Thus, the students’ repeated calls to blame Mom and not Dad constructs a text that reinscribes discourses which associate evil and wickedness with women rather than men.

Mrs. Alden: What does he first do to get out of trouble?

Multiple students: Lie!

Wesley: He says…

Mrs. Alden: (writing on easel chart paper) *He sayssssssss…*

Jason: I didn’t do it!

Mrs. Alden: (writing on easel chart paper) *I…didn’t…do…it*

Multiple students: (giggles)

Mrs. Alden: And then he blames someone else.

Multiple students: Blame it on mom! Mom!

Mrs. Alden: The next thing he does to try to get out of trouble is?

Multiple students: Blame it on mom!

Mrs. Alden: (writing on easel chart paper) *Max…*

Carli: He blames…

Mrs. Alden: (writing on easel chart paper) *blames…*

Multiple students: It on mom! Mom!

Mrs. Alden: (writing on easel chart paper) *The…missing…phone…on…*

Multiple kids: (yelling) Mom! On mom! On mom! Mom! Mom! Yeah!
Mrs. Alden: (writes “mom” on the easel chart paper) That’s a… (pause) such a bad idea. Whatever you do, don’t blame things on your parents. Such a bad idea.

The students’ repeated performance of calling out to blame Mom can be read as exerting their power to subjugate women while simultaneously constructing and positioning Mom, a representation of femaleness and femininity, as a dangerous social subject. As the shared writing sessions continue over the next several days, Max confesses to stealing his sister’s iPhone, exonerating his victimized mom of the crime. This plot turn in the shared crafting of the text reifies discourses associated with the helpless female needing to be rescued by the competent, or in this case honest male. In other words, Max rescues Mom from the subject positioning of evil thief and repositions her as a nurturing housewife and mother within the protective confines of the home. Reinscribing discourses associated with positioning women and girls as dangerous social subjects through the crafting of text continues into the next event.

**Event 5 – “The Danger Zone”: Constructing Spaces Women Occupy as Polluted**

It is the next day, and the Writing Workshop mini-lesson’s teaching point is *how to create a text’s tone through using descriptive language when writing about the setting of the story*. The students and Mrs. Alden are all gathered in the Writing Workshop area. As they work, Mrs. Alden transcribes the shared writing of the story onto the easel chart paper. The following conversation unfolds just as the students have decided the character Max should sneak into his sister’s room.

Mrs. Alden: (looking at the students) So, he decided to go…?

Milo: (calling out) To his sister’s room!

Jason: To his sister’s…

Mrs. Alden: (writing on the easel chart paper) *Into the* (pause, looks at students, then resumes writing) *daaanger...zone...of the...sister’s...room.*
Rituals of pollution occur when individuals or groups, especially girls, and the spaces they occupy are treated as contaminating (Thorne, 2010). The story being drafted reflects larger social and cultural structures of gender inequality. As Thorne (2010) suggests:

… in contemporary US culture even young girls are treated as symbolically contaminating in a way that boys, as a group, are not. This may be because in our culture even at a young age, girls are sexualized more than boys, and female sexuality, especially when ‘out of place’ or actively associated with children, connotes danger and endangerment. (p.75)

Thus, positioning the sister’s room as a dangerous, contaminating space exemplifies how power is operating within this shared writing activity: it ensures not only social distancing between boys and girls but also the privileged positioning and superiority of boys.

Mrs. Alden: (reading what she just wrote on the easel chart paper) So, he decided to...

Hailey: To then...can we add a “suddenly” to our book? So, “suddenly”

Mrs. Alden: Oh! Yes! We can totally add “suddenlys”, but would we put a “suddenly” on the first page?

Multiple kids: No

Mrs. Alden: First we have to just set the tone

Multiple students: Yeah

Mrs. Alden: And the stage, and not quite at the problem yet-And, and actually we haven’t even...we’re gonna wait to introduce our characters too, ok? Just wait a second, ok? Last week, on a gloomy and rainy day, Max came home from school. He was sad that he could not go out and play, so he decided to go...into...

Multiple kids: The danger zone!

Mrs. Alden: The danger zone!

Jason: Danger zone!

Wesley: He did look in the danger zone

Leo: Of his sister’s room, he looked for something to do

Hailey: Of. You forgot the “of”.

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Carli: Oh!

Mrs. Alden: Oh. Would you like me to use “of” instead of a comma?

Multiple kids: Yeah

Mrs. Alden: Sure. I was gonna say, So, he decided to go into the danger zone, his sister’s room. But we can do “of”. His sister’s room, do you see the apostrophe? The room that belongs to her. To look…

Multiple kids: For something to do

Mrs. Alden: For something (pause)

Wesley: To do

Mrs. Alden: To do.

Despite the sister’s room being constructed as a dangerous, polluted space, Max, by virtue of his maleness, exerts his privileged, powerful position by violating her space. This is reflective of patterns within broader social and institutional structures where men often violate the space of women (Henley, 1977). However, rather than viewing the girls’ co-constructing of the sister’s room as a “danger zone” as a form of compliance, when analyzing this particular event through the lens of Foucault’s (1980) notion of power relations, it becomes evident how power is neither hierarchical nor static. By crafting the sister’s room as a “danger zone”, it becomes a scary place to enter and thus, a type of weapon and source of power for girls to utilize in the deflection and protection against male aggression.

These two events, both centered on the literacy practice of shared writing, illustrate how school literacy practices produce students as simultaneously both gendered and literate. Put differently, analysis of the two shared writing events draws attention to how the creation of text not only reinscribes dominant discourses associated with the gender binary and order, but also highlights how writing preferences are themselves a social construction, as students work to
signify membership within particular gendered social categories through the choices they make in the crafting of text (Dressman, 1977).

**Theme: Gendered Bodies Constructed Through Discursive Power**

The following section tells the story of how students positioning themselves within the literacy classroom as either masculine males or feminine females is an embodied act. It draws attention to how students’ bodies continue to be gendered through text, talk, and disciplining of the body within the official literacy space of the classroom. The next set of events make visible how literacy and bodies are inextricably linked and intertwined. In other words, they show not only how children respond to literacy experiences with their entire bodies but also make visible the ways in which bodies carry discourses. As Butler suggests, “discourses do actually live in bodies. They lodge in bodies: bodies in fact carry discourses as part of their own life-blood” (quoted in Meijer & Prins, 1998, p. 282).

**Event 1 - “He is A Stern Master”: Discursively Constructed Meanings of Gender Through Schooled Literacy**

This week, the students have been learning about the “er” blend/digraph. Two of the spelling words on this week’s list are “stern” and “master”. The following excerpt highlights how the combining of these two words into one sentence during a spelling test reinscribes a pattern of patriarchy, a hierarchical gender order of power and privilege reflected within broader social and institutional structures. The students, seated at their tables with pencils in hand, focus on Mrs. Alden as she circulates throughout the classroom.

Mrs. Alden: Alright! Here comes the sentence! Are you ready to listen to the sentence?

Multiple students: Yeah

Mrs. Alden: The sentence is… (pause) “He is a stern master” Point to the places on the line. “He is a stern master.” Are you ready to start writing?

Multiple students: Yeah
Mrs. Alden: You shouldn’t be writing yet. (pause) Ready, here you go. He is a…

Multiple students: SssstEEERRRNN

Mrs. Alden: SstEERRRN

Wesley: Master!

Hailey: How do you spell that?

Wesley: You sound it out!

Mrs. Alden: mAASSTeRR

Multiple kids: Maassster

Mrs. Alden: What does stern mean? Jason?

Jason: Um, like, serious?

Mrs. Alden: Serious! Or… (pause)

Adeline: Strict!

Mrs. Alden: Serious or strict. That’s right, that’s what stern means. “He is a stern master.” Someone said “How do we spell it?” And I heard Wesley say “You sound it out”. Yes, we sound it out, but then we also have to look at the word to see, does it look better with an I-R, or an E-R?

Multiple students: E-R!

Mrs. Alden: Check your sentence against mine and re-write it please

Multiple students: (spelling out) S-T-E-R-N

Mrs. Alden: “He is a stern master.”

This event illustrates how schooled literacy, a discourse that normalizes particular ways of being in school (Kontovourki & Siegel, 2022), and gender are inextricably intertwined within the literacy practice of learning how to spell. Embedded within the practice of sounding out and defining words is a reinscribing of gender performance expectations that posit males are not only stern but also masters. The subject positioning of he, and not she, as a stern master makes visible the ideological underpinnings of language as it creates a clear dichotomy between males and
females while simultaneously reinscribing discourses related to the subjugation of women. As argued by Foucault (1980) individuals are constituted through discourses that are linked to systems of knowledge that come to be regarded as true and thus govern how individuals understand and inhabit the world. In other words, discourse is never just linguistic. As the next two events illustrate, the discourse of he as a stern master organizes two male students’ ways of thinking into ways of performing their gender within the literacy classroom.

Event 2 - “NO! NO! …SHHH! SHHH!”: Performing Hegemonic Masculinity

Milo, Carli, and Hailey are huddled along with three other students on the Writing Workshop area rug. It is their table’s turn to select one of this week’s spelling words and then lead the full class in a kinesthetic activity of either sky-writing or body-writing the word. While the six students are holding their meeting, the rest of the class is engaged in noisy chatter as they await the group’s instructions. Between the noise throughout the classroom and the six in the huddle all talking over each other, much of the group’s conversation is unintelligible. Yet, the decipherable data produced throughout this event clearly draws attention to how Milo embodies and performs the discourse of stern master, or in other words, the dominant male as he attempts to silence both Carli and Hailey through control, assertiveness, and discipline. The other three students in the group are on-lookers as the following event unfolds.

Milo looks at Carli and shouts above the noise, “No! No! No! No! She said, she said done! She said done!” Carli, while jumping up and down, points her finger at Milo as she speaks to him. Milo gives her a stern look, turns away, and begins to speak to Hailey. Carli continues talking to Milo’s back while furiously pointing and shaking her finger at him. Milo spins around back toward Carli and with an angry facial expression, quickly says something before turning back toward Hailey. Carli continues talking to Milo’s back. Again, Milo whips around back.
toward Carli and while staring her down loudly yells, “NO! NO!” (He puts his fingers to his mouth and loudly sounds) “SHHH! SHHH!”

Connell’s (1995) theory of hegemonic masculinity provides a framework through which to contextualize Milo’s gendered performance as a stern master, a discourse that defines what it means to be properly masculine or, in other words, a “real man or a boy” (Kehily, 2010, p. 172). Hegemonic masculinity refers to a dominant mode of masculinity that exercises the greatest influence and authority through control, assertiveness, and enforcement of discipline. This type of gendered performance occurred when Milo firmly and authoritatively disciplined and shushed Carli. Milo’s efforts to limit Carli’s voice was an attempt to remove one of the means available to her for resisting his mistreatment, which would position her as a powerless subject within the literacy classroom community. Yet, Carli resisted.

Carli leans in close to Milo’s face. With an angry facial expression, she furiously shakes her head back-and-forth in a “no” gesture as she speaks. At the same time, Hailey, who is standing next to Carli, places her right arm behind her back, forms her right hand into a fist, and then slowly raises her fist up toward Milo. Before reaching Milo’s face, Hailey stops herself, relaxes her fist, and drops her arm back down to her side. As Carli continues speaking to Milo, his gaze turns toward Hailey. As Hailey begins to speak to him, he moves his fingers toward his lips and makes a shushing gesture toward Hailey.

While hegemonic masculinity provides a framework for contextualizing Milo’s performance, it is not a construct through which to understand the girls’ resistance. Poststructuralist theory provides an alternate entry point through which to better understand and apply meaning to the girls’ performances. The unstable and productive nature of power relations was evident when Carli repeatedly stepped outside of the dominant-male subordinate-female pattern and resisted
Milo’s attempt to aggressively silence her. Similarly, Hailey’s move to punch Milo, a performance most commonly associated with males, was an act of resistance to being positioned as a powerless female subject. Conversely, when Hailey caught herself and did not follow through with punching Milo, it became clear how once children have taken up the bodily, emotional, and cognitive patterns of the dominant male and the subordinate female, it is difficult for them to imagine, accept, or participate in any alternate gendered social structure (Davies, 2003a).

**Event 3 – “That’s MY Book!”: Subjugating Women Through Disciplinary Control**

It is the independent reading portion of the Reading Workshop literacy block. Today, Mrs. Alden gives the students permission to read either independently or quietly with a partner while she leads a guided-reading session with a small group of students at the teacher table. What follows is an account and analysis of the interactions that occurred when two students who decided to read quietly together found themselves interrupted by a third.

Sean and Carli are sitting together on the Reading Workshop meeting area rug. On the floor in between them is an opened book. The book, one from National Geographic’s *Weird, But True* series for children, is a nonfiction text containing hundreds of weird but true facts presented in the style and tradition of the *Guinness Book World of Records*. Sean and Carli are engaged in calm, quiet talk as they look at the book together, taking turns flipping through and pointing to the pages. From the opposite side of the rug, Oliver runs toward Carli and Sean and then, as if sliding into home base while playing baseball, lands on the floor just short of banging into Carli. He gives her a stern look and exclaims, “You know, that’s MY book!” Carli looks at him and calmly says, “It’s *not* your book.” Oliver points to the book and loudly responds “that’s MY book!” Carli says something
quietly, so quietly that it appears to be said underneath her breath and as such, is indecipherable. Oliver stares at Carli, grabs the book away from her, and repeats, “MY book.” Oliver places the book down on the floor between himself and Sean, out of Carli’s reach. Sean resumes flipping through the pages of the book. Carli looks at Oliver and asks, “Was it in your bag?” Once again, Oliver stares her down and sharply responds, “I brought it with me!”

Just as Milo performed hegemonic masculinity in the previous event, Oliver performed a similar dominant mode of masculinity where he exercised control over Carli by flying toward her in a physically aggressive manner. As Connell (1987) suggests, males’ bodies are often used and perceived as a source of power. When Oliver grabbed and placed the book between himself and Sean, outside of Carli’s reach, Oliver took physical control over what he claimed to be his property while simultaneously positioning himself and Sean, who was permitted to continue reading the book, in privileged positions of power. The interaction between Carli and Oliver can be understood as reinscribing broader cultural discourses associated with males’ privileged position of power; discourses that cannot be abstracted from history. For example, throughout most of American history women’s lives were circumscribed by laws which stipulated that a married woman did not have a separate legal existence from her husband. A married woman was a dependent and could not own property. It was not until between the years of 1839 and those of the 1880s that these laws were finally disassembled. Despite over 100 years passing since these marriage and property laws (otherwise known as coverture) have been in place, when analyzed through a poststructural feminist lens, Carli (positioned as female/wife) being forced to surrender property to the control of Oliver (positioned as male/husband) makes visible how dominant gendered practices become so ingrained over time, and are so deeply embedded within history.
and culture that they not only come to be seen as natural and normal “common-sense”
prescriptions for living (Davison & Frank, 2006), but also dictate gender performance, even
within an early elementary literacy classroom.

However, the unstable, mobile nature of power is also displayed throughout this event. In
terms of property ownership, Carli did not surrender easily. She resisted Oliver’s seizing of the
book by telling him it is not his book and then, she insisted he provide proof to support his claim
of ownership. This can be read as a discourse of resistance associated with those of women’s
suffrage. Women fought not only for the right to vote but also for the right to have separate legal
existence from husbands, which, in turn, allowed them to own and have control over their own
property. Another discourse circulating throughout this event was that of boy books. During my
tenure as a K-5 school library media specialist, I observed clear gender differences in my
students’ text preferences. While the majority of the girls preferred to read fiction chapter books,
the overwhelming majority of boys preferred nonfiction texts; or as they would tell me, books
about “real” things. Therefore, I read Oliver as closely guarding the gendered boundaries of his
reading preferences within the public space of the classroom. Allowing Carli to continue reading
his nonfiction book might be observed by others in the class who would then equate his reading
preference with the reading preference of a girl. So, it had to be stopped. As Dutro (2011) argues,
boys’ rejection of things feminine may be due to their awareness of how things associated with
“girls and women are devalued by society and thus...it is important that they define themselves
against those things” (p. 377). Therefore, Oliver’s physical removal of the nonfiction “boy” book
from within Carli’s reach, and positioning it between himself and Sean, can be understood as a
literacy performance that proclaimed his identity as a member of the male/masculine gendered
category.
Event 4 - Air Chest Bump: Defining Themselves Against All Things Feminine

The current unit of study within the classroom in both reading and writing is realistic fiction. Each student’s published piece by the end of the unit will be a realistic fiction picture book. Today, the students are supposed to be spending independent writing time to craft their main characters’ likes and dislikes. Macie is sitting at the yellow table toward the rear of the room working on her writing. On the other side of the room, Mason and Oliver have gotten up from their table and crossed over to the supply table behind Macie’s chair. Mason and Oliver are quite popular in the second-grade classroom. Their extreme dedication to sports is demonstrated by their being in control of every basketball and football game during recess as well as their preference for reading books about sports. Both Mason and Oliver look, act, and speak the part of stereotypical boys normalized and represented in the larger society and culture. The following event highlights how Mason and Oliver’s bodies carry and reinscribe discourses related to “boy-ness”, which means being strong and active.
Mason and Oliver are standing approximately 8 feet apart from each other behind Macie’s chair. Oliver is focused on the supply table. Mason waves to catch Oliver’s attention. Oliver looks at Mason, turns to face him, and takes two steps back. Once Mason and Oliver are facing each other at approximately 10 feet apart, they each take two quick steps toward each other. When they are a few feet apart, they jump high up in the air, puffing out their chests toward each other. Just as their chests are about to bump, they fling themselves backward and away from each other. Macie watches the boys. She is up on her hunches on her chair bouncing up and down while laughing. When the boys hit the ground, all three are smiling and laughing. Then, while continuing to smile and laugh, Macie turns to scan the classroom as if to ascertain if anyone else saw what has just occurred.

Mason and Oliver’s performance of “boy-ness” (i.e., their strong, active air chest bump) was a gender performance that was taken up approvingly by Macie. As was evidenced by their smiles and laughter, Macie’s enthusiastic response to their performance caused Mason and Oliver to experience pleasure, thus illustrating the power of approval for doing gender right. Another aspect to the boys’ gender performance was related to space. Macie, as an active participant in this event, never left the confined space of her chair. Mason and Oliver, on the other hand, took up much more space than Macie, both on the ground and in the air. This small point alone illustrates one way in which the boys were able to define themselves within the literacy classroom as masculine boys against Macie, a feminine girl. Likewise, Mason and Oliver were able to define themselves against all things feminine through the crafting of their realistic fiction characters’ likes and dislikes. While Macie’s character liked animals, friends and reading and disliked bullies and fights, both Mason and Oliver’s characters liked sports and video games and
disliked ballroom dancing, the color pink, reading, and school. In following up their writing activity with their air chest bump performance, the boys further defined themselves against literacy activities (such as remaining in their chairs to read and write) that are coded as feminine. Thus, the boys preempted a situation where they may have been deemed not masculine enough and accused of being weird. For girls, the worry over not performing their gender right is different from boys, a topic addressed in the next event.

Figure 3. Air Chest Bump

Event 5 – “You Really Look Like Her!”: Performing Perfect Femininity

During today’s independent reading portion of Reading Workshop, students are supposed to work on completing character maps for the characters in their independent leveled books. Cole, Maggie, and Ariana are engaged in conversation while they sit at their table and work on their maps. On the cover of Maggie’s book is an image of a girl dressed in a sleeveless tank top and bell-bottom jeans adorned with a row of flowers down each leg. Maggie’s outfit is similar to the cover image on the book. The following excerpt highlights a moment where social approval of Maggie is framed around the reading of her performance as properly gendered.
Maggie holds her book on top of her head as she displays the cover to both Ariana and Cole. Cole, who is sitting to Maggie’s left, is holding and shining a flashlight on Maggie. He says something to Maggie which causes her to giggle and then playfully and shyly recoil. Maggie removes the book from on top of her head and holds it in front of her examining the cover. Cole continues shining the light on Maggie. Ariana leans in toward Maggie and says, “You really look like her! You really look like her!” Maggie stands up and while moving her hands from the top of her shoulders down toward her knees presents her outfit, from top to bottom, to both Cole and Ariana. Cole continues to keep the light on Maggie. Then, while extending her left arm outward toward Maggie and her right arm straight up in the air to form a sort of “ta-da!” pose, Ariana again says, “You REALLY look like her!”

As argued by Boldt (2004), for girls, the worry or accusation of not performing their gender right is different from boys. Rather than fear of being called weird for performing outside of expected gender norms, girls fear they may not be feminine enough to be attractive to boys or to the “other girls who judge them by their perceived desirability to boys” (p. 10). Clearly, Maggie succeeded on both fronts. Cole’s keeping the spotlight on Maggie connects to broader social structures related to discourses that privilege the physical appearance of women thus signaling his approval of her gender performance. Likewise, Ariana’s repeated assurance to Maggie that she really looked like the girl on the cover of the book along with her very theatrical “ta-da” gesture indicated Ariana believed Maggie was, indeed, attractive to boys. This brief event succinctly illustrates that when gender performances successfully reiterate socially and culturally dominant norms, they are considered to be performative accomplishments that both the audience and actors believe to be true (Enriquez, 2016; Guuitierrez-Gomez, 2005; Johnson, 2011).
Event 6 - “That Was a Beautiful Curtsy!”: Applause for Doing Gender Right

Rather than calling students to the Reading Workshop gathering area for the day’s reading mini-lesson, Mrs. Alden calls the students to meet with her in the Writing Workshop gathering area. Once all of the students settle on the rug and Mrs. Alden in her chair, she informs the students that before moving on to the day’s reading lesson she wants to show them something on the Smart Board. Mrs. Alden explains she has recently learned something very special about a student in the class that she and, as far as she knows, no one else in the class has knowledge of. Ariana is a ballroom dancer. The weekend prior, Ariana had competed in her first official ballroom dancing competition. Ariana’s mother emailed Mrs. Alden photos and a video of Ariana and her dance partner performing in the competition. As Mrs. Alden opens up her email to share the photos of Ariana and her dance partner on the Smart Board, the majority of girls move up close to the Smart Board while the majority of boys reposition themselves toward the back of the rug. After viewing the photos, Mrs. Alden plays the video of Ariana and her dance partner performing the Cha-Cha. The students and teacher are mesmerized. I, too, am mesmerized. I am, quite frankly, floor by Ariana’s talent. The interactions that occur between Mrs. Alden, Ariana, and the students throughout the following event draw attention to how
gender functions within the classroom environment to let students know what sorts of behaviors, beliefs, and interests are normal within their gendered identity groups.

When the video of Ariana and her dance partner performing the Cha-Cha ends, there is furious applause. Mrs. Alden shouts, “WOO HOO!” Mrs. Alden waves her hand toward Ariana, who is sitting directly in front of the Smart Board, and says, “Get up and take a bow!” Mrs. Alden leans forward toward Ariana, whispers something, then extends her hand to help Ariana stand up. With her hands on Ariana’s shoulders, Mrs. Alden encourages her to turn around while saying, “Turn around!” Ariana turns to face the class. Mrs. Alden says, “Let me see you do it for everybody! You’re dancing curtsy!” Ariana, wearing an ear-to-ear grin, performs two dramatic, graceful, and exaggerated curtseys in a row. When she stands back up Mrs. Alden begins clapping followed by the students joining in. Mrs. Alden leans forward toward the students on the rug and quietly says, “That was a beautiful curtsy”. Then, while widening her eyes, she says, “Wow! What do you all think? What do you all think?” Multiple students respond, overlapping each other: It was good! That was really good! So good! Good! Sooooo good!

While this event did not occur during the curricular required reading mini-lesson, it did take place within a designated formal literacy space of the classroom. Once again, as discussed in an earlier section of this chapter, how and where boys and girls decide to inhabit space on the meeting area rug is a gendered performance. As was evidenced in their talk, play, and writing, dance was a consistent hot topic amongst most of the girls within the classroom. In contrast, the only time I observed boys referencing dance was when they were required to create likes and dislikes for the characters they had crafted during the class’s realistic fiction writing unit. Most of the boys included dance as one of their character’s dislikes. Therefore, once it was revealed
that the topic for this meeting would be dance, the girls moving up close to the Smart Board was communal affirmation that dance is the stuff of “girl-ness” while the boys moving to the back of the rug indicated communal affirmation that dance is the antithesis of “boy-ness.”

The request for Ariana to take a bow rapidly shifted to a request for her to perform a curtsy. There is no small distinction between a curtsy and a bow. The subject positionings represented in the performance of curtesys and bows create a dichotomy between males and females while simultaneously reinscribing discourses related to the subjugation of women. Within the performing arts and other social and cultural institutions, bows, which involve a slight bending at the waist with a lowering of the head while remaining in a standing position, are primarily performed by males. Curteys, on the other hand, which involve bending the knees and lowering the entire body close to the floor, are typically performed by females. Therefore, bows situate males in privileged positions of power as they are physically positioned above females whose curteys leave them in positions of powerlessness; literally on the floor.

The power of approval for Ariana’s doing her gender right was evident in both the applause and glowing compliments she received from her audience. The classroom community approval of Ariana’s gender performance was not lost on most of the girls in the room. Following this event, dance became not only an ever more popular component of their gender identities but also a metric by which to measure and regulate each other’s gender performances.
That Was a Beautiful Curtsy!

Figure 5. That Was a Beautiful Curtsy!

Theme: The Privileged Positioning of Boys

The following events tell the story of how students in the official literacy space of the classroom continue to be treated differently based on perceived gender. Similar to Sadker and Sadker’s (1985) findings, the boys in 2-Alden were more likely than the girls to be praised and critiqued for the quality of their literacy work. Girls received less attention, which not only positioned them as powerless subjects, but also as invisible members of the official literacy classroom community.

Event 1 - “His Name is Garbanzo”: Positioning Him as a Successful Literate Subject

Jason’s work was often highlighted by the teacher for the purpose of modeling how to either improve upon or accomplish specific schooled literacy goals. For example, during the school-wide Book Character Day, Jason, who was dressed as the cat from Dr. Seuss’s Cat in the
Hat, was used by Mrs. Alden to model how to describe the physical, outside traits of a character. On another occasion, Mrs. Alden referred to Jason as a “great reading detective” when she used his written homework, which was not done correctly, to model for the class how to fill in a worksheet meant to assist in identifying how the setting of a story influences a character’s actions and feelings. However, it was during the pre-assessment writing activity at the beginning of the realistic fiction writing unit when a clear dichotomy between the level of attention given to a boy (Jason) and the attention given to a girl (Carli) became glaringly visible.

The room is quiet. All of the students, sitting at their tables, appear to be focused on and engaged in their writing. Then, with paper in hand, Jason stands up from his seat, walks over to Mrs. Alden, who is sitting at the teacher table, and tells her he would like to read to her his story. Mrs. Alden looks at him, leans back in her chair, and gives him permission to proceed.

Jason: (loudly reading from his paper) Once upon a time there was a man.

Mrs. Alden; (smiles)

Jason: (projecting his voice as he reads from his paper) His name is GARBANZO!

Most students: (stop working, focus on Jason, begin to laugh)

Mrs. Alden (laughs)

Jason: (Big smile while reading from his paper) Garban... (erupting in laughter)

Whole class: (erupting in laughter)

Mrs. Alden: (places hand over mouth while erupting in laughter)

Jason: (giggles while looking around the room) GARBANZO!

Mrs. Alden: (takes her hand away from her mouth and nods at Jason)

Jason: (to Mrs. Alden) It get weirder!

Mrs. Alden: (smiles and playfully responds) Oh, noooo!
Whole class: (the laughter becomes increasingly louder)

Jason: (to the class) It gets weirder!

Mrs. Alden: (Smiling) Alright. Well now we’ve stopped everyone from working, so go ahead and finish.

Jason: (to the class) The book gets weirder!

Whole class: (raucous laughter)

Mrs. Alden: (Laughs, places her hand on Jason’s arm, then looking out toward the class) Shhh!

Jason: (reading from his paper) Garbanzo. He was very clumsy. Garbanzo kept tripping all the time. He needed help. He also was a wizard that could do anything.

Mrs. Alden: (smiles and tries to hold back laughter)

Whole class: (increasing laughter)

Mrs. Alden: So, this is a great beginning. Can you write more?

Carli: (loudly calling out) It’s a hilaaarious beginning!

Jason: (looking at Carli) It’s supposed to be.

Mrs. Alden: (points to a pile of blank writing paper on her table) Grab a piece of paper.

As Jason grabs a piece of paper and returns to his table, Carli, with her paper in hand, quickly stands up, crosses over to Mrs. Alden, and asks if she may read her story out loud. Mrs. Alden, without speaking, nods for Carli to go ahead and read. Wearing an ear-to-ear grin and rocking back-and-forth while shifting her weight between her right foot and left foot, Carli reads from her paper, projecting her voice loudly across the room:

“We are going to have a contest. ‘Yay!’ said the class. Kate said, ‘When is it?’ ‘It is the fourth of March from 6:30 to seven.’” Mrs. Alden watches and listens to Carli with an emotionless expression, offering neither a physical nor verbal response. Likewise, unlike the attention they paid to Jason, none of the students within the classroom are watching,
listening, or reacting to Carli’s public sharing of her writing. The students have returned to their independent work and individual table conversations. Mrs. Alden cuts Carli off from reading aloud, tells her to keep working, and then announces to the class that it’s almost time to put their work away and get ready for lunch. Carli nods, smiles and returns to her table.

Jason’s social positioning as a “great reading detective” and as a writer worthy of receiving public attention and approval for his work was bestowed upon him solely by virtue of his being a boy. Unlike Carli, who Mrs. Alden described to me as an incredibly bright student whose writing shows potential for great depth, Jason’s work was, at best, average. Yet, Jason, and not Carli, was the one who was publicly positioned as a successful literate subject within the official literacy space of the classroom. The subject positioning of Jason was not surprising. Having taught within the same district, I am familiar with how teachers are under pressure to raise the academic achievement of boys. One of the administration’s suggestions for how to achieve this goal was to provide boys with extra praise, attention, and support. The boy discourse (Lahelma, 2014), which suggest “boys are the actual losers in education” (p. 172) is connected to broader social, institutional, and curricular structures that place emphasis on gender gaps in school achievement. Therefore, the privileged positioning of Jason can be understood as connected to managerial discourses concerned with school effectiveness, as the district, school, and teacher will all be assessed based on their students’ achievement. When the main focus with regard to gender equity is on improving the academic achievement of boys, it becomes easier to understand how and why Carli was rendered invisible when she attempted to share her work within the public sphere of the official space of the literacy classroom. Moreover, when
juxtaposing Jason’s public literacy performance with Carli’s public literacy performance, we are left with a stark representation of how inclusion does not always guarantee equity.

Figure 6. *His Name is Garbanzo*

**Event 2 - Oliver’s Trick: Positioning Him as the Teacher**

It is independent writing time and the students are sitting at their tables working on editing their realistic fiction picture books. As Mrs. Alden sits at her teacher table working with a student, I circulate throughout the room helping students with their work and answering their questions. Mrs. Alden calls me over and asks if I wouldn’t mind sitting with Oliver to assist him in the editing of his story. I walk to the other side of the classroom and sit down next to Oliver. He asks if he may read his story to me. I, of course, answer, “Absolutely!” As Oliver reads his story aloud, Sean and Ruby, who are sitting at the same table, stop what they’re doing to watch and listen.

Oliver: (reading his story) Sam woke up and went into… (pause). He looked side to side to make sure no one was coming. He opened the door and peeked in…(pause) he went in, he was looking all around (pronounced “awound”). He looked under her bed, and saw it charging. He unplugged it and brought it back to his room with Jessie’s … (pause) … iPad. When Sam gets to his room (unintelligible) an accident. He breaks it. His sister sees him when he took it. First, she looks inside of Sam’s room. Sam says he did not … he DID … not
… do … it. Then she said, “Mom! Mom! Sam broke my iPad!” And Sam’s mom goes and says … and says … uhhh … and Sam says he did not do it. “I know you did it, Sam,” says Sam’s sister. “I did not d … not do it … Sam’s … says … Sam’s dad … Sam says, “Dad, you b-b-roke” … says, “Dad, you b-broke it.” “I di … d-did not … Sam.”

Sean: (Pointing to Oliver’s paper) Your “b”’s. Your “d”’s

Oliver: (Speaking to Sean) Oh. Yeah. (Speaking to me) I mix up my “b”’s and “d”’s all the time.

Me: Yeah, that’s easy to do, right? That’s an easy mistake to make.

Ruby: I still do it.

Mrs. Alden: (Calling from across the room) Oliver! What’s the trick you learned?

Oliver: The bed.

Mrs. Alden: Show Mrs. Drennan and Ruby how it works.

Me: How does the trick work?

Oliver: (reciting the letters as he writes) b-e-d

Me: (I look at what he has drawn and realize the dashes and letters form the image of a bed) Ah! I love that trick. You taught me something new today. (I point to Oliver’s drawing) b-e-d. I love it! Thank you!

The multi-directional power relations between myself, Oliver, Sean, Ruby, and Mrs. Alden illustrate how both gender and literacy identities, performances, and subject positionings occur through dynamic engagement situated on a hierarchical construct of privilege and power. For example, when Mrs. Alden requested that I sit with Oliver to help him with his writing, I was positioned as teacher, a position of power. The privileged and powerful position of teacher shifted from myself to Sean, who was positioned within the classroom as a high performing literate subject, when he pointed out to Oliver the mistake he had made in mixing up his “b”’s and “d”’s. Mrs. Alden, who had been surveilling the exchange from across the room, positioned Oliver as teacher when she publicly announced he should show me and Ruby how to not confuse our “b”’s and “d”’s when writing. Positioning both Ruby and myself, and not Sean, as Oliver’s
students reinscribed discourses related to males being more clever, intelligent, and cerebral than females. There was also the flow of power between myself and Mrs. Alden. Her public repositioning of me from Oliver’s teacher to Oliver’s student made clear that she was the teacher, the one who held the power within the literacy classroom. In the end, I participated in reinscribing the privileged positioning of Oliver as my teacher when I thanked him for teaching me something new.

**Part 2: Performing Differently Within the Official Literacy Space**

This part of the analysis draws attention to momentary discontinuities that occurred in the repetition of normative gender performances within the official literacy space of the classroom. These fleeting, cracks in the veneer of expected masculine and feminine performance appeared and then disappeared with such speed and fluidity they were initially missed. It was not until I engaged in an iterative review of the full data set that I discovered the following events. If I, as a researcher who was on the lookout for such events, missed their happening in real time, then the teacher, who was busy with the day-to-day, minute-by-minute enactment of the official curriculum, was certainly not positioned to do so. Nonetheless, brief moments of normative gender subjectivities being destabilized within the course of reiteration did occur. Thus, the power dynamics around the inscription of gender and literate identities were interrupted.

**Theme: Crossing Invisible Gender Boundaries**

Students’ performances within the official literacy space of the classroom were closely surveilled not only by the teacher but also by their peers. I, too, surveilled the students’ performances; not only as a researcher, but also as a teacher. I was often asked by Mrs. Alden to assist the students with their literacy work. So, the students knew I was positioned as an authoritative teacher figure within the classroom. As the following events illustrate, when
students were caught performing differently than expected, their performances were either rapidly shutdown by others or immediately self-corrected.

**Event 1 – “No! I Didn’t Vote for a Girl”: Category Maintenance Work**

The teaching point for today’s Writing Workshop mini-lesson is how to use detailed, descriptive language when describing a character’s outside (i.e., physical) traits. Today, the students will work with the teacher to create a class character. The shared writing activity entails filling in one section of a graphic organizer that will be utilized throughout the unit as they co-create the remaining literary elements (i.e., setting, problem, solution) of their class’s story. The organizer will then serve as a guide when they are ready to engage in writing out the full version of their class’s realistic fiction story. Mrs. Alden and the students have all gathered in the Writing Workshop meeting area. Mrs. Alden is sitting in her chair, projecting a blank copy of the graphic organizer on the Smart Board, while the students are spread out on the rug. As the event unfolds, it becomes evident that gender boundaries within the official literacy space of the classroom are monitored by students and crossing them comes with the risk of punishment (Davies, 2003).

Mrs. Alden: Should we take a vote?

Multiple students Yeah! Yes!

Mrs. Alden: Okay, shall we take a vote?

Multiple students: (louder) Yeah! Yes!

Mrs. Alden: Okay, you know what, it totally doesn’t matter, it’s going to be fun any which way. I want you to do your own thinking. Okay?

Leo: Do we have to close our eyes?

Mrs. Alden: You don’t have to close your eyes, no. How many people would like to have a boy as our main character?

Multiple students: Oh, yeah! Yes!
There are 21 students voting; 11 girls and 10 boys. Nine boys and two girls, Hailey and Adeline, raise their hands to vote for a boy character. As Mrs. Alden is counting the raised hands, Alice, who is sitting next to Adeline, reaches up and forcefully pulls down Adeline’s hand.

Mrs. Alden: (Looking at Adeline and Alice) Hold it up high, so I can count again, I want to make sure I get it right.

Adeline moves away from Alice. While bouncing up and down on her haunches she enthusiastically shoots her hand up in the air, waving it back and forth as she casts her vote in favor of a boy character.

Mrs. Alden: (counts to 11) Okay, great. How many would like to have a girl as the main character?

The nine remaining girls and one boy, Sean, vote for a girl character. Mrs. Alden counts to 10. A few of the boys sitting near Sean stare at him, lean in close, and quietly say something.

Sean: (Speaking loudly while curling his body up into a ball) No! I don’t want a girl. I was just raising my hand because I was bored.

Mrs. Alden: So, let’s do the girl count again please. If you want it to be a girl….

Nine of the girls’ hands shoot up into the air. Again, Hailey and Adeline do not vote for a girl. Not one of the boys, including Sean, vote for the girl, which leaves the vote 9 to 12 in favor of a boy character.

Mrs. Alden: Okay! So, our character…

Multiple students: (loud cheering) Is a boy! It's a boy! Yay! Yesss!

Mrs. Alden: Is going to be a boy.

Multiple students: Yaaay!

Mrs. Alden: We don’t have to do any of that. We are going to create him together, okay? We’re going to have fun…because this is our character…and the first thing we know about this boy, is that he is a boy!

Right out of the gate, the male-female binary was reinscribed when the students were asked to vote for only one of two options: a boy character or a girl character. Further, the exuberant
cheering for the boy winning the position of class character reflected larger social and cultural structures of gender inequality, thus reinscribing discourses associated with the privileged positioning of males. As discussed earlier, when crafting a text with a male main character, there are infinite possibilities for having the character engage in myriad exciting adventures and experiences. Conversely, when crafting a text with a female main character, there are strict limitations and guidelines placed on her performance, which makes for an uninteresting, un-fun writing experience. Therefore, writing about a boy will be fun because, as Mrs. Alden said, “He is a boy!” Indeed, as the shared writing continued, the class created their character’s outside (i.e., physical) traits in the image of their classmate, Jason. Jason, who was often the recipient of privileged positioning within the classroom, was once again in the spotlight. The only difference was the fictionalized version of Jason was named Max.

Figure 7. In the Image of Jason

Tucked within the expected performances and subject positionings that unfolded within this event were a few momentary turns when unexpected performances occurred. The first was when both Hailey and Adeline voted for a boy class character. While I will discuss the two girls’ votes in greater detail in the next event, it was the interaction between Alice and Adeline that made visible the multi-directional flow of power. When Alice perceived Adeline had deviated
from performing as expected she engaged in a form of category maintenance work (Davies, 2003a). By forcefully grabbing and pulling down Adeline’s arm, Alice indicated to Adeline, *you are a girl and girls vote for girls, not for boys!* Nonetheless, Adeline defied Alice by physically moving away and then making a rather public show of her vote for a boy class character.

When Sean was confronted by the other boys, he quickly backpedaled and publicly announced that he did *not* want a girl. And then, in what seemed to be said in a state of panic while trying to undo what he had done, Sean said he was raising his hand because he was bored, which made little sense. Adeline, on the other hand, gave no public declaration of an apology nor an excuse for her vote. Instead, she doubled down and defiantly voted for the boy character, twice. When I spoke with Sean a few days later, he continued to deny that he had initially voted for a girl classroom character.

Me: May I ask you a question? Do you remember on Monday when we were all voting if we wanted the class character to be a boy or a girl?

Sean: Yeah

Me: Do you remember that?

Sean: Yeah

Me: And Mrs. Alden counted you as voting for a girl

Sean: But then she said not! She said not!

Me: Why did you change your mind?

Sean: No! I didn’t vote for a girl because I don’t want a girl.

Me: Why not?

Sean: I don’t know

Me: You don’t know?

Sean: I’m a boy
Me: Because you’re a boy? Yeah? (pause) Hmm. What do you think would have happened if you voted for a girl?

Sean: I don’t know

I did not press Sean any further on the matter as my questioning him about the event seemed to make him uncomfortable. This led me to believe that despite Sean’s saying he did not know what would happen if he voted for a girl character, on some level he did know what would happen.

Already positioned as the youngest and one of least masculine males within the classroom, Sean would be leaving himself open to the possibility of being humiliated and ostracized by the other students. Sean’s backpedaling and repeated denial of ever voting for a girl character demonstrates the power of the normative gender discourses circulating throughout the official literacy space of the classroom. Moreover, this event illustrates how the power and knowledge disseminated through those discourses can create an unsafe space for students to take gender risks. When juxtaposing Adaline’s experience in voting for a boy classroom character with Sean’s experience in voting for a girl classroom character, an argument can be made that it is easier for girls than it is for boys to cross invisible gender boundaries with impunity. However, such a claim must be contextualized as this was a single event that occurred within the official literacy space of one particular classroom. I point this out as in Chapter 6, the results of my analysis of several events that occurred within the unofficial literacy space of the classroom suggest that girls, more so than boys, are subjected to punitive measures for failing to do their gender right.

The next two events occurred immediately following this shared-writing session. The students have all been sent off to begin creating their own characters for their own realistic fiction picture books. Each student has their own copy of the graphic organizer. The independent
writing task for today is to draw a picture of their character in the center box on the organizer. Then, in one of the other boxes, they are to list their character’s outside (i.e., physical) traits.

**Event 2 – “I Like to Switch it Up”: Masculinity as a Form of Protection**

While the students work on their independent writing, I circulate throughout the room talking with them about the characters they are creating for their own realistic fiction picture books and the votes they made for the classroom character. My first stop is with Adeline, Alice, and Maggie. The three girls are sitting together at the yellow table, chatting and giggling as they work on drawing pictures of their realistic fiction characters. I ask them if the characters they are creating are girls or boys. In unison, they answer, “Girls!”

Me: Oh. So, everybody at this table made their character a girl?

Three girls: (overlapping) Yeah. Uh-huh. Yeah.

Me: Wow!

Alice: ‘cause we are…(unintelligible)

Me: What? (pause) Do you think… (pause) Why did you choose a girl? To make them girls?

Alice: Ummm… because we’re a girl and we like, like, boys can’t wear dresses. Only girls can wear dresses.

Me: Boys can’t wear dresses?

Three girls: (overlapping) Yeah. Un-huh. Yeah.

Through a poststructural feminist lens, the girls, as well as the characters they created, were constituted through discourses that are linked to systems of knowledge regarding what girls and boys can and cannot wear. However, their claim that boys can’t wear dresses was indicative of how discourses are culturally and historically contingent. For example, until the 1920s, young children, whether male or female, wore dresses. It was over time and through the cumulative effect of variations in boys’ performances and/or failures to repeat the performances of wearing a
dress that the shift in the discourse linked to knowledge regarding what boys can and cannot wear became the norm. At this point, I turn to speak with Adeline as I am interested in hearing why she decided to vote for a boy for the classroom character.

Me: I have a quick question to ask you

Adeline: Mhm?

Me: When we were voting if we wanted the class character to be a boy or a girl, you voted for the class character to be a boy. Do you remember that?

Adeline: Mhm

Me: And you’re making your character here a girl. So, I’m wondering, why did you vote for the class character to be a boy?

Adeline: Well, I, I voted for a boy ‘cause I wanted mine to be a girl and I like, cause I like to, focus on two different things. I don’t want my thing, all my things to be the same, I like it to switch it up

During the early stages of reviewing and analyzing the produced data, I was repeatedly drawn to Adeline’s “I like to switch it up” comment. It was a confusing piece of data that I kept trying to analyze as evidence of performing gender differently than expected. I played with the notion that the comment, perhaps, might indicate a potential for gender-bending, but that was neither what the produced data indicated, nor what my theoretical framing supported. So, I pushed this event aside and did not return to it until several weeks later. Upon returning to this event, I realized that as my conversation with Adeline continued, she may have conveyed to me what she meant by liking to “switch it up.”

Me: Ah! Switch it up. Ok. Alright. So that’s interesting. So, the class had a boy character. So, for you, you knew you were going to make your character a girl. Right?

Adeline: Yeah

Me: Why do you think you did that?

Adeline: Um, because I’m a girl, and I wanted this (points to her paper) to be based off of me.
Me: Oh

Adeline: And then, I voted for a boy ‘cause I’m the only girl in the family.

Me: Are you? Really?

Adeline: It’s three boys in my family.

Me: Three? You have three brothers?

Adeline: My dad, my brother, and my other brother.

Me: Oh! Alright. Very good. Right, and (I point to the drawing of her character) she likes sports, friends, what’s that?

Adeline: Waffles.

Me: Oh, waffles!

Adeline: (giggles) I can’t figure out how to spell it.

Me: That’s … (I check her spelling) W-A-F-F-L-E-S. That’s good! Well, thank you for sharing with me!

Adeline: You’re welcome!

When Adeline told me she wanted her character to be a girl, but she voted for the classroom character to be a boy because she is the only girl in her family, I started to see a possible entry point for analyzing her “I like to switch it up” comment. Adeline was not the most feminine girl in the classroom. Nor was she the least. Yet, she could always be found with a group I referred to in my field notes as the girly-girls. The girly-girls were hyper-feminine as was evidenced by their fashion, their play, and their obsession with Irish dancing. Unlike the girly-girls, Adeline’s clothes were not particularly sparkly. In addition, Adeline did not take dance lessons at a professional dance studio, an activity that carried quite a bit of social capital with the girls in the classroom. Nonetheless, Adeline held her own with the group, but just barely. For example, Alice, one of the girly-girls, was the one who forced Adeline’s arm down when she was voting for a boy class character. So, Adeline’s gender performances were clearly under surveillance,
and she knew it. While neither her voting for a boy character nor her stating that she likes to “switch it up” can be fit neatly into this section of my analyses, I argue these two moments represent turns where Adeline performed differently than expected. Blackburn (2005) writes of how “alternative feminine and masculine performances illustrate the ways in which masculinity … serves as protection while femininity does not…” (p. 408). While the produced data of this particular event did not support Adeline shifted between feminine and masculine performances, it did support her privileging masculinity as a form of protection against being criticized for imperfect femininity. Throughout my time in the classroom, I observed a few other events where Adeline made an effort to clarify her own gendered social competence, which I will address Chapter 6.

Event 3 – “I Get in Trouble A LOT!”: Discourse of Resistance

After speaking with Adeline, I turn around to see Hailey and Carli sitting alone at the red table. I walk over to their table and ask if I may join them to talk about their votes for the classroom character and the characters they are creating for their own realistic fiction picture books. They invite me to sit down, which I do, and our conversation begins.

Me: Hailey, you voted for a boy.

Hailey: Yeah.

Me: Right?

Hailey: Yeah.

Me: (pointing to Hailey’s drawing of her character) But you’re making your character a girl. I was wondering if you could tell me more about why you made those decisions.

Hailey: Umm, because I like the name Ashley and, umm, there’s no boy named Ashley.

Me: (laughs) Actually, you know what? In the olden days, it was a name for boys

Hailey: (wide-eyed, shocked expression) And it wasn’t a name for girls?
Me: But now it’s mostly girls. I don’t think I’ve ever met a boy with the name Ashley. Now, why did you vote for a boy to be the classroom character?

Hailey: ‘Cause I think a boy for the classroom character is better and I also like the name Max.

Similar to the previous event, where the girls claimed boys couldn’t wear dresses, both Hailey and the character she created were constituted through discourses that are linked to systems of knowledge regarding what names girls and boys may have. Again, discourses related to dictating appropriate male and female names are culturally and historically contingent and, over time, become taken for granted aspects of the society from which they emerged.

Me: You like the name Max. Could you tell me a little bit more about why you think the boy character is better for the classroom character?

Hailey: I just don’t know. I think he can get in trouble more than a girl.

Me: Oh! Boys can get in trouble more than girls?

Hailey: I don’t know

Me: Is that true?

Hailey: Hmm

Me: Boys can get in trouble more than girls? They can, or they do?

Hailey: Well, maybe they can

Carli: They can!

Me: They can? So, they can. Why do you think they can?

Hailey: I don’t know

Me: What do you think, Carli?

Carli: (loudly) I get in trouble A LOT! (giggles)

Me: (laughs) Hmm.

Hailey: Let's change the subject.
Both Hailey and Carli created a clear dichotomy between boys and girls. They took up an essentialist view of gender that sees masculinity and femininity as binary opposites in which enacted masculine behavior is strong and active, while feminine behavior is weak and passive. However, there was a brief moment where Carli takes a sudden turn and performs differently than expected. On the heels of agreeing with Hailey that boys can get into more trouble than girls, Carli animatedly announced that she gets in trouble “A LOT!” In this moment, Carli disrupts dominant discourses associated with expected feminine behavior; or more specifically, discourses of the good girl. Carli’s admission that she, like a boy, gets into trouble A LOT was also a discourse of resistance against the imposition of a pre-defined, normative gender subject positioning. Hailey immediately shuts down Carli’s troubling of the gender order by telling us to “change the subject”. Hailey’s response illustrates how once children have taken up the bodily, emotional, and cognitive patterns of the dominant male and the subordinate female, it is difficult for them to imagine, accept, or participate in any alternate gendered social structure (Davies, 2003a). As the conversation continues, Leo, who has been listening to our conversation from the rug in the Reading Workshop gathering area, stands up and grabs a chair to join our table.

Me: (laughs) Change the subject? Hmm. Ok, yep. I was just wondering what you think
Hailey: Maybe I think, it, it should be a boy because it makes (pause) have better details
Me: It makes better details if it’s a boy?
Hailey: Yeah. If it’s a girl you only do like the hair, the shirt
Leo: Yeah!
Hailey: Yeah!

Leo has pushed in and invited himself to join our table and our conversation This is reflective of patterns within broader social and institutional structures where men often violate the space of women (Henley, 1977). Leo’s affirmation of Hailey’s assertion that boy characters are better
than girl characters because they “have better details” reifies discourses that position males, both in life and text, in privileged positions of power.

Me: So, like, with a girl you can only do hair, and the- but what different details can you do with a boy?

Hailey: Glasses, hair

Carli: Well, you could do these things on the girls too!

Me: Yeah, those things you could do, right? What do you think?

Carli: Can’t put, um, blush on a boy (giggles)

Hailey: Yeah

Both Girls: (giggles)

Leo: I’m probably literally the funniest in this class

Carli: Yeah, you are, Leo

Hailey: You are, Leo

Carli: Yeah

Me: You’re literally the funniest one in the class?

Carli: The funniest word he says issss….?

Carli, Hailey, Leo: BANANA! (giggles)

Once Leo entered into our space, he succeeded in taking total control of the conversation. First, he ensured the talk remained focused on positioning male characters as the best choice when crafting a text. Next, he hijacked the conversation for the purpose of redirecting the topic toward being all about himself! Again, this was reflective of patterns within broader social and institutional structures where men are positioned in privileged positions of power while women are positioned as powerless subjects. That said, this event also draws attention to the unstable and dynamic nature of power relations; how power is a form of action and something that is exercised rather than possessed. For example, Carli’s pronouncement that she gets in trouble “A
LOT!” was reflective of a discourse of resistance that destabilized the discourse of the *good* girl. As argued by Foucault (1981), while discourse transmits, produces, and reinforces power it also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it” (p. 101).

**Event 4 – “I Don’t Do Football”: Denial of an Alternate Gendered Performance**

Ariana is what some might call, *all girl*. She looks, acts, and speaks the part of the stereotypical girl normalized and represented throughout broader society and culture. She is an incredibly accomplished ballroom dancer. She is also a *good* girl. In fact, she is so good, so polite, and so respectful that when I asked her to tell me why she didn’t like a book she had just finished reading, she replied, “Umm, I don’t like the, the book because they, umm, a boy, he does a very bad thing in the whole entire front of the school. And it’s so embarrassing I don’t even wanna say what he does.” After refusing to tell me what the boy did that was so embarrassing, Ariana offers to show me the page “where he did it.” She flips to the page and hands me the book. The full-page illustration shows a boy of approximately seven or eight years old standing in front of his classroom. His legs are crossed, the front of his pants are wet, and there is puddle on the floor by his feet. I look at Ariana and her head is down with her hands covering her eyes. I chuckle and say, “OK. I think I know what the embarrassing thing was. How did you feel when you read that?” Ariana answers, “Very disgust [sic].” I decided to introduce Ariana prior to recounting the following event as I thought having a bit of knowledge about who Ariana is may provide context for the way she interacts with me across two separate moments.

It is the independent reading portion of the day’s Reading Workshop lesson. The teaching point of today’s mini-lesson was learning how to identify the ways in which characters’ feelings influence their actions. The students’ task during independent reading is to create a T-chart in their readers notebooks, with one side titled *feelings* and the other side titled *actions*. Students are supposed to fill in their T-charts as they independently read their leveled books. However,
some of the students have finished their work before the end of the reading workshop block.

Today, the teacher allows those who finish early to engage in a literacy activity of their choice. The only requirement is that they work quietly, as she is working with a small group of students at the teacher table. It was the time of year when the Super Bowl was just a few weeks away. As a result, a number of the boys selected to make T-charts with the names of the two teams scheduled to compete in the Super Bowl. A few of the girls also created T-charts, only theirs had to do with comparing mermaids to unicorns and puppies to kittens. The students with T-charts began walking around the room, asking me and each other questions such as, ‘What do you like better? Puppies or kittens?’, and marking the votes on their T-charts. As the noise level in the room rises, the teacher stops what she is doing to remind the students to work quietly. I am standing in the Reading Workshop gathering area observing all of the activity when a very excited Ariana runs toward me. She holds up a large piece of pink paper. On the paper is a T-cart with the left column labeled “Giants” and the right column labeled “Jets.” Under the “Giants” column, there are 11 tally marks, and under the “Jets” column, there are 5 tally marks.

Me: You’re asking me if I want the Jets or the Giants?

Ariana: Yes!

Me: Is that football?

Ariana: Yes!

Me: When are they playing?

Ariana: (looks at her paper) I don’t know. I’m just asking, Jets or Giants?”

Me: Ok, um...(a few seconds pass)

Ariana: I like the Jets better.

Me: I feel sorry for the Jets, because they only have 5 votes, so I’ll go with the Jets.
Ariana turns, crosses to the red table, grabs a marker off the table, and marks my vote on her T-chart.

I was amused to see Ariana running around the room with a T-chart, asking people to vote on football teams. Based on my observations, Ariana was much more the *puppies or kittens* type. There was only one other girl, Carli, who decided to create a football T-chart. However, it was not out of character for Carli to do so, as when given a choice, she would always select to participate in an activity having to do with sports. I just assumed Ariana got caught up in the moment, as the excitement of the upcoming Super Bowl was palpable within the air of the classroom. Still, I was intrigued by her choice to create the same type of T-chart associated with most of the boys in the room. So, I decided to ask her. A few days later I had the opportunity to sit down with Ariana to chat about reading and writing and, yes, football. The following excerpt begins when I bring up the topic of creating T-charts during Reading Workshop.

**Figure 8. I Don’t Do Football**

Me: Ok. I’m going to ask you to draw a picture. Remember a couple days ago, when we were making t-charts?

Ariana: That was reading.
Me: That was reading. That was the feelings and actions lesson, I think, right?

Ariana: Yeah

Me: But after, you and, I think it was Carli, you made t-charts, um, and, you were walking around, asking everybody questions. Do you remember that?

Ariana: (nods her head yes) Uh-huh

Me: Do you remember that?

Ariana: Yeah. I was asking questions to people.

Me: About what? What was your t-chart question, do you remember?

Ariana: Umm, yeah.

Me: Yeah?

Ariana: Umm, the… (She looks up toward the ceiling)

Me: Can you draw a picture of what you were doing?

Ariana: I…umm…

Me: You and Carli were doing it.

Ariana: A t-chart?

Me: Yeah, well, draw a picture of you, and what was happening. You and Carli. You came to me and you asked me a question and you were marking it off, you had made a t-chart. You were marking it off on your t-chart.

Ariana: Mmm…

Me: Do you remember what it was?

Ariana: (long pause) No.

Me: Were you asking me about (pause) football?

Ariana: No. I don’t do football

Me: Really? I have this picture. (I show her the picture of her holding the t-chart) You asked me which team I want.

Ariana: Mmm. (shaking her head no) No. I don’t do football.
At this point, the conversation abruptly shifted to talking about playing tag on the playground. I was fascinated. Even with photo evidence and my implicit prompts, Ariana refused to admit that she had engaged in an activity around football. My two interactions with Ariana over her football T-chart draw attention to how students, even when within the official literacy space of the classroom, perform one way when surveilled and another when unsurveilled. For example, when Ariana created the football T-chart, it was during the independent reading portion of Reading Workshop and thus, within an official literacy space within the classroom. However, as the teacher was busy working with a small group at the same time, Ariana was unsurveilled. This created room for Ariana to cross an invisible gender boundary; to perform in a way that might have been perceived by the teacher as the antithesis of a ballroom dancer capable of performing a perfect, beautiful, feminine curtsy. Now, I did wonder why Ariana did not consider me as a surveilling teacher figure within the room. I had, after all, been performing as both an observer and teacher in the classroom. However, on the day of this event I was not only enjoying watching all of the activity, I was taking part in it. I suspect Ariana read the room, saw that I was positioned neither as a teacher nor as a figure for surveilling students’ performances. Thus, Ariana felt safe performing differently than she might otherwise have done under the watchful eyes of her teacher.

Then, several days later, when I sat down to talk with Ariana about her reading, writing, and football, I was positioned as both teacher and researcher, a position of power. Ariana, like the other students in the classroom that I had opportunity to work with, was very familiar with how to talk with and to a teacher. When she and I sat down at the table with several books in between us and my recording device on the table, Ariana was clearly being surveilled, by me, and she knew it. When I showed Ariana the picture of her holding the T-chart, rather than
acknowledging she had engaged in a “boy” activity, she fell back into performing gender as expected: She was an incredibly accomplished ballroom dancer who curtsied beautifully. She was also a good girl. So good, in fact, that she could not bring herself to say the word pee because it was “very disgust [sic].” In Ariana’s world, girls don’t do football. And if they do, they don’t admit it, even in the face of undeniable evidence.

**Theme: Unapologetic Cracks in the Veneer of Gender and Schooled Literacy Performance**

Occasionally, performing differently within the official literacy space went either unnoticed or, when surveilled, continued without fear of reprisal. The first event in this section illustrates how a student’s perception of how, why, and when he was being surveilled enabled him to move fluidly between performing gender and literacy in expected and unexpected ways. The second event draws attention to how an unnoticed moment of performing differently than expected became progressively lengthy, pronounced, and a seeming source of great pleasure.

**Event 1 – “I’m Trying to Build a Rocket”: Disrupting Schooled Literacy**

The teaching point of today’s reading workshop mini-lesson was learning how to identify and talk about the outside, or in other words physical traits of a character. Students, who are now engaged in the independent reading portion of Reading Workshop, are supposed to be quietly reading while recording the outside traits of their leveled book’s main character into their readers notebooks. Jason, who is sitting at a table with four other students, is being disruptive. Mrs. Alden, who is sitting across the room at her table working with a student, calls across the room to Jason and asks him to move to his private office. She tells him it will be easier for him to concentrate there. Jason picks up his book, his readers notebook, and moves over to the lone, isolated desk situated toward the back of the Writing Workshop gathering area rug. As the following event unfolds, Jason navigates the preestablished conventions of schooled literacy as
he moves fluidly between reinscribing and disrupting discourses related to how a good reader should look and sound within the official literacy space of the classroom.

I am circulating throughout the room assisting students with their work and answering their questions. When I stop by to check in with Jason, I see he is neither reading his book nor recording anything in his reader’s notebook as both are closed and pushed up away from him toward the top of the desk. Instead, he appears to be engrossed in drawing on a crumpled-up piece of paper.

Me: (smiling at him) Jason, what are you reading?

Jason: (looks up at me then quickly grabs his book) I'm reading a Pee Wee Scouts, ummm… (looks at the cover and reads the title) *Blue Skies, French Fries*.

Me: Do you like it?

Jason: Yeah.

Me: Why do you like it?

Jason: Because it's kind of funny and it tells a lot, and it has a lot, of adventure in it and I like adventure books.

Me: Oh, you like adventure books. Can you tell me a little bit more about that?

Jason: So, like, it's kind of like funny because it's about these like scouts that go on like some silly adventures and they're really funny and there are like, I'd say, four or five people and they like work together and they solve the mysteries.

Me: Oh, so mysteries. So, you like mysteries too? Mysteries and adventure?

Jason: Mhm.

When Jason realized he was being surveilled by an adult authority figure within the classroom, he immediately shifted from working on his drawing (a performance he knows may not be welcomed within the official literacy space of the classroom) to answering my questions about the book he was supposed to be reading. This indicated Jason was quite savvy about the type of
performance expected within the official literacy space of the classroom during independent
reading time. In other words, he was fully aware of how to do school.

Me: (I point to his drawing) Can you tell me what is this?

Jason: (smiles) Oh, that? (Puts the book down out of the way and pulls the drawing closer
to himself) I've been working on it at home.

As Jason realized I was not going to reprimand him for not doing what he should be doing, he
relaxed and began to tell me about his drawing.

Jason: I read this book called Amazing Grace, and it said you can do anything you want,
and I believed in it. I'm like her, so I'm trying to build a rocket when I grow
up.

Me: Can you tell me more about being like Amazing Grace?

Jason: I can do anything I want. (He points to show me parts of his drawing) So, it's kind
of like, has everything you need. It's like, I think this is like, I think you can
like, put stuff in. I have to follow this, and I have to wait until I grow up, and
then I'm going to build this.

Me: So, this is a rocket? A plan for building a rocket?

Jason: Yes. For when I grow up.

Me: That is very cool. May I take a picture of this?

Jason: Yeah!

Jason’s crafting of the plan to build a rocket was a literacy performance that disrupted discourses
related to what a good reader was supposed to look like within the official literacy space of his
classroom. Instead of reading his Pee Wee Scouts book and recording information on the
characters’ physical traits in his reader’s notebook, Jason was drawing a picture. He was
completely off task. Yet, his drawing the picture and explaining it to me was evidence of Jason
engaging in a different, but common literacy practice performed within the official literacy space
of the classroom. He had made a text-to-self connection with a character in a book he had read; a
Black girl. When Jason said, “I’m like her”, I was intrigued. Unlike the character Grace, Jason
was a young White male, and it appeared he had crossed the boundaries of both race and gender. But as quickly as he had crossed over, he crossed back. It was a smooth, fluid, rapid turn. When I questioned him further on his telling me he was “like her”, he focused on the text’s theme related to building self-confidence and believing that anything can be accomplished if you just put your mind to it, even if it means planning for something that may not come to fruition for years.

Jason’s crafting of a rocket design exemplifies how performance of his literate identity was being lived and felt across time and space, as he repeatedly spoke of how he must wait until he grows up to build it. In not attending to the task of identifying and recording the physical traits of a character in his reader’s notebook, Jason risked being caught and reprimanded for drawing a picture and thus being positioned as a disruptive, reluctant reader. Yet, as evidenced in his response to the text *Amazing Grace* and subsequent designing of the rocket, Jason was neither disruptive nor a reluctant reader. On the contrary; he was a literate subject capable of engaging in a complex literacy performance.

Figure 9. *I’m Trying to Build a Rocket*
**Event 2 – “I Like the Feeling of Jason’s Hair”: Questioning Heteronormativity**

It is time for word study. Today the students are learning about homophones. Mrs. Alden is sitting in her chair by the Smart Board while the students are sitting on the rug in the Writing Workshop meeting area. The students have their writer’s notebooks and pencils with them. On the farthest rear corner of the meeting area, partly hidden by the student publication book display and thus partly hidden from Mrs. Alden’s view, Van and Jason are shoulder-to-shoulder on the rug. As the following event unfolds, Jason and Van’s unexpected embodied performances challenge their inscribed gender and literate subject positionings within the official literacy space of the classroom.

Jason is sitting on his knees and has his notebook in his lap, while Van is sitting up on his knees and has his notebook on the floor in front of him. Jason hits his notebook with his pencil, drops his pencil, gasps, and begins rapidly rubbing the opened page of his notebook while quickly shaking his head back and forth. He stops rubbing his notebook and slows down his head-shaking, then turns his head toward Van and begins talking to him. Van lifts his right hand and touches Jason’s face. Jason smiles and coyly recoils.

Then, Van moves his right hand to massage Jason’s left shoulder. After a brief moment, Van moves his hand down Jason’s back and then upward to the back of Jason’s head. Van moves his hand to alternately stroke Jason’s hair and massage his shoulder. When Mrs. Alden asks the class to write a word in their writer’s notebook, Van, while keeping his right hand on Jason’s hair, leans forward to grab his notebook with his left hand. He quickly takes his right hand off of Jason’s head and then uses both hands to place his notebook on his lap. Then, while balancing the notebook on his lap, he quickly places his hand right hand back on Jason’s hair, while using his left hand to write in his notebook. Mrs. Alden asks a student, “Do you have a sentence for us? Everybody put your finger in
the air if you’re ready to hear it.” Van quickly raises his left index finger while moving his right hand back to Jason’s shoulder. Mrs. Alden says, “Everyone go to a page and write the sentence there.” Van uses his left hand to point to a page in Jason’s notebook while continuing to stroke Jason’s hair before moving to put his arm around Jason’s shoulder. Jason turns toward Van and smiles.

The boys’ embodied performances disrupted not only discourses of masculinity, but also heterosexuality. Typically, playing with each other’s hair and massaging each other’s shoulders was an activity that the girls in the classroom attempted to engage in. However, it was a well-known school rule that students were to keep their bodies to themselves. This rule, as explained to the students, had to do with respect of personal space and safety. In particular, playing with each other’s hair is not allowed in order to reduce the spreading of head lice. Keeping their bodies to themselves and not touching each other, especially within the official literacy space of the classroom, had more to do with ensuring students were not being disruptive and distracting each other during instruction. Therefore, when students were observed to be either playing with someone’s hair or touching another’s body during instruction they were immediately asked to stop. I was not surprised that the interaction between Van and Jason was allowed to continue for almost two minutes as Mrs. Alden, based on my observations, was not able to see what was happening.

As I observed this event unfold, and noted the tenderness between Jason and Van, I wrote into my field notes that they reminded me of the characters in Arnold Lobel’s *Frog and Toad* series. Frog, like Jason, is the more cheery and relaxed character. Toad, like Van, is shorter with a brown shade, and while as caring as frog, is the more serious of the two. Jason and Van could not have been more different; Jason was White and the tallest, most bombastic male in the
classroom while Van was brown-skinned and the slightest, quietest, most serious male in the room. When I later reviewed this event through a poststructural feminist lens, I was reminded of how the *Frog and Toad* books are often praised for representing and helping children understand same sex relationships. Indeed, Jason and Van were an unlikely couple that performed differently than expected. Rather than poking and prodding each other in a physically assertive manner, like many of the boys in the classroom would do during instruction, the loving, physical tenderness shown between Jason and Van disrupted not only discourses of heterosexuality, but also those that equate aggressive behavior with masculinity. Several days later when I sat with Van and asked him to draw a picture of what was happening on the rug on the day of this event, he drew a picture of himself sitting next to Jason. When I asked him to tell me about the picture he said, “I’m touching Jason’s hair…. I like the feeling of Jason’s hair, so I’m touching it…. It felt good.”

The boys’ literacy performances produced subjectivities different from those of the attentive student sitting on the rug listening to the literacy lesson. Van’s performance, in particular, destabilized notions of what constitutes the ideal literate student within the official literacy space of the classroom. For example, Van was labeled as a reluctant, struggling reader and writer. Yet, while continuing to stroke and massage Jason, Van successfully performed an expected schooled literacy practice when he listened intently to Mrs. Alden’s directions and raised his finger to let her know he was ready to hear the sentence. Moreover, Van appeared to make sure Jason, too, performed an expected schooled literacy practice when he pointed to Jason’s notebook, signaling that it was time for him to write. Both Jason and Van’s performances made visible the fluid, un-fixed nature of both gendered and literate identities within the official
literacy space of the classroom. In other words, subjectivities within the classroom were never
fixed; rather, they were in a constant state motion.

Figure 10. *I Like the Feeling of Jason’s Hair*

Chapter Conclusion

This chapter has constructed a story of how power flows through performances of gender
within the context of one second-grade classroom’s official literacy spaces. The events retold
here illustrate how gender and literacy are inextricably intertwined social constructs and confirm
the argument that school literacy practices continue to reproduce the binary gender order through
text, talk, and disciplining of the body. Yet, as power is neither static nor held by any one
individual, there were moments of resistance to being inscribed and/or othered as powerless
gendered subjects. However, in the highly surveilled official literacy spaces, most moments of
resistance were fleeting and precipitously reversed back into compliance. The brief nature of the
moments of resistance made them difficult to identify. In fact, their virtual invisibility was
rivaled only by the naturalization and normalization of the binary gender order that occurred
through discourses and practices of literacy within the official literacy space of the classroom.
Chapter 6: Performing Gender and Literacy in Unofficial Literacy Spaces

The events presented in this chapter occurred within the unofficial literacy spaces of the second-grade classroom. In contrast to the official literacy spaces, the power of discourse and the multi-directional nature of power relations within the unofficial literacy spaces of the classroom were more pronounced. Across four themes, I trace how acts of compliance and resistance to being positioned as either powerful or powerless gendered subjects within the unofficial literacy space of the classroom were magnified and prolonged. In other words, they were visible.

Theme: Policing Gender Performance

The following two events illustrate how discourses are constitutive of more than ways of thinking and acting so as to present oneself as a socially recognizable subject. Indeed, the students were concerned not only with how their gendered identities were perceived by others, but also with ensuring their peers performed gender correctly while also maintaining the hierarchal gender order of the classroom.

Event 1 – “I’m Not a Frog!”: Maintaining the Gendered Social Order

The 8:35 a.m. morning bell has just rung. Today is Book Character Day. Students and staff are dressed up as their favorite characters from the books they love. The excitement is palpable as the students run down the hall laughing and enthusiastically enter the classroom. Everyone has brought with them the book that features their favorite character. The day will begin with an all-school parade throughout the building. The remainder of the day will be dedicated to literacy activities both within the classroom and during specials the students attend (i.e., art, music, physical education). The goal of today’s activities is to foster a love of reading.
Macie, Alice, and Jason are at their table chatting as they unpack their backpacks. Both Alice’s and Jason’s costumes are easily recognizable as characters from books that are popular with the students. Jason is dressed as the cat from Dr. Seuss’s *The Cat in the Hat*. Alice is dressed as Miss. Viola Swamp, the wicked witch from Allard and Marshall’s *Miss Nelson is Missing*.

Unlike Jason and Alice, Macie in not wearing a recognizable costume. She is dressed as she is most days. As the following event unfolds, Macie is subjected to an unmistakably intense and prolonged communal interrogation of *who* and *what* she *is*.

Macie and Alice are seated at the yellow table. Jason, who is standing a few feet from Macie, looks at her and loudly proclaims, “Macie’s a frog.” Macie makes a small hop in her chair, makes a small “ribbit” sound, smiles, and says “I’m *not* a frog”. Leo, who is sitting at a different table watching and listening to what has been going on, points and shouts toward Macie, “I’ll turn you into a banana!” Jason moves closer to Macie, leans in, and while looking down on her from above says, “So, *what* are you?”

When Jason and Leo are unable to decipher either *who* or *what* Macie *is*, they each immediately position her as powerless, non-human entities. Jason not only overpowers Macie by physically leaning over her, but also declares she is a *frog*. Frogs, which are featured prominently in folklore throughout many cultures as well within modern-day pop culture, are often portrayed as ugly and clumsy. Therefore, Jason’s positioning Macie as a frog indicates she is an undesirable female subject. While Leo’s threatening to turn Macie into a banana may seem silly, within popular culture, the banana has been alluded to as a phallic symbol; thus, a symbol of male/masculine power utilized in the subjugation of women. Threatening to turn her into a banana could also indicate affirmation that she is perceived within the classroom as a subject who is not capable of successfully performing femininity. In other words, she might be better off
as a *boy*. Afterall, as noted in Chapter 4, Macie is positioned by the teacher as a “mean girl”—a nasty child who turns off the other kids and needs to learn how to behave nicely so as to have friends, a type of social and cultural embedded criticism more commonly heaped upon girls then upon boys.

Macie stares blank-faced at Jason. Then, while fidgeting with a piece of paper she is holding, she looks around to see who is watching and quietly replies, “OK… umm…” Suddenly, Alice stands up from her chair and leans across the table toward Macie.

Alice: Yeah! *Who* are you?

Jason: We wanna know *what* you are!

Alice: (screaming) *WHO* ARE YOU?

Leo: (shouting from his table) She’s wearing shorts!

Macie: OK!

Macie, while keeping her eyes on Jason who is standing to her left, reaches into her backpack and pulls out a folder. As she pulls a book from inside the folder, she tilts the book in an attempt to keep the book’s cover hidden from Jason’s view. Meanwhile, without Macie noticing, Alice sneaks up behind Macie’s chair and catches a peek of the cover on Macie’s Book. Alice smiles, nods her head in approval, stealthily backs away, and returns to her chair. After Alice takes her seat, she informs the others that Macie is the character Junie B. Jones.

This event illustrates young students’ strong compulsion to identify and categorize each other’s gender categories. Leo shouting across the room that Macie is wearing shorts indicates a public questioning of Macie’s femininity, thus reinscribing discourses connected to performing gender through the wearing of proper attire. Macie, herself, reinscribed these discourses when she and I later discussed a book she had read and enjoyed. When the discussion turned toward clothing,
As discussed earlier, a common literacy practice within the official literacy curriculum was to have students make text-to-self connections. In other words, students were asked to think and talk about how they were the same as the characters in the books they had read. By the time Book Character Day arrived I had already spent a great deal of time in the classroom speaking with the students and observing how they interacted with each other. What I found fascinating was many of the students chose to dress as characters that mirrored how they themselves performed gender within the classroom. For example, Alice’s character, Miss. Viola Swamp, is the evil alter ego of the sweet and kind elementary school teacher, Miss. Nelson. When Miss.
Swamp takes over teaching the children there is no story hour, she tells the children to keep their mouths shut, and she threatens them with terrible punishment should they misbehave. In the spirit of the kind and gentle Miss. Nelson’s character, Alice’s surveillance and correction of the other girls’ gender performances in the official literacy space of the classroom was swift, brief, and covert. This was illustrated in an earlier event where Alice pulled down Adeline’s hand to prevent her from voting for a boy class character during shared writing. However, in the unofficial literacy space of the classroom, Alice takes on the magnified hostility of the evil Miss. Swamp not only by screaming at Macie, but also with her less than honorable way of attaining the information she and the others were seeking to gain through their aggressive intimidation of Macie.

Macie’s selecting to dress as the character Junie B. Jones was particularly interesting as Junie’s character traits mirrored how Macie was socially positioned within the classroom. Junie is spunky, a troublemaker, often calls people names, and isn’t averse to talking back to her teachers. In other words, she is naughty. A few days after Book Character Day, I had the opportunity to talk with Macie about why she chose to dress up as Junie B. Jones.

Me: Why did you choose Junie B. Jones?

Macie: She was like, she’s like so funny, she’s naughty just like I am.

Me: She’s naughty just like you?

Macie: Um, but, it ends, but one part of her, she tells something, like, she’s usually always honest, like, let’s pretend she did something bad, like, she got sent to the principal’s office (laughs) she just tells her mom and dad “I was sent to the principal’s office.”

Me: Okay. So, she’s naughty but she’s honest.

Macie: And sometimes she even yells in front of the teacher. (laughs)

Me: She does what?
Macie: She yells in front of the teacher. (laughs)

Me: She yells in front of the teacher. (laughs). You said you like it because, you chose to be her because she’s naughty like you?

Macie: ‘Cause I’m sometimes naughty. And I’m sometimes (pause) like, I usually choose when I wanna be naughty.

Me: Oh, you choose. You choose. When do you choose to be naughty?

Macie: I choose when to be naughty when like, something makes me mad, or when someone is mean to me, when like, when we’re doing something like, when we’re trying to, like, when someone pulls a prank on me or something. (laughs)

Me: Uh-huh.

Macie: Yeah.

When reviewing the produced data that involved Macie, I became acutely aware of how I must be very careful not to let the past be prologue. My introduction to Macie was the teacher’s positioning of her as a mean girl that needed to learn how to be nicer in order to make friends. Consequently, I tried to avoid letting Macie’s history, of which I had no first-hand knowledge, set the context for how I observed and analyzed her interactions with the other students, the teacher, and myself. For example, through a poststructural feminist lens, I did not understand Macie to be a mean girl. Rather, she was labeled as mean because, at times, she was observed to be naughty, which is not a performance consistent within the discourse of the good girl. In other words, Macie was labeled as mean for not doing her gender right. When Macie suggests that she, like the character Junie, is always honest, she effectively takes control and shifts her social positioning from that of the mean, naughty girl toward that of the honest social subject; a positioning that should not be gender bound. The unstable, multi-directional flow of power became especially evident when Macie clearly articulated to me that she decides when to be naughty; which was when she felt that she was somehow being mistreated. Thus, Macie’s
naughty performances can be read as discourses of resistance to being inscribed and othered as a powerless female. While Macie was busy convincing her table mates that she was not a frog, on the other side of the room, Sean was being subjected to interrogation by two students dressed as law enforcement officers.

Figure 11. I’m Not a Frog

Event 2 – The Dog Man Boys: A Hierarchy of Masculinity

On the other side of the classroom Sean, Mason, and Oliver are gathered around their table. Mason and Oliver are both dressed as law enforcement officers. More precisely, they are dressed as Dog Man, the main character in Dav Pilkey’s *Dog Man* series. The series begins by telling the story of how a policeman and his police dog fail to defuse a bomb. When the ensuing explosion kills the officer’s head and the dog’s body, the dog’s head is grafted onto the man’s body and, voila! The world’s greatest crime fighting sensation, Dog Man, is born. Sean does not appear to be wearing any costume. He is dressed as he would be on any other day.

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Oliver and Mason probe Sean by repeatedly asking, “Who are you? Tell us! Who are you?” Without responding and keeping his book’s cover face down on the table with his hand, Sean gives them a blank stare. Hailey, who has been watching from across the room, yells, “WHO ARE YOU, SEAN?” She runs over to Sean, forces her face in close to his face and says “Whooo are you, Sean?” Sean picks up his book from the table and flips it over to show the cover to Hailey. Hailey looks at the book (Miss. Porter is Out of Order! by Dan Gutman). She turns to Oliver and Mason and says, ‘Oh! He’s A.J.’” Then Oliver, Mason, and Hailey all walk away, leaving Sean alone at the table.

This event lays bare a hierarchy of masculinity where two boys with more stereotypical attributes of masculinity attempt to intimidate one who is less stereotypically masculine (Dutro, 2001). Oliver and Mason, who I referred to in my field notes as the Dog Man boys, were known within the classroom as the sports guys. Not only were their reading and writing activities often centered around the topic of sports, but both were always in charge of the basketball and football games that took place on the playground during recess. I never once observed Sean taking part in the boys’ games. Rather, he would typically join in on the girls’ games of tag during recess. Just as on the playground, Oliver and Mason performed a dominant mode of masculinity not only through their firm and authoritative interrogation of Sean, but also with their selection of the highly gendered Dog Man text and character. The Dog Man Boys’ privileged position of power with respect to Sean was symbolically magnified by their wearing law enforcement costumes.

Sean revealing his book and thus the character he was portraying to Hailey, as opposed to the Dog Man boys, was a simultaneous act of resistance and compliance. While A.J. is a male character, he is certainly not as hyper masculine as the character of Dog Man. Therefore, Sean’s refusal to reveal his book and character to the Dog Man boys may have been a performance
reflective of a discourse of resistance against social and cultural expectations that boys perform masculinity in stereotypical ways. Sean’s performance was also an act of protection against the possibility of being publicly scorned for not being masculine enough. Revealing the book and character to Hailey satisfied her curiosity; Sean was, indeed, a boy. Oliver and Mason, too, were satisfied with Sean’s selection of book and character, as they questioned him no further. However, whether Sean was portraying a boy or something other than a boy may not have been Oliver and Mason’s only concern. They may have also wanted to confirm Sean, a less stereotypical masculine male than themselves, had not selected a hyper masculine book and character such as Dog Man. Indeed, Sean had not. The *My Weird School* book and the character of A.J. were decidedly less masculine than Dog Man. Therefore, through the interrogation of Sean, the Dog Man boys ensured that both the gender order and hierarchy of masculinity within the classroom were maintained.

A.J., the character Sean was portraying, is the immature main character in Dan Gutman’s *My Weird School* series. A.J. is friends with only one girl in his class. Even though she is a girl, A.J. believes she is pretty cool because she is a tomboy. A.J. refers to the other girls in his class as the enemies. A few days later, when I spoke with Sean about why he decided to be A.J. on Book Character Day, he told me it was because the book, *Miss. Porter is Out of Order!*, was funny, especially when the class gets “a new girl, that’s kind of like a boy … a tomboy.” Sean went on to explain what he meant by tomboy: “It’s like a boy, but, it’s, it’s, it’s like a boy – no, it’s a girl but it acts like a boy.” He told me the tomboy character was very funny. When I asked him if she would still be funny if she was not a tomboy, he responded, “If she was a girl? No.” Sean took the book out of his desk and showed me the cover illustration. He pointed to two of the other female characters and said, “These two girls are not funny…that’s the enemy.” My
“interrogation” of Sean regarding his choice of book and character was done from a position of power. Rather than staring at me blank-faced, Sean was compelled to answer my questions. In other words, once the “interrogation” shifted from the unofficial literacy space with the Dog Man boys to an official literacy space where he was being surveilled and questioned by an authoritative teacher figure, Sean understood how to perform schooled literacy. He answered my questions and in doing so, made clear his gendered identity. Yes, the character he was portraying is friends with a tomboy. But a tomboy is *not* a girl. As a matter of fact, Sean mostly referred to the tomboy character as *it*; a genderless individual. *It* not only acts like a boy, but is also funny. Moreover, girls are the enemy. Therefore, Sean made it very clear that he had not betrayed his gender by reading what some might misconstrue to be a *girl* book. Rather, he situated himself in a position of power by reifying discourses associated with maintaining the gender order and mocking those, especially women, who fail to do their gender right.

Figure 12. *The Dog Man Boys*
Theme: Literacy Competence Affords Gendered Social Capital

The common thread throughout the next three events is Sean. Of all the students, he was one of, if not the most accomplished, readers in the bunch. Despite being the youngest student in the class and positioned by the teacher as socially immature, Sean was observed to be quite savvy when it came to navigating the hierarchy of gendered power relations within his second-grade literacy classroom.

Event 1 – “Read the Things in Bold”: Disrupting the Hierarchy of Masculinity

It is 9:40 a.m. on Book Character Day. The students have been given time to sit at their tables and share with each other information about their book characters. There is no particular assignment or activity to be completed; it is simply a time to sit and engage in some friendly chat. As this event unfolds, Sean is sitting at his classroom table with the Dog Man boys, Mason and Oliver. Ivy is also sitting at the table; however, she is never acknowledged by any of the boys throughout this event. On the table in front of Sean is his Book Character Day book, Miss Porter is Out of Order! by Dan Gutman. Sean is holding a pencil in his right hand, twirling it between his thumb and index finger. While dropping the pencil to the table and then rolling it underneath his fingers, Sean speaks to Mason and Oliver, who both listen intently to what he has to say.

Sean: (to Oliver) Uhhh… A. J. and Mrs. Porter. Those are the two main characters. (Shifting his gaze toward Mason) And then, the outside characters are Andrea, Emily, Michael, and Ryan. (While tapping the eraser of the pencil on his book, he shifts his gaze back and forth between Oliver and Mason) And when they hack her, she says all this weird stuff. (While watching Oliver and Mason, he begins to repeatedly flick the pencil between his fingers)

Mason: Whaat?

Sean: (Picks up his book and points to the illustration on the book’s cover) They hack her because she comes out of this thing. And they hack her, and the computer. They say they’ll run to the bathroom and they hack her from the computer when they’re there. So, they hack her and she says all this weird stuff. Let me
show you what she says. (He opens the book, flips to a page, places the book down onto the table so everyone can see, and points to a sentence on the page with his pencil) Read this. Read the things in bold and then you will see. (He pushes the book across the table closer to Mason and Oliver) See? Read the things in bold. (He reaches across the table to again point to a sentence on the page with his pencil).

Sean was positioned within the classroom as an extremely bright, high reader. As evidenced in this event, he took great pride in his reading abilities. Sean’s aptitude for being able to talk about the literary elements taught within the official school literacy curriculum (i.e., differentiating main characters from secondary characters, explaining the problem of the story, and pointing out how the style of font indicates how a portion of text should be read) illustrated his command of being able to perform schooled literacy. Mason and Oliver’s listening intently to Sean indicated they not only acknowledged but also respected his reading proficiency. Thus, at the table, Sean performed as the teacher; a subject positioning with power and authority. Yet, it was only an hour earlier that Mason and Oliver, the more stereotypically masculine boys in the classroom, were in a privileged position of power with respect to Sean. The power differential was such that Sean did not answer their questions about what character he was portraying. Instead, Sean remained silent as if to ward off any possible scorn for portraying a character that might be perceived as not masculine enough. This event shows how Sean used literacy as a tool for self-empowerment. For one brief moment, Sean disrupted the hierarchy of masculinity that only an hour earlier had been established between himself and the Dog Man boys: Oliver, and Mason.

Throughout this event, Ivy was at the table listening and watching as Sean schooled Oliver and Mason. Yet, not one of the three boys paid her any mind. She was invisible; that is until Sean saw an opportunity to engage in a public performance of dominant masculinity. So, Sean quickly turned his attention to Ivy.
Event 2 – Ivy’s Book: License to Perform Hegemonic Masculinity

Ivy has pushed in her chair and is standing at the table examining the cover of a thick, yellow, hard-covered book entitled *A Madeline Treasury*. Ivy is dressed as Madeline, the main character in Ludwig Bemelmans’s *Madeline* stories. Next to the book on the table is her Madeline styled ribboned straw hat and a cassette tape case with an illustration of Madeline.

Sean gets up from his seat and leans over the table to get a close look at Ivy’s items. He pulls out Ivy’s chair, takes a seat, and leans in even closer. Ivy opens up her book and begins flipping through the pages. The opened book covers the cassette tape, hiding it from view. Sean quickly stands up, leans across Ivy and, for a few seconds, takes control of flipping the pages, as though he is interested in her book. Suddenly, he snaps the book shut, grabs the cassette tape case, and opens it. Ivy yells, “It’s my tape! Stop!” She grabs the cassette tape out of his hands and puts it inside her Madeline hat on the table, far from his reach. Sean immediately grabs the book, places it on the table in front of him, and opens it. Ivy grabs the book back from Sean and places it on the table in front of her. She opens the book and begins flipping through the pages. Then, as quick as flipping a switch, the two engage in calm, quiet conversation about the illustrations. As they
converse, Sean keeps his hands to himself while Ivy remains in control of turning the pages.

Sean leveraged his subject positioning as an accomplished reader to gain access to and confiscate Ivy’s property. His initial move was to invade Ivy’s space by taking over her chair, which is reflective of patterns within broader social and institutional structures where men often violate the space of women (Henley, 1977). Due to Sean’s privileged and powerful positioning within the classroom as a proficient reader, Ivy had no reason to be suspicious of his motives for wanting to look at her book. Once Sean had strategically positioned himself close to Ivy, he engaged in a performance of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1995) where, by feigning interest in Ivy’s book, he was able to seize control of both the book and the cassette tape. For a moment, Sean had successfully positioned Ivy as a subjugated female, forced to surrender her property to the control of a dominant male. However, as power is neither static nor held by any one individual or institution, Ivy resisted. Her yelling at Sean, grabbing back and hiding the cassette tape, and regaining control over the book are embodied performances representative of a discourse of resistance to being inscribed and othered as a powerless female.

More than wanting to gain control over Ivy and her property, there is the possibility that Sean was more interested in having Oliver and Mason be audience to his performing a form of dominant masculinity. After all, earlier that morning, Oliver and Mason, AKA the Dog Man boys, had interrogated Sean in an attempt to ascertain what book character he was portraying. Sean’s character, A.J., was certainly not as masculine as Oliver and Mason’s character, Dog Man. So, here was a golden opportunity. Oliver and Mason were sitting right there, at the same table. A perfect set-up for Sean to show them that while he may not be as masculine as they are, he is masculine enough to be able to subjugate a girl. Of course, in the end, Ivy resisted and Sean
Sean regained his footing when he quickly reverted back to performing schooled literacy by engaging in a calm, collegial conversation with Ivy about the book’s illustrations. Thus, he reclaimed his position of power within the room as a most proficient and accomplished reader.

Figure 14. *Ivy’s Book*

**Event 3 – Paper Dog Bone: Subjugating the Girls**

It is a freezing cold January day. Since it is too cold to go outside, the students are having indoor recess. As is common, the majority of students chose to engage in literacy type activities. Hailey has written a story about puppies and recruits Sean and Alice to help act out her story. She has already constructed a prop to help with the performance: a paper dog bone.

Sean is holding a long skinny piece of paper, functioning as a string. Attached to the end of the paper string is a cut-out paper dog bone. He holds it high in the air, swinging it back and forth in front of Alice and Hailey. Alice steps toward Sean, puts her face near the paper dog bone, and pretends to lick it. When Sean swings the paper dog bone near Hailey’s face, she pretends to bite it. Alice pushes Hailey out of the way to get back near Sean and continues to pretend to lick the paper dog bone. Hailey grabs Alice’s arm and backs away from Sean while trying to drag Alice along with her. Sean prevents the girls
from leaving by grabbing Hailey’s arm with one of his hands and Alice’s hand with the other. The girls tug until he finally lets them go. The girls run away. Sean drops the paper dog bone to the floor and runs in the opposite direction.

This event illustrates how play was a gendered event where students enacted popular beliefs and attitudes that reflected normalized gender social positionings with regard to power and powerlessness. The acting out of Hailey’s story and, more importantly, the assignment of roles to be played was an act of signification that proclaimed their identities as members of particular gendered social categories. Sean appropriated the role of the powerful, dominant, human male while both girls appropriated non-human roles as powerless subordinates. The girls were dogs, commonly considered to be property, kept as house pets, and lorded over by stern human masters. Thus, the students’ play produced an exceptionally magnified sense of gender as dichotomy and opposition.

The social capital afforded to Sean by his competency in literacy is most likely the reason he was invited to participate in the acting out of Hailey’s story. Just as he would prefer to play with the girls on the playground during outdoor recess, Sean would gravitate toward the girls and their activities during indoor recess. I never observed Sean joining a table of girls who were coloring flowers and rainbows or a group in the corner practicing dance steps, as those were performances riddled with risk of being accused of not doing his gender right. What I did observe on a few occasions was Sean being welcomed to co-write with a few girls; a far less risky performance. It was a win-win situation; the girls’ benefited from Sean’s literacy proficiency and Sean benefitted from being able to maintain his position of power both as a literate subject and, as was evidenced in the role he was assigned to play in Hailey’s story, the dominant male.
When thinking about this event, some questions may arise such as: Why didn’t one of the girls take the dominant position and hold the paper dog bone? Why didn’t Sean take on a subordinate role as one of the dogs? As Dressman’s (1997) work suggests, preferences are not normatively determined by characteristics such as gender. Rather, preferences are constructed as individuals of differing genders interact with social, cultural, and historical factors. The students’ performance of Hailey’s story reified normative discourses of masculinity and femininity and made visible an inequitable structure of power. Yet, the performance ended with Hailey and Alice resisting Sean’s subjugation as they struggled to break free of his grasp, which suggests that within the complexities of children’s play there exists possibility for social change (Thorne, 2010). Therefore, young students’ play should not be counted as inconsequential. Rather, as illustrated in this event, it must be considered central to how they go about questioning the social construction of gender and the consequential structures of power.

Figure 15. *Paper Dog Bone*
Theme: Vacillating Between Performances of Masculinity and Femininity

The following thematic collection of events tell a story that is centered around the relationship observed between Carli and Adeline. The dichotomy of femininity and masculinity, and the risk versus the benefit of performing one over the other, appeared to cause great tension not only between the two girls but also within themselves individually. These events, in particular, illustrate how discourse not only transmits, produces, and reinforces power but also how it “undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it” (Foucault, 1981, p. 101).

Event 1 – “You’re Covering the Binder!”: Invading the Boys’ Space

Today is another bitterly cold day, so recess is being held indoors. As usual, the majority of students select activities related to literacy. Mason and Cole (the Dog Man Boys) are on the rug in the Reading Workshop gathering area. Mason is lying on his stomach and Oliver is kneeling beside him. On the floor in front of them are two opened three-ring binders each chock full of football trading card sleeves. As this event unfolds, Carli kneels down on the rug next to the boys as they flip through the pages of the binders.

Carli munches on her morning snack of crackers and a cut up apple as she intently watches Mason and Oliver examining the football cards. The boys do not seem to acknowledge her presence as neither one looks up at her. Carli looks up from the binders and shouts across the room, “Cole! Football cards!” She motions for Cole to join them on the rug. Mason and Oliver each pull a football card out from one of the sheets in each binder and trade. Cole arrives and joins the group. He gets down on his knees next to Mason, directly across from Carli. At this point, Carli, Cole, Mason, and Oliver are all within touching distance of each other. Leo wanders on to the rug and while standing several feet away, watches the group on the rug. Cole is holding a beige-colored piece of
paper that has a t-chart drawn on it. Mason begins re-organizing the football cards throughout the pockets in the sleeves of his binder. As Cole leans in to get a closer look, the piece of paper he is holding partly covers one of the binders from Carli’s view. Carli points her finger at Cole and quietly speaks to him. The three boys neither respond to nor look at Carli. Carli yells, “You’re covering the binder!” as she gestures with her hand for Cole to remove the paper. But again, none of the boys react to or look at her. Cole leans in closer, places his paper down firmly on top of the binder, and begins to write. Mason and Oliver lean in along with Cole until all three boys have essentially closed ranks so as to block both binders from Carli’s view.

Figure 16. *You’re Covering the Binder!*

This event appears to reflect Sadker and Sadker’s (1985) notion that girls are more likely than boys to be positioned as powerless subjects and thus invisible members of the classroom.
community. In this case, the boys’ ignoring Carli’s presence and control of the space around the binders reflect a pattern of claimed entitlement to an activity culturally representative of “boy-ness” and masculinity. In other words, girls do not do football. Yet, in a public performance of resistance to being gendered and subjugated by Mason and Oliver, Carli loudly summoned Cole from across the room to join her in examining the football cards. When Carli called Cole to join the group, she took up a position of power as a connector. By connector, I mean a person who works to bring together individuals with similar knowledge and interests. Still, once Cole arrived, the three boys worked collaboratively to physically shut Carli out, an embodied performance of communal affirmation that girls are not permitted to invade the space of boys. Allowing girls to do so would dilute their claim to masculinity and thus their privileged position of power within the classroom.

When considering Sadker and Sadker’s (1985) notion of girls’ invisibility within the classroom, I have always understood it to be a metaphor for girls receiving less of teachers’ attention and acknowledgment than boys. So, a few days later, when I had the opportunity to sit and talk with Mason about this event, I was interested in teasing out, albeit stealthily, his thoughts on the matter of girls being treated as invisible within the classroom. What I expected to glean from our conversation was something along the lines of him telling me, in one way or another, that she was interrupting them or that she was not really part of their group of sports loving boys. However, as the following excerpt from my interaction with Mason reveals, he never mentioned ignoring or excluding Carli because he appeared to have no recollection of Carli ever being there. When I asked Mason to draw a picture of the event, Carli was not included; her presence was erased. She had been, at least to Mason, literally invisible; a far more
punitive, oppressive measure than simply telling her, *you can’t play with us because you’re a girl*.

Me: I noticed you and Oliver, a couple days ago, on the floor, with these big binders

Mason: Oh, yeah!

Me: Yeah. Can you draw a picture of what was going on there? (I hand Mason a piece of paper and pencil. He takes a few minutes to draw a picture.)

Me: Ok. Alright. Can you tell me what’s going on in this picture?

Mason: So, me and Oliver are trading football cards.

Me: Uh-huh.

Mason: And I’m saying I want (pointing to his drawing) this one, whatever is there.

Me: Uh-huh.

Mason: And that’s basically all.

Me: So, football cards. Because the Super Bowl is coming up too, right?

Mason: Yeah.

Me: So, that looked like you were having a lot of fun…

Mason: (overlapping with me) Yeah!

Me: …doing that, because you were looking at those binders a lot that day. But, when you were on the floor here sharing, did anybody else come over?

Mason: (nodding *yes*) There was, Cole and Leo were watching us.

Me: Uh-huh.

Mason: They were like, “Are you gonna trade?”, and I was like, “I don’t know.”

Me: Uh-huh. So, Cole and Leo were watching you.

At this point Mason veers off to tell me about how valuable his football cards are. After a bit, I steer the conversation back toward discussing who joined him on the rug to read and examine the football cards.

Me: So, Cole and Leo came over to watch also. Did they want to trade?
Mason: No, they, they didn’t bring their, they were just asking stuff

Me: They were just watching?

Mason: Yeah.

Me: They were just watching. Ok. Nobody else?

Mason: (pause) Nah.

After speaking with Mason, I decided to sit with Carli to ask if she would draw a picture of the event. Unlike Mason, Carli did not erase herself.

Me: Can you draw me a picture of what was going on there?

Carli: (smiles) Ok!

Me: And take your time.

Carli: Ok. (giggles)

Me: It doesn’t have to be perfect.

Carli: Ok, well I’m just gonna make it perfect.

Me: Ok. Alright! You can make it perfect.

As she works on her drawing, she breaks out in laughter.

Me: Why are you laughing?

Carli: I don’t know, it’s just funny.

She takes several minutes to complete her drawing.

Carli: (smiling) Ok. There! (She puts down her pencil)

Me: Ok!

Carli: So, this is like, (she points to one of the figures in her drawing) Oliver holding up the binder, and that’s someone else looking at it, and I’m, (pause) I’m looking at it, in, like, (pause) the background. (giggles)

Me: Ok! So, (I point to the other figure) and this is?

Carli: Mason.
Me: Ah! Mason, Oliver, and that’s you looking at it in the background? (Carli nods \textit{yes})

Ok. Can you tell me more about the picture?

Carli: (laughs) I was just, like, looking at them, cause (pause) so, I’d been begging my
dad for Christmas to get me football cards and (unintelligible) to buy them, so
I was, like, staring at them (giggles) ‘cause I wanted to see, like, what they
look like, and stuff

Me: Uh huh.

Carli: So, yeah.

Me: So, you were just- you were just looking at them in the back… (pause) Why were
you in the background?

Carli: I don’t know.

Me: You don’t know? Do you think they would have let you look at the cards with them?

Carli: No. I just wanted to be in the background. Just… (pause)

Me: You just wanted to be in the background?

Carli: Yeah.

Me: Ok.

Figure 17. \textit{Carli is Erased}

Both Mason’s and Carli’s drawings are evidence of embodied literacy performances. The
term \textit{embodied}, as understood by Blackburn (2016), means to “represent or take up in bodily or
material form” (p. 171). This conceptualization of embodiment aligns with multimodal theory,
which accounts for how individuals utilize images to communicate meaning. Performance theory focuses on the ways in which power operates within multimodal communicative acts, and analyzes how those acts might be understood as identity performances that not only discursively produce subjectivities, but also provide opportunities for their destabilization (Butler, 2007; Johnson, 2011). Mason’s drawing signified his membership with the masculine gendered social category. While I cannot speak to whether his erasure of Carli was a conscious or unconscious act, it was an act that helped him to define himself against anything associated with femininity while simultaneously positioning Carli as a powerless social subject, thus maintaining the gendered social order of the classroom.

My interaction with Carli was a bit more complex. In her drawing, she, Mason, and Oliver are all of equal size and placed on an even plane. That is, not one of the three figures is drawn or situated in such a way as to draw the viewer’s attention away from the others. Carli’s drawing was a critical literacy performance that worked to destabilize the dichotomy of power and powerlessness associated with the gendered stratification of her classroom. Yet, when explaining her drawing of the event, rather than providing me with an account of what had actually occurred, and was implied in her drawing, she giggled nervously and rationalized her presence by telling me she was only looking because she wanted her father to buy her some similar football cards. Moreover, she insisted she was only in the “background”. Well, both her drawing and video-recorded data told a different story. It took me a while to understand why Carli had insisted to me that she was in the background when, clearly, she was anything but in the background. Then, I realized she may have changed the story for me. The event I observed occurred in an unsurveilled, unofficial literacy space of the classroom. The moment I invited Carli to sit down and discuss the event, she knew that her actions and talk were being surveilled.
She told me a story that she may have thought that I wanted to hear. She had not tried to disrupt the gender order of the classroom. She stayed in the background. She tried to remain invisible. Thus, her story reified discourses of the good girl. My interaction with Carli illustrates how the power differential between an authoritative teacher figure and a young student is not insignificant and as such, needs to be considered throughout every phase of data production and analysis.

My analysis of this event contradicts Sunderland’s (2000) claim that “girls can cross gender boundaries with impunity, whereas boys cannot” (p. 168). According to my observations and analysis, Carli, more so than any of the boys in the classroom, was subjected to punitive measures whenever she attempted to cross invisible gender boundaries. She was actively ignored and shut out from participating in the football card activity and, in Mason’s drawing, she was literally erased from having been there at all. The next two events, which followed this event in rapid succession, further illustrate how Carli was a prime target for discipline when crossing gender boundaries and thus failing to do her gender right.

**Event 2 – Dance with Me: Clarifying Her Own Gendered Social Competence**

As discussed in Chapter 5, dance was a consistent hot topic amongst most of the girls within the classroom. Dance was not only a popular component of their gender identities but also a metric by which they measured and regulated each other’s gender performances. The girls would often break out in dance, especially during recess. They would show each other what they had learned at their dance studios and coach each other on how to correctly execute a step or combination. Unlike many of her friends, Adeline did not take dance lessons at a professional dance studio, an activity that carried quite a bit of social capital with the girls in the classroom. Nonetheless, Adeline held her own and was able to successfully perform femininity through
dance by watching closely and mimicking the others’ moves. Adeline was not the most feminine girl in the classroom. Nor was she the least. That honor fell to Carli. Nevertheless, Adeline was drawn to, or to be more precise, obsessed with Carli. Adeline watched her very closely. As soon as Carli stepped out of line and crossed the invisible gender boundary, Adeline jumped into action and would attempt to school Carli in how to perform femininity. As this event unfolds, Mason, Oliver, and Cole have just closed ranks and blocked Carli from both viewing and being physically close to the football card binders. Carli stands up from the rug and moves about ten feet away to sit in a chair against the glass wall of the classroom.

Sitting still with a blank facial expression, Carli’s gaze is set on the three boys and football binders. About ten feet to Carli’s right, Adeline appears and, while facing Carli, begins jumping up and down performing some sort of Irish jig. While executing her dance steps, Adeline moves sideways toward Carli until she is directly in front of her, which positions her between Carli and the boys. Once Adeline is in front of Carli, she breaks into an exaggerated dance, progressively hopping higher and faster. As she dances in front of Carli, she counts out loud, “5, 6, 7!” Throughout the entirety of Adeline’s dance Carli never looks at, acknowledges, or speaks to Adeline. Her gaze remains locked on the boys and the binders. After a few moments of jigging in front of Carli, Adeline dances off to the left and leaves the rug area.

Like most of Adeline’s efforts at schooling Carli in how to perform femininity, her attempt to separate Carli from the boys and football binders by tempting her to dance away failed miserably. Carli’s lack of acknowledgment of Adaline’s presence coupled with her sustained gaze on the boys and football binders was an act of resistance to being inscribed and othered by both the boys and Adeline as a gendered, powerless social subject. Adeline’s performance could
certainly be read as an act of category-maintenance work (Davies, 2003a). When Adeline perceived Carli had strayed from performing femininity by reading “boy stuff” with the boys, she danced in front of her to signal, *I am a girl, and the way you are behaving is not the way girls behave.* Adeline’s dance not only attempted to draw Carli into performing femininity, but also served to clarify her own gendered social competence. When considering Adeline’s obsession with Carli, there may have been another purpose to her performance that was related to the power structures associated with the hierarchy of femininity within the classroom. Adeline was on the lower rung of femininity in the classroom and her gender performances were closely surveilled by the other girls. The only girl who appeared to be lower on the rung of femininity than Adeline was Carli. Unlike Adeline, Carli was less interested in performing femininity and being accepted by the girls than she was in being accepted into the boys’ spaces and activities. Therefore, other than Adeline, most of the girls paid Carli little mind and never appeared to question her gendered performances. If Adeline could draw Carli away from the boys and closer to the girls, Carli’s imperfect femininity would cause *her* to become the surveilled member of the group. Thus, Adeline would be repositioned from the lowest rung to a more privileged position of power within the classroom’s hierarchy of femininity.
Event 3 – “No, No, No, No!”: Resisting Masculinity

Adeline’s personality and presence were very strong, and somewhat intimidating. She liked to get her way, and did not hesitate to exert power, both verbally and physically, over the other females in the classroom. Adeline often engaged in these types of performances, which are commonly linked to discourses of masculinity, when attempting to draw Carli away from performing “boy stuff” toward performing more “girl stuff”. Generally, Carli was good natured and amused by Adeline’s persistent pursuit to feminize her. However, sometimes Adeline would go too far and Carli would snap. The following event picks up where the last left off.
After a few moments of jigging in front of Carli, Adeline dances off to the left, leaves the rug area, and jigs her way to the yellow table to join Alice and Maggie. Meanwhile, Carli has given up watching the boys with the football binders. She gets up from her chair by the glass wall and crosses to the student supply area where she grabs a piece of paper and a pencil. Then, working at the red table, she creates a t-chart with Packers heading one column and Chiefs heading the other. Over at the yellow table, Maggie is seated playing with a paper fortune teller. Alice is standing next to her watching as she eats hummus out of a small container with her finger. Adeline is standing directly behind the two girls, still dancing, jumping up and down as if she is performing a perpetual jig. Carli yells from across the room, “Maggie! Packers or Chiefs?” Maggie turns toward Carli, as do Alice and Adeline, who is still jigging. Carli crosses to the girls with her t-chart in hand. She stands next to Maggie, plops her t-chart on the table and asks the girls, “Packers or Chiefs?” As Maggie answers, “Packers” and Alice answers, “Chiefs,” Adeline jigs her way around the table toward Carli and sandwiches herself in between Carli and Maggie. While keeping her eyes fixed on Carli, Adeline continues to jig as she leans forward with her hands on the table and begins to high kick her legs up and down. Carli, who is not paying attention to Adeline, leans over to mark her t-chart with a pencil. Without missing a single jig kick, Adeline grabs on to Carli’s pencil and t-chart and tries to pull them away. Carli yanks her pencil and t-chart back from Adeline’s hands as she sharply says “No! no! no! no! Give it to me!” and then proceeds to continue marking her t-chart. Adeline jigs off to the other side of the table.

Creating a t-chart to collect votes on what football team students hoped to win the Super Bowl had been a favorite activity of most of the boys, and Carli, for several days in a row. So, it
was no surprise when Carli found herself unable to successfully join in on the boys’ football binder activity, she opted for the t-chart football activity. Carli choosing to make a beeline for the table where Adeline was jigging was a magnified performance of resistance to Adeline’s constant and unrelenting efforts to disrupt Carli’s gender identity and performances. Alice and Maggie, who were two of the hyper-feminine girls that routinely surveilled Adeline’s performances of femininity, seemed unbothered by Carli’s less than feminine performance. This could have been because girls who cross gender lines usually do so as tomboys (Davies, 2003), and Carli was socially positioned within the classroom as somewhat of a tomboy. As Sean explained to me on Book Character Day, a tomboy is “a girl but it acts like a boy.” As it became more and more apparent that Carli was going to successfully drag the hyper-feminine girls into performing an activity commonly associated with “boy-ness”, Adeline’s jigging became a progressively frenetic public performance meant to define herself against anything masculine. Sandwiching herself between Maggie and Carli was an embodied performance meant to disrupt Carli’s egregious move. When Carli, Alice, and Maggie ignored Adeline and carried on, the only way she could put a stop to the pending affront to femininity was to physically and violently rip the t-chart, or in other words, the symbol of masculinity from Carli’s hands. Carli, of course, resisted and Adeline, once again, failed in her attempt to bring Carli into the fold of femininity.

The multi-directional, unstable, disruptive, and productive flow of power is evident throughout this entire event. The struggle between masculinity and femininity is played out not only between Adeline and Carli, but also within Adeline herself. Adeline’s perpetual jigging indicates her acute awareness of the social capital dance carries with the girls in the classroom and how one’s level of expertise is a measure by which performances of femininity are often judged. Yet, Adeline’s gender performances were observed to be fluid. One moment she would
perform femininity with a jig and then the next, exert her power in a normative masculine manner. Then at times, as was illustrated by Adeline’s continuing to jig as she grabbed the t-chart from Carli, she engaged in a simultaneous performance of masculinity and femininity. Adeline’s gender performances exemplify the complexity of subjectivity; how it is “precarious, contradictory, and in process, constantly being reconstituted in discourse” (Weedon, 1987, p. 32). The next day, the unfixed, fluid nature of subjectivity and gender performance is further played out by Carli.

**Event 4 – A Quick Jig: Dancing into Femininity**

It is still too cold to have outdoor recess. So, the students are scattered around the room engaged in a variety of self-selected and self-directed literacy activities.

Carli and Hailey are sitting together at the red table writing a story about puppies. When Hailey gets up and walks across the room to the yellow table, Carli stands up from her chair. While standing next to her table, she hops onto her right foot while crossing her left foot across her right ankle. Then, she hops onto her left foot while crossing her right foot across her left ankle. She repeats the move several times, alternating hops between her right foot and her left foot. She appears to be attempting some sort of Irish dance step, the same type of jig Adeline performed the day before. From several feet away, Hailey has been watching Carli jig. After a moment, Hailey approaches Carli. Carli immediately stops dancing and waves Hailey away. Hailey turns away from Carli, smiles, and returns to the yellow table.

Carli’s sudden and unexpected quick jig brings focus to both the power of and striking tension between the normative gender discourses that circulated within the classroom. Carli’s subject positioning as a less-than feminine girl was disrupted when she stood up to dance. That Carli felt compelled, or felt it necessary to perform a jig to signify her membership within the
feminine gendered social category of her second-grade classroom reveals how cultural norms around gender performance are “unoriginal and imitative in nature ... and therefore potentially changeable” (Morison & MacLeod, 2013, p. 566). When I spoke with Carli about her quick jig, she giggled and drew me a picture. When I asked her to tell me about the drawing, she told me it was of Adeline teaching her how to dance. Carli also made sure to let me know that she only knew one step, and had no intention of learning any more.

Figure 19. A Quick Jig

Carli and Adeline were like two sides of the same coin. Carli struggled to find her femininity while Adeline struggled to resist her masculinity. Both girls were caught at the intersection of “boy-ness” and “girl-ness.” Their multiple subjectivities required them to navigate not only the hierarchal power structures within their second-grade classroom, but also their classroom’s pre-established conventions of masculinity and femininity. Their gender performances were a complex mix of masculine-feminine contradictions. For Carli, in particular, this led to a gender subject positioning that was a bit unclear and thus, problematic as she was
often observed to be marginalized when desiring to participate in culturally normed, gender specific activities.

**Chapter Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have attempted to draw attention to how the flow of power through performances of gender in the unofficial literacy space of the classroom was more pronounced than in the official literacy space of the classroom. The reinscribing, disrupting, and questioning of the gender binary and order were magnified, drawn out, unambiguous and thus, *visible*. For the students, the risk-benefit assessment of performing differently than expected became less important within the unofficial literacy space of the classroom. It was a safer space to take gender risks. It was a space free from feeling compelled to comply with the constitutive force of the gender discourses circulating throughout the official literacy space of the classroom. It was a space where it was easy to see the power of discourse in action. And, I *did* see.
**Chapter 7: Discussion and Implications**

This study examined how power flowed through performances of gender within the context of one early elementary literacy classroom. I explored how the gender and literacy performances of the students and their teacher reinscribed, disrupted, and/or questioned the gender binary and order. Theoretically framed by poststructural feminist perspectives on discourse, power, and performativity, I understood gender and literacy to be inextricably intertwined constructs located within particular social, cultural, political, and historical contexts. Interested in tracing how discourses of gender were negotiated, I focused on events where the intersection of gender and literacy performances within one second grade classroom occurred. Drawing on Burnett and Merchant’s (2018) notion of *event*, I constructed 30 stories that aimed to account not only for what happened in these events, but for what might have been. In other words, my goal was to identify and analyze events so as to make *visible* not only how literacy intersected with gender but also held the potential to interrupt power dynamics around the inscription of both gender and literate identities.

In this final chapter, I discuss the main contributions the analyses of the events made in my understanding how power flowed through performances within the context of the second-grade literacy classroom. While scholars have previously addressed the intersection of gender, literacy, and power within various types of literacy spaces (Davies, 2000a/2003b; Dyson, 2003/2013; Kontovourki, 2014; Marsh, 1999/2000; Vasquez, 2005; Wohlwend, 2009/2011), I argue the focus of my analyses were unique. Unlike previous studies, I traced how power flowed at the intersection of gender and literacy pedagogy teaching practices. Then, I analyzed how
students’ gender performances shifted as they moved between two distinct literacy spaces. Therefore, I will discuss how this study contributes to the field by offering unique entry points for being able to see more clearly and understand more deeply how power flows through discourses of gender within and across the official and unofficial literacy spaces of the classroom.

Discussion

Common-Sense Prescriptions for Living?: What the Literature Says

Inquiry into how literacy constructs gender and gender literacy is nothing new, especially within school settings. Decades of research have established myriad ways in which the school literacy curriculum serves as a site that privileges gender performances consistent with the binary gender order (Alvermann et al., 1997; Davies, 2003a; Luke, 1992; Levy, 2016; Orellana, 1995; Wohlwend, 2012). There is much consensus that schooled literacy practices reproduce the gender dichotomy through text, talk, and disciplining of the body (Davies & Saltmarsh, 2006). Yet, despite students having the guarantee of legal protection from discrimination based on gender identity or failure to conform to stereotypical notions of masculinity or femininity (U.S. DOE, 2015), schools remain institutions where performances of gender consistent with the heteronormative matrix (which sets up gender as a binary) are privileged over all others (Levy, 2016; Liu, 2006). Even when teachers do take up the notion of gender equity or neutrality within their classrooms, literacy teaching and learning remain part of a system that reinforces inequitable, heteronormative gendered stereotypes (Levy, 2016). Scholars suggest this is due to dominant gendered practices having become so ingrained over time, and so deeply embedded within history and culture, that they are seen as natural and normal and thus “‘common-sense’ prescriptions for living” (Davison & Frank, 2006, p. 154). Consequently, the naturalization and
normalization of the binary gender order that circulates through discourses and practices of literacy has become virtually invisible (Alvermann et al., 1997; Davies & Saltmarsh, 2006).

The Intersection of Gender and Literacy Teaching Practices

Unlike previous studies, this study detailed how power flowed at the intersection of gender and literacy pedagogy teaching practices. Tracing how teaching moves (e.g., participating in talk around text and the crafting of text that reified the gender binary/order) worked to construct gender performances within the official literacy space of the classroom is not always addressed in the literature, especially with regard to early elementary literacy learners. Consider how during the read alouds of Brave Irene and Gooseberry Park Mrs. Alden did not address the textual representations of gender. Thus, the texts were interpreted in a way that subverted their progressive message that women can be self-sufficient and brave. As a result, talk around the texts fell into stereotypical patterns reflective of gendered heterosexist thinking. This type of gendered talk extended into independent writing time when students told me boys make the best characters in stories because they can be written with more detail and get into more trouble than girl characters. Then, during shared writing, Mrs. Alden was complicit in crafting male characters as powerful dominant figures while female characters were crafted as dangerous powerless figures. Discourses that position females as dangerous were prominent when Sean told me girl characters in the book he was reading were the enemy. Similarly, Oliver embodied discourses related to powerful, dominant males victimizing females when he accused Carli of stealing his book and then aggressively ripped it from her grasp. Even the way Mrs. Alden used the words stern and master in a sentence during word study (i.e., He is a stern master) reinscribed a pattern of patriarchy, a hierarchical gender order of power and privilege reflected within broader social and institutional structures. The discourse of stern master was immediately embodied and performed by Milo when, in a display of hegemonic masculinity, he silenced two
girls through control, assertiveness, and discipline. These and other teaching moves were observed to wield incredible power in shaping students’ gender performances within the official literacy space of the classroom.

**The Subject Positioning of Students**

Mrs. Alden’s positionings of particular students suggested that girls’ correct performances of femininity within the official literacy space of the classroom were valued over their schooled literacy performances. For example, Mrs. Alden delayed beginning a reading lesson to lead the class in communal applause for Ariana’s ability to perform a beautiful curtsy. Macie, a high performing reader and writer, was initially described to me as a mean girl who did not know how to make friends. Similarly, Carli, who Mrs. Alden considered to be an incredibly bright reader and writer, was never afforded Mrs. Alden’s public adulation for her literacy work in the same way two lower achieving boys were. While I touched upon the topic of the privileged positioning of boys within the official literacy space of the classroom in Chapter 5, I feel it bears repeating as it helps provide context for some of Mrs. Alden’s teaching moves.

I was not surprised when Mrs. Alden publicly praised and positioned boys rather than girls as successful literate subjects within the official literacy space of the classroom. Throughout my tenure as an educator within the same district, a culture of concern over boys’ English Language Arts (ELA) standardized test scores developed. The administration approached me and the district’s other elementary librarians to task us with considering how the K-5 library media curriculum might be reconceptualized so as to help “fix” the problem. My colleagues and I, along with the district’s elementary classroom teachers, received a tacit directive to give more time and attention to improving the ELA achievement of the boys. At the same time, the district implemented a system where student test scores were factored into teachers’ year-end evaluations. Thus, the *boy discourse*, which places emphasis on gender gaps in achievement and
suggests “boys are the actual losers in education” (Lahelma, 2014, p. 172) took hold. As noted in Chapter 5, Mrs. Alden’s teaching moves in these events aligned with Sadker and Sadker’s (1985) findings that boys are more likely than girls to be praised and critiqued for the quality of their literacy work. Thus, the boys in 2-Alden were afforded privileged positions of power while the girls, who received less attention, were positioned not only as powerless subjects but also as invisible members of the official literacy classroom community. However, when considering how the district’s main focus with regard to gender equity appeared to be on improving the academic achievement of boys, it is possible to see how gender discourses may have become submerged by discourses concerned with school and teacher effectiveness. Therefore, no matter how committed teachers such as Mrs. Alden may be to implementing gender sensitive classroom practices, they find themselves circumscribed by school rules, prescribed curricula, education policies, and politics.

It is not a critique of Mrs. Alden’s teaching, which by all accounts was outstanding, to draw attention to how some of her literacy teaching moves reified dominant gender discourses. After all, teachers, like all others, are social subjects constructed through discursive power. As Butler (1992) argues, individuals do not exist independent of the ways of thinking and being that are made available to them though the discourses to which they are exposed. Of course, since power is neither static nor held by any one individual (Foucault, 1980), there were moments within the official literacy space when students performed differently from what was expected. However, the majority of those moments were difficult to see. Even I, with an eye out to catch unexpected performances, missed much of what occurred while in action. It was only later when I reviewed the produced data through a poststructural feminist lens that I caught some brief moments of performing differently than expected. It was evident that power was rested mostly
within the teacher in the official literacy space of the classroom. Therefore, surveillance was heavy, which influenced how power flowed. Students were quick to self-correct or correct each other’s gender performance “mistakes”. The power of surveillance and the dominant discourses circulating throughout the official literacy space of the classroom became especially apparent when I had the opportunity to conduct member checks with a few students. Since I was interested in having the students tell me what they thought of their performances, I shared video recordings of the events. Despite the video evidence, two of the three I spoke with flatly denied the moments of their performing gender differently from expected had ever occurred.

**Unofficial Literacy Space Gender Identities**

It has been well documented that children, when left to their own devices, act as agents in taking up, resisting, reworking, monitoring, and creating gender boundaries (Davies, 2003a; Thorne, 2010). Thus, this study confirms previous works in problematizing the notion that classroom teachers are the “problem” with regard to how gender identities are inscribed on young literacy learners. Yet, what I observed taking place in the unofficial literacy space of the classroom was something I have not seen reported in the literature. Most striking was how moments of resistance to being positioned as particular types of gendered subjects were prolonged, pronounced, magnified and thus, visible. Some students’ gender performances in the unofficial literacy space diverged greatly from those they performed in the official literacy space. Across multiple events I was able to analyze how the repeated disruption of inequitable power dynamics shaped and made known alternate gender identities. Consider Sean, the youngest member of the classroom. Sean was positioned by Mrs. Alden as an extremely high reader yet socially immature child who had difficulty navigating the second-grade classroom environment. I did wonder if Mrs. Alden’s positioning of Sean was grounded in his being on the lower rung of the hierarchy of masculinity within the official literacy space of the classroom. After all, Sean
preferred to work with the girls rather than the boys. He also had suffered reprisal from some of
the boys when he voted to have a girl as the main character in a story the class composed
together instead of a boy as the classroom character. However, within the unofficial literacy
space of the classroom Sean proved himself to be quite savvy at navigating the gendered social
environment of the classroom. He leveraged his subject positioning as an accomplished reader to
disrupt the classroom hierarchy of masculinity, perform hegemonic masculinity, and subjugate a
group of girls. Thus, one of the least masculine boys in the official literacy space of the
classroom transformed into one of the most masculine boys in the unofficial literacy space of the
classroom.

Then there were Carli and Adeline. While both girls were on the lower rung of the
hierarchy of femininity, within the official literacy space of the classroom they performed
femininity as expected. They scooched up close to Mrs. Alden during read alouds, wrote stories
about puppies and friendship, and followed all of the teacher’s directions. It was in the unofficial
literacy space that tensions between performing femininity and masculinity exploded. Adeline’s
fixation with being accepted into the hyper-feminine popular girls’ group and Carli’s obsession
with being accepted into the sports-loving boys’ group were at odds, and that did not sit well
with Adeline. As Adeline’s repeated attempts at schooling Carli in how to perform femininity
became progressively exaggerated and frenetic, Carli became increasingly resistant. Carli
doubled down and increasingly performed masculinity by doing “boy stuff.” In the end, Adeline,
one of the least feminine girls in the official literacy space of the classroom, performed as one of
the most hyper-feminine girls in the unofficial literacy space. Carli, on the other hand, shifted
from performing femininity as expected in the official literacy space of the classroom to
engaging in discourses of resistance to being inscribed and othered as a powerless feminine
subject in the unofficial literacy space. In essence, Carli performed gender like a book character Sean had told me about a “girl that’s kind of like a boy … a tomboy. It’s like a boy, but … it’s a girl … but it acts like a boy.”

**Unveiling the Invisible**

Blackburn (2005) argues that when focusing on literacy and gender there must be recognition of “the invisibility of practices that are privileged” (p. 411). This study not only recognized the invisibility of practices that are privileged, but also aimed to contribute to the field by offering new entry points for making visible the deeply embedded gendered discursive practices that hold existing structures in place. By detailing how power flowed at the intersection of gender and literacy pedagogy teaching practices, this study traced how teaching moves worked to construct gender performances within the official literacy spaces of the classroom. In drawing attention to how some students’ gender performances in the unofficial literacy space diverged greatly from those they performed in the heavily surveilled official literacy space of the classroom, this study made visible how power operates within embodied acts. Lastly, in looking across the two distinct literacy spaces of the classroom, this study revealed how the flow of power through performances of gender, and thus the discursive practices that hold existing gendered structures in place, were *more visible* in unofficial literacy spaces than in official literacy spaces. Therefore, I argue that looking to unofficial literacy spaces will provide invaluable guidance when reconceptualizing how official literacy spaces might better support gender equity within the early elementary literacy classroom.

**Implications**

A common consideration of all inquiry into gender and literacy is how the gender-literacy relationship might shape implications for policy, practice, and future research. With regard to policy, I will speak only briefly. On March 1, 2021, the governor of New Jersey signed into law
Chapter 32, mandating that starting with the 2021-2022 school year, New Jersey schools begin teaching age-appropriate lessons about diversity and inclusion to students in Kindergarten through Grade 12. The law calls on schools to highlight and promote “economic diversity, equity, inclusion, tolerance, and belonging in connection with gender and sexual orientation, race and ethnicity, disabilities, and religious tolerance” (State of NJ, 2021, p. 1). When I returned to work in my home school building in the spring 2021, I was handed a copy of Sparkle Boy by Leslea Newman and told to add it to the school library’s collection in preparation for meeting the standards of the newly passed state law. That was it! No further explanation. Just, put the book in the library. I thought it was an interesting gesture, considering no one had spoken with me to ascertain if I already had a copy in the collection (which I did) or asked my advice on which children’s literature on the topic of gender might best serve the school community. Soon after, the staff was called to a meeting where we were required to take a survey that asked questions such as, please indicate which of the following best describes you (transgender man, transgender woman, gender non-conforming, genderqueer, other-please specify). Needless to say, there was a lot of confusion over and unwillingness to participate in the survey. I offer these anecdotes to illustrate how state policies and laws and the ways they are taken up by school districts accomplish little, if anything at all. In reality what is happening in schools is standardization of education, standardization of students, and test accountability for all. So, it’s not surprising the teachers have no time as they are being held to state standards, curricular requirements, pacing calendars, etc. It is a technical way to avert attention from important issues such as gender equity. All teachers know this. I knew this when I was teaching. And Mrs. Alden knew it. She told me so.

Crestwood has been on this quest for the same, the same, the same, the same…our different schools still have their different personalities and their different ways of being
and we used to do a good amount of grade level interdisciplinary work and sharing, and … what exists now is totally on “x” subject facilitated by “y” person … it’s not the same. (Interview Transcript, 2021)

When I asked Mrs. Alden why she thought the district decided to make the literacy curriculum so dictated, scripted, and uniform across all the elementary schools, she replied,

I think they felt like it was an equality issue, that you had some schools whose parents were more active and more affluent and more giving to the school of resources so that they automatically were able to do more and different things and expose their children to more. (Interview Transcript, 2021)

The irony was not lost on me that the quest to make everything the same was in the name of equity. As our conversation continued Mrs. Alden connected how the quest for equity was actually a quest to ensure students scored high on “the test”. This brings me back to how policy and the ways in which districts take up policy accomplishes little. That is why I am a firm believer that effecting change from the ground up is immeasurably more effective and equitable than implementing top-down policy directives. Change must start with the teachers, a point I will address further after discussing the implications for future research.

Implications for Future Research

The research literature on gender and literacy has tended to focus on official literacy instruction. Yet, this dissertation research found that gender and literacy was performed differently when children interacted in the unofficial space. I can imagine a variety of related case studies that could address questions raised around the intersection of gender and literacy. Researchers who choose to explore gender and literacy performances in early literacy classrooms might find it helpful to focus on one aspect of what was presented in this study. For example, some studies could concentrate on one component of the literacy curriculum (i.e., read alouds, Reading Workshop, Writing Workshop, word study) and trace how specific teaching moves are taken up in students’ gender performances in official and unofficial literacy spaces. A related
study could examine the official written curriculum (e.g., scripted workshop mini-lessons, school or district created lesson and unit plans) to understand which teaching moves are teacher initiated and which are school/district mandated. In-depth case studies of particular students could also be conducted. Some studies could go beyond the case of the classroom to include other community spaces. This would provide insight into how a student’s way of performing gender in official and unofficial literacy spaces is informed by the world beyond the classroom. Lastly, the suggested studies should be conducted collaboratively with classroom teachers because teachers must be invited into the conversation.

**Implications for Teachers of Young Literacy Learners**

I have always believed it is more effective to persuade than it is to demand. And persuasion begins by inviting those you wish to sway into conversation. Teachers, and I speak from decades of experience, are rarely invited into conversation. Rather, they are repeatedly met with demands to teach particular things in particular ways. They are provided with texts, checklists, scripted lessons and hours of professional development that reiterate the demand to teach particular things in particular ways. Individually, the constructs of gender and literacy are complex. The fact that they are inextricably intertwined only complicates the issue. Understanding how and why the school literacy curriculum serves as a site that privileges gender performances consistent with the binary gender order is not something that can be achieved by attending a few professional development sessions, reading a book, or following scripted lesson plans. If it were that easy, issues of gender (in)equity within schools would have been solved decades ago. Much of what teachers need to know with regard to how literacy constructs gender and gender literacy cannot be easily codified. Rather, it’s about performing pedagogy differently, with an awareness. It’s learning what discourse is, how it becomes “common sense,” how it becomes the main way individuals take up and inhabit the world. It’s about understanding how
power flows through discourse and subject positionings of power and powerlessness. It’s about learning to watch, listen, and speak differently. It’s about developing a mindset that influences the everyday way of living and experiencing life. Admittedly, to ask and expect teachers to make such a shift is a challenge. But, if teachers are invited into the conversation, there is potential for great change. The work I have presented in this dissertation suggests that the following steps should be taken.

First, this should not be a typical professional development program. Rather, this should be a voluntary inquiry group. If I were facilitating, I would recommend that the group meet once a month. At each meeting, I might share one of the short stories presented in this study. The stories would be shared without my analysis. Small groups or partners could look at the story together to see what they notice. Then, after they each share with the whole group, I might provide them with my analysis of the story and use that as an entry point to introduce and discuss one specific aspect of discourse, power, or subjectivity. Before we meet again, perhaps the teachers could take the topic we discussed and apply it to an event they notice either in their own classroom or a colleague’s classroom. Then, at the next meeting, we could first have discussions about what they noticed in their own classrooms. Next, I would provide them with another of the stories from this dissertation and focus on another small aspect of the analytic tools used to analyze the stories presented in this study. This, I argue, is the approach that should be taken.

Traditional Professional Development places demands on teachers. Inquiry groups, on the other hand, invite teachers into the conversation, and when in conversation there is always the potential to persuade.
Critique of the Study

I selected a qualitative case study for this dissertation because I believe in the value of exploring and unpacking the messy complexity of the intertwined constructs of gender and literacy in the early elementary classrooms. This study was a product of the decisions I made regarding theoretical framing, methodologies, data production, and analysis. I feel it is important to make clear, I did not collect data, rather I produced data. As explained by Ramazanoglu and Holland (2002), data collection implies “facts are lying around waiting for the researcher to spot them” (p. 148). On the other hand, data production implies “information gathered by the researcher is produced in a social process of giving meaning to the social world” (p. 148). Therefore, while I aimed to represent participants’ knowledge of gender and literacy, my own epistemological and theoretical perspectives influenced what I deemed to be important and focused on within the produced data.

One clear limitation of this study was the short time frame. Had I spent a year or more with participants, I would have been able to explore how, over time, shifts might occur in the ways participants regulate and/or disrupt the dominant gender discourses within the literacy classroom. Such an extended inquiry would add great depth and complexity to the work presented in this study. Another limitation arose in the spring of 2021 when the country entered into a nation-wide Covid-19 shutdown. While I had already completed my day-to-day classroom observations, the follow-up visits that were scheduled to complete interviews and conduct member checks were cancelled. I had hoped to conduct the final data production sessions via Zoom or another virtual platform, but at the time it was logistically impossible. All of the teachers within the district, including myself, were working tirelessly day and night to create and deliver live and recorded online instruction to our students. Despite these limitations, the data
produced during my time with the students and their teacher held amazing stories of how power flowed through performances of gender within their second-grade literacy classroom.

**Reflexivity and Reflections**

Hesse-Biber (2012) suggests feminist research practitioners must practice reflexivity, which includes “paying attention to the ways in which our own agendas affect the research at all points in the research process” (p. 17). To be honest, I found the practice of reflexivity to be no easy task. While I strove to be both aware of and transparent in how my biases influenced the outcome of this study, I also attempted to make sure I did not overcomplicate or weigh down the work by providing a frame of reference for every decision I made. Yet, when reflecting upon my final work, it became clear that some salient opportunities for the transparent intertwining of how my own identity affected my research were missed. Therefore, I will discuss some of those missed opportunities and in doing so also dispel any notions that the research I have presented here is neutral. Put differently, this study has not presented a “view from nowhere” (p. 17). Rather, it has presented a view influenced by my location, assumptions, and social, political, and cultural background. In what follows, I address a few areas where deeply embedded discourses related to the gender binary may have made me predisposed to reason that the data pointed towards particular conclusions.

**Trapped in the Binary**

I entered into this research focused on exploring how power flows through performances of gender within the context of a second-grade literacy classroom. My goal was to examine how the teacher and students disrupted, questioned, and/or reified the gender order and binary. When looking across the analyses of the events that occurred within the official literacy space of the classroom, it is evident that literacy teaching and learning remain part of the system that reinforces inequitable heteronormative gendered stereotypes. Additionally, the official school
literacy curriculum was revealed to serve as a site that privileged gender performance consistent with the binary gender order. Of course, there were moments when students performed gender differently than expected. However, the ways in which I ultimately observed, understood, and analyzed those moments were bounded by the masculine-feminine binary. I focused on and analyzed the ways in which gender performances disrupted the gender order, not the binary. Despite being fully aware of how Judith Butler (2007) calls for creating “gender trouble” by disrupting the binary view of gender, by working within the boundaries of masculinity and femininity I have, inadvertently, reinforced it. Similarly, when analyzing the events that occurred in the unofficial literacy space of the classroom, I wrote in terms of how students performed either masculinity or femininity. In other words, my analyses became trapped in the binary. Even the way in which I selected focal students was trapped in the binary. While not the sole determining factor, I did tend to focus on students who crossed invisible gender boundaries; boys who did “girl stuff” and girls who did “boy stuff”. Rather than moving beyond the binary, I swam around within it. What fascinates me is that I did not realize what I was doing, which illustrates the power of discourse. As Butler (2007) asserts, “I am not outside the language that structures me…” (p. xxvi). Moving forward, I will not only work to be more aware of my subject positioning but also strive to make genders that fall outside the binary visible.

Through the Eyes of an Adult

When conducting research with children, Jipson and Jipson (2005) argue we must consider if “capturing a moment in time is capturing the child’s reality or whether it is the researcher’s representation of the child’s reality, given his or her own filter or assumptions” (p. 42). Clearly, what I have presented throughout this study is my representation of the students’ realities. The students’ stories are told through my eyes—the eyes of an adult. To ensure some confidence that my understandings represented the students’ thoughts, behaviors, and
experiences I utilized audio-recordings, video-recordings, and transcripts when analyzing events.

Yet, as discussed above, my analyses were bounded by the masculine-feminine binary. Had there been an opportunity to speak further with the students or have them provide their own analyses of events, there is the possibility new data could have been generated that nudged me toward analyzing performances of gender that fall outside the binary. Lourdes Diaz Soto (2005) contends “children’s representations, voices, and wisdom can guide our democratic dreams as we listen for what children intend to say” (p. 18). Indeed, to accurately represent a child’s reality in a captured moment of time they must be invited to join the conversation and participate in the inquiry. Therefore, it is my hope that some of my future research around literacy and gender will be collaborative projects where I work with young children throughout every stage of the research process.

**Binary Bound Policy and Curriculum**

As discussed in earlier chapters, the Crestwood Public School District’s policy with regard to gender echoed the United States Department of Education’s (US DOE, 2015) revision of Title IX, which stipulates students are guaranteed legal protection from “discrimination based on gender identity or failure to conform to stereotypical notions of masculinity or femininity” (p. 1). Based on my 20 years as an elementary school classroom teacher and librarian within the district I can say with certainty that the gender policy had no impact on the official literacy curriculum. There were no state standards related to gender education nor any district mandated lessons. There were no curricular requirements in place that would cause teachers to examine how they understood gender or how their teaching moves might reify or disrupt the gender order and binary. And that is how it was during the time this study was conducted. Then, on March 1, 2021, everything changed. The governor of New Jersey signed into law Chapter 32, mandating that starting with the 2021-2022 school year New Jersey schools begin teaching age-appropriate
lessons about diversity and inclusion to students in Kindergarten through Grade 12. The law calls on schools to highlight and promote “economic diversity, equity, inclusion, tolerance, and belonging in connection with gender and sexual orientation, race and ethnicity, disabilities, and religious tolerance” (State of NJ, 2021, p. 1).

By late 2021 the state department of education had posted to its website updated standards and sample lessons for gender and sex education. The new standard for second-graders stated they should learn the medically accurate names for body parts, including genitals, and the range of ways people express their gender. They should also learn how gender-role stereotypes may limit behavior. A posted second-grade lesson titled Gender Expressions includes a role play activity. The four scenarios are as follows: 1) A girl who wants to play with the boys is told by the boys she can’t play. Then the other girls tell her she can’t play with them because they don’t want to play with a tomboy; 2) A boy who is crying because he skinned his knee is told he is a sissy; 3) A girl who acts silly and disrupts the class like the boys is told by her classmates that she should stop acting so rough; and 4) A boy comes to school wearing sparkly polish on his fingernails and toenails. No one will sit or play with him. One way the Crestwood School District works to be in compliance with state education mandates is by providing texts to the district’s school libraries. As mentioned earlier, I was given a copy of Sparkle Boy by Leslea Newman and asked to add it to the school library collection. Sparkle Boy tells the story of three-year-old Casey. Casey loves to copy his older sister by painting his nails and dressing in sparkly “girl” things that shimmer and glitter. While the adults in Casey’s life are accepting of his interests, his sister is not. However, she eventually accepts and celebrates her gender creative younger brother.
I have highlighted these examples of gender policy and curricular materials to illustrate how they are trapped in the masculine-feminine binary. Rather than disrupting the binary view of gender, they place emphasis on disrupting the gender *order*. Requiring students to learn how gender-role stereotypes may limit behavior and acting out scenarios and reading books where boys do “girl stuff” and girls do “boy stuff” does not attend to genders that fall outside the binary. So, how should schools take up gender aside this policy? For now, I believe the current shift in policy with its focus on disrupting the gender order is a good first step toward change.

When situated within the early elementary classroom, the concept of addressing gender identity and gender roles has been largely ignored (Walkerdine, 1990; Yelland, 2002). Robinson (2005) suggests this may be due to dominant discourses of childhood and sexuality, which “construct children as innocent and pure; as asexual, immature, and undeveloped beings, with no control over their bodies” (p. 22). This suggestion supports the argument that there exists a common lack of understanding of the distinction between gender and biological sex difference (Orellana, 1995). Consequently, when understood to denote sex or sexuality, gender becomes a construct that is not only considered to be irrelevant to children’s lives, but also “a ‘taboo’ subject in their education” (Robinson, 2005, p. 21). Teachers, administrators, parents, and members of wider school communities will need time to adjust to the idea that a topic that has been historically ignored within early elementary education will now become part of the required curriculum. Therefore, focusing on disrupting the gender order may be the best way to introduce gender education into the early elementary classroom. Disrupting the binary view of gender by focusing on genders that fall outside of the binary can be introduced further down the road.

**Gender Equality, Gender Equity, or Gender Sensitivity?**

Throughout this study, I used all three of the following terms: *gender equality*, *gender equity*, and *gender sensitivity*. As I read through the study, it bothered me that I sometimes
seemed to use the terms interchangeably. While all three speak to issues around gender, they
each carry a unique meaning. Following is how I define each of the terms. *Gender equality*
means access to rights or opportunities is unaffected by gender. *Gender equity* ensures fairness
by compensating individuals for historical or social disadvantages that prevent them from
otherwise operating on a level playing field. Thus, equity leads to equality. *Gender sensitivity*
refers to the act of being sensitive to the ways people think about gender. It is about recognizing
how language choices have consequences when communicating with others. It is about working
to ensure people rely less on assumptions about gender, which includes normative constructions
of gender, the gender order, and the gender binary. During the writing of this study, I time and
again contemplated which of the three terms best captured what I hoped to convey through my
work. It wasn’t until the very end, while writing the conclusion to this final chapter that I knew.

**Conclusion: Creating Gender Sensitive Literacy Classrooms**

I no longer think it is valuable to try to convince children to deny the powers of
“girlness” or “boyness” in their own lives and in the lives of others. I also believe,
however, it is the teachers responsibility to challenge the narratives that confirm that
gender means exclusion and to provide alternatives both in action and in story in our
classrooms. (Boldt, 2011)

I first read the above passage about 10 years ago, and it never left me. It clearly and
concisely states how teachers of young students can go about fostering gender sensitive literacy
classrooms. First, the passage implies that addressing issues of gender differences within the
classroom will not cause masculine males (or “boyness”) and feminine females (or “girlness”) to
be erased. Yet, in the current political climate one might think that is an actual fear. The source
for much of the current uproar over teaching young children about gender is the New Jersey Law
mentioned earlier in this chapter. The law continues to face some opposition, both from within
the state legislature and across New Jersey communities. Critics claim the law tramples on the
rights of parents and allows young children to be exposed to sensitive topics at too young an age.
Supporters argue children already talk about these topics and it is teachers who are in need of guidance on how to help children accept, tolerate, and appreciate the differences among them. Like the supporters of the New Jersey law, Boldt (2011) understands teachers to be the key. She believes teachers have the responsibility of challenging the dominant gender discourses that construct subject positionings of power and powerlessness. She believes it can be achieved through action and story. In other words, literacy. As I have attempted to illustrate through the stories shared in this study, literacy has the potential to both disrupt and replicate inequitable gendered power dynamics. Put simply, literacy is not a neutral practice. Rather, it is a practice that can be leveraged for good.
References


Horvat, E. (2013). Making sense of what you are seeing: Writing and analysis. In E. Horvat (Ed.), *The beginner’s guide to doing qualitative research: How to get into the field, collect data, and write up your project* (pp. 105-124). Teachers College Press.


Appendix A: Definitions

**Binary gender order**: the strict either-or option of males performing in ways that are perceived to be masculine or females in ways that are perceived to be feminine (Davies, 2003).

**Discourse**: refers to more than just talk. Rather, it refers to ways of being in the world that signify specific and recognizable social identities.

**Discursive practices**: the processes by which cultural meanings are produced and understood. Simply put, discursive practices are the spoken and unspoken rules and conventions that govern how individuals learn to think, act, and speak in all the social positions they occupy in life (Alvermann et al, 1997)

**Embodiment**: means to represent or take up in bodily or material form (Blackburn, 2016)

**Gender**: a social construct held together by elements of discourse where the dominant gender discourse maintains a social order predicated on females performing in ways perceived to be feminine and males in ways perceived to be masculine (Dressman, 1997)

**Gender assignment**: is based on both biological and perceived physical differences. We unconsciously assign gender to everyone we meet, becoming cognizant of our gendering of others only when we get it wrong or find ourselves struggling to categorize individuals who present themselves in an ambiguous manner (Paechter, 2010).

**Gender equity**: protection of individuals from practices, whether consciously or unconsciously enacted, that marginalize, oppress, silence, and/or discriminate based on gender identify or failure to conform to stereotypical notions of masculinity or femininity (US DOE, 2015).
Gender identity: refers to an individual’s feelings about their gender: whether they are male, female, both, or neither.

Gender performance: a stylized practice in which words and actions based on cultural norms of masculinity and femininity shape the individual. In other words, the gendered subject is constructed by the performance (Bettie, 2003).

Gender role: refers to a set of expected behaviors for individuals who have a particular assigned gender. Gender roles are socially constructed and as such, vary between cultures and can change over time. (Blaise, 2005; Paechter, 2010).

Heteronormativity: where the only acceptable form of sexuality is heterosexuality

Literacy: a social, cultural and political practice through which individuals come to know and understand their place within the social ordering of the world (Davies & Saltmarsh, 2006; Street, 2016). However, I adopt the notion that individuals utilize literacy in every aspect of their lives; “as the body is everywhere, so is literacy” (Johnson & Kontovourki, 2006, p.3).

Multimodality: the multiple and varied ways individuals utilize speech, writing, gesture, image, etc., to communicate meaning.

Official literacy curriculum: the written curriculum, gives the basic lesson plan to be followed, including objectives, sequence, and materials.

Official literacy spaces: teacher-controlled spaces where official language arts lessons (i.e., the official literacy curriculum) is enacted.

Performativity: the “repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (Butler, 1990, p. 43).
Power relations: where power is understood to be mobile, reversible, and unstable; a “dynamic of control, compliance and lack of control between discourses and the subjects constituted by discourses, who are their agents” (Weedon, 1987, p. 110).

Schooled literacy: “…a discourse: an effect and form of power that both generates and governs knowledge and subjectivities, normalizing particular meanings and ways of being in school (Kontovourki & Siegel, 2022, p.2).

Sex: the biological features that differentiate males from females. While understandings of these differences are culturally constructed, sex, in general, is considered to be a matter of biological fact (Blaise, 2005; Paechter, 2010).

Unofficial literacy spaces: student-governed spaces where students engage in self-selected, self-directed literacy activities unrelated to those of the official literacy curriculum.
Appendix B: Institutional Review Board Approval Letter

Teachers College IRB Expedited Approval Notification

To: Elizabeth Drennan  
From: Amy Camilleri  
Subject: IRB Approval: 20-116 Protocol  
Date: 11/25/2019

Please be informed that as of the date of this letter, the Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects at Teachers College, Columbia University has given full approval to your study, entitled "Literacy Teaching and Learning in an Era of Shifting Conceptions of Gender: A Case Study of Gender and Literacy Performance in an Early Elementary Classroom," under Expedited Review on 11/25/2019: Category (6) Collection of data from voice, video, digital, or image recordings made for research purposes.

The IRB Committee must be contacted if there are any changes to the protocol during this period. Under the new IRB regulations, continuing review for this study is not required. If you encounter any problems or issues, please contact the IRB office to discuss. When you have completed the study, please terminate using the "Terminate Protocol" button at the top of the view protocol page in Mentor IRB. The IRB number assigned to your protocol is 20-116. Feel free to contact the IRB Office (212-678-4105 or accamilleri@gmail.com) if you have any questions.

Please note that your Consent form bears an official IRB authorization stamp and is attached to this email. Copies of this form with the IRB stamp must be used for your research work. Further, all research recruitment materials must include the study’s IRB-approved protocol number.

As the PI of record for this protocol, you are required to:

- Use current, up-to-date IRB approved documents
- Ensure all study staff and their CITI certifications are on record with the IRB
- Notify the IRB of any changes or modifications to your study procedures
- Alert the IRB of any adverse events

You are also required to respond if the IRB communicates with you directly about any aspect of your protocol. Failure to adhere to your responsibilities as a study PI can result in action by the IRB up to and including suspension of your approval and cessation of your research.

You can retrieve a PDF copy of this approval letter from Mentor IRB.

When your study ends, please visit the IRB Mentor site. Go to the view protocol page and click on the "Terminate Protocol" button at the top.

Best wishes for your research work.

Sincerely,
Amy Camilleri
IRB Administrator
IRB@tc.edu

Attachments:
- ASSENT FORM FOR MINORS_E.Drennan.pdf
- PARENTAL PERMISSION FORM_E.Drennan.pdf
- TEACHER INFORMED CONSENT_E.Drennan.pdf
Appendix C: Informal Conversations with the Classroom Teacher

Topics of conversation will arise primarily from observed events. For example, I may say to the teacher, “I noticed this happened yesterday. Could you tell me more about what happened?”

Other Possible Conversation Starters

1. How have you observed the literacy curriculum to evolve over time?
2. How would you describe a literate individual?
3. When you hear the word “gender” what images come to mind?
4. Could you tell me about any experiences you and/or others within the school have had with gender fluid or gender non-conforming students?
5. Could you tell me about any training or professional development programs the district has provided regarding gender? How about gender with relation to literacy?
6. Think of a child you thought was a very successful literacy learner. What are some examples of this child’s literacy success?
7. Could you tell me about your best readers and writers?
8. Could you tell me about your students that are having the most problems with reading and writing?
9. In what settings or in relation to what activities do you see the most differences between boys and girls?
Appendix D: Informal Conversations with the Focal Students

Topics of conversation will arise primarily from observed events. For example, I may say to a focal student, “I noticed this happened yesterday. Could you draw a picture of what happened? Can you tell me about your picture?”

Other Possible Conversation Starters

1. Please draw a picture of yourself reading. Can you tell me about your picture?
2. Could you share with me a book you like reading? Can you show me why?
3. Could you share with me a book you don’t like reading? Can you show me why?
4. Please draw a picture of yourself writing. Can you tell me about your picture?
5. Let’s look at some of the writing you have done.
   a. Which one did you enjoy writing? Can you show me why?
   b. Which one did you not enjoy writing? Can you show me why?
Appendix E: Teacher Informed Consent

Protocol Title: Literacy Teaching and Learning in an Era of Shifting Conceptions of Gender: A Case Study of Gender and Literacy Performance in an Early Elementary Classroom
Principal Investigator: Elizabeth Drennan, Teachers College, 201-694-1381

INTRODUCTION
You are being invited to participate in this research study called “Literacy Teaching and Learning in an Era of Shifting Conceptions of Gender: A Case Study of Gender and Literacy Performance in an Early Elementary Classroom.” You and all of the students in your class are being invited to participate in this study, which will last for approximately three months.

WHY IS THIS STUDY BEING DONE?
This study is being done to understand how gender is performed in the early elementary literacy classroom. I will also be investigating how gender influences the ways in which students come to see themselves as readers and writers.

WHAT WILL I BE ASKED TO DO IF I AGREE TO TAKE PART IN THIS STUDY?
If you decide to participate, I will be in your classroom during reading and Writing Workshop for approximately three months. Throughout my visits I will be observing and occasionally video-recording classroom reading and writing activities. Video editing programs will be used to protect your identity. Identifying features, such as facial features will be obscured through blurring or pixilation. The video-recordings will be deleted in five years. If you do not wish to be video-recorded, you will not be able to participate in the study. I will also be analyzing any work the students complete. In addition, I will be conducting interviews with four to six focal students. Additionally, I will interview you three times (approximately once per month). The interviews will take place at a time of your convenience. During the interviews you will be asked to discuss issues around the topic of gender and literacy teaching and learning. These interviews will be audio-recorded. The audio-recordings will be transcribed. The recordings will be deleted in five years. If you do not wish to be audio-recorded, you will not be able to participate in the study. Each interview will take approximately 40 minutes and take place in the classroom. You will be given a pseudonym or false name in order to keep your identity confidential.

WHAT POSSIBLE RISKS OR DISCOMFORTS CAN I EXPECT FROM TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?
This is a minimal risk study, which means the harms or discomforts that you may experience are not greater than you would ordinarily encounter in daily life. However, there are some risks to consider:

You may feel uncomfortable with some of the interview questions. However, you do not have to answer any questions or divulge anything you don’t want to talk about. I will stop the interview if you become uncomfortable. You have the right to refuse to participate in any aspect of the study or to withdraw at any time. I will take extended silence as a cue to ask if you want to keep going or if you would prefer to stop.
You might feel uncomfortable reflecting on your teaching practice during interviews, and/or having an observer in the room while you are teaching. However, observations are not evaluative, and will not be shared with supervisors.

You may have a potential loss of confidentiality, as I will be sharing my findings with other educators and university faculty. However, your name, your students’ names, and your school’s name will not be identified.

The researcher will minimize risks to this study by:

The researcher will take precautions to keep your information confidential and prevent anyone from discovering or guessing your identity by using a pseudonym instead of your name and altering some potentially identifying information, such as the location of the school and school district. In addition, all information will be kept on a password protected computer and locked in a file drawer in the researcher’s home office.

Video-recordings taken during observations of classroom activities around reading and writing will be viewed and transcribed. To protect confidentiality, you will be given a pseudonym within the transcribed video-recordings. Additionally, video editing programs will be used to further protect your identity. Identifying features, such as facial features will be obscured through blurring or pixilation. You may request to not be video-recorded at any time.

You may stop the interviews or turn off the recorder at any time. You may also ask the researcher to delete certain sections of an interview recording. Again, you do not have to answer any questions or divulge anything you do not want to talk about. You may stop participating in the study at any time without penalty.

**WHAT POSSIBLE BENEFITS CAN I EXPECT FROM TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?**

There is no direct benefit to you for participating in this study.

**WILL I BE PAID FOR BEING IN THIS STUDY?**

You will not be paid to participate in this study.

**WHEN IS THE STUDY OVER? CAN I LEAVE THE STUDY BEFORE IT ENDS?**

The study is over when you have completed the three interviews and the researcher has conducted daily observations of reading and Writing Workshop over the course of approximately three months. However, you can leave the study at any time even if the study is not completed, as originally planned.

**PROTECTION OF YOUR CONFIDENTIALITY**

The researcher will keep all written materials locked in a file drawer in the researcher’s home office. Any electronic or digital information (including audio and video-recordings) will be stored on a computer that is password protected. What is on the recordings will be transcribed. The recordings will be deleted in five years. There will be no record matching your real name with your pseudonym. Regulation requires that research data be kept for at least five years.
For quality assurance, the study team, the study sponsor (grant agency), and/or members of the Teachers College Institutional Review Board (IRB) may review the data collected from you as part of this study. Otherwise, all information obtained from your participation in this study will be held strictly confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by U.S. or State law.

**HOW WILL THE RESULTS BE USED?**
The results of this study will be published in journals and presented at academic conferences. Your identity will be removed from any data you provide before publication or use for educational purposes. This study is being conducted as part of the researcher’s literacy specialist studies in the Teachers College Department of Curriculum and Teaching.

**CONSENT FOR AUDIO AND VIDEO RECORDING**
Audio and video recording are part of this research study. You can choose whether to give permission to be recorded. If you decide that you don’t wish to be recorded, you will not be able to participate in this research study.

_____ I give my consent to be recorded ____________________________

________________
Signature

_____ I do not consent to be recorded ____________________________

________________
Signature

**WHO MAY VIEW MY PARTICIPATION IN THIS STUDY**

___ I consent to allow written, video and/or audio recorded materials viewed at an educational setting or at a conference outside of Teachers College

________________
Signature

___ I do not consent to allow written, video and/or audio recorded materials viewed outside of Teachers College Columbia University

________________
Signature

**WHO CAN ANSWER MY QUESTIONS ABOUT THIS STUDY?**
If you have any questions about taking part in this research study, you should contact the principal investigator, Elizabeth Drennan at 201-694-1381 or ed2604@tc.columbia.edu.

If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research subject, you should contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) (the human research ethics committee) at 212-678-4105 or email IRB@tc.edu. Or you can write to the IRB at Teachers College, Columbia University, 525 W. 120th Street, New York, NY 1002. The IRB is the committee that oversees human research protection for Teachers College, Columbia University.
PARTICIPANT’S RIGHTS

• I have read and discussed the informed consent with the researcher. I have had ample opportunity to ask questions about the purposes, procedures, risks and benefits regarding this research study.
• I understand that my participation is voluntary. I may refuse to participate or withdraw participation at any time without penalty.
• The researcher may withdraw me from the research at his or her professional discretion.
• If, during the course of the study, significant new information that has been developed becomes available which may relate to my willingness to continue my participation, the investigator will provide this information to me.
• Any information derived from the research study that personally identifies me will not be voluntarily released or disclosed without my separate consent, except as specifically required by law.
• I should receive a copy of the Informed Consent document.

My signature means that I agree to participate in this study

Print name: ______________________________________  Date: ______________________________________

Signature: ______________________________________
Appendix F: Parental Permission Form

Protocol Title: Literacy Teaching and Learning in an Era of Shifting Conceptions of Gender: A Case Study of Gender and Literacy Performance in an Early Elementary Classroom
Principal Investigator: Elizabeth Drennan, Teachers College, 201-694-1381

INTRODUCTION
Your child is being invited to participate in this research study called “Literacy Teaching and Learning in an Era of Shifting Conceptions of Gender: A Case Study of Gender and Literacy Performance in an Early Elementary Classroom.” Your child qualifies to take part in this research study because he/she is a young elementary student who is in the process of learning how to read and write within his/her classroom space. Approximately thirty children and the classroom teacher will participate in this study, and it will last for approximately three months.

WHY IS THIS STUDY BEING DONE?
This study is being done to understand how gender is performed in the early elementary literacy classroom. I will also be investigating how gender influences the ways in which students come to see themselves as readers and writers.

WHAT WILL MY CHILD BE ASKED TO DO IF I AGREE THAT MY CHILD CAN TAKE PART IN THIS STUDY?
If you decide to allow your child to take part in this study, I will be visiting your child’s classroom during reading and Writing Workshop for approximately three months. Throughout my visits I will be observing your child along with the other students in the classroom. In addition to observing, I will occasionally be video-recording the students during their classroom reading and writing activities. Video editing programs will be used to protect the identities of any video-recorded students. Identifying features such as faces will be obscured through blurring or pixilation. If you do not wish your child to be video-recorded, your child will not be able to participate. Student work and photographs of student artwork related to reading and writing will be photocopied, scanned, and/or collected. None of the collected work will have any of your child’s identifying information, but will include a pseudonym or false name.

Additionally, I will be interviewing four to six focal students, two times each, for approximately 20 minutes. During the interview, they will be asked to draw and talk with me about their experiences, feelings, and attitudes toward reading and writing. I will talk to them about what they like to read and write about both inside and outside of school, and why. Both interviews will be audio-recorded and written down (transcribed). If you do not wish your child to be audio-recorded, your child will not be able to participate. If your child is interviewed, your child will be given a pseudonym or false name in order to keep their identity confidential. Each interview will take place in the hall outside of the classroom or in another area deemed appropriate by the classroom teacher. Interviews will be conducted during times that will not impinge on classroom instructional time. The researcher will work with the teacher and focal students to schedule mutually acceptable times for conducting the interviews so that the interviews do not interfere with the child’s participation in any aspect of the school curriculum.
Students who are not participating in the study will not be video or audio-recorded. However, should a non-participating child walk into the frame during video-recording, filming will immediately stop, and that portion of the video will be promptly deleted. Similarly, should a student who is not participating in the study enter into an interview as it is being audio-recorded, recording will immediately stop and that portion of the audio-recording will be promptly deleted.

**WHAT POSSIBLE RISKS OR DISCOMFORTS CAN MY CHILD EXPECT FROM TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?**

This is a minimal risk study, which means the harms or discomforts that your child may experience are not greater than your child would ordinarily encountered in his or her daily life. However, there are some risks to consider:

There is some risk of students getting tired during the interviews. I will stop the interview if this happens. Your child can also feel nervous about being asked questions or about being audio-recorded. I will remind students that they can decide not to answer any of the questions, and that they can decide that they don’t want to be audio-recorded. If students continue to feel nervous about these things I will stop the interview and/or stop the recording.

There is also a risk that students may feel uncomfortable with the questions on the interview. Your child will be reminded that they don’t have to answer any questions they don’t want to answer, and I will stop the interview if they become uncomfortable. I will also explain that they have the right to refuse to participate in any aspect of the study or to withdraw at any time. I will take extended silence as a cue to ask your child if they want to keep going or if they would prefer to stop. Finally, if your child does not want me to photocopy particular samples of his/her work, I will not.

Similarly, if your child should become uncomfortable and express concern, either verbally or physically, over being video-recorded, recording will immediately be stopped and that portion of the video will be promptly deleted. Your child may at any time request to not be video-recorded. Your child may have a potential loss of confidentiality, as I will be sharing my findings with other educators and university faculty. However, the name of your child, the teacher, and the school will not be identified.

The researcher will minimize risks to the study by:

The researcher will take precautions to keep your child’s information confidential and prevent anyone from discovering or guessing his/her identity. This will be done by using a pseudonym instead of your child’s name and keeping all information on a password protected computer and locked in a file drawer in the researcher’s home office.

Video recordings taken during observations of classroom activities around reading and writing will be viewed and transcribed. To protect confidentiality, all named individuals within the transcribed video-recordings will be given pseudonyms. Additionally, video editing programs will be used to further protect the identities of any recorded participants. Identifying features such as faces will be obscured through blurring or pixilation. Your child will be reminded that he/she may request to not be video-recorded at any time.
The researcher will remind your child that he/she may stop the interviews or turn off the recorder at any time. Your child may also ask the researcher to delete certain sections of an interview recorded. Your child does not have to answer any questions or divulge anything that he/she does not want to talk about. He/she can stop participating in the study at any time without penalty.

WHAT POSSIBLE BENEFITS CAN MY CHILD EXPECT FROM TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?
There is no direct benefit to your child for participating in this study.

WILL MY CHILD BE PAID FOR BEING IN THIS STUDY?
Your child will not be paid to participate in this study.

WHEN IS THE STUDY OVER? CAN MY CHILD LEAVE THE STUDY BEFORE IT ENDS?
The study is over when your child has completed the two interviews and the researcher has conducted daily observations of reading and Writing Workshop over the course of approximately three months. However, your child can leave the study at any time even if the study continues in the classroom.

PROTECTION OF YOUR CHILD’S CONFIDENTIALITY
The researcher will keep all written materials locked in a file drawer in the researcher’s home office. Any electronic or digital information (including audio and video-recordings) will be stored on a computer that is password protected. What is on the audio/video-recordings will be written down (transcribed). There will be no record matching your child’s real name with their pseudonym. Video editing programs will be used to protect the identities of any video-recorded students. Identifying features such as faces will be obscured through blurring or pixilation. Regulations require that research data concerning children be kept for five years.
For quality assurance, the study team, the study sponsor, and/or members of the Teachers College Institutional Review Board (IRB) may review the data collected from your child as part of this study. Otherwise, all information obtained from your child’s participation in this study will be held strictly confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by U.S. or State law.

HOW WILL THE RESULTS BE USED?
The results of this study will be published in journals and presented at academic conferences. Your child’s name or any identifying information about your child will not be published. This study is being conducted as part of the researcher’s literacy specialist studies in the Teachers College Department of Curriculum and Teaching.
**CONSENT FOR AUDIO AND OR VIDEO RECORDING**

Audio recording and video recording are part of this research study. You can choose whether to give permission for your child to be recorded. If you decide that you don’t wish your child be recorded, they will not be able to participate in this research study.

_____ I give my consent for my child to be recorded ________________________________

Signature

_____ I do not consent for my child to be recorded ________________________________

Signature

**WHO MAY VIEW MY CHILD’S PARTICIPATION IN THIS STUDY**

___ I consent to allow written, video and/or audio recorded materials viewed at an educational setting or at a conference outside of Teachers College ________________________________

Signature

___ I do not consent to allow written, video and/or audio recorded materials viewed outside of Teachers College Columbia University ________________________________

Signature

**WHO CAN ANSWER MY QUESTIONS ABOUT THIS STUDY?**

If you have any questions about the study or your child’s taking part in this research study, you should contact the principal investigator, Elizabeth Drennan, at 201-694-1381, or at ed2604@tc.columbia.edu

If you have questions or concerns about your child’s rights as a research subject, you should contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at 212-678-4105 or email IRB@tc.edu. Or you can write to the IRB at Teachers College, Columbia University, 525 W. 120th Street, New York, NY 10027, box 151. The IRB is the committee that oversees human research protection at Teachers College, Columbia University.

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**PARTICIPANT’S RIGHTS**

- I have read and discussed the informed consent with the investigator. I have had ample opportunity to ask questions about the purposes, procedures, risks and benefits regarding this research study.
- I understand that my child’s participation is voluntary. I may refuse to allow my child to participate or withdraw participation at any time without penalty. I understand that my child may refuse to participate without penalty.
- The investigator may withdraw my child from the research.
• If, during the course of the study, significant new information that has been developed becomes available which may relate to my willingness to allow my child to continue participation, the investigator will provide this information to me.

• Any information derived from the research study that personally identifies my child will not be voluntarily released or disclosed without my separate consent, except as specifically required by law.

• I should receive a copy of the Informed Consent document.

My signature means that I agree to allow my child participate in this study

Child’s name: ______________________________________________________

Print Parent or guardian’s name: ______________________________________

Parent or guardian’s signature: ______________________________________

Date: __________________
Appendix G: Assent Form for Minors

Protocol Title: Literacy Teaching and Learning in an Era of Shifting Conceptions of Gender: A Case Study of Gender and Literacy Performance in an Early Elementary Classroom

Principal Investigator: Elizabeth Drennan, Teachers College, 201-694-1381

My name is Elizabeth Drennan. I am trying to learn more about what girls and boys think and feel about reading and writing. I want to learn more about this because sometimes girls and boys have different ideas about what it means to be a reader or a writer, and I would like to learn how this happens.

I am asking you to be in this study because I would like to find out what you think and feel about reading and writing. I hope to have 30 children like you in this research.

If you are in the research, this is what will happen:

I will be visiting your classroom to watch and learn from you and your teacher during reading and Writing Workshop. Sometimes, I will be writing down the things you are saying and doing as you are reading and writing and talking with one another. I may even video-record you as you work. Other times I may ask to speak with a few of you about reading and writing. I would also like to make copies and take pictures of your work so that I can look at what you are doing in the classroom as you’re learning how to read and write. I will take your names off of this work so no one will know you did it.

The research will take three months. I do not think you personally will be helped by being in this study. But I could learn something that will help other children and teachers understand how girls and boys develop their ideas and feelings about how to be a reader and writer.

You do not have to do anything differently from what you normally do each day in your classroom. So please continue to do your work, talk with your friends, and talk with your teacher freely. If I ask you questions and you do not want to answer, that is fine. You do not need to answer any questions you do not want to. If you are ever uncomfortable being video-recorded, just ask me to stop. You do not have to be video-recorded if you do not want to.

Both you and your parent/guardian must agree to you being in the study. Even if your parent or guardian says yes, you may still say no, and that is okay. You do not have to be in this study if you do not want to. Nothing bad will happen to you if you say no now or change your mind later after starting the study. You just need to tell me if you want to stop being in the study. I will ask you later if you want to stop or if you want to keep going. It’s okay to say yes or no.

I will keep the information I collect for the study safe and secure. I will not share information that has your name on it with people who are not part of the research team.
If you have questions, you can contact the researcher:

Elizabeth Drennan
201-694-1381
ed2604@tc.columbia.edu

If you want to talk to someone else besides the researcher you may contact the Teachers College Institutional Review Board (IRB) at 212-678-4105 or by email at IRB@tc.edu.

**Assent Statement**

I_______________________ (child’s name) agree to be in this study, titled *Literacy Teaching and Learning in an Era of Shifting Conceptions of Gender: A Case Study of One Early Elementary Classroom Community*.

What I am being asked to do has been explained to me by Elizabeth Drennan.

I understand what I am being asked to do and I know that if I have any questions, I can ask Elizabeth Drennan at any time. I know that I can quit this study whenever I want to and it is perfectly OK to do so. It won’t be a problem for anyone if I decide to quit.

Name:
________________________________________________
Signature:
________________________________________________

Witness Name: _____________________________________________ Date: _______________

**Researcher’s Verification of Explanation**

The child is not capable of reading the assent form, but the information was verbally explained to him/her in age-appropriate language. The child had an opportunity to ask questions and indicated his/her assent. The child has been informed that he/she can quit this study whenever he/she wants to and it is perfectly OK to do so.

Witness Name: _____________________________________________ Date: ______________

Printed name of Person Obtaining Assent:
________________________________________________

Signature of Person Obtaining Assent:
________________________________________________

Name of Child: ________________________________________ Age: ___